Title: The Trappers of Arkansas; or, The Loyal Heart

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Release date: August 15, 2013 [EBook #43473]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Camille Bernard & Marc D'Hooghe at
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THE TRAPPERS OF ARKANSAS

OR

THE LOYAL HEART

BY

GUSTAVE AIMARD

AUTHOR OF

"SMUGGLER CHIEF," "STRONG HAND," "PRAIRIE FLOWER," ETC.

LONDON

WARD AND LOCK, 158, FLEET STREET

LONDON

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PREFACE.

The publication of the present volume of Gustave Aimard's works renders the series complete. It takes its place as the first of all: and it is succeeded by the "Border Rifles," "Freebooters," and "White Scalper." In exciting scenes and perilous adventures, this work, if possible, surpasses all those which have as yet been offered to the English reader. Moreover it enables the development of Aimard's literary talent to be distinctly traced. The critic will discover, that, at first, Gustave Aimard's brain so teemed with incidents, that he paid slight attention to plot, and hence this volume—as is indeed generally the case with works relative to Indian life and character—consists rather of a succession of exciting adventures than of a regularly developed drama. This fault our Author has corrected in his later works: his hand, at first better suited to wield the bowie knife than the pen, has regained its pliancy; and the ever increasing encouragement bestowed on his stories in England, is a gratifying proof that his efforts after artistic improvement have been fully appreciated.

L.W.

CONTENTS.

CHAPTER I.

HERMOSILLO.

The traveller who for the first time lands in the southern provinces of America involuntarily feels an undefinable sadness.

In fact, the history of the New World is nothing but a lamentable martyrology, in which fanaticism and cupidity continually go hand in hand.

The search for gold was the origin of the discovery of the New World; that gold once found, America became for its conquerors merely a storehouse, whither greedy adventurers came, a poniard in one hand and a crucifix in the other, to gather an ample harvest of the so ardently coveted metal, after which they returned to their own countries to make a display of their riches, and provoke fresh emigrations, by the boundless luxury they indulged in.

It is to this continual displacement that must be attributed, in America, the absence of those grand monuments, the foundation stones as it were of every colony which plants itself in a new country with a view of becoming perpetuated.

If you traverse at the present day this vast continent, which, during three centuries, has been in the peaceable possession of the Spaniards,—you only meet here and there, and at long distances apart, with a few nameless ruins to attest their passage; whilst the monuments erected many ages before the discovery, by the Aztecs and the Incas, are still standing in their majestic simplicity, as an imperishable evidence of their presence in the country and of their efforts to

attain civilization.

Alas! what has resulted from those glorious conquests, so envied by the whole of Europe, in which the blood of the executioner was mingled with that of the victims, to the profit of that other nation, at that time so proud of its valiant captains, of its fertile territories, and of its commerce which embraced the entire world? Time has held on his march, and Southern America is at this hour expiating the crimes of which she was the instigation. Torn by factions which contend for an ephemeral power; oppressed by ruinous oligarchies; deserted by the strangers who have fattened upon her substance, she is sinking slowly beneath the weight of her own inertia, without having the strength to lift the leaden winding sheet which stifles her, and is destined never to awaken again till the day when a new race, unstained by homicide, and governed by laws framed after those of God, shall bring to her the labour and liberty which are the life of nations.

In a word, the Hispano-American race has perpetuated itself in the domains bequeathed to it, by its ancestors, without extending their boundaries; its heroism was extinguished in the tomb of Charles V, and it has preserved nothing of the mother country but its hospitable customs, its religious intolerance, its monks, its guitarreros, and its mendicants armed with muskets.

Of all the states that form the vast Mexican confederation, that of Sonora is the only one which, by its conflicts with the Indian tribes that surround it, and a continual intercourse with these races, has preserved a distinctive physiognomy.

The manners of its inhabitants have a certain wild character, which distinguishes them, at the first glance, from those of the interior provinces.

The Rio Gila may be considered the northern limit of this state: on the east and west it is bounded by the Sierra Madre and the Gulf of California.

The Sierra Madre beyond Durango divides into two chains; the principal continues the grand direction from north to south; the other tends towards the west, running along, in the rear of the states of Durango and Guadalajara, all the regions which terminate at the Pacific. This branch of the Cordilleras forms the southern limits of Sonora.

Nature seems to have taken a delight in lavishing her benefits upon this country. The climate is clear, temperate, salubrious; gold, silver, the most fertile soil, the most delicious fruits, and medicinal herbs abound; there are to be found the most efficacious balms, insects the most useful for dyeing, the rarest marbles, the most precious stones, as well as game and fish of all sorts. But in the vast solitudes of the Rio Gila and the Sierra Madre, the independent Indians, the Comanches, Pawnees, Pimas, Opatas, and Apaches, have declared a rude war against the white race, and in their implacable and incessant incursions, make them pay dearly for the possession of all those riches of which their ancestors despoiled the natives, and which they incessantly endeavour to recover again without ceasing.

The three principal cities of the Sonora are Guaymas, Hermosillo, and Arispe.

Hermosillo, anciently Pitic, and which the expedition of the Count de Raouset Boulbon has rendered famous, is the *entrepôt* of the Mexican commerce of the Pacific, and numbers more than nine thousand inhabitants.

This city, built upon a plateau which sinks towards the north, in a gentle declivity to the sea, leans and shelters itself against a hill named El Cerro de la Campana (Mountain of the Bell), whose summit is crowned with enormous blocks of stone, which, when struck, render a clear metallic sound.

In other respects, like its other American sisters, this ciudad is dirty, built of pisé bricks, and presents to the astonished eyes of the traveller a mixture of ruins, negligence, and desolation which saddens the soul.

On the day in which this story commences, that is to say, the 17th January, 1817, between three and four o'clock in the afternoon, a time when the ordinary population are taking the *siesta* in the most retired apartments of their dwellings, the city of Hermosillo, generally so calm and quiet, presented an unusual aspect.

A vast number of leperos, gambusinos, contrabandists, and, above all, of rateros, were crowded together, with cries, menaces, and wild howlings, in the Calle del Rosario (Street of the Rosary). A few Spanish soldiers,—at that period Mexico had not shaken off the yoke of the mother country,—were endeavouring in vain to re-establish order and disperse the crowd, by striking heavily, right and left, with the shafts of their lances, all the individuals who came in their way.

But the tumult, far from diminishing, on the contrary rapidly increased; the Hiaquis Indians, in particular, mingled with the crowd, yelled and gesticulated in a truly frightful manner.

The windows of the houses were filled with the heads of men and women, who, with looks directed towards the Cerro de la Campana, from the foot of which arose thick clouds of smoke in large volumes towards the heavens, seemed to be in expectation of some extraordinary event.

All at once loud cries were heard; the crowd divided in two, like an overripe pomegranate, everyone throwing himself on one side or the other, with marks of the greatest terror; and a young man, or a boy rather, for he was scarcely sixteen, appeared, borne along like a whirlwind by the furious gallop of a half wild horse.

"Stop him!" cried some.

"Lasso him!" cried others.

"*Válgame Dios!*" the women murmured, crossing themselves. "It is the demon himself."

But everyone, instead of stopping him, got out of his way as quickly as he could; the bold boy continued his rapid course, with a jeering smile upon his lips, his face inflamed, his eye sparkling, and distributing, right and left, smart blows with his *chicote* on all who ventured too near him, or whose unfortunate destiny prevented them from getting out of his way as fast as they would have wished.

"Eh! eh! *Caspita!*" (said, as the boy jostled him in passing, a *vaquero* with a stupid countenance and athletic limbs,) "Devil take the madman, he nearly knocked me down! Eh! but," he added, after having cast a glance at the young man, "if I mistake not, that is Rafaël, my neighbour's son! Wait a moment, *picaro!*"

While speaking this aside between his teeth, the vaquero unrolled the lasso which he wore fastened to his belt, and set off running in the direction of the horseman.

The crowd, who understood his intention, applauded with enthusiasm.

"Bravo, bravo!" they cried.

"Don't miss him, Cornejo!" some vaqueros encouragingly shouted, clapping their hands.

Cornejo, since we know the name of this interesting personage, gained insensibly upon the boy, before whom obstacles multiplied more and more.

Warned of the perils which threatened him, by the cries of the spectators, the horseman turned his head.

Then he saw the vaquero.

A livid paleness covered his countenance; he felt that he was lost.

"Let me escape, Cornejo," he cried, choking with tears.

"No, no!" the crowd howled; "lasso him! lasso him!"

The populace took great interest in this manhunt; they feared to find themselves cheated of a spectacle which gave them much satisfaction.

"Surrender," the giant replied; "or else, I warn you, I will lasso you like a ciboto."

"I will not surrender," the boy said resolutely.

The two speakers still held on their way, the one on foot, the other on horseback.

The crowd followed, howling with pleasure. The masses are thus everywhere—barbarous and without pity.

"Leave me, I say," the boy resumed, "or I swear by the blessed souls of purgatory, that evil will befall you!"

The vaquero sneered, and whirled his lasso round his head.

"Be warned, Rafaël," he said; "for the last time, will you surrender?"

"No! a thousand times no!" the boy cried, passionately.

"By the grace of God, then!" said the vaquero.

The lasso whizzed and flew through the air.

But a strange thing happened at the same moment.

Rafaël stopped his horse short, as if it had been changed into a block of granite; and, springing from the saddle, he bounded like a tiger upon the giant, whom the shock bore down upon the sand; and before anybody could oppose him, he plunged into his throat the knife which all Mexicans wear in their belts.

A long stream of blood spouted into the face of the boy, the vaquero writhed about for a few seconds, and then remained motionless.

He was dead!

The crowd uttered a cry of horror and fear.

Quick as lightning, the boy had regained his saddle, and recommenced his desperate course, brandishing his knife, and laughing with the grin of a demon.

When, after the first moment of stupor had passed, the people turned to pursue the murderer, he had disappeared. No one could tell which way he had gone. As is generally the case under such circumstances, the juez de letras (criminal judge), accompanied by a crowd of ragged alguaciles, arrived on the spot where the murder had been committed when it was too late.

The juez de letras, Don Inigo Tormentes Albaceyte, was a man of some fifty years of age, short and stout, with an apoplectic face, who took snuff out of a gold box enriched with diamonds, and concealed under an apparent *bonhomie* a profound avarice backed by excessive cunning and a coolness which nothing could move.

Contrary to what might have been expected, the worthy magistrate did not appear the least in the world disconcerted by the flight of the assassin; he shook his head two or three times, cast a glance round the crowd, and winked his little grey eye,—

"Poor Cornejo!" he said, stuffing his nose philosophically with snuff: "this was sure to happen to

him some day or other."

"Yes," said a lepero, "he was neatly killed!"

"That is what I was thinking," the judge replied; "he who gave this blow knew what he was about; the fellow is a practised hand."

"Humph!" the lepero replied, with a shrug of his shoulders, "he is a boy."

"Bah!" the judge said, with feigned astonishment, and casting an under-glance at the speaker; "a boy!"

"Little more," the lepero added, proud of being thus listened to; "it was Rafaël, Don Ramón's eldest son."

"Ah! ah! ah!" the judge said, with a secret satisfaction. "But no," he went on, "that is not possible; Rafaël is but sixteen at most; he would never have been so foolish as to quarrel with Cornejo, who, by only grasping his arm, could have disabled him."

"Nevertheless, it was as I tell your excellency,—we all saw it. Rafaël had been playing at *monte*, at Don Aguillar's, and it appears that luck was not favourable to him; he lost all the money he had; he then flew into a rage, and to avenge himself, set fire to the house."

"Caspita!" said the judge.

"It was just as I have the honour to tell your excellency; look, the smoke may yet be seen, though the house is in ashes."

"Well, it seems so," the judge said, turning his eyes to the point indicated by the lepero. "And, then——"

"Then," the other continued, "he naturally wished to escape. Cornejo endeavoured to stop him."

"He was right!"

"Well, he was wrong, I think; for Rafaël killed him!"

"That's true! that's true!" said the judge; "but be satisfied, my good people, justice will avenge him."

This promise was received by all present with a smile of doubt.

The magistrate, without concerning himself about the impression produced by his words, ordered his acolytes, who had already examined and plundered the defunct, to take the body away, and transport it to the porch of the nearest church, and then returned to his residence, rubbing his hands with a satisfied air.

The judge put on a travelling dress, placed a brace of pistols in his belt, fastened a long sword to his side, and, after taking a light dinner, went out.

Ten alguaciles, armed to the teeth, and mounted on strong horses, waited for him at the door; a domestic held the bridle of a magnificent black horse, which pawed the ground and champed the bit impatiently. Don Inigo placed himself in the saddle, headed his men, and the troop went off at a gentle trot.

"Eh! eh!" said the curious, who were stationed around upon the doorsteps. "The Juez Albaceyte is going to Don Ramón Garillas's; we shall hear some news tomorrow."

"Caspita!" others replied; "his picaro of a son has fairly earned the cord that is to hang him!"

"Humph!" said a lepero, with a smile of regret; "that would be unfortunate! the lad promises so well! By my word, the *cuchillada* he gave Cornejo was magnificent. The poor devil was neatly killed."

In the meantime, the judge continued his journey, returning with punctuality all the salutations with which he was overwhelmed on his way. He was soon in the country.

Then pulling his cloak tighter round him, he asked,—

"Are the arms all loaded?"

"Yes, excellency," the chief of the alguaciles replied.

"That's well. To the hacienda of Don Ramón Garillas, then; and at a smart pace; we must endeavour to get there before nightfall."

The party set off at a gallop.

CHAPTER II.

THE HACIENDA DEL MILAGRO.

The environs of Hermosillo are a thorough desert. The road which leads from that city to the Hacienda del Milagro (Farm of the Miracle) is one of the dullest and most arid possible.

Nothing is to be seen but, at rare intervals, ironwood, gum, and Peru trees, with red and spicy clusters, nopales, and cactuses, the only trees that can possibly grow in a soil calcined by the

incandescent rays of a perpendicular sun.

At distances are visible, as if in bitter derision, the long poles of cisterns, with a leathern bucket, twisted and shrivelled, at one extremity, and at the other stones fastened by straps; but the cisterns are dry, and the bottom of them is merely a black slimy crust, in which myriads of unclean animals disport; whirlwinds of a fine and impalpable dust, raised by the least breath of wind, choke the panting traveller, and under every blade of dried grass the grasshoppers call with fury for the beneficent night dews.

When, however, with great labour, the traveller has covered six leagues of this burning solitude, the eye reposes with delight upon a splendid oasis, which appears all at once to rise from the bosom of the sands.

This Eden is the Hacienda del Milagro.

At the time our history took place, this hacienda, one of the richest and largest in the province, was composed of a two storied house, built of *tapia* and *adobes*, with a terrace roof of reeds, covered with beaten earth.

Access to the hacienda was gained by passing through an immense court, the entrance of which shaped like an arched portico, was furnished with strong folding gates, and a postern on one side. Pour chambers completed the front; the windows had gratings of gilded iron, and shutters inside; they were glazed, an almost unheard-of luxury in that country at that time; on the four sides of the court, or patio, were the apartments for the peons and children, &c.

The ground floor of the principal house was composed of three apartments; a kind of grand vestibule furnished with antique fauteuils and canopies covered with stamped Cordovan leather, with a large nopal table and some stools; upon the walls hung, in gilded frames, several old full-length portraits, representing the members of the family; while the beams of the ceiling, left in relief, were decorated with a profusion of carvings.

Two folding doors opened into the saloon; the side in front of the patio was raised about a foot above the rest of the floor; it was covered by a carpet, and contained a row of curiously carved low stools ornamented with, crimson velvet, and cushions for the feet; there was also a little square table, eighteen inches high, serving as a work table. This portion of the saloon is reserved for the ladies, who there sit cross-legged, in the Moorish fashion; on the other side of the saloon were chairs covered with the same stuff as the stools and the cushions. Facing the entrance of the saloon was the principal bedchamber, with an alcove at the back of a daïs, upon which stood a bed of ceremony, ornamented with an infinity of gildings and brocade curtains, with tassels and fringes of gold and silver; the sheets and pillowcases were of the most beautiful linen, bordered with wide lace.

Behind the principal house was a second patio, in which were the kitchens and the corral; beyond this court was an immense garden, surrounded by walls, and more than a hundred perches in length, laid out in the English fashion, and containing the most remarkable exotic plants and trees.

It was holiday time at the hacienda.

It was the period of the matanza del ganado (slaughtering of cattle). The peons had formed, at a few paces from the hacienda, an enclosure, in which, after driving the beasts, they separated the lean from the fat, which they drove out, one by one, from the enclosure.

A vaquero, armed with a sharp instrument in the form of a crescent, furnished with points placed at the distance of a foot apart, and who was concealed behind the door of the enclosure, cut, with great address, the hamstrings of the poor beasts, as they passed before him.

If by chance he missed a stroke, which he rarely did, a second vaquero, mounted on horseback, galloped after the animal, threw the lasso round its horns, and held it till the first had succeeded in cutting its hamstrings.

Carelessly leaning against the portico of the hacienda, a man of about forty years of age, clothed in the rich costume of a gentleman farmer, his shoulders covered by a zarapé of brilliant colours, and his head protected from the rays of the setting sun by a fine hat of Panama straw, worth at least five hundred piastres, seemed to be presiding over this scene while enjoying a husk cigarette.

He was a gentleman of lofty bearing, slightly built, but perfectly well-proportioned, and his features well defined with firm and marked lines, denoted loyalty, courage, and, above all, an inflexible will. His large black eyes, shaded by thick eyebrows, displayed indescribable mildness; but when any contradictory chance spread a red glow over his embrowned complexion, his glance assumed a fixity and a force which few could support, and which made even the bravest hesitate and tremble.

His small hands and feet, and more than all, the aristocratic stamp impressed upon his person, denoted, at the first glance, that this man was of pure and noble Castilian race.

In fact, this personage was Don Ramón Garillas de Saavedra, the proprietor of the Hacienda del Milagro, which we have just described.

Don Ramón Garillas was descended from a Spanish family, the head of which had been one of the principal lieutenants of Cortez, and had settled in Mexico after the miraculous conquest of that clever adventurer.

Enjoying a princely fortune, but unnoticed by the Spanish authorities, on account of his marriage

with a woman of mixed Aztec blood, he had given himself up entirely to the cultivation of his land, and the amelioration of his vast domains.

After seventeen years of marriage, he found himself the head of a large family, composed of six boys and three girls, in all nine children, of whom Rafaël—he whom we have seen so deftly kill the vaquero—was the eldest.

The marriage of Don Ramón and Doña Jesuita had been merely a marriage of convenience, contracted solely with a view to fortune, but which, notwithstanding, had rendered them comparatively happy; we say comparatively, because, as the girl only left her convent to be married, no love had ever existed between them, but its place had been almost as well occupied by a tender and sincere affection.

Doña Jesuita passed her time in the cares necessitated by her children, surrounded by her Indian women. On his side, her husband, completely absorbed by the duties of his life as a gentleman farmer, was almost always with his vaqueros, his peons, and his huntsmen, only seeing his wife for a few minutes at the hours of meals, and sometimes remaining months together absent in hunting excursions on the banks of the Rio Gila.

Nevertheless, we are bound to add that, whether absent or present, Don Ramón took the greatest care that nothing should be wanting for his wife's comfort; and in order that her least caprices might be satisfied, he spared neither money nor trouble to procure her all she appeared to desire.

Doña Jesuita was endowed with extraordinary beauty and angelic mildness; she appeared to have accepted, if not with joy, at least without any great pain, the kind of life to which her husband bad obliged her to submit; but in the depth of her large black languishing eye, in the paleness of her countenance, and, above all, in the shade of sadness which continually obscured her beautiful white brow, it was easy to divine that an ardent soul abode within that seducing statue, and that the heart, which was ignorant of itself, had turned all its feelings upon her children, whom she adored with all the virginal strength of maternal love, the most beautiful and the most holy of all loves.

As for Don Ramón, always good and anxious for his wife, whom he had never taken the pains to study, he had a right to believe her the happiest creature in the world, which, in fact, she became as soon as God made her a mother.

It was some minutes after sunset; the sky, by degrees, lost its purple tint, and grew rapidly darker; a few stars began to sparkle in the celestial vault, and the evening wind arose with a force that presaged for the night, one of those terrible storms which so often burst over these regions of the sun.

The mayoral, after having caused the rest of the ganado to be carefully shut up in the enclosure, assembled the vaqueros and the peons, and all directed their steps towards the hacienda, where the supper bell announced to them that the hour of rest was at length arrived.

As the major-domo passed the last, with a bow, before his master, the latter asked him:

"Well, Nô Eusebio, how many heads do we count this year?"

"Four hundred and fifty *mi amo*—my master," replied the mayoral, a tall, thin, wizened man, with a grayish head, and a countenance tanned like a piece of leather, stopping his horse and taking off his hat; "that is to say, seventy-five head more than last year. Our neighbours the jaguars and the Apaches have not done us any great damage this season."

"Thanks to you, Nô Eusebio," Don Ramón replied; "your vigilance has been great; I must find means to recompense you for it."

"My best recompense is the kind remark your lordship has just addressed to me," the mayoral, whose rough visage was lit up by a smile of satisfaction, replied. "Ought I not to watch over everything that belongs to you with the same zeal as if it were my own?"

"Thanks," the gentleman remarked with emotion, and shook his servant's hand. "I know how truly you are devoted to me.

"For life and to death, my master! My mother nourished you with her milk; I belong to you and your family."

"Come, come, Nô Eusebio," the hacendero said, gaily; "supper is ready; the señora is by this time at table; we must not keep her waiting."

Upon this, both entered the patio, and Nô Eusebio, as Don Ramón had named him, prepared, as was his custom every evening, to close the gates.

In the meantime, Don Ramón entered the dining hall of the hacienda, where all the vaqueros and peons were assembled.

This hall was furnished with an immense table, which occupied the entire centre; around this table there were wooden forms covered with leather, and two carved armchairs, intended for Don Ramón and the señora. Behind these chairs, an ivory crucifix, four feet high, hung against the wall, between two pictures, representing, the one, "Jesus in the Garden of Olives," the other the "Sermon on the Mount." Here and there, on the whitewashed walls, grinned the heads of jaguars, buffaloes, and elks, killed in the chase by the hacendero.

The table was abundantly supplied with lahua, or thick soup made of the flour of maize boiled with meat, with puchero, or olla podrida, and with pepian; at regular distances there were bottles

of mezcal, and decanters of water.

At a sign from the hacendero the repast commenced.

The storm, which had threatened for some time past, now broke forth with fury.

The rain fell in torrents; at every second vivid flashes of lightning dimmed the lights of the hall, preceding awful claps of thunder.

Towards the end of the repast, the hurricane acquired such violence, that the tumult of the conspiring elements drowned the hum of conversation.

The thunder peals clashed with frightful force, a whirlwind filled the hall, after dashing in a window, and extinguished all the lights; the assembly crossed themselves with terror.

At that moment, the bell placed at the gate of the hacienda resounded with a convulsive noise, and a voice, which had nothing human in it, cried twice distinctly,—

"Help! help!"

"Sangre de Cristo!" Don Ramón cried, as he rushed out of the hall, "somebody is being murdered on the plain."

Two pistol shots resounded at almost the same moment, a cry of agony rung through the air, and all relapsed into sinister darkness.

All at once, a pale flash of lightning furrowed the obscurity, the thunder burst with a horrible crash, and Don Ramón reappeared in the hall, bearing a fainting man in his arms.

The stranger was placed in a seat, and all crowded round him.

There was nothing extraordinary in either the countenance or the appearance of this man, and yet, on perceiving him, Rafaël, the eldest son of Don Ramón, could not repress a gesture of terror, and his face became lividly pale.

"O!" he murmured, in a low voice, "it is the juez de letras!"

It was, indeed, the worthy judge, whom we saw leave Hermosillo with such a brilliant equipage.

His long hair, soaked with rain, fell upon his breast, his clothes were in disorder, spotted with blood, and torn in many places.

His right hand convulsively clasped the stock of a discharged pistol.

Don Ramón had likewise recognized the juez de letras, and had unconsciously darted a glance at his son, which the latter could not support.

Thanks to the intelligent care that was bestowed upon him by Doña Jesuita and her women, he breathed a deep sigh, opened his haggard eyes, which he rolled round upon the assembly, without at first seeing anything, and by degrees recovered his senses.

All at once a deep flush covered his brow, which had been so pale a minute before, and his eye sparkled. Directing a look towards Don Rafaël which nailed him to the floor, a prey to invincible terror, he rose painfully, and advancing towards the young man, who saw his approach without daring to seek to avoid him, he placed his hand roughly on his shoulder, and turning towards the peons, who were terrified at this strange scene, of which they comprehended nothing, he said solemnly,—

"I, Don Inigo Tormentes Albaceyte, juez de letras of the city of Hermosillo, arrest this man, accused of assassination, in the king's name!"

"Mercy!" cried Rafaël, falling on his knees, and clasping his hands with despair.

"Woe! woe!" the poor mother exclaimed, as she sank back fainting in her chair.

CHAPTER III.

THE SENTENCE.

On the morrow the sun rose splendidly on the horizon. The storm of the night had completely cleared the sky, which was one of deep blue; the birds warbled gaily, concealed beneath the leaves, and all nature seemed to have resumed its accustomed festive air.

The bell sounded joyously at the Hacienda del Milagro; the peons began to disperse in all directions, some leading horses to the pasturage, others driving cattle to the artificial prairies, others again wending their way to the fields, whilst the rest were employed in the patio in milking the cows and repairing the damages done by the hurricane.

The only traces left of the tempest of the preceding night were two magnificent jaguars stretched dead before the gate of the hacienda, not far from the carcass of a half-devoured horse.

Nô Eusebio, who was walking about in the patio, carefully overlooking the occupations of all, ordered the rich trappings of the horse to be taken off and cleaned, and the jaguars to be skinned; all of which was done in the shortest time possible.

Nô Eusebio was, however, very uneasy; Don Ramón, generally the first person stirring in the

hacienda, had not yet appeared.

On the preceding evening, after the terrible accusation brought by the juez de letras against the eldest son of the hacendero, the latter had ordered his servants to retire, and after having himself, in spite of the tears and prayers of his wife, firmly bound his son, he led Don Inigo Albaceyte into a retired apartment of the farm, where they both remained in private till a far advanced hour of the night.

What had passed in that conversation, in which the fate of Don Rafaël was decided, nobody knew —Nô Eusebio no more than the others.

Then, after having conducted Don Inigo to a chamber he had had prepared for him, and having wished him good night, Don Ramón proceeded to rejoin his son, with whom the poor mother was still weeping: without pronouncing a word, he took the boy in his arms, and carried him into his bedroom, where he laid him on the ground near his bed; then the hacendero shut and locked the door, went to bed, with two pistols under his pillow. The night passed away thus, the father and son darting at each other through the darkness the looks of wild beasts, and the poor mother on her knees on the sill of that chamber, which she was forbidden to enter, weeping silently for her first-born, who, as she had a terrible presentiment, was about to be ravished from her for ever.

"Hum!" the mayoral murmured to himself, biting, without thinking of doing so, the end of his extinguished cigarette, "what will be the end of all this? Don Ramón is not a man to pardon, he will not compromise his honour. Will he abandon his son to the hands of justice! Oh no! but, in that case what will he do?"

The worthy mayoral had arrived at this point in his reflections, when Don Inigo Albaceyte and Don Ramón appeared in the patio.

The countenances of the two men were stern; that of the hacendero, in particular, was dark as night.

"Nô Eusebio," Don Ramón said in a sharp tone, "have a horse saddled, and prepare an escort of four men to conduct this cavalier to Hermosillo."

The mayoral bowed respectfully, and immediately gave the necessary orders.

"I thank you a thousand times," continued Don Ramón, addressing the judge; "you have saved the honour of my house."

"Do not be so grateful, señor," Don Inigo replied; "I swear to you that when I left the city yesterday, I had no intention of making myself agreeable to you."

The hacendero only replied by a gesture.

"Put yourself in my place; I am criminal judge above everything; a man is murdered—a worthless fellow, I admit—but a man, although of the worst kind; the assassin is known, he traverses the city at full gallop, in open daylight, in the sight of everybody, with incredible effrontery. What could I do?—set off in pursuit of him. I did not hesitate."

"That is true," Don Ramón murmured, holding down his head.

"And evil have been the consequences to me. The scoundrels who accompanied me abandoned me, like cowards, in the height of the storm, and took shelter I know not where; and then, to crown my troubles, two jaguars, magnificent animals, by the bye, rushed in pursuit of me; they pressed me so hard that I came and fell at your door like a mass. It is true I killed one of them, but the other was very nearly snapping me up, when you came to my assistance. Could I, after that, arrest the son of the man who had saved my life at the peril of his own? That would have been acting with the blackest ingratitude."

"Thanks, once more."

"No thanks; we are quits, that is all. I say nothing of some thousands of piastres you have given me; they will serve to stop the mouths of my lynxes. Only, let me beg of you, Don Ramón, keep a sharp eye upon your son; if he should fall a second time into my hands, I don't know how I could save him."

"Be at ease, in that respect, Don Inigo; my son will never fall into your hands again."

"The hacendero pronounced these words in so solemn and melancholy a tone, that the judge started at hearing them, and turned round saying,—

"Take care what you are about to do!"

"Oh, fear nothing," replied Don Ramón; "only, as I am not willing that my son should mount a scaffold, and drag my name in the mud, I must endeavour to prevent him."

At that moment the horse was led out, and the juez de letras mounted.

"Well, adieu, Don Ramón," he said in an indulgent voice; "be prudent, this young man may still reform; he is hot blooded, that is all."

"Adieu, Don Inigo Albaceyte," the hacendero replied, in so dry a tone that it admitted of no reply.

The judge shook his head, and clapping spurs to his horse, he set off at full trot, followed by his escort, after having made the farmer a farewell gesture.

The latter looked after him, as long as he could see him, and then re-entered the house with long and hasty strides.

"Nô Eusebio," he said to the mayoral, "ring the bell to call together all the peons, as well as the other servants of the hacienda."

The mayoral, after having looked at his master with astonishment, hastened to execute the order he had received.

"What does all this mean?" he said to himself.

At the sound of the bell, the men employed on the farm ran to answer it in haste, not knowing to what cause they should attribute this extraordinary summons.

They were soon all collected together in the great hall, which served as a refectory. The completest silence reigned among them. A secret pang pressed on their hearts,—they had the presentiment of a terrible event.

After a few minutes of expectation, Doña Jesuita entered, surrounded by her children, with the exception of Rafaël, and proceeded to take her place upon a platform, prepared at one end of the hall.

Her countenance was pale, and her eyes proclaimed that she had been weeping.

Don Ramón appeared.

He was clothed in a complete suit of black velvet without lace; a heavy gold chain hung round his neck, a broad leafed hat of black felt, ornamented with an eagle's feather, covered his head, a long sword, with a hilt of polished steel, hung by his side.

His brow was marked with wrinkles, his eyebrows were closely knitted above his black eyes, which appeared to dart lightning.

A shudder of terror pervaded the ranks of the assembly—Don Ramón Garillas had put on the robe of justice.

Justice was then about to be done?

But upon whom?

When Don Ramón had taken his place on the right hand of his wife, he made a sign.

The mayoral went out, and returned a minute after, followed by Rafaël.

The young man was bareheaded, and had his hands tied behind his back.

With his eyes cast down, and a pale face, he placed himself before his father, whom he saluted respectfully.

At the period at which our history passes, in those countries remote from towns and exposed to the continual incursions of the Indians, the heads of families preserved, in all its purity, that patriarchal authority which the efforts of our depraved civilization have a tendency to lessen, and, at length, to destroy. A father was sovereign in his own house, his judgments were without appeal, and executed without murmurs or resistance.

The people of the farm were acquainted with the firm character and implacable will of their master; they knew that he never pardoned, that his honour was dearer to him than life; it was then with a sense of undefinable fear that they prepared to witness the terrible drama which was about to be performed before them between the father and the son.

Don Ramón arose, cast a dark glance round upon the assembly, and threw his hat at his feet:

"Listen all to me," he said in a sharp but most distinct voice; "I am of an old Christian race, whose ancestors have never done wrong; honour has always in my house been considered as the first of earthly goods; that honour which my ancestors transmitted to me intact, and which I have endeavoured to preserve pure, my first-born son, the inheritor of my name, has sullied by an indelible stain. Yesterday, at Hermosillo, in consequence of a tavern quarrel, he set fire to a house, at the risk of burning down the whole city, and when a man endeavoured to prevent his escape, he killed him with a poniard stroke. What can be thought of a boy who, at so tender an age, is endowed with the instincts of a wild beast? Justice must be done, and, by God's help, I will do it severely."

After these words, Don Ramón crossed his arms upon his breast, and appeared to reflect.

No one durst hazard a word in favour of the accused; all heads were bent down, all hearts were palpitating.

Rafaël was beloved by his father's servants on account of his intrepidity, which yielded to no obstacles, for his skill in managing a horse, and in the use of all arms, and more than all, for the frankness and kindness which formed the most striking features of his character. In this country particularly, where the life of a man is reckoned of so little value, everyone was inwardly disposed to excuse the youth, and to see nothing in the action he had committed but the result of warmth of blood and hasty passion.

Doña Jesuita arose; without a murmur she had always bent to the will of her husband, whom for many years she had been accustomed to respect; the mere idea of resisting him terrified her, and sent a cold shudder through her veins; but all the loving powers of her soul were concentrated in her heart. She adored her children, Rafaël in particular, whose indomitable character stood more in need than the others, of the watchful cares of a mother.

"Sir," she said to her husband, in a voice choked with tears, "remember that Rafaël is your first-born; that his fault, however serious it might be, ought not to be inexcusable in your eyes, as you

are his father; and that I—I—" she continued, falling on her knees, clasping her hands and sobbing, "I implore your pity! pardon, sir! pardon for your son!"

"Don Ramón coldly raised his wife, whose face was inundated with tears, and after obliging her to resume her place in her chair, he said,—

"It is particularly as a father, that my heart ought to be without pity! Rafaël is an assassin and an incendiary; he is no longer my son!"

"What do you mean to do?" Doña Jesuita cried, in accents of terror.

"What does that concern you, madam?" Don Ramón replied harshly; "the care of my honour concerns me alone. Sufficient for you to know that this fault is the last your son will commit."

"Oh!" she said with terror, "will you then become his executioner?"

"I am his judge," the implacable gentleman replied in a terrible voice. "Nô Eusebio, get two horses ready."

"My God! my God!" the poor mother cried, rushing towards her son, whom she folded closely in her arms, "will no one come to my succour?"

All present were moved; Don Ramón himself could not restrain a tear.

"Oh!" she cried with a wild joy, "he is saved! God has softened the heart of this inflexible man!"

"You are mistaken, madam," Don Ramón interrupted, pushing her roughly back, "your son is no longer mine, he belongs to my justice!"

Then fixing on his son a look cold as a steel blade, he said in a voice so stern that in spite of himself it made the young man start.

"Don Rafaël, from this instant you no longer form a part of this society, which your crimes have horrified; it is with wild beasts that I condemn you to live and die."

At this terrible sentence, Doña Jesuita took a few steps towards her son, but, tottering, she fell prostrate—she had fainted.

Up to this moment Rafaël had, with a great effort, suppressed in his heart the emotions which agitated him, but at this last accident he could no longer restrain himself; he sprang towards his mother, burst into tears, and uttered a piercing cry:

"My mother! my mother!"

"Come this way," said Don Ramón, laying his hand upon his shoulder.

The boy stopped, staggering like a drunken man.

"Look, sir! pray look!" he cried, with a heartbroken sob; "my mother is dying!"

"It is you who have killed her!" the hacendero replied coldly.

Rafaël turned round as if a serpent had stung him; he darted at his father a look of strange expression, and, with clenched teeth and a livid brow said to him,

"Kill me, sir; for I swear to you that in the same manner as you have been pitiless to my mother and me, if I live I will be hereafter pitiless to you!"

Don Ramón cast upon him a look of contempt.

"Come on!" he said.

"Come on, then!" the boy repeated in a firm tone.

Doña Jesuita, who was beginning to recover her senses, perceived the departure of her son, as if in a dream.

"Rafaël! Rafaël!" she shrieked.

The young man hesitated for a second; then, with a bound, he sprang towards her, kissed her with wild tenderness, and rejoining his father, said—

"Now I can die! I have bidden adieu to my mother!"

And they went out.

The household, deeply moved by this scene, separated without communicating their impressions to each other, but all penetrated with sincere grief.

Under the caresses of her son, the poor mother had again lost all consciousness.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MOTHER.

Two horses, held by the bridle by Nô Eusebio, were waiting at the door of the hacienda.

"Shall I accompany you, señor?" asked the major-domo.

"No!" the hacendero replied drily.

He mounted and placed his son across the saddle before him.

"Take back the second horse," he said; "I do not want it."

And plunging his spurs into the sides of his horse, which snorted with pain, he set off at full speed.

The major-domo returned to the house, shaking his head sadly.

As soon as the hacienda had disappeared behind a swell in the ground, Don Ramón stopped, drew a silk handkerchief from his breast, bandaged the eyes of his son without saying a word to him, and then again resumed his course.

This ride in the desert lasted a long time; it had something dismal about it that chilled the soul.

This horseman, clothed in black, gliding silently along through the sands, bearing before him on his saddle a securely-bound boy, whose nervous starts and writhings alone proclaimed his existence, had a fatal and strange aspect, which would have impressed the bravest man with terror.

Many hours had passed without a word being exchanged between the son and the father; the sun began to sink in the horizon, a few stars already appeared in the dark blue of the sky—but the horse still went on.

The desert, every instant, assumed a more dismal and wild appearance; every tree of vegetation had disappeared; only here and there heaps of bones, whitened by time, marbled the sand with livid spots; birds of prey hovered slowly over the horsemen, uttering hoarse cries; and in the mysterious depths of the chaparrals, wild beasts, at the approach of night, preluded their rude concerts with dull roarings.

In these regions twilight does not exist; as soon as the sun has disappeared, the darkness is complete.

Don Ramón continued to gallop on. His son had not addressed a single prayer to him, or uttered a single complaint.

At length, towards eight o'clock, the horsemen stopped. This feverish ride had lasted ten hours. The horse panted and throbbed, and staggered at every step.

Don Ramón cast an anxious glance around him; a smile of satisfaction curled his lip. On all sides the desert displayed its immense plains of sand; on one alone the skirt of a virgin forest cut the horizon with its strange profile, breaking in a sinister manner the monotony of the prospect.

Don Ramón dismounted, placed his son upon the sand, took the bridle from his horse, that it might eat the provender he gave it; then, after having acquitted himself of all these duties, with the greatest coolness he approached his son, and removed the bandage from his eyes.

The boy remained silent, fixing upon his father a dull, cold look.

"Sir!" Don Ramón said, in a sharp, dry tone, "you are here more than twenty leagues from my hacienda, in which you will never set your foot again under pain of death; from this moment you are alone, you have no longer either father, mother, or family; as you have proved yourself almost a wild beast, I condemn you to live with wild beasts; my resolution is irrevocable, your prayers could not change it. Spare them then!"

"I shall not pray to you," the boy replied, "people do not intreat an executioner!"

Don Ramón started; he walked about in feverish agitation; but soon recovering himself, he continued,

"In this pouch are provisions for two days. I leave you this rifle, which in my hands never missed its mark; I give you also these pistols, this machete, and this knife, this hatchet, and powder and balls in these buffalo horns. You will find with the provisions a steel and everything necessary for kindling a fire. I add to these things a Bible, belonging to your mother. You are dead to society, into which you can never return; the desert is before you; it belongs to you; for me, I have no longer a son, adieu! The Lord be merciful to you, all is ended between us on earth; you are left alone, and without a family; it depends upon yourself, then, to commence a second existence, and to provide for your own wants. Providence never abandons those who place their confidence in it; henceforward, it alone will watch over you."

After having pronounced these words, Don Ramón, his countenance still impassible, replaced the bridle on his horse, restored his son to liberty by cutting the cords which bound him, and then getting into his saddle, he set off at his horse best speed.

Rafaël rose upon his knees, bent his head forward, listened with anxiety to the retreating gallop of the horse on the sand, followed with his eyes, as long as he was able, the fatal profile which was thrown in black relief by the moonbeams; and when the horseman was at length confounded with the darkness, the boy placed his hand upon his breast, and an expression of despair impossible to be described convulsed his features.

"My mother! my mother!" he cried.

He fell lifeless upon the sand. He had fainted.

After a long gallop, Don Ramón, insensibly and as if in spite of himself, slackened the speed of his horse, lending a keen ear to the vague noises of the desert, listening with anxiety, without rendering an account to himself why he did so, but expecting, perhaps, an appeal from his unfortunate son to return to him. Twice even his hand mechanically pulled the bridle as if he

obeyed a secret voice which commanded him to retrace his steps; but the fierce pride of his race was still the stronger, and he continued his course homewards.

The sun was rising at the moment Don Ramón arrived at the hacienda.

Two persons were standing side by side at the gate, waiting his return.

The one was Doña Jesuita, the other the major-domo.

At sight of his wife, pale, mute, and motionless before him, like the statue of desolation, the hacendero felt an unutterable sadness weigh upon his heart; he wished to pass, but Doña Jesuita, making two steps towards him and seizing the bridle of his horse, said with agonized emotion,—

"Don Ramón, what have you done with my son?"

The hacendero made no reply; on beholding the grief of his wife, remorse shot a pang into his heart, and he asked himself mentally if he had really the right to act as he had done.

Doña Jesuita waited in vain for an answer. Don Ramón looked earnestly at his wife; he was terrified at perceiving the indelible furrows which grief had imprinted upon that countenance, so calm, so placid, but a few hours before.

The noble woman was livid; her contracted features had an inexpressible rigidity; her eyes, burnt with fever, were red and dry, two black and deep lines rendered them hollow and haggard; a large stain marbled each of her cheeks, the trace of tears the source of which was dried up; she could weep no more, her voice was hoarse and broken, and her oppressed breast heaved painfully to allow the escape of a panting respiration.

After having waited some minutes for a reply to her question, "Don Ramón," she repeated, "what have you done with my son?"

The hacendero turned away his head with something like confusion.

"Oh! you have killed him!" she said, with a piercing shriek.

"No;" Don Ramón replied, terrified at her grief, and for the first time in his life forced to acknowledge the power of the mother who demands an account of her child.

"What have you done with him?" she screamed persistently.

"Presently, when you are more calm, you shall know all."

"I am calm," she replied, "why should you feign a pity you do not feel? My son is dead, and it is you who have killed him!"

Don Ramón alighted from his horse.

"Jesuita," he said to his wife, taking her hands and looking at her with tenderness, "I swear to you by all that is most sacred in the world, that your son exists; I have not touched a hair of his head."

The poor mother remained pensive for a few seconds.

"I believe you," she said; then after a pause she added, "What is become of him?"

"Well!" he replied, with some hesitation, "since you insist upon knowing all, learn that I have abandoned your son in the desert, but have left him the means to provide for his safety and his wants."

Doña Jesuita started, a nervous shudder crept through the whole of her frame.

"You have been very clement," she said in a cutting tone, and with bitter irony; "you have been very clement towards a boy of sixteen, Don Ramón; you felt a repugnance to bathe your hands in his blood, and you have preferred leaving that task to the wild beasts and ferocious Indians who alone people those solitudes."

"He was guilty!" the hacendero replied, in a low but firm voice.

"A child is never guilty in the eyes of her who has borne him in her bosom, and nourished him with her milk," she said with energy. "It is well, Don Ramón, you have condemned your son, I—I will save him!"

"What would you do?" the hacendero said, terrified at the resolution he saw kindled in the eyes of his wife.

"What matters it to you? Don Ramón, I will accomplish my duty as you believe you have accomplished yours! God will judge between us! Tremble, lest He should one day demand of you an account of the blood of your son!"

Don Ramón bent his head beneath this anathema; with a pale brow, and a mind oppressed by heavy remorse, he went slowly into the hacienda.

Doña Jesuita looked after him for an instant.

"Oh!" she cried, "may God grant that I may arrive in time!"

She then went out from the portico, followed by Nô Eusebio.

Two horses awaited them, concealed behind a clump of trees. They mounted immediately.

"Where are we going, señora?" the major-domo asked.

"In search of my son!" she replied in a shrill voice.

She seemed transfigured by hope; a bright colour flushed her cheeks; her black eyes darted

lightning.

Nô Eusebio untied four magnificent bloodhounds, called rastreros in the country, and which were kept to follow trails; he made them smell a shirt belonging to Rafaël; the hounds rushed forward on the scent, baying loudly. Nô Eusebio and Doña Jesuita galloped after them, exchanging a look of sanguine hope.

The dogs had no trouble in following the scent, it was straight and without obstruction, therefore they did not stop an instant.

When Doña Jesuita arrived at the spot where Rafaël had been abandoned by his father, the place was void!—the boy had disappeared!

The traces of his having sojourned there were visible; a fire was not yet burnt out; everything indicated that Rafaël could not have quitted that place more than an hour.

"What is to be done?" Nô Eusebio asked anxiously.

"Push forward!" Doña Jesuita replied resolutely, urging her horse again into action, and the generous steed responding with unflagging spirit.

Nô Eusebio followed her.

On the evening of that day the greatest consternation prevailed at the Hacienda del Milagro, Doña Jesuita and Nô Eusebio had not returned.

Don Ramón ordered all the household to mount on horseback.

Provided with torches, the peons and vaqueros commenced a battue of an immense extent in search of their mistress and the major-domo.

The whole night passed away without bringing the least satisfactory result.

At daybreak, the horse of Doña Jesuita was found half devoured in the desert. Its trappings were wanting.

The ground round the carcass of the horse appeared to have been the scene of a desperate conflict of some kind.

Don Ramón, in despair, gave orders for return.

"Great Heaven!" he cried, as he re-entered the hacienda, "is it possible that my chastisement has already commenced?"

Weeks, months, years passed away, without any circumstance, lifting the corner of the mysterious veil which enveloped these sinister events, and, notwithstanding the most active and persevering researches, nothing could be learnt of the fate of Rafaël, his mother, and Nô Eusebio.

THE END OF THE PROLOGUE.

PART I.

THE LOYAL HEART.

CHAPTER I.

THE PRAIRIE.

To the westward of the United States extends, many hundred miles beyond the Mississippi, an immense territory, unknown up to this day, composed of uncultivated lands, on which stands neither the log house of the white man nor the hatto of the Indian.

This vast desert, intersected by dark forests, with mysterious paths traced by the steps of wild beasts, and by verdant prairies with high and tufted herbage that undulates with the slightest breeze, is watered by powerful streams, of which the principal are the great Canadian river, the Arkansas, and the Red River.

Over these plains, endowed with so rich a vegetation, wander innumerable troops of wild horses, buffaloes, elks, bighorns, and those thousands of animals which the civilization of the other parts of America is every day driving back, and which regain their primitive liberty in these regions.

On this account, the most powerful Indian tribes have established their hunting grounds in this country.

The Delawares, the Creeks, and the Osages, prowl along the frontiers of the desert up to the environs of the establishments of the Americans, with whom some few bonds of civilization are beginning to unite them, engaged in constant conflict with the hordes of Pawnees, Blackfeet, Assiniboins, and Comanches, indomitable races, nomads of the prairies, or inhabitants of the mountains, who permeate in all directions this desert, the proprietorship of which none of them

venture to assert, but which they appear to agree to devastate, uniting in vast numbers for hunting parties, as if for the purpose of making war.

In fact, the enemies travellers are exposed to encounter in these deserts are of all kinds; without mentioning in this place wild beasts, there are hunters, trappers, and partisans, who are not less formidable to the Indians than to their fellow countrymen.

The prairie, therefore, the sinister theatre of incessant and terrible contests, is nothing in reality but a vast charnel house, in which perish obscurely, every year, in a merciless war of ambuscades, tens of thousands of intrepid men.

Nothing can be more grand or more majestic than the aspect of these prairies, into which Providence has bounteously bestowed such innumerable riches,—nothing, more seductive than these green fields, these thick forests, these large rivers; the melancholy murmur of the waters rippling over the stones of the shallow stream, the songs of thousands of birds concealed under the foliage, the bounding of animals sporting amidst the high grass: everything enchants, everything attracts, and draws aside the fascinated traveller, who soon, the victim of his enthusiasm, will fall into one of those numberless snares laid under his feet among the flowers, and will pay with his life for his imprudent credulity.

Towards the end of the year 1837, in the latter days of the month of September, by the Indians called the moon of the falling leaves—a man, still young, and who, from his complexion, notwithstanding his costume was entirely like that of the Indians, it was easy to perceive was a white man, was seated, about an hour before sunset, near a fire, the want of which began to be felt at this period of the year, at one of the most unfrequented spots of the prairie we have just described.

This man was at most thirty-five to thirty-six years old, though a few deeply marked wrinkles on his broad white forehead seemed to indicate a more advanced age.

His features were handsome and noble, and impressed with that pride and energy which a savage life imparts. His black eyes, starting from his head, and crowned with thick eye-brows, had a mild and melancholy expression, that tempered their brilliancy and vivacity; the lower part of his face disappeared beneath a long, thick beard, the bluish tint of which contrasted with the peculiar paleness spread over his countenance.

He was tall, slender, and perfectly well proportioned; his nervous limbs, upon which rose muscles of extreme rigidity, proved that he was endowed with more than common strength. In short, the whole of his person inspired that respectful sympathy which superior natures attract more easily in these countries than in ours, where physical strength is nearly always the attribute of the brute.

His remarkably simple attire was composed of a mitasse, or a kind of close drawers falling down to his ankles, and fastened to his hips by a leather belt, and of a cotton hunting shirt, embroidered with ornaments in wool of different colours, which descended to his midleg. This blouse, open in front, left exposed his embrowned chest, upon which hung a scapulary of velvet, from a slight steel chain. Short boots of untanned deerskin protected him from the bites of reptiles, and rose to his knees. A cap made of the skin of a beaver, whose tail hung down behind, covered his head, while long and luxuriant curls of black hair, which were beginning to be threaded with white, fell beneath it over his broad shoulder. This man was a hunter.

A magnificent rifle laid within reach of his hand, the game bag which was hung to his shoulder belt and the two buffalo horns, suspended at his girdle, and filled with powder and balls, left no doubt in this respect. Two long double pistols were carelessly thrown near his rifle.

The hunter, armed with that long knife called a machete, or a short-bladed straight sabre, which the inhabitants of the prairies never lay aside, was occupied in conscientiously skinning a beaver, whilst carefully watching the haunch of a deer which was roasting at the fire, suspended by a string, and listening to the slightest noises that arose in the prairies.

The spot where this man was seated was admirably chosen for a halt of a few hours.

It was a clearing at the summit of a moderately elevated hill, which, from its position, commanded the prairie for a great distance, and prevented a surprise. A spring bubbled up at a few paces from the place where the hunter had established his bivouac, and descended, forming a capricious cascade; to the plain. The high and abundant grass afforded an excellent pasto for two superb horses, with wild and sparkling eyes, which, safely tethered, were enjoying their food at a short distance from him. The fire, lighted with dry wood, and sheltered on three sides by the rock, only allowed a thin column of smoke to escape, scarcely perceptible at ten paces' distance, and a screen of all trees concealed the encampment from the indiscreet looks of those persons who were probably in ambuscade in the neighbourhood.

In short, all precautions necessary for the safety of the hunter had been taken with that prudence which announces a profound knowledge of the life of a wood ranger.

The red fires of the setting sun tinged with beautiful reflections the tops of the great trees, and the sun itself was on the point of disappearing behind the mountains which bounded the horizon, when the horses, suddenly ceasing their repast, raised their heads and prickled their ears—signs of restlessness which did not escape the hunter.

Although he heard no suspicious sound, and all appeared calm around him, he hastened to place the skin of the beaver before the fire, stretched upon two crossed sticks, and, without rising, he put out his hand towards his rifle.

The cry of the jay was heard, and repeated thrice at regular intervals.

The hunter laid his rifle by his side again with a smile, and resumed his watchful attention to the supper. Almost immediately the grass was violently opened, and two magnificent bloodhounds bounded up and lay down by the hunter, who patted them for an instant, and not without difficulty quieted their caresses.

The horses had carelessly resumed their interrupted repast.

The dogs only preceded by a few minutes a second hunter, who made his appearance almost immediately in the clearing.

This new personage, much younger than the first,—for he did not appear to be more than twenty-two years old,—was a tall, thin, agile and powerfully-built man, with a slightly-rounded head, lighted by two grey eyes, sparkling with intelligence, and endowed with a physiognomy open and loyal, to which long light hair gave a somewhat childish appearance.

He was clothed in the same costume as his companion, and on arriving, threw down by the fire a string of birds which he was carrying at his shoulder.

The two hunters then, without exchanging a word, set about preparing one of those suppers which long exercise has always the privilege of causing to be considered excellent.

The night had completely set in; the desert awoke by degrees; the howlings of wild beasts already resounded in the prairie.

The hunters, after supping with a good appetite, lit their pipes, and placing their backs to the fire, in order that the flame should not prevent them from perceiving the approach of any suspicious visitor whom darkness might bring them, smoked with the enjoyment of people who, after a long and painful journey, taste an instant of repose which they may not meet with again for some time.

"Well!" the first hunter said laconically between two puffs of tobacco.

"You were right," the other replied.

"Ah!"

"Yes, we have kept too much to the right, it was that which made us lose the scent."

"I was sure of it," the first speaker replied; "you see, Belhumeur, you trust too much to your Canadian habits: the Indians with whom we have to do here in no way resemble the Iroquois, who visit the hunting grounds of your country."

Belhumeur nodded his head in sign of acquiescence.

"After all," the other continued, "this is of very little importance at this moment; what is urgent is to know who are our thieves."

"I know."

"Good!" the other said, withdrawing his pipe quickly from his mouth; "and who are the Indians who have dared to steal the traps marked with my cipher?"

"The Comanches."

"I suspected as much. By heavens, ten of our best traps stolen during the night! I swear, Belhumeur, that they shall pay for them dearly! And where are the Comanches at this moment?"

"Within three leagues of us at most. It is a party of plunderers composed of a dozen men; according to the direction they are following, they are turning to their mountains."

"They shall not all arrive there," said the hunter, casting a glance at his rifle.

"Parbleu!" said Belhumeur with a loud laugh, "they will only get what they deserve. I leave it to you, Loyal Heart, to punish them for their insult; but you will be still more determined to avenge yourself upon them when you know by whom they are commanded."

"Ah! ah! I know their chief then?"

Belhumeur said, slightly smiling, "it is *Nehu Nutah*."

"Eagle Head!" cried Loyal, almost bounding from his seat. "Oh, oh! yes, I know him, and God grant that this time. I may settle the old account there is between us. His moccasins have long enough trodden the same path with me and barred my passage."

After pronouncing these word with an accent of hatred that made Belhumeur shudder, the hunter, sorry at having allowed the anger which mastered him to appear, resumed his pipe and continued to smoke with a feigned carelessness that did not at all impose upon his companion.

The conversation was interrupted.

The two hunters appeared to be absorbed in profound reflections, and smoked silently by the side of each other.

At length Belhumeur turned towards his companion.

"Shall I watch?" he asked.

"No," Loyal Heart replied, in a low voice; "sleep, I will be sentinel for you and myself too."

Belhumeur, without making the least observation, laid himself down by the fire, and in a few minutes slept profoundly.

When the owl hooted its matin song, which seemed to salute the speedy appearance of the sun, Loyal Heart, who during the night had remained motionless as a marble statue, awakened his companion.

"It is time," said he.

"Very good!" Belhumeur replied, rising immediately.

The hunters saddled their horses, descended the hill with precaution, and galloped off upon the track of the Comanches.

At this moment the sun appeared radiant in the heavens, dissipating the darkness and illuminating the prairie with its magnificent and reviving radiance.

CHAPTER II.

THE HUNTERS.

A few words now about the personages we have just brought upon the scene, and who are destined to play an important part in this history.

Loyal Heart—this name was the only one by which the hunter was known throughout the prairies of the West—enjoyed an immense reputation for skill, loyalty, and courage among the Indian tribes, with whom the chances of his adventurous existence had brought him in relation. All respected him. The white hunters and trappers, whether Spaniards, North Americans, or half-breeds, had a high opinion of his experience of the woods, and often had recourse to his counsels.

The pirates of the prairies themselves, thorough food for the gallows, the refuse of civilization, who only lived by rapine and exactions, did not dare to attack him, and avoided as much as possible throwing themselves in his way.

Thus this man had succeeded by the sheer force of his intelligence and his will, in creating for himself, and almost unknown to himself, a power accepted and recognized by the ferocious inhabitants of these vast deserts,—a power which he only employed in the common interest, and to facilitate for all the means of following in safety the occupations they had adopted.

No one knew who Loyal Heart was, or whence he came; the greatest mystery covered his early years.

One day, about twenty years before, when he was very young, some hunters had fallen in with him on the banks of the Arkansas in the act of setting traps for beavers. The few questions put to him concerning his preceding life remained unanswered; and the hunters, people not very talkative by nature, fancying they perceived, from the embarrassment and reticence of the young man, that he had a secret which he desired to keep, made a scruple about pressing him further—and nothing more was said on the subject.

At the same time, contrary to other hunters, or trappers of the prairies, who have all one or two companions with whom they associate, and whom they never leave, Loyal Heart lived alone, having no fixed habitation; he traversed the desert in all directions without pitching his tent anywhere.

Always reserved and melancholy, he avoided the society of his equals, although always ready, when occasion offered, to render them services, or even to expose his life for them. Then, when they attempted to express their gratitude, he would clap spurs to his horse, and go and set his traps at a distance, to give time to those he had obliged to forget the service he had rendered.

Every year, at the same period, that is to say, about the month of October, Loyal Heart disappeared for several entire weeks, without anyone being able to suspect whither he was gone; and when he returned it was observed that for several days his countenance was more dark and sad than ever.

One day he came back from one of these mysterious expeditions, accompanied by two magnificent young bloodhounds, which had from that time remained with him, and of which he seemed very fond.

Five years before the period at which we resume our narrative, when returning one evening from laying his traps for the night, he suddenly perceived the fire of an Indian camp through the trees.

A white youth, scarcely seventeen years of age, was fastened to a stake, and served as mark for the knives of the redskins, who amused themselves with torturing him before they sacrificed him to their sanguinary rage.

Loyal Heart, listening to nothing but the pity which the victim inspired, and without reflecting on the terrible danger to which he exposed himself, rushed in among the Indians, and placed himself in front of the prisoner, for whom he made a rampart of his body.

These Indians were Comanches. Astonished by this sudden irruption, which they were far from expecting, they remained a few instants motionless, confounded by so much audacity.

Without losing a moment, Loyal Heart cut the bonds of the prisoner, and giving him a knife, which the other received with joy, they both prepared to sell their lives dearly.

White men inspire Indians with an instinctive, an invincible terror; the Comanches, however, on recovering from their surprise, showed signs of rushing forward to attack the two men who seemed to defy them.

But the light of the fire, which fell full upon the face of the hunter, had permitted some of them to recognize him. The redskins drew back with respect, murmuring among themselves,—

"Loyal Heart! the great paleface hunter!"

Eagle Head, for so was the chief of these Indians named, did not know the hunter; it was the first time he had descended into the plains of the Arkansas, and he could not comprehend the exclamation of his warriors; besides, he cordially detested the palefaces, against whom he had sworn to carry on a war of extermination. Enraged at what he considered cowardice on the part of those he commanded, he advanced alone against Loyal Heart, but then an extraordinary occurrence took place.

The Comanches threw themselves upon their chief, and notwithstanding the respect in which they held him, they disarmed him to prevent his making any attack upon the hunter.

Loyal Heart, after thanking them, himself restored his arms to the chief; who received them coldly, casting a sinister glance at his generous adversary.

The hunter, perceiving this feeling, shrugged his shoulders disdainfully, and departed with the prisoner.

Loyal Heart had, in less than ten minutes, made for himself an implacable enemy and a devoted friend.

The history of the prisoner was simple.

Having left Canada with his father, for the purpose of hunting in the prairies, they had fallen into the hands of the Comanches; after a desperate resistance, his father had fallen covered with wounds. The Indians, irritated at this death, which robbed them of a victim, had bestowed the greatest care upon the young man, in order that he might honourably figure at the stake of punishment, and this would inevitably have happened had it not been for the providential intervention of Loyal Heart.

After having obtained these particulars, the hunter asked the young man what his intentions were, and whether the rough apprenticeship he had gone through as a wood ranger had not disgusted him with a life of adventures.

"By my faith, no!" the other replied; "on the contrary, I feel more determined than ever to follow this career; and, besides," he added, "I wish to avenge my father."

"That is just," the hunter observed.

The conversation broke off at this point.

Loyal Heart, having conducted the young man to one of his *cachés* (a sort of magazines dug in the earth in which trappers collect their wealth), produced the complete equipment of a trapper,—gun, knife, pistols, game bags, and traps,—and then, after placing these things before his *protégé*, he said simply,—

"Go! and God speed you!"

The other looked at him without replying; he evidently did not understand him.

Loyal Heart smiled.

"You are free," he resumed; "here are all the objects necessary for your new trade,—I give them to you, the desert is before you; I wish you good luck!"

The young man shook his head.

"No," he said, "I will not leave you unless you drive me from you; I am alone, without family or friends; you have saved my life, and I belong to you."

"It is not my custom to receive payment for the services I render," said the hunter.

"You require to be paid for them too dearly," the other answered warmly, "since you refuse to accept gratitude. Take back your gifts, they are of no use to me; I am not a mendicant to whom alms can be thrown; I prefer going back and delivering myself up again to the Comanches—adieu!"

And the Canadian resolutely walked away in the direction of the Indian camp.

Loyal Heart was affected. This young man had so frank, so honest and spirited an air, that he felt something in his breast speak strongly in his favour.

"Stop!" he said.

And the other stopped.

"I live alone," the hunter continued; "the existence which you will pass with me will be a sad one: a great grief consumes me; why should you attach yourself to me, who are unhappy?"

"To share your grief, if you think me worthy, and to console you, if that be possible; when man is left alone, he runs the risk of falling into despair; God has ordained that he should seek companions."

"That is true," the still undecided hunter murmured.

"Why do you pause?" the young man asked anxiously.

Loyal Heart gazed at him for a moment attentively; his eagle eye seemed to seek to penetrate his most secret thoughts; then, doubtless, satisfied with his examination, he asked,

"What is your name?"

"Belhumeur," the other replied; "or, if you prefer it, George Talbot; but I am generally known by the first name."

The hunter smiled.

"That is a promising name," he said, holding out his hand. "Belhumeur," he added, "from this time you are my brother; henceforth there is a friendship for life and death between us."

He kissed him above the eyes, as is the custom in the prairies in similar circumstances.

"For life and death," the Canadian replied, with a burst of enthusiasm, warmly pressing the hand which was held out to him, and kissing, in his turn, his new brother under the eyes.

And this was the way in which Loyal Heart and Belhumeur had become known to each other. During five years, not the least cloud, not the shadow of a cloud, had darkened the friendship which these two superior natures had sworn to each other in the desert, in the face of God. On the contrary, every day seemed to increase it; they had but one heart between them. Completely relying on each other, divining each other's most secret thoughts, these two men had seen their strength augment tenfold, and such was their reciprocal confidence, that they doubted nothing, and undertook and carried out the most daring expeditions, in face of which ten resolute men would have paused.

But everything succeeded with them, nothing appeared to be impossible to them; it might be said that a charm protected them, and rendered them invulnerable and invincible.

Their reputation was thus spread far and near, and those whom their name did not strike with admiration repeated it with terror.

After a few months passed by Loyal Heart in studying his companion, drawn away by that natural want which man feels of confiding his troubles to a faithful friend, the hunter no longer had any secrets from Belhumeur. This confidence, which the young man expected impatiently, but which he had done nothing to bring about, had bound still closer, if possible, the ties which united the two men, by furnishing the Canadian with the means of giving his friend the consolations which his bruised spirit required, and of avoiding irritating wounds that were ever bleeding.

On the day we met them in the prairie, they had just been the victims of an audacious robbery, committed by their ancient enemy, Eagle Head, the Comanche chief, whose hatred and rancour, instead of being weakened by time, had, on the contrary, only increased.

The Indian, with the characteristic deceit of his race, had dissembled, and devoured in silence the affront he had undergone from his people, and of which the two palefaced hunters were the direct cause, and awaited patiently the hour of vengeance. He had quietly dug a pit under the feet of his enemies, by prejudicing the redskins by degrees against them, and adroitly spreading calumnies about them. Thanks to this system, he had at length succeeded, or, at least, he thought he had, in making all the individuals dispersed over the prairies, even the white and half-breed hunters, consider these two men as their enemies.

As soon as this result had been obtained, Eagle Head placed himself at the head of thirty devoted warriors; and, anxious to bring about a quarrel that might ruin the men whose death he had sworn to accomplish, he had in one single night stolen all their traps, certain that they would not leave such an insult unpunished, but would try to avenge it.

The chief was not deceived in his calculations; all had fallen out just as he had foreseen it would.

In this position he awaited his enemies.

Thinking that they would find no assistance among the Indians or hunters, he flattered himself that with the thirty men he commanded he could easily seize the two hunters, whom he proposed to put to death with atrocious tortures.

But he had committed the fault of concealing the number of his warriors, in order to inspire more confidence in the hunters.

The latter had only partially been the dupes of this stratagem. Considering themselves sufficiently strong to contend even with twenty Indians, they had claimed the assistance of no one to avenge themselves upon enemies they despised, and had, as we have seen, set out resolutely in pursuit of the Comanches.

Closing here this parenthesis, a rather long one, it is true, but indispensable to understand of what is to follow, we will take up our narrative at the point we broke off at, on terminating the preceding chapter.

CHAPTER III.

THE TRAIL.

Eagle Head, who wished to be discovered by his enemies, had not taken any pains to conceal his trail.

It was perfectly visible in the high grass, and if now and then it appeared to be effaced, the hunters had but slightly to turn to one side or the other to regain the prints of it.

Never before had a foe been pursued on the prairies in such a fashion. It must have appeared the more singular to Loyal Heart, who, for a long time, had been acquainted with the cunning of the Indians, and knew with what skill, when they judged it necessary, they caused every indication of their passage to disappear.

This facility gave him reason to reflect. As the Comanches had taken no more pains to conceal their track, they must either believe themselves very strong, or else they had prepared an ambush into which they hoped to make their too confident enemies fall.

The two hunters rode on, casting, from time to time, a look right and left, in order to be sure they were not deceived; but the track still continued in a straight line, without turnings or circuits. It was impossible to meet with greater facilities in a pursuit. Belhumeur himself began to think this very extraordinary, and to be made seriously uneasy by it.

But if the Comanches had been unwilling to take the pains of concealing their trail, the hunters did not follow their example; they did not advance a step without effacing the trace of their passage.

They arrived thus on the banks of a tolerably broad rivulet, named the Verdigris, which is a tributary of the great Canadian river.

Before crossing this little stream, on the other side of which the hunters would no longer be very far from the Indians, Loyal Heart stopped, making a sign to his companion to do so likewise.

Both dismounted, and leading their horses by the bridle, they sought the shelter of a clump of trees, in order not to be perceived, if, by chance, some Indian sentinel should be set to watch their approach.

When they were concealed in the thickness of the wood, Loyal Heart placed a finger on his lip to recommend prudence to his companion, and, approaching his lips to his ear, he said, in a voice low as a breath,—

"Before we go any farther, let us consult, in order to ascertain what we had better do."

Belhumeur bent his head in sign of acquiescence.

"I suspect some treachery," the hunter resumed; "Indians are too experienced warriors, and too much accustomed to the life of the prairies, to act in this way without an imperative reason."

"That is true," the Canadian replied, with a tone of conviction; "this trail is too good and too plainly indicated not to conceal a snare."

"Yes, but they have wished to be too cunning; their craft has overshot the mark; old hunters, like us, are not to be deceived thus. We must redouble our prudence, and examine every leaf and blade of grass with care, before we venture nearer the encampment of the redskins."

"Let us do better," said Belhumeur, casting a glance around him; "let us conceal our horses in a safe place, where we can find them again at need, and then go and reconnoitre on foot the position and the number of those whom we wish to surprise."

"You are right, Belhumeur," said Loyal Heart; "your counsel is excellent, we will put it in practice."

"I think we had better make haste in that case."

"Why so? On the contrary, do not let us hurry; the Indians, not seeing us appear, will relax in their watchfulness, and we will profit by their negligence to attack them, if we should be forced to have recourse to such extreme measures; besides, it would be better to wait for the night before we commence our expedition."

"In the first place, let us put our horses in safety. Afterwards, we shall see what is best to be done."

The hunters left their concealment with the greatest precaution. Instead of crossing the river, they retraced their road, and for some time followed the route they had already traversed, then they bent a little to the left, and entered a ravine, in which they quickly disappeared among the high grass.

"I leave you to be guide, Belhumeur," said Loyal Heart, "I really do not know whither you are leading me!"

"Leave it to me, I have by chance discovered, within two gunshots of the place where we now are, a sort of citadel, where our horses will be as safe as possible, and in which, if so it should fall out, we should be able to sustain a regular siege."

"*Caramba!*" the hunter exclaimed, who, by this oath, which was habitual with him, betrayed his Spanish origin, "how did you make this precious discovery?"

"Faith!" said Belhumeur, "in the simplest manner possible. I had just laid my traps, when, in climbing up the mountain before us in order to shorten my road and rejoin you more quickly, at nearly two-thirds of the ascent, I saw, protruding from the bushes the velvety muzzle of a superb bear."

"Ah! ah! I am pretty well acquainted with that adventure. You brought me that day, if I am not mistaken, not one, but two black bearskins."

"That is the same, my fine fellows were two, one male and the other female. You may easily suppose that at the sight of them my hunter's instincts were immediately roused; forgetful of my fatigue, I cocked my rifle, and set out in pursuit of them. You will see for yourself what sort of a fortress they had chosen," he added, as he alighted from his horse, and Loyal Heart followed his example.

Before them rose, in the shape of an amphitheatre, a mass of rocks, which assumed the most curious and fantastic shapes; thin bushes sprang here and there from the interstices of the stones, climbing plants crowned the summits of the rocks, and gave to this mass, which rose more than six hundred feet above the prairie, the appearance of one of those ancient feudal ruins which are to be met with occasionally on the banks of the great rivers of Europe.

This place was named by the hunters of these plains, the White Castle, from the colour of the blocks of granite which formed it.

"We shall never be able to get up there with our horses," said Loyal Heart, after carefully surveying for an instant the space they had to clear.

"Let us try, at all events!" said Belhumeur, pulling his horse by the bridle.

The ascent was rough, and any other horses than those of hunters, accustomed to the most difficult roads, would have been unable to accomplish it, but would have rolled from the top to the bottom.

It was necessary to choose with care the spot on which the foot must be placed, and then to spring forward at a bound, and all this with turnings and twisting enough to produce a dizziness.

After half an hour of extraordinary difficulties they arrived at a sort of platform, ten yards broad at most.

"This is it!" said Belhumeur, stopping.

"How this?" Loyal Heart replied, looking around on all sides without perceiving an opening.

"Come this way!" said Belhumeur, smiling.

And still dragging his horse after him, he passed behind a block of the rock, the hunter following him with awakened curiosity.

After walking for five minutes in a sort of trench, at most three feet wide, which seemed to wind round upon itself, the adventurers found themselves suddenly before the yawning mouth of a deep cavern.

This road, formed by one of those terrible convulsions of nature so frequent in these regions, was so well concealed behind the rocks and stones which masked it, that it was impossible to discover it except by a providential chance.

The hunters entered.

Before ascending the mountain, Belhumeur had collected a large provision of candlewood; he lit two torches, keeping one for himself, and giving the other to his companion.

Then the grotto appeared to them in all its wild majesty.

Its walls were high and covered with brilliant stalactites, which reflected back the light, multiplying it, and forming a fairy-like illumination.

"This cavern," said Belhumeur, after he had given his friend time to examine it in all its details, "is, I have no doubt, one of the wonders of the prairies; this gallery, which descends in a gentle declivity before us, passes under the Verdigris, and debouches on the other side of the river, at a distance of more than a mile, into the plain. In addition to the gallery by which we entered, and that which is before us, there exist four others, all of which have issues at different places. You see that here we are in no risk of being surrounded, and that these spacious chambers offer us a suite of apartments splendid enough to make the president of the United States himself jealous."

Loyal Heart, enchanted with the discovery of this refuge, wished to examine it perfectly, and although he was naturally very silent, the hunter could not always withhold his admiration.

"Why have you never told me of this place before?" he said to Belhumeur.

"I waited for the opportunity," the latter replied.

The hunters secured their horses, with abundance of provender, in one of the compartments of the grotto, into which the light penetrated by imperceptible fissures; and then, when they were satisfied that the noble animals; could want for nothing during their absence, and could not escape, they threw their rifles over their shoulders, whistled to their dogs, and, descended with hasty steps the gallery which passed under the river.

Soon the air became moist around them, a dull, continuous noise was heard above their heads,—they were passing under the Verdigris. Thanks to a species of lantern, formed by a hollow rock rising in the middle of the river's course, there was light sufficient to guide them.

After half an hour's walk they debouched in the prairie by an entrance masked by bushes and creeping plants.

They had remained a long time in the grotto. In the first place, they had examined it minutely,

like men who foresaw that some day or other they should stand in need of seeking a shelter there; next they had made a kind of stable for their horses; and lastly, they had snatched a hasty morsel of food, so that the sun was on the point of setting at the moment when they set off again upon the track of the Comanches.

Then commenced the true Indian pursuit. The two hunters, after having laid on their bloodhounds, glided silently in their traces, creeping on their hands and knees through the high grass, the eye on the watch, the ear on the listen, holding their breath, and stopping at intervals to inhale the air, and interrogate those thousand sounds of the prairies which hunters notice with incredible facility, and which they explain without hesitation.

The desert was plunged in a death-like silence.

At the approach of night in these immense solitudes, nature seems to collect herself, and prepare, by a religious devotion, for the mysteries of darkness.

The hunters continued advancing, redoubling their precautions, and creeping along in parallel lines.

All at once the dogs came silently to a stop. The brave animals seemed to comprehend the value of silence in these parts, and that a single cry would cost their masters their lives.

Belhumeur cast a piercing glance around him. His eye flashed, he gathered himself up, and bounding like a panther, he sprang upon an Indian warrior, who, with his body bent forward, and his head down, seemed to be sensible of the approach of an enemy.

The Indian was roughly thrown upon his back, and before he could utter a cry of distress or for help, Belhumeur had his throat in his grasp and his knee on his breast.

Then, with the greatest coolness, the hunter unsheathed his knife, and plunged it up to the hilt in the heart of his enemy.

When the savage saw that he was lost, he disdained to attempt any useless resistance, but fixing upon the Canadian a look of hatred and contempt, an ironical smile curled his lips, and he awaited death with a calm face.

Belhumeur replaced his knife in his belt, and pushing the body on one side, said imperturbably,—

"One!"

And he crept on again.

Loyal Heart had watched the movements of his friend with the greatest attention, ready to succour him if it were necessary; when the Indian was dead, he calmly took up the trail again.

Ere long the light of a fire gleamed between the trees and an odour of roasted flesh struck the keen smell of the hunters.

They drew themselves up like two phantoms along an enormous cork tree, which was within a few paces of them, and embracing the gnarled trunk, concealed themselves among the tufted branches.

Then they looked out, and found that they were, it might be said, soaring over the camp of the Comanches, situated within ten yards of them, at most.

CHAPTER IV.

THE TRAVELLERS.

About the same hour that the trappers issued from the grotto, and took up the trail of the Comanches again, at twenty miles' distance from them, a rather large party of white travellers halted upon the banks of the great Canadian river and prepared to encamp for the night in a magnificent position, where there were still some remains of an ancient camp of an Indian hunting party.

The hunters and the half-breed Gambusinos who served as guides to the travellers hastened to unload a dozen mules, which were escorted by Mexican lanceros.

With the bales they made an enclosure of an oval form, in the interior of which they lit a fire; then, without troubling themselves any further about their companions, the guides united together in a little group and prepared their evening repast.

A young officer, of about twenty-five years of age, of martial bearing, with delicately marked features, went up respectfully to a palanquin drawn by two mules and escorted by two horsemen.

"In what place would you wish, señor, the señorita's tent to be pitched?" the young officer asked, as he raised his hat.

"Where you please, Captain Aguilar, provided it be quickly done; my niece is sinking with fatigue," the cavalier, who rode on the right of the palanquin, replied.

He was a man of lofty stature, with hard marked features, and an eagle eye, whose hair was as white as the snows of Chimborazo, and who, under the large military cloak which he wore,

allowed glimpses to appear of the splendid uniform, glittering with embroidery, of a Mexican general.

The captain retired, with another bow, and returning to the lanceros, he gave them orders to set up in the middle of the camp enclosure, a pretty tent, striped rose colour and blue, which was carried across the back of a mule.

Five minutes later, the general, dismounting, offered his hand gallantly to a young female, who sprang lightly from the palanquin, and conducted her to the tent, where, thanks to the attentions of Captain Aguilar, everything was so prepared that she found herself as comfortable as circumstances would permit.

Behind the general and his niece, two other persons entered the tent.

One was short and stout, with a full, rosy face, green spectacles, and a light-coloured wig, who appeared to be choking in the uniform of an army surgeon.

This personage, whose age was a problem, but who appeared to be about fifty, was named Jérome Boniface Duveux; he was a Frenchman, and a surgeon-major in the Mexican service.

On alighting from his horse, he had seized and placed under his arm, with a species of respect, a large valise fastened to the hinder part of his saddle, and from which he seemed unwilling to part.

The second person was a girl of about fifteen years of age, of a forward and lively mien, with a turn-up nose and a bold look, belonging to the half-breed race, who served as lady's maid to the general's niece.

A superb Negro, decorated with the majestic name of Jupiter, hastened, aided by two or three Gambusinos, to prepare the supper.

"Well! doctor," said the general, smiling, to the fat man, who came in puffing like a bullock, and sat down upon his valise, "how do you find my niece this evening?"

"The señorita is always charming!" the doctor replied gallantly, as he wiped his brow, "Do you not find the heat very oppressive?"

"Faith! no," replied the general, "not more so than usual."

"Well, it appears so to me!" said the doctor with a sigh. "What are you laughing at, you little witch?" added he, turning towards the waiting maid, who, in fact, was laughing with all her might.

"Pay no attention to that wild girl, doctor; you know she is but a child," the young lady said, with a pleasing smile.

"I have always told you, Doña Luz," persisted the doctor, knitting his large eyebrows, and puffing out his cheeks, "that that little girl is a demon, to whom you are much too kind, and who will end by playing you an evil turn some of these days."

"Ooouch! the wicked picker up of pebbles!" the quadroon said with a grin, in allusion to the doctor's mania for collecting stones.

"Come, come, peace!" said the general, "has today's journey fatigued you much, my dear niece?"

"Not exceedingly," the young lady replied, with a suppressed yawn; "during nearly a month that we have been travelling I have become accustomed to this sort of life, which, I confess, at the commencement, I found painful enough."

The general sighed, but made no reply. The doctor was absorbed by the care with which he was classifying the plants and stones which he had collected during the day.

The half-breed girl flew about the tent like a bird, occupied in putting everything in order that her mistress might want.

We will take advantage of this moment of respite to sketch the portrait of the young lady.

Doña Luz de Bermudez was the daughter of a younger sister of the general.

She was a charming girl of sixteen at most. Her large black eyes, surmounted by eyebrows whose deep colour contrasted finely with the whiteness of her fair, pure forehead, were veiled by long velvety lashes, which modestly concealed their splendour; her little mouth was set off by teeth of pearl, edged by lips of coral; her delicate skin wore the down of the ripe peach, and her blue-black hair, when liberated from its bands, formed a veil for her whole person.

Her form was slender and supple, with all the curves of the true line of beauty. She possessed, in an eminent degree, that undulating, gracefully serpentine movement which distinguishes American women; her hands and feet were extremely small, and her step had the careless voluptuousness of the Creole, so full of ever varying attractions.

In short, in the person of this young lady, might be said to be combined all the graces and perfections.

Ignorant as most of her compatriots, she was gay and cheerful; amused with the smallest trifle, and knowing nothing of life but the agreeable side of it.

But this beautiful statue was not animated; it was Pandora before Prometheus had stolen for her fire from heaven, and, to continue our mythological comparison, Love had not yet brushed her with his wing, her brow had not yet been contracted by the pressure of thought, her heart had

not yet beaten under the influence of passion.

Brought up under the care of the general in almost cloistral seclusion, she had only quitted it to accompany him in a journey he had undertaken through the prairies.

What was the object of this journey, and why had her uncle so positively insisted upon her making it with him? That was of little consequence to the young girl.

Happy to live in the open air, to be constantly seeing new countries and new objects, to be free in comparison with the life she had hitherto led, she had asked nothing better, and took care never to trouble her uncle with indiscreet questions.

At the period when we met her, then, Doña Luz was a happy girl, living from day to day, satisfied with the present, and thinking nothing of the future.

Captain Aguilar entered, preceding Jupiter, who brought in the dinner.

The table was decked by Phoebe, the waiting maid.

The repast consisted of preserved meats and a joint of roast venison.

Four persons took their places round the table; the general, his niece, the captain, and the doctor.

Jupiter and Phoebe waited.

Conversation languished during the first course; but when the appetite of the party was a little abated, the young girl, who delighted in teasing the doctor, turned to him, and said,—

"Have you made a rich harvest today, doctor?"

"Not too rich, señorita," he replied.

"Well! but," she said, laughing, "there appears to me to be such an abundance of stones on our route, that it only rested with yourself to gather together enough to load a mule."

"You ought to be pleased with your journey," said the general, "for it offers you such an opportunity for indulging in your passion for plants of all sorts."

"Not too great, general, I must confess; the prairie is not so rich as I thought it was; and if it were not for the hope I entertain of discovering one plant, whose qualities may advance science, I should almost regret my little house at Guadeloupe, where my life glided away in such uniform tranquillity."

"Bah!" the captain interrupted, "we are as yet only on the frontiers of the prairies. You will find, when we have penetrated further into the interior, that you will not be able to gather the riches which will spring from under your feet."

"God grant it may be so, captain;" said the doctor, with a sigh; "provided I find the plant I seek I shall be satisfied."

"Is it then such a very valuable plant?" asked Doña Luz.

"What, señorita!" cried the doctor, warming with the question. "A plant which Linnaeus has described and classified, and which no one has since found! a plant that would make my reputation! And you ask me if it is valuable?"

"Of what use is it, then?" the young lady asked, in a tone of curiosity.

"Of what use is it?"

"Yes."

"None at all, that I am aware of," the doctor replied, ingeniously.

Doña Luz broke into a silvery laugh, whose pearly notes might have made a nightingale jealous.

"And you call it a valuable plant?"

"Yes—if only for its rarity."

"Ah! that's all."

"Let us hope you will find it, doctor," said the general in a conciliatory tone. "Jupiter, call the chief of the guides hither."

The Negro left the tent, and almost immediately returned, followed by a Gambusino.

The latter was a man of about forty, tall in stature, square-built, and muscular. His countenance, though not exactly ugly, had something repulsive in it for which the spectator was at a loss to account; his wild, sinister-looking eyes, buried under their orbits, cast a savage light, which with his low brow, his curly hair, and his coppery complexion, made altogether a not very agreeable whole. He wore the costume of a wood ranger; he was cold, impassible, of a nature essentially taciturn, and answered to the name of *the Babbler*, which, no doubt, the Indians or his companions had given him by antiphrasis.

"Here, my good fellow," said the general, holding out to him a glass filled to the brim with a sort of brandy, called mescal, from the name of the place where it is distilled, "drink this."

The hunter bowed, emptied the glass, which contained about a pint, at a draught; then, passing his cuff across his moustache, waited.

"I wish," said the general, "to halt for a few days in some safe position, in order to make, without

fear of being disturbed, certain researches; shall we be secure here?"

The eye of the guide sparkled: he fixed a burning glance upon the general.

"No," he replied, laconically.

"Why not?"

"Too many Indians and wild beasts."

"Do you know one more suitable?"

"Yes."

"Is it far?"

"No."

"At what distance?"

"Forty miles."

"How long will it take us to arrive there?"

"Three days."

"That will do. Conduct us thither. Tomorrow, at sunrise, we will set forward in our march."

"Is that all?"

"That is all."

"Good night."

And the hunter withdrew.

"What I admire in the Babbler," said the Captain, with a smile, "is that his conversation never tires you."

"I should like it much better if he spoke more," said the doctor, shaking his head. "I always suspect people who are so afraid of saying too much; they generally have something to conceal."

The guide, after leaving the tent, joined his companions, with whom he began to talk in a low voice, but in a very animated manner.

The night was magnificent; the travellers, assembled in front of the tent, were chatting together, and smoking their cigars.

Doña Luz was singing one of those charming Creole songs, which are so full of sweet melody and expression.

All at once a red-tinted light appeared in the horizon, increasing every instant, and a dull continuous noise, like the growling of distant thunder, was heard.

"What is that?" the general cried, rising hastily.

"The prairie is on fire," the Babbler replied, quietly.

At this terrible announcement, made so quietly, the camp was all in confusion.

It was necessary to fly instantly, if they did not choose to run the risk of being burnt alive.

One of the Gambusinos, taking advantage of the disorder, glided away among the baggage, and disappeared in the plain, after exchanging a mysterious signal with the Babbler.

CHAPTER V.

THE COMANCHES.

Loyal Heart and Belhumeur, concealed among the tufted branches of the cork tree, were observing the Comanches.

The Indians depended upon the vigilance of their sentinels. Far from suspecting that their enemies were so near them and were watching their motions, they crouched or lay around the fires, eating or smoking carelessly.

These savages, to the number of twenty-five, were dressed in their buffalo robes, and painted in the most varied and fantastic manner. Most of them had their faces covered with vermillion, others were entirely black, with a long white stripe upon each cheek; they wore their bucklers on their backs, with their bows and arrows, and near them lay their guns.

By the number of wolves' tails fastened to their moccasins, and which dragged on the ground behind them, it was easy to perceive that they were all picked warriors, renowned in their tribe.

At some paces from the group, Eagle Head leant motionless against a tree. With his arms crossed on his breast, and leaning gently forward, he seemed to be listening to vague sounds, perceptible to himself alone.

Eagle Head was an Osage Indian; the Comanches had adopted him when quite young, but he had always preserved the costume and manners of his nation.

He was, at most, twenty-eight years of age, nearly six feet high, and his large limbs, upon which enormous muscles developed themselves, denoted extraordinary strength.

Differing in this respect from his companions, he only wore a blanket fastened round his loins, so as to leave his bust and his arms bare. The expression of his countenance was handsome and noble; his black, animated eyes, close to his aquiline nose, and his somewhat large mouth, gave him a faint resemblance to a bird of prey. His hair was shaved off, with the exception of a ridge upon the middle of his head, which produced the effect of the crest of a helmet, and a long scalp lock, in which was fixed a bunch of eagle's feathers, hung down behind him.

His face was painted of four different colours—blue, white, black, and red; the wounds inflicted by him upon his enemies were marked in blue upon his naked breast. Moccasins of untanned deerskin came up above his knees, and numerous wolves' tails were fastened to his heels.

Fortunately for the hunters, the Indians were on the warpath, and had no dogs with them; but for this, they would have been discovered long before, and could not possibly have approached so near the camp.

In spite of his statue-like immobility, the eye of the chief sparkled, his nostrils expanded, and he lifted his right arm mechanically, as if to impose silence upon his warriors.

"We are scented," Loyal Heart murmured, in a voice so low that his companion could hardly hear it.

"What is to be done?" Belhumeur replied.

"Act," said the trapper, laconically.

Both then glided silently from branch to branch, from tree to tree, without touching the ground, till they reached the opposite side of the camp, just above the place where the horses of the Comanches were hobbled to graze.

Belhumeur descended softly, and cut the thongs that held them; and the horses, excited by the whips of the hunters, rushed out, neighing and kicking in all directions.

The Indians rose in disorder, and hastened, with loud cries, in pursuit of their horses.

Eagle Head alone, as if he had guessed the spot where his enemies were in ambush, directed his steps straight towards them, screening himself as much as possible behind the trees which he passed.

The hunters drew back, step by step, looking carefully round them, so as not to allow themselves to be encompassed.

The cries of the Indians grew fainter in the distance; they were all in eager pursuit of their horses.

The chief found himself alone in presence of his two enemies.

On arriving at a tree whose enormous trunk appeared to guarantee the desired safety, disdaining to use his gun, and the opportunity seeming favourable, he adjusted an arrow on his bowstring. But whatever might be his prudence and address, he could not make this movement without discovering himself a little. Loyal Heart raised his gun, the trigger was pressed, the ball whizzed, and the chief bounded into the air uttering a howl of rage, and fell upon the ground.

His arm was broken.

The two hunters were already by his side.

"Not a movement, redskin," Loyal Heart said to him; "not a movement, or you are a dead man!"

The Indian remained motionless, apparently stoical, but devouring his rage.

"I could kill you," the hunter continued; "but I am not willing to do so. This is the second time I have given you your life, chief, but it will be the last. Cross my path no more, and, remember, do not steal my traps again; if you do, I swear I will grant you no mercy."

"Eagle Head is a chief renowned among the men of his tribe," the Indian replied, haughtily; "he does not fear death; the white hunter may kill him, he will not hear him complain."

"No, I will not kill you, chief; my God forbids the shedding of human blood unnecessarily."

"Wah!" said the Indian, with an ironical smile, "my brother is a missionary."

"No, I am an honest trapper, and do not wish to be an assassin."

"My brother speaks the words of old women," the Indian continued; "Nehu mutah never pardons, he takes vengeance."

"You will do as you please, chief," the hunter replied, shrugging his shoulders contemptuously, "I have no intention of trying to change your nature; only remember you are warned—farewell!"

"And the devil admire you!" Belhumeur added, giving him a contemptuous shove with his foot.

The chief appeared insensible even to this fresh insult, save that his brows contracted slightly. He did not stir, but followed his enemies with an implacable look, while they, without troubling themselves further about him, plunged into the forest.

"You may say what you like, Loyal Heart," said Belhumeur, "but you are wrong, you ought to have killed him."

"Bah! what for?" the hunter asked, carelessly.

"*Cascaras!* what for? Why, there would have been one head of vermin the less in the prairie."

"Where there are so many," said the other, "one more or less cannot signify much."

"Humph! that's true!" Belhumeur replied, apparently convinced; "but where are we going now?"

"To look after our traps, *caramba!* do you think I will lose them?"

"Humph! that's a good thought."

The hunters advanced in the direction of the camp, but in the Indian fashion—that is to say, by making numberless turnings and windings intended to throw out the Comanches.

After progressing in this way for twenty minutes, they arrived at the camp. The Indians had not yet returned; but in all probability, it would not be long before they did so. All their baggage was scattered about. Two or three horses, which had not felt disposed to run away, were browsing quietly on the peavines.

Without losing time, the hunters set about collecting their traps, which was soon done. Each loaded himself with five, and, without further delay, they resumed the way to the cavern where they had concealed their horses.

Notwithstanding the tolerably heavy weight they carried on their shoulders, the two men marched lightly, much pleased at having so happily terminated their expedition, and laughing at the trick they had played the Indians.

They had gone on thus for some time, and could already hear the murmur of the distant waters of the river, when, all at once, the neighing of a horse struck their ears.

"We are pursued," said Loyal Heart, stopping.

"Hum!" Belhumeur remarked, "it is, perhaps, a wild horse."

"No; a wild horse does not neigh in that manner; it is the Comanches; but we can soon know," he added, as he threw himself down to listen, and placed his ear close to the ground.

"I was sure of it," he said, rising almost immediately; "it is the Comanches; but they are not following a full track—they are hesitating."

"Or perhaps their march is retarded by the wound of Eagle Head."

"That's possible! Oh, oh! do they fancy themselves capable of catching us, if we wished to escape from them?"

"Ah! if we were not loaded, that would soon be done."

Loyal Heart reflected a minute.

"Come," he said, "we have still half an hour, and that is more than we want."

A rivulet flowed at a short distance from them; the hunter entered its bed with his companion, who followed all his movements.

When he arrived in the middle of the stream, Loyal Heart carefully wrapped up the traps in a buffalo skin, that no moisture might come to them, and then he allowed them quietly to drop to the bottom of the stream.

This precaution taken, the hunters crossed the rivulet, and made a false trail of about two hundred paces, and afterwards returned cautiously so as not to leave a print that might betray their return. They then re-entered the forest, after having, with a gesture, sent the dogs to the horses. The intelligent animals obeyed, and soon disappeared in the darkness.

This resolution to send away the dogs was useful in assisting to throw the Indians off the track, for they could scarcely miss following the traces left by the bloodhounds in the high grass.

Once in the forest, the hunters again climbed up a tree, and began to advance between heaven and earth—a mode of travelling much more frequently used than is believed in Europe, in this country where it is often impossible, on account of the underwood and the trees, to advance without employing an axe to clear a passage.

It is possible, by thus passing from branch to branch, to travel leagues together without touching the ground.

It was exactly thus, only for another cause, that our hunters acted at this moment.

They advanced in this fashion before their enemies, who drew nearer and nearer, and they soon perceived them under them, marching in Indian file, that is to say, one behind another, and following their track attentively.

Eagle Head came first, half lying upon his horse, on account of his wound, but more animated than ever in pursuit of his enemies.

When the Comanches passed them, the two trappers gathered themselves up among the leaves, holding their breath. The most trifling circumstance would have sufficed to proclaim their presence. The Indians passed without seeing them. The hunters resumed their leafy march.

"Ouf!" said Belhumeur, at the end of a minute. "I think we have got rid of them this time!"

"Do not cry before you are out of the wood, but let us get on as fast as we can; these demons of redskins are cunning, they will not long be the dupes of our stratagem."

"*Sacrebleu!*" the Canadian suddenly exclaimed, "I have let my knife fall, I don't know where; if

these devils find it, we are lost."

"Most likely," Loyal Heart murmured; "the greater reason then for not losing a single minute."

In the meantime, the forest, which till then had been calm, began all at once to grow excited, the birds flew about uttering cries of terror, and in the thick underwood they could hear the dry branches crack under the hurried footfalls of the wild animals.

"What's going on now?" said Loyal Heart, stopping, and looking round him with uneasiness; "the forest appears to be turned topsy-turvey!"

The hunters sprang up to the top of the tree in which they were, and which happened to be one of the loftiest in the forest.

An immense light tinged the horizon at about a league from the spot where they were; this light increased every minute, and advanced towards them with giant strides.

"Curses on them!" cried Belhumeur, "the Comanches have fired the prairie!"

"Yes, and I believe this time that, as you said just now, we are lost," Loyal Heart replied coolly.

"What's to be done?" said the Canadian, "in an instant we shall be surrounded."

Loyal Heart reflected seriously.

At the end of a few seconds he raised his head, and a smile of triumph curled the corners of his mouth.

"They have not got us yet," he replied; "follow me, my brother;" and he added in a low voice, "I must see my mother again!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE PRESERVER.

In order to make the reader comprehend the position of the hunters, it is necessary to return to the Comanche chief.

Scarce had his enemies disappeared among the trees, ere Eagle Head raised himself softly up, bent his body forward, and listened to ascertain if they were really departing. As soon as he had acquired that certainty, he tore off a morsel of his blanket with which he wrapped up his arm as well as he could, and, in spite of the weakness produced by loss of blood and the pain he suffered, he set off resolutely on the trail of the hunters.

He accompanied them, thus himself unseen, to the limits of the camp. There, concealed behind an ebony tree, he witnessed, without being able to prevent it, though boiling with rage, the search made by the hunters for their traps, and, at length, their departure after recovering them.

Although the bloodhounds which the hunters had with them were excellent dogs, trained to scent an Indian from a distance, by a providential chance, which probably saved the life of the Comanche chief, they had fallen upon the remains of the repast of the redskins, and their masters, not dreaming that they were watched, did not think of commanding their vigilance.

The Comanches at length regained their camp, after having, with infinite difficulty, succeeded in catching their horses.

The sight of their wounded chief caused them great surprise, and still greater anger, of which Eagle Head took advantage to send them all off again in pursuit of the hunters, who, retarded by the traps they carried, could not be far off, and must inevitably fall speedily into their hands.

They had been but for an instant the dupes of the stratagem invented by Loyal Heart, and had not been long in recognising, on the first trees of the forest unequivocal traces of the passage of their enemies.

At this moment, Eagle Head, ashamed of being thus held in check by two determined men, whose cunning, superior to his own, deceived all his calculations, resolved to put an end to them at once, by carrying into execution the diabolical project of setting fire to the forest; a means which, according to the manner in which he meant to employ it, must, he did not doubt, at length deliver his formidable adversaries up to him.

In consequence, dispersing his warriors in various directions, so as to form a vast circle, he ordered the high grass to be set on fire in various places simultaneously.

The idea, though barbarous and worthy of the savage warriors who employed it, was a good one. The hunters, after having vainly endeavoured to escape from the network of flame which encompassed them on all sides, would be obliged, in spite of themselves, if they did not prefer being burnt alive, to surrender quietly to their ferocious enemies.

Eagle Head had calculated and foreseen everything, except the most easy and most simple thing, the only chance of safety that would be left to Loyal Heart and his companions.

As we have said, at the command of their chief the warriors had dispersed, and had lighted the conflagration at several points simultaneously.

At this advanced season of the year, the plants and grass, parched by the incandescent rays of the summer's sun, were immediately in a blaze, and the fire extended in all directions with frightful rapidity.

Not, however, so quickly as not to allow a certain time to elapse before it united.

Loyal Heart had not hesitated. Whilst the Indians were running like demons around the barrier of flame they had just opposed to their enemies, and were uttering yells of joy, the hunter, followed by his friend, had rushed at full speed between two walls of fire, which from right and left advanced upon him, hissing, and threatening to unite at once above his head and beneath his feet. Amidst calcined trees which fell with a crash, blinded by clouds of thick smoke which stopped their respiration, burnt by showers of sparks which poured upon them from all parts, following boldly their course beneath a vault of flame, the intrepid adventurers had cleared, at the cost of a few trifling burns, the accursed enclosure in which the Indians had thought to bury them for ever, and were already far from the enemies who were congratulating themselves upon the success of their artful and barbarous plan.

The conflagration, in the meantime, assumed formidable proportions; the forest shrivelled up under the grasp of the fire; the prairie was but one sheet of flame, in the midst of which the wild animals, driven from their dens and lairs by this unexpected catastrophe, ran about, mad with terror.

The sky gleamed with blood-red reflections, and an impetuous wind swept before it both flames and smoke.

The Indians themselves were terrified at their own handiwork, on seeing around them entire mountains lighted up like baleful beacons; the earth became hot, and immense troops of buffalos made the ground tremble with their furious course, while they uttered those bellowings of despair which fill with terror the hearts of the bravest men.

In the camp of the Mexicans everything was in the greatest disorder; it was all noise and frightful confusion. The horses had broken their shackles, and fled away in all directions; the men seized their arms and ammunition; others carried the saddles and packages.

Everyone was crying, swearing, commanding—all were running about the camp as if they had been struck with madness.

The fire continued to advance majestically, swallowing up everything in its passage, preceded by a countless number of animals of all kinds, who bounded along with howls of fear, pursued by the scourge which threatened to overtake them at every step.

A thick smoke, laden with sparks, was already passing over the camp of the Mexicans; twenty minutes more and all would be over with them.

The general, pressing his niece in his arms, in vain demanded of the guides the best means of avoiding the immense peril which threatened them.

But these men, terrified by the imminence of the peril, had lost all self-possession. And then, what remedy could be employed? The flames formed an immense circle, of which the camp had become the centre.

The strong breeze, however, which up to that moment had kept alive the conflagration, by lending it wings, sank all at once.

There was not a breath of air.

The progress of the fire slackened.

Providence granted these unhappy creatures a few minutes more.

At this moment the camp presented a strange aspect.

All the men, struck with terror, had lost the sense even of self-preservation.

The *lanceros* confessed to each other.

The guides were plunged in gloomy despair.

The general accused Heaven of his misfortune.

As for the doctor, he only regretted the plant he could not discover; with him every other consideration yielded to that.

Doña Luz, with her hands clasped, and her knees on the ground, was praying fervently.

The fire continued to approach, with its vanguard of wild beasts.

"Oh!" cried the general, shaking the arm of the guide violently, "will you leave us to be burnt thus, without making an effort to save us?"

"What can be done against the will of God?" the Babbler replied, stoically.

"Are there no means, then, of preserving us from death?"

"None!"

"There is one!" a man cried, who, with a scorched face, and half-burnt hair, rushed into the camp, climbing over the baggage, and followed by another individual.

"Who are you?" the general exclaimed.

"That is of little consequence," the stranger replied, drily; "I come to save you! My companion

and I were out of danger; to succour you we have braved unheard-of perils—that should satisfy you. Your safety is in your own hands; you have only to will it."

"Command!" the general replied, "I will be the first to give you the example of obedience."

"Have you no guides with you, then?"

"Certainly we have," said the general.

"Then they are traitors or cowards, for the means I am about to employ are known to everybody in the prairie."

The general darted a glance of mistrust at the Babbler, who had not been able to suppress an appearance of disagreeable surprise at the sudden coming of the two strangers.

"Well," said the hunter, "that is an account you can settle with them hereafter; we have something else to think of now."

The Mexicans at the sight of this determined man, with his sharp impressive language, had instinctively beheld a preserver; they felt their courage revive with hope, and held themselves ready to execute his orders with promptness.

"Be quick!" said the hunter, "and pull up all the grass that surrounds the camp."

Everyone set to work at once.

"For our part," the stranger continued, addressing the general, "we will take wetted blankets and spread them in front of the baggage."

The general, the captain, and the doctor, under the directions of the hunter, did as he desired, whilst his companion lassoed the horses and the mules, and hobbled them in the centre of the camp.

"Be quick! be quick!" the hunter cried incessantly, "the fire gains upon us!"

Everyone redoubled his exertions, and, in a short time a large space was cleared.

Doña Luz surveyed with admiration this strange man, who had suddenly appeared among them in such a providential manner, and who, amidst the horrible danger that enveloped them, was as calm and self-possessed as if he had had the power to command the awful scourge which continued to advance upon them with giant strides.

The maiden could not take her eyes off him; in spite of herself, she felt attracted towards this unknown preserver, whose voice, gestures,—his whole person, in short, interested her.

When the grass and herbs had been pulled up with that feverish rapidity which men in fear of death display in all they do, the hunter smiled calmly.

"Now," he said, addressing the Mexicans, "the rest concerns me and my friend; leave us to act as we think proper; wrap yourselves carefully in damp blankets."

Everyone followed his directions.

The stranger cast a glance around him, and then after making a sign to his friend, walked straight towards the fire.

"I shall not quit you," the general said, earnestly.

"Come on, then," the stranger replied, laconically.

When they reached the extremity of the space where the grass had been pulled up, the hunter made a heap of plants and dry wood with his feet, and scattering a little gunpowder over it, he set fire to the mass.

"What are you doing?" the general exclaimed, in amazement.

"As you see, I make fire fight against fire," the hunter replied, quietly.

His companion had acted in the same manner in an opposite direction.

A curtain of flames arose rapidly around them, and, for some minutes, the camp was almost concealed beneath a vault of fire.

A quarter of an hour of terrible anxiety and intense expectation ensued.

By degrees the flames became less fierce, the air more pure; the smoke dispersed, the roarings of the conflagration diminished.

At length they were able to recognise each other in this horrible chaos.

A sigh of relief burst from every breast.

The camp was saved!

The conflagration, whose roaring became gradually more dull, conquered by the hunter, went to convey destruction in other directions.

Everyone rushed towards the stranger to thank him.

"You have saved the life of my niece," said the general warmly; "how shall I discharge my debt to you?"

"You owe me nothing, sir," the hunter replied, with noble simplicity; "in the prairie all men are brothers; I have only performed my duty by coming to your assistance."

As soon as the first moments of joy were past, and the camp had been put in a little order, everyone felt the necessity for repose after the terrible anxieties of the night.

The two strangers, who had constantly repulsed modestly, but firmly, the advances the general had made in the warmth of his gratitude, threw themselves carelessly on the baggage for a few hours' rest.

A little before dawn they arose.

"The earth must be cool by this time," said the hunter: "let us be gone before these people wake; perhaps they would not wish us to leave them so."

"Let us be gone!" the other replied laconically.

At the moment he was about to pass over the boundary of the camp, a hand was laid lightly upon the shoulder of the elder. He turned round, and Doña Luz was before him.

The two men stopped and bowed respectfully to the young lady.

"Are you going to leave us?" she asked in a soft and melodious voice.

"We must, señorita," the hunter replied.

"I understand," she said with a charming smile; "now that, thanks to you, we are saved, you have nothing more to do here,—is it not so?"

The two men bowed without replying.

"Grant me a favour," she said.

"Name it, señorita."

She took from her neck a little diamond cross she wore.

"Keep this, in remembrance of me."

The hunter hesitated.

"I beg you to do so," she murmured in an agitated voice.

"I accept it, señorita," the hunter said, as he placed the cross upon his breast close to his scapulary; "I shall have another talisman to add to that which my mother gave me."

"Thank you," the girl replied joyfully; "one word more?"

"Speak it, lady."

"What are your names?"

"My companion is called Belhumeur."

"But yourself?"

"Loyal Heart."

After bowing a second time, in sign of farewell, the two hunters departed at a quick pace, and soon disappeared in the darkness.

Doña Luz looked after them as long as she could perceive them, and then returned slowly and pensively towards her tent, repeating to herself in a low but earnest tone,—

"Loyal Heart! Oh! I shall remember that name."

CHAPTER VII.

THE SURPRISE.

The United States have inherited from England that system of continual invasion and usurpation which is one of the most salient points in the British character.

Scarcely was the independence of North America proclaimed, and peace concluded with the mother country, ere those very men who cried out so loudly against tyranny and oppression, who protested against the violation of the rights of nations, of which they said they were the victims, organized, with that implacable coolness which they owe to their origin, a hunt of the Red Indians. Not only did they do so over the whole extent of their territories, but dissatisfied with the possession of the vast regions which their restless population, spite of its activity, did not suffice to clear and render valuable, they wished to make themselves masters of the two oceans, by encircling on all sides the aboriginal tribes, whom they drove back incessantly, and whom, according to the prophetic words, filled with bitter displeasure, of an aged Indian chief, they will eventually drown in the Pacific, by means of treachery and perfidy.

In the United States, about which people are beginning to be disabused, but which prejudiced or ill-informed persons still persist in representing as the classic land of liberty, is found that odious anomaly of two races degraded and despoiled for the advantage of a third race, which arrogates to itself a right of life and death over them, and considers them as nothing more than beasts of burden.

These two races, so worthy of the interest of all enlightened minds, and of the true friends of the human species, are the black and red races.

It is true, that on the other hand, to prove what thorough philanthropists they are, the United States did, in the year 1795, sign a treaty of peace and friendship with the Barbary States, which gave them advantages incomparably greater than those offered by the Order of Malta, which was likewise desirous of treating with them—a treaty guaranteed by the regencies of Algiers and Tripoli.

In this treaty it is positively stated that the government of the United States is not founded, in any way, upon the Christian religion.

To those to whom this may appear strong, we will reply that it is logical, and that the Americans in the article of God acknowledge but one alone—the God Dollar! who, in all times, has been the only one adored by the pirates of every country.

Draw the conclusion from this who will.

The squatters, a race without hearth or home, without right or law, the refuse of all nations, and who are the shame and scum of the North-American population, are advancing incessantly towards the West, and by clearings upon clearings endeavour to drive the Indian tribes from their last places of refuge.

In rear of the squatters come five or six soldiers, a drummer, a trumpeter, and an officer of some kind bearing the banner of the Stars and Stripes.

These soldiers build a fort with some trunks of trees, plant the flag on the top of it, and proclaim that the frontiers of the Confederation extend to that point.

Then around the fort spring up a few cabins, and a bastard population is grouped—a heterogeneous compound of whites, blacks, reds, copper-coloured, &c., &c., and a city is founded, upon which is bestowed some sonorous name—Utica, Syracuse, Rome, or Carthage, for example, and a few years later, when this city possesses two or three stone houses, it becomes by right the capital of a new state which is not yet in existence.

Thus are things going on in this country!—it is very simple, as is evident.

A few days after the events we have related in our preceding chapter, a strange scene was passing in a possession built scarcely two years before, upon the banks of the great Canadian river, in a beautiful position at the foot of a verdant hill.

This possession consisted of about twenty cabins, grouped capriciously near each other, and protected by a little fort, armed with four small cannon which commanded the course of the river.

The village, though so young, had already, thanks to the prodigious American activity, acquired all the importance of a city. Two taverns overflowed with tipplers, and three temples of different sects served to gather together the faithful.

The inhabitants moved about here and there with the preoccupation of people who work seriously and look sharply after their affairs.

Numerous canoes ploughed the river, and carts loaded with merchandise passed about in all directions, grinding upon their creaking axles, and digging deep ruts.

Nevertheless, in spite of all this movement, or, perhaps, on account of it, it was easy to observe that a certain uneasiness prevailed in the village.

The inhabitants questioned each other, groups were formed upon the steps of doors, and several men, mounted upon powerful horses, rode rapidly away, as scouts, in all directions, after taking their orders from the captain commanding the fort, who, dressed in full uniform, with a telescope in his hand, and his arms behind his back, was walking backwards and forwards, with hasty steps, upon the glacis of the little fort.

By degrees, the canoes regained the shore, the carts were unteamed, the beasts of burden were collected in the home pastures, and the entire population assembled upon the square of the village.

The sun was sinking rapidly towards the horizon, night would soon be upon them, and the horsemen sent to the environs had all returned.

"You see," said the captain to the assembled inhabitants, "that we had nothing to fear, it was only a false alarm; you may return peaceably to your dwellings, no trace of Indians can be found for twenty miles round."

"Hum!" an old half-breed hunter, leaning on his gun, observed, "Indians are not long in travelling twenty miles!"

"That is possible, White Eyes," the commandant replied, "but be convinced that if I have acted as I have done, it has been simply with the view of reassuring the people; the Indians will not dare to avenge themselves."

"Indians always avenge themselves, captain," said the old hunter, sententiously.

"You have drunk too much whiskey, White Eyes; it has got into your head; you are dreaming, with your eyes open."

"God grant you may be right, captain! but I have passed all my life in the clearings, and know the manners of the redskins, while you have only been on the frontiers two years."

"That is quite as long as is necessary," the captain interrupted, peremptorily.

"Nevertheless, with your permission, Indians are men, and the Comanches, who were treacherously assassinated here, in contempt of the laws of nations, were warriors renowned in their tribe."

"White Eyes, you are of mixed breed, you lean a little too much to the red race," said the captain ironically.

"The red race," the hunter replied proudly, "are loyal; they do not assassinate for the pleasure of shedding blood, as you yourself did, four days ago, in killing those two warriors who were passing inoffensively in their canoe, under the pretence of trying a new gun which you had received from Acropolis."

"Well, well! that's enough! Spare me your comments, White Eyes, I am not disposed to receive observations from you."

The hunter bowed awkwardly, threw his gun upon his shoulder and retired grumbling.

"That's all one!—Blood that is shed cries for vengeance; the redskins are men, and will not leave the crime unpunished."

The captain retired into the fort, visibly annoyed by what the half-breed had said to him. Gradually the inhabitants dispersed, after wishing each other good night, and closed their dwellings with that carelessness peculiar to men accustomed to risk their lives every minute.

An hour later night had completely set in, thick darkness enveloped the village, and the inhabitants, fatigued with the rude labours of the day, were reposing in profound security.

The scouts sent out by the captain towards the decline of day had badly performed their duty, or else they were not accustomed to Indian cunning, otherwise they never could, by their reports, have placed the colonists in such deceitful confidence.

Scarcely a mile from the village, concealed amongst and confounded with the thick bushes and intertwining trees of a virgin forest, of which the nearest part had already fallen under the indefatigable axe of the clearers, two hundred warriors of the tribe of the Serpent, guided by several renowned chiefs, among whom was Eagle Head, who, although wounded, insisted upon joining the expedition, were waiting, with that Indian patience which nothing can foil, the propitious moment for taking a severe vengeance for the insult they had received.

Several hours passed thus, and the silence of night was not disturbed by any noise whatever.

The Indians, motionless as bronze statues, waited without displaying the slightest impatience.

Towards eleven o'clock the moon rose, lighting the landscape with its silvery beams.

At the same instant the distant howling of a dog was repeated twice.

Eagle Head then left the tree behind which he had been screened, and began to creep with extreme address and velocity, in the direction of the village.

On reaching the skirts of the forest he stopped; then, after casting round an investigating glance, he imitated the neighing of a horse with such perfection that two horses of the village immediately replied to him.

After waiting for a few seconds, the practised ear of the chief perceived an almost insensible noise among the leaves; the bellowing of an ox was heard a short distance away; then the chief arose and waited.

Two seconds later a man joined him.

This man was White Eyes, the old hunter.

A sinister smile curled the corners of his thin lips.

"What are the white men doing?" the chief asked.

"They are asleep," the half-breed answered.

"Will my brother give them up to me?"

"For a fair exchange."

"A chief has but one word. The pale woman and the grey head?"

"Are here."

"Shall they belong to me?"

"All the inhabitants of the village shall be placed in the hands of my brethren."

"Och! Has not the hunter come?"

"Not yet."

"He will come presently?"

"Probably he will."

"What does my brother say now?"

"Where is that which I demanded of the chief?" the hunter said.

"The skins, the guns, and the powder, are in the rear, guarded by my young men."

"I trust to you, chief," the hunter replied, "but if you deceive me——"

"An Indian has but one word."

"That is good! Whenever you please, then."

Ten minutes later the Indians were masters of the village, all the inhabitants of which, roused one after the other, were made prisoners without a struggle.

The fort was surrounded by the Comanches, who, after heaping up at the foot of the walls trunks of trees, carts, furniture, and all the farming implements of the colonists, only waited for a signal from their chief to commence the attack.

All at once a vague form stood out from the top of the fort, and the cry of the sparrowhawk echoed through the air.

The Indians set fire to the kind of pyre they had raised and rushed towards the palisades, uttering altogether that horrible and piercing war cry which is peculiar to them, and which, on the frontiers, is always the signal for a massacre.

CHAPTER VIII.

INDIAN VENGEANCE.

The position of the Americans, was most critical.

The captain, surprised by the silent attack of the Comanches, had been suddenly awakened by the frightful war cry they uttered, as soon as they had set fire to the materials heaped up in front of the fort.

Springing out of bed, the brave officer, for a moment dazzled by the ruddy gleam of the flames, half-dressed himself, and, sabre in hand, rushed towards the side where the garrison reposed; they had already taken the alarm, and were hastening to their posts with that careless bravery which distinguishes the Yankees.

But what was to be done?

The garrison amounted, captain included, to twelve men.

How, with so numerically weak a force, could they resist the Indians, whose diabolical profiles they saw fantastically lit up in the sinister reflections of the conflagration?

The officer sighed deeply.

"We are lost!" he murmured.

In the incessant combats fought on the Indian frontiers, the laws of civilized warfare are completely unknown.

The *vae victis* reigns in the full acceptation of the term.

Inveterate enemies, who fight one against another with all the refinements of barbarity, never ask or give quarter.

Every conflict, then, is a question of life and death.

Such is the custom.

The captain knew this well, therefore he did not indulge in the least allusion as to the fate that awaited him if he fell into the hands of the Comanches.

He had committed the fault of allowing himself to be surprised by the redskins, and he must undergo the consequence of his imprudence.

But the captain was a good and brave soldier; certain of not being able to retreat safe and sound from the wasp's nest into which he had fallen, he wished at least, to succumb with honour.

The soldiers had no need to be excited to do their duty; they knew as well as their captain that they had no chance of safety left.

The defenders of the fort, therefore, placed themselves resolutely behind the barricades, and began to fire upon the Indians with a precision that speedily caused them a heavy loss.

The first person the captain saw, on mounting the platform of the little fort, was the old hunter, White Eyes.

"Ah, ah!" murmured the officer to himself, "what is this fellow doing here?"

Drawing a pistol from his belt, he walked straight up to the half-breed, and, seizing him by the throat, he clapped the barrel of his pistol to his breast, saying, to him with that coolness which the Americans inherit from the English, and upon which they have improved—

"In what fashion did you introduce yourself into the fort, you old screech owl?"

"Why, by the gate, seemingly," the other replied, unmoved.

"You must be a sorcerer, then!"

"Perhaps I am."

"A truce with your jokes, mixed-blood, you have sold us to your brothers the redskins."

A sinister smile passed over the countenance of the half-breed; the captain perceived it.

"But your treachery shall not profit you, you miserable scoundrel!" he said, in a voice of thunder; "you shall be the first victim of it."

The hunter disengaged himself by a quick, unexpected movement; then, with a spring backwards, and clapping his gun to his shoulder, he said—

"We shall see," with a sneer.

These two men, placed face to face upon that narrow platform, lighted by the sinister reflection of the fire, the intensity of which increased every minute, would have had a terrific expression for the spectator who was able to contemplate them coolly.

Each of them personified in himself those two races confronted in the United States, whose struggle will only finish by the complete extinction of the one to the profit of the other.

At their feet the combat was taking the gigantic proportions of an epic.

The Indians rushed with rage, and uttering loud cries, against the intrenchments, where the Americans received them with musket shots or at the point of the bayonet.

But the fire continued to increase, the soldiers fell one after another; all promised soon to be over.

To the menace of White Eyes, the captain had replied by a smile of contempt.

Quick as lightning he discharged his pistol at the hunter; the latter let his gun drop, his right arm was broken.

The captain sprang upon him with a shout of joy.

The half breed was knocked down by this unexpected shock.

Then his enemy, placing his knee upon his breast, and looking at him for an instant, said, with a bitter laugh,—

"Well! was I mistaken?"

"No," the half-breed replied in a firm tone; "I am a fool—my life belongs to you—kill me!"

"Be satisfied I shall reserve you for an Indian death."

"You must be quick, then, if you wish to avenge yourself," the half-breed said, ironically, "for it will soon be too late."

"I have time enough. Why did you betray us, you miserable wretch?"

"Of what consequence is that to you?"

"I wish to know."

"Well then, be satisfied," the hunter said, after an instant of silence; "the white men, your brothers, were the murderers of all my family, and I wished to avenge them."

"But we had done nothing to you, had we?"

"Are you not white men? Kill me and put an end to all this. I can die joyfully, for numbers of victims will follow me to the tomb."

"Well, since it is so," said the captain, with a sinister smile, "I will send you to join your brothers; you see I am a loyal adversary."

Then pressing his knees strongly on the chest of the hunter, to prevent his escape from the punishment he reserved for him, he cried—

"In the Indian fashion!"

And taking his knife, he seized with his left hand the half-breed's thick and tangled head of hair, and with the greatest dexterity scalped him.

The hunter could not restrain a cry of frightful agony at this unexpected mutilation. The blood flowed in torrents from his bare skull, and inundated his face.

"Kill me! kill me!" he said, "this pain is horrible!"

"Do you find it so?" said the captain.

"Oh! kill me! kill me!"

"What!" said the captain, shrugging his shoulders, "do you take me for a butcher? No, I will restore you to your worthy friends."

He then took the hunter by the legs, and dragging him to the edge of the platform, pushed him with his foot.

The miserable creature instinctively endeavoured to hold himself up by seizing, with his left hand, the extremity of a post which projected outward.

For an instant he remained suspended in space.

He was hideous to behold; his denuded skull, his face, over which streams of black blood

continued flowing, contracted by pain and terror; his whole body agitated by convulsive movements, inspired horror and disgust.

"Pity! pity!" he murmured.

The captain surveyed him with a bitter smile on his lips, and with his arms crossed upon his chest.

But the exhausted nerves of the hunter could sustain him no longer; his clenched fingers relaxed their hold of the post he had seized with the energy of despair.

"Hangman! be for ever accursed!" he cried, with an accent of frantic rage.

And he fell.

"A good journey to you!" said the captain, sneeringly.

An immense clamour arose from the gates of the fort.

The captain rushed to the assistance of his people.

The Comanches had gained possession of the barricades.

They rushed in a crowd into the interior of the fort, massacring and scalping the enemies whom they encountered in their passage.

Four American soldiers only were left standing; the others were dead.

The captain entrenched himself in the middle of the staircase which led to the platform.

"My friends," he said to his comrades, "die without regret, for I have killed the man who betrayed us."

The soldiers replied by a shout of joy to this novel consolation, and prepared to sell their lives dearly. But at this moment an incomprehensible thing took place.

The cries of the Indians ceased, as if by enchantment.

The attack was suspended.

"What are they about now?" the captain muttered; "What new devil's trick have these demons invented?"

Once master of all the approaches to the fort, Eagle Head ordered the fight to cease.

The colonists who were made prisoners in the village were brought, one after another, into his presence: there were twelve of them, and four were women.

When these twelve unfortunates stood trembling before him, Eagle Head commanded the women to be set apart.

Ordering the men to pass one by one before him, he looked at them attentively, and then made a sign to the warriors standing by his side.

The latter instantly seized the Americans, chopped off their hands at the wrists with their knives, and, after having scalped them, pushed them into the fort.

Seven colonists underwent this atrocious torture, and there remained but one.

He was an old man of lofty stature, thin, but still active; his hair, white as snow, fell on his shoulders; his black eyes flashed, but his features remained unmoved; he waited, apparently impassible, till Eagle Head should decide his fate, and send him to join the unfortunates who had preceded him.

But the chief continued to survey him attentively.

At length the features of the savage expanded, a smile played upon his lips, and he held out his hand to the old man,—

"*Usted no conocer amigo?*" (No you know friend?) he said to him in bad Spanish, the guttural accent of his race.

At these words the old man started, and looked earnestly at the Indian in his turn.

"Oh!" said he, with astonishment, "El Gallo!" (the Cock.)

"Wah!" replied the chief, with satisfaction, "I am a friend of the grey head; redskins have not two hearts: my father saved my life,—my father shall come to my hut."

"Thanks, chief! I accept your offer," said the old man, warmly pressing the hand the Indian held out to him.

And he hastily placed himself by a woman of middle age, with a noble countenance, whose features, though faded by grief, still preserved traces of great beauty.

"God be praised!" she said, with great emotion, when the old man rejoined her.

"God never abandons those who place their trust in Him," he replied.

During this time the redskins were preparing the last scenes of the terrible drama which we have made the reader witness.

When all the colonists were shut up in the fort, the fire was revived with all the materials the Indians could find; a barrier of flames for ever separated the unfortunate Americans from the world.

The fort soon became one immense funeral pyre, from which escaped cries of pain, mingled at intervals with the report of firearms.

The Comanches, motionless, watched at a distance the progress of the fire, and laughed like demons at the spectacle of their vengeance.

The flames, which had seized upon the whole building, mounted with fearful rapidity, throwing their light over the desert, like a dismal beacon.

On the top of the fort some individuals were seen rushing about in despair, while others, on their knees seemed to be imploring divine mercy.

Suddenly a horrible crackling was heard, a cry of extreme agony rose towards heaven, and the fort crumbled down into the burning pile which consumed it, throwing up millions of sparks.

All was over.

The Americans had perished!

The Comanches planted an enormous mast on the spot where the square had been. This mast, to which were nailed the hands of the colonists, was surmounted by a hatchet, the iron of which was stained with blood.

Then, after setting fire to the few cabins that were left standing, Eagle Head gave orders for departure.

The four women and the old man, the sole survivors of the population of this unfortunate settlement, followed the Comanches.

And a melancholy silence hovered over these smoking ruins, which had just been the theatre of so many sorrowful scenes.

CHAPTER IX.

THE PHANTOM.

It was about eight o'clock in the morning, a cheering autumn sun lit up the prairie splendidly.

Birds flew hither and thither, uttering strange cries, whilst others, concealed under the thickest of the foliage, poured forth melodious concerts. Now and then a deer raised its timid head above the tall grass, and then disappeared with a bound.

Two horsemen, clothed in the costume of wood rangers, mounted upon magnificent half wild horses, were following, at a brisk trot, the left bank of the great Canadian river, whilst several bloodhounds, with glossy black skins, and eyes and chests stained with red, ran and gambolled around them.

These horsemen were Loyal Heart and his friend Belhumeur.

Contrary to his usual deportment, Loyal Heart seemed affected by the most lively joy, his countenance beamed with cheerfulness, and he looked around him with complacency. Sometimes he would stop, and looked out ahead, appearing anxiously to seek in the horizon some object he could not yet discern. Then, with an expression of vexation, he resumed his journey, to repeat a hundred paces further on the same manoeuvre.

"Ah, parbleu!" said Belhumeur, laughing, "we shall get there in good time. Be quiet, do!"

"Eh, *caramba!* I know that well enough; but I long to be there! For me, the only hours of happiness that God grants me, are passed with her whom we are going to see—my mother, my beloved mother! who gave up everything for me, abandoned all without regret, without hesitation. Oh, what happiness it is to have a mother! to possess one heart which understands yours, which makes a complete abnegation of self to absorb itself in you; which lives in your existence, rejoices in your joys, sorrows in your sorrows; which divides your life into two parts, reserving to itself the heaviest and leaving you the lightest and the most easy! Oh, Belhumeur, to comprehend what that divine being is, composed of devotedness and love, and called a mother, it is necessary to have been, as I was, deprived of her for long years, and then suddenly to have found her again, more loving, more adorable than ever! How slowly we get on! Every moment of delay is a kiss of my mother's which time steals from me! Shall we never get there?"

"Well! here we are at the ford."

"I don't know why, but a secret fear has suddenly fallen upon my spirits, an undefinable presentiment makes me tremble in spite of myself."

"Oh, nonsense! Send such black thoughts to the winds; in a few minutes, we shall be with your mother!"

"That is true! And yet I don't know whether I am mistaken, but it seems to me as if the country does not wear its usual aspect; this silence which reigns around us, and this solitude which environs us, do not appear to be natural. We are close to the village, we ought already to hear the barking of the dogs, the crowing of the cocks, and the thousand noises that proclaim inhabited places."

"Well," said Belhumeur, with vague uneasiness, "I must confess that everything seems strangely silent around us."

The travellers came to a spot where the river makes a sharp curve; being deeply embanked, and skirted by immense blocks of rock and thick copsewood, it did not allow any extensive view.

The village towards which the travellers were directing their course, was scarcely a gunshot from the ford where they were preparing to cross the river, but it was completely invisible, owing to the peculiar nature of the country.

At the moment the horses placed their feet in the water, they made a sudden movement backwards, and the bloodhounds uttered one of those plaintive howlings peculiar to their race, which freeze the bravest man with terror.

"What does this mean?" Loyal Heart exclaimed, turning pale as death, and casting round a terrified glance.

"Look here!" replied Belhumeur, pointing with his finger to several dead bodies which the river was carrying away, and which glided along near the surface.

"Oh!" cried Loyal Heart, "something terrible has taken place here. My mother! my mother!"

"Do not alarm yourself so," said Belhumeur; "no doubt she is in safety."

Without listening to the consolations his friend poured out, though he did not believe in them himself Loyal Heart drove the spurs into his horse's flanks, and sprang into the water.

They soon gained the opposite bank, and there all was explained.

They had before them the most awful scene that can possibly be imagined.

The village and the fort were a heap of ruins.

A black, thick, sickening smoke ascended in long wreaths towards the heavens.

In the centre of what had been the village, arose a mast against which were nailed human fragments, for which *urubus* were contending with loud cries.

Here and there lay bodies half devoured by wild beasts.

No living being appeared.

Nothing remained intact—everything was either broken, displaced, or overthrown. It was evident, at the first glance, that the Indians had passed there, with their sanguinary rage and their inveterate hatred of the whites. Their steps were deeply imprinted in letters of fire and blood.

"Oh!" the hunter cried shuddering, "my presentiments were a warning from Heaven;—my mother! my mother!"

Loyal Heart fell upon the ground in utter despair; he concealed his face in his hands and wept.

The grief of this high-spirited man, endowed with a courage proof against all trials, and whom no danger could surprise, was like that of the lion, it had something terrific in it.

His sobs were like roarings, they rent his breast.

Belhumeur respected the grief of his friend—indeed what consolation could he offer him? It was better to allow his tears to flow, and give the first paroxysm of despair time to calm itself; certain that his unyielding nature could not long be cast down, and that a reaction would soon come, which would permit him to act.

Still, with that instinct innate to hunters, he began to look about on all sides, in the hope of finding some indication which might afterwards serve to direct their researches.

After wandering for a long time about the ruins, he was suddenly attracted towards a large bush at a little distance from him by barkings which he thought he recognised.

He advanced towards it precipitately; a bloodhound like their own jumped up joyfully upon him, and covered him with wild caresses.

"Oh, oh!" said the hunter, "what does this mean? Who has tied poor Trim up in this fashion?"

He cut the rope which fastened the animal, and, in doing so, perceived that a piece of carefully folded paper was tied to its neck.

He seized it, and running to Loyal Heart, exclaimed:

"Brother! brother! Hope! Hope!"

The hunter knew his brother was not a man to waste vulgar consolations upon him; he raised his tear-bathed face towards him.

As soon as it was free, the dog fled away with incredible velocity, baying with the dull, short yelps of a bloodhound following the scent.

Belhumeur, who had foreseen this flight, had hastened to tie his cravat round the animal's neck.

"No one knows what it may lead to," murmured the hunter, on seeing the dog disappear.

And after this philosophical reflection he went to join his friend.

"What is the matter?" Loyal Heart asked.

"Read!" Belhumeur quietly replied.

The hunter seized the paper, which he read eagerly. It contained only these few words:—

"We are prisoners of the redskins. Courage! Nothing of any significance has happened to your mother."

"God be praised!" said Loyal Heart with great emotion, kissing the paper, which he concealed in his breast. "My mother still lives! Oh, I shall find her again!"

"Pardieu! that you will," said Belhumeur in a tone of conviction.

A complete change, as if by enchantment, had taken place in the mind of the hunter; he drew himself up to his full height, his brow became expanded and clear.

"Let us commence our researches," he said; "perhaps one of the unfortunate inhabitants has escaped death, and we may learn from him what has taken place."

"That's well," said Belhumeur joyfully; "that's the way. Let us search."

The dogs were scratching with fury among the ruins of the fort.

"Let us commence there," said Loyal Heart.

Both set to work to clear away the rubbish. They worked with an ardour incomprehensible to themselves. At the end of twenty minutes they discovered a sort of trapdoor, and heard weak and inarticulate cries arise from beneath it.

"They are here," said Belhumeur.

"God grant we may be in time to save them."

It was not till after a length of time, and with infinite trouble, that they succeeded in raising the trap, and then a horrid spectacle presented itself.

In a cellar exhaling a fetid odour, a score of individuals were literally piled up one upon another.

The hunters could not repress a movement of terror, and drew back in spite of themselves; but they immediately—returned to the edge of the cellar, to endeavour, if there were yet time, to save some of those unhappy victims.

Of all these men, one alone showed signs of life; all the rest were dead.

They dragged him out, laid him gently on a heap of dry leaves, and gave him every assistance in their power.

The dogs licked the hands and face of the wounded man.

At the end of a few minutes the man made a slight movement, opened his eyes several times, and then breathed a profound sigh.

Belhumeur introduced between his clenched teeth the mouth of a leathern bottle filled with rum, and obliged him to swallow a few drops of the liquor.

"He is very bad," said the hunter.

"He is past recovery," Loyal Heart replied, shaking his head.

Nevertheless the wounded man revived a little.

"My God," said he, in a weak and broken voice, "I am dying! I feel I am dying!"

"Hope!" said Belhumeur, kindly.

A fugitive tinge passed across the pale cheeks of the wounded man, and a sad smile curled the corners of his lips.

"Why should I live?" he murmured. "The Indians have massacred all my companions, after having horribly mutilated them. Life would be too heavy a burden for me."

"If, before you die, you wish anything to be done that is in our power to do, speak, and by the word of hunters, we will do it."

The eyes of the dying man flashed faintly.

"Your gourd," he said to Belhumeur.

The latter gave it to him, and he drank greedily. His brow was covered with a moist perspiration, and a feverish redness inflamed his countenance, which assumed a frightful expression.

"Listen," said he, in a hoarse and broken voice. "I was commander here; the Indians, aided by a wretched half-breed, who sold us to them, surprised the village."

"The name of that man?" the hunter said, eagerly.

"He is dead—I killed him!" the captain replied, with an inexpressible accent of hatred and joy. "The Indians endeavoured to gain possession of the fort; the contest was terrible. We were twelve men against four hundred savages; what could we do? Fight to the death—that was what we resolved on doing. The Indians, finding the impossibility of taking us alive, cast the colonists of the village in among us, after cutting off their hands and scalping them, and then set fire to the fort."

The wounded man, whose voice grew weaker and weaker, and whose words were becoming unintelligible, swallowed a few more drops of the liquor, and then continued his recital, which was eagerly listened to by the hunters.

"A cave, which served as a cellar, extended under the ditches of the fort. When I knew that all

means of safety had escaped, and that flight was impossible, I led my unfortunate companions into this cave, hoping that God would permit us to be thus saved. A few minutes after, the fort fell down over us! No one can imagine the tortures we have suffered in this infected hole, without air or light. The cries of the wounded—and we were all so, more or less—screaming for water, and the rattle of the dying, formed a terrible concert that no pen can describe. Our sufferings, already intolerable, were further increased by the want of air; a sort of furious madness took possession of us; we fought one against another; and, in there under a mass of burnt ruins, commenced a hideous combat, which could only terminate by the death of all engaged in it. How long did it last? I cannot tell. I was already sensible that the death which had carried off all my companions was about to take possession of me, when you came to retard it for a few minutes. God be praised! I shall not die without vengeance."

After these words, pronounced in a scarcely articulate voice, there was a funereal silence among these three men—a silence interrupted only by the dull rattle in the throat of the dying man, whose agony had begun.

All at once the captain made a strong effort; he raised himself up, and fixing his bloodshot eyes upon the hunters, said,—

"The savages who attacked me belong to the nation of the Comanches; their chief is named Eagle Head; swear to avenge me like loyal hunters."

"We swear to do so," the two men cried, in a firm tone.

"Thanks," the captain murmured, and falling back he remained motionless.

He was dead.

His distorted features and his open eyes still preserved the expression of hatred and despair which had animated him to the last.

The hunters surveyed him for an instant, and then, shaking off this painful impression, they set about the duty of paying the last honours to the remains of the unfortunate victims of Indian rage.

By the last rays of the setting sun, they completed the melancholy task which they had imposed upon themselves.

After a short rest, Loyal Heart arose, and saddling his horse, said,—

"Now, brother, let us place ourselves on the trail of Eagle Head."

"Come on," the hunter replied.

The two men cast around them a long and sad farewell glance, and whistling their dogs, they boldly entered the forest, in the depths of which the Comanches had disappeared.

At this moment the moon arose amidst an ocean of vapour, and profusely scattered her melancholy beams upon the ruins of the American village, in which solitude and death were doomed to reign for ever.

CHAPTER X.

THE ENTRENCHED CAMP.

We will leave the hunters following the track of the redskins, and return to the general.

A few minutes after the two men had quitted the camp of the Mexicans, the general left his tent, and whilst casting an investigating look around him, and inhaling the fresh air of the morning, he began to walk about in a preoccupied manner.

The events of the night had produced a lively impression upon the old soldier.

For the first time, perhaps, since he had undertaken this expedition, he began to see it in its true light. He asked himself if he had really the right to associate with him in this life of continual perils and ambushes, a girl of the age of his niece, whose existence up to that time had been an uninterrupted series of mild and peaceful emotions; and who probably would not be able to accustom herself to the incessant dangers and agitations of a life in the prairies, which, in a short time, would break down the energies of the strongest minds.

His perplexity was great. He adored his niece; she was his only object of love, his only consolation. For her he would, without regret or hesitation, a thousand times sacrifice all he possessed; but, on the other side, the reasons which had obliged him to undertake this perilous journey were of such importance that he trembled, and felt a cold perspiration bedew his forehead, at the thought of renouncing it.

"What is to be done?" he said to himself. "What is to be done?"

Doña Luz, who was in her turn leaving her tent, perceived her uncle, whose reflective walk still continued, and, running towards him, threw her arms affectionately round his neck.

"Good day, uncle," she said, kissing him.

"Good day, my daughter," the general replied. He was accustomed to call her so. "Eh! eh! my child, you are very gay this morning."

And he returned with interest the caresses she had lavished upon him.

"Why should I not be gay, uncle? Thanks to God? we have just escaped a great peril; everything in nature seems to smile, the birds are singing upon every branch, the sun inundates us with warm rays; we should be ungrateful towards the Creator if we remained insensible to these manifestations of His goodness."

"Then the perils of last night have left no distressing impression upon your mind, my dear child?"

"None at all, uncle, except a deep sense of gratitude for the benefits God has favoured us with."

"That is well, my daughter," the general replied joyfully, "I am happy to hear you speak thus."

"All the better, if it please you, uncle."

"Then," the general continued, following up the idea of his preoccupation, "the life we are now leading is not fatiguing to you?"

"Oh, not at all; on the contrary, I find it very agreeable, and, above all, full of incidents," she said with a smile.

"Yes," the general continued, partaking her gaiety; "but," he added, becoming serious again, "I think we are too forgetful of our liberators."

"They are gone," Doña Luz replied.

"Gone?" the general said, with great surprise.

"Full an hour ago."

"How do you know that, my child?"

"Very simply, uncle, they bade me adieu before they left us."

"That is not right," the general murmured in a tone of vexation; "a service is as binding upon those who bestow it as upon those who receive it; they should not have left us thus without bidding me farewell, without telling us whether we should ever see them again, and leaving us even unacquainted with their names."

"I know them."

"You know them, my daughter?" the general said, with astonishment.

"Yes, uncle; before they went, they told me."

"And—what are they?" the general asked, eagerly.

"The younger is named Belhumeur."

"And the elder?"

"Loyal Heart."

"Oh! I must find these two men again," the general said, with an emotion he could not account for.

"Who knows," the young girl replied, thoughtfully, "perhaps in the very first danger that threatens us they will make their appearance as our benevolent genii."

"God grant we may not owe their return among us to a similar cause."

The captain came up to pay the compliments of the morning.

"Well, captain," said the general, with a smile, "have you recovered from the effects of their alarm?"

"Perfectly, general," the young man replied, "and are quite ready to proceed, whenever you please to give the order."

"After breakfast we will strike tents; have the goodness to give the necessary orders to the lancers, and send the Babbler to me."

The captain bowed and retired.

"On your part, niece," the general continued, addressing Doña Luz, "superintend the preparations for breakfast, if you please, whilst I talk to our guide."

The young lady tripped away, and the Babbler almost immediately entered.

His air was dull, and his manner more reserved than usual.

The general took no notice of this.

"You remember," he said, "that you yesterday manifested an intention of finding a spot where we might conveniently encamp for a few days?"

"Yes, general."

"You told me you were acquainted with a situation that would perfectly suit our purpose?"

"Yes, general."

"Are you prepared to conduct us thither?"

"When you please."

"What time will it require to gain this spot?"

"Two days."

"Very well. We will set out, then, immediately after breakfast."

The Babbler bowed without reply.

"By the way," the general said, with feigned indifference, "one of your men seems to be missing."

"Yes."

"What is become of him?"

"I do not know."

"How! you do not know?" said the general, with a scrutinizing glance.

"No: as soon as he saw the fire, terror seized him, and he escaped."

"Very well!"

"He is most probably the victim of his cowardice."

"What do you mean by that?"

"The fire, most likely, has devoured him."

"Poor devil!"

A sardonic smile curled the lips of the guide.

"Have you anything more to say to me, general?"

"No;—but stop."

"I attend your orders."

"Do you know the two hunters who rendered us such timely service?"

"We all know each other in the prairie."

"What are those men?"

"Hunters and trappers."

"That is not what I ask you."

"What then?"

"I mean as to their character."

"Oh!" said the guide, with an appearance of displeasure.

"Yes, their moral character."

"I don't know anything much about them."

"What are their names?"

"Belhumeur and Loyal Heart."

"And you know nothing of their lives?"

"Nothing."

"That will do—you may retire."

The guide bowed, and with tardy steps rejoined his companions, who were preparing for departure.

"Hum!" the general murmured, as he looked after him, "I must keep a watch upon that fellow; there is something sinister in his manner."

After this aside, the general entered his tent, where the doctor, the captain, and Doña Luz were waiting breakfast for him.

Half an hour later, at most, the tent was folded up again, the packages were placed upon the mules, and the caravan was pursuing its journey under the direction of the Babbler, who rode about twenty paces in advance of the troop.

The aspect of the prairie was much changed since the preceding evening.

The black, burnt earth, was covered in places with heaps of smoking ashes; here and there charred trees, still standing, displayed their saddening skeletons; the fire still roared at a distance, and clouds of coppery smoke obscured the horizon.

The horses advanced with precaution over this uneven ground, where they constantly stumbled over the bones of animals that had fallen victims to the terrible embraces of the flames.

A melancholy sadness, much increased by the sight of the prospect unfolded before them, had taken possession of the travellers; they journeyed on, close to each other, without speaking, buried in their own reflections.

The road the caravan was pursuing wound along a narrow ravine, the dried bed of some torrent, deeply enclosed between two hills.

The ground trodden by the horses was composed of round pebbles, which slipped from under

their hoofs, and augmented the difficulties of the march, which was rendered still more toilsome by the burning rays of the sun, that fell directly down upon the travellers, leaving no chance of escaping them, for the country over which they were travelling had completely assumed the appearance of one of those vast deserts which are met with in the interior of Africa.

The day passed away thus, and excepting the fatigue which oppressed them, the monotony of the journey was not broken by any incident.

In the evening they encamped in a plain absolutely bare, but in the horizon they could perceive an appearance of verdure, which afforded them great consolation;—they were about, at last, to enter a zone spared by the conflagration.

The next morning, two hours before sunrise, the Babbler gave orders to prepare for departure.

The day proved more fatiguing than the last; the travellers were literally worn out when they encamped.

The Babbler had not deceived the general. The site was admirably chosen to repel an attack of the Indians. We need not describe it; the reader is already acquainted with it. It was the spot on which we met with the hunters, when they appeared on the scene for the first time.

The general, after casting around him the infallible glance of the experienced soldier, could not help manifesting his satisfaction.

"Bravo!" he said to the guide; "if we have had almost insurmountable difficulties to encounter in getting here, we could at least, if things should so fall out, sustain a siege on this spot."

The guide made no reply; he bowed with an equivocal smile, and retired.

"It is surprising," the general murmured to himself, "that although that man's conduct may be in appearance loyal, and however impossible it may be to approach him with the least thing,—in spite of all that, I cannot divest myself of the presentiment that he is deceiving us, and that he is contriving some diabolical project against us."

The general was an old soldier of considerable experience, who would never leave anything to chance, that *deus ex machinâ*, which in a second destroys the best contrived plans.

Notwithstanding the fatigue of his people, he would not lose a moment; aided by the captain, he had an enormous number of trees cut down, to form a solid intrenchment, protected by *chevaux de frise*. Behind this intrenchment the lancers dug a wide ditch, of which they threw out the earth on the side of the camp; and then, behind this second intrenchment, the baggage was piled up, to make a third and last enclosure.

The tent was pitched in the centre of the camp, the sentinels were posted, and everyone else went to seek that repose of which they stood so much in need.

The general, who intended sojourning on this spot for some time, wished, as far as it could be possible, to assure the safety of his companions, and, thanks to his minute precautions, he believed he had succeeded.

For two days the travellers had been marching along execrable roads, almost without sleep, only stopping to snatch a morsel of food; as we have said, they were quite worn out with fatigue. Notwithstanding, then, their desire to keep awake, the sentinels could not resist the sleep which overpowered them and they were not long in sinking into as complete a forgetfulness as their companions.

Towards midnight, at the moment when everyone in the camp was plunged in sleep, a man rose softly, and creeping along in the shade, with the quickness of a reptile, but with extreme precaution, he glided out of the barricades and intrenchments.

He then went down upon the ground, and by degrees, in a manner almost insensibly, directed his course, upon his hands and knees, through the high grass towards a forest which covered the first ascent of the hill, and extended some way into the prairie. When he had gone a certain distance, and was safe from discovery, he rose up.

A moonbeam, passing between two clouds, threw a light upon his countenance.

That man was the Babbler.

He looked round anxiously, listened attentively, and then with incredible perfection imitated the cry of the prairie dog.

Almost instantly the same cry was repeated, and a man rose up, within at most ten paces of the Babbler.

This man was the guide who, three days before, had escaped from the camp on the first appearance of the conflagration.

CHAPTER XI.

THE BARGAIN.

Indians and wood rangers have two languages, of which they make use by turns, according to

circumstances—spoken language, and the language of gestures.

Like the spoken language, the language of signs has, in America, infinite fluctuations; everyone, so to say, invents his own. It is a compound of strange and mysterious gestures, a kind of masonic telegraph, the signs of which, varying at will, are only comprehensible to a small number of adepts.

The Babbler and his companion were conversing in signs.

This singular conversation lasted nearly an hour; it appeared to interest the speakers warmly; so warmly, indeed, that they did not remark, in spite of all the precautions they had taken not to be surprised, two fiery eyes that, from the middle of a tuft of underwood, were fixed upon them with strange intenseness.

At length the Babbler, risking the utterance of a few words, said, "I await your good pleasure."

"And you shall not wait it long," the other replied.

"I depend upon you, Kennedy; for my part, I have fulfilled my promise."

"That's well! that's well! We don't require many words to come to an understanding," said Kennedy, shrugging his shoulders; "only you need not have conducted them to so strong a position—it will not be very easy to surprise them."

"That's your concern," said the Babbler, with an evil smile.

His companion looked at him for a moment with great attention.

"Hum," said he; "beware, *compadre*, it is almost always awkward to play a double game with men like us."

"I am playing no double game; but I think you and I have known each other a pretty considerable time, Kennedy, have we not?"

"What follows?"

"What follows? Well! I am not disposed that a thing should happen to me again that has happened before, that's all."

"Do you draw back, or are you thinking about betraying us?"

"I do not draw back, and I have not the least intention of betraying you, only——"

"Only?" the other repeated.

"This time I will not give up to you what I have promised till my conditions have been agreed to pretty plainly; if not, no——"

"Well, at least that's frank."

"People should speak plainly in business affairs," the Babbler observed, shaking his head.

"That's true! Well, come, repeat the conditions; I will see if we can accept them."

"What's the good of that? You are not the principal chief, are you?"

"No:—but—yet——"

"You could pledge yourself to nothing—so it's of no use. If Waktehno—he who kills—were here now, it would be quite another thing. He and I should soon understand one another."

"Speak then, he is listening to you," said a strong, sonorous voice.

There was a movement in the bushes, and the personage who, up to that moment, had remained an invisible hearer of the conversation of the two men, judged, without doubt, that the time to take a part in it was arrived, for, with a bound, he sprang out of the bushes that had concealed him, and placed himself between the speakers.

"Oh! oh! you were listening to us, Captain Waktehno, were you?" said the Babbler without being the least discomposed.

"Is that unpleasant to you?" the newcomer asked, with an ironical smile.

"Oh! not the least in the world."

"Continue, then, my worthy friend—I am all ears."

"Well," said the guide, "it will, perhaps, be better so."

"Go on, then—speak; I attend to you."

The personage to whom the Babbler gave the terrible Indian name of Waktehno was a man of pure white race, thirty years of age, of lofty stature, and well proportioned, handsome in appearance, and wearing with a certain dashing carelessness the picturesque costume of the wood rangers. His features were noble, strongly marked, and impressed with that loyal and haughty expression so often met with among men accustomed to the rude, free life of the prairies.

He fixed his large, black, brilliant eyes upon the Babbler, a mysterious smile curled his lips, and he leant carelessly upon his rifle whilst listening to the guide.

"If I cause the people I am paid to escort and conduct to fall into your hands, you may depend upon it I will not do so unless I am amply recompensed," said the bandit.

"That is but fair," Kennedy remarked; "and the captain is ready to assure your being so

recompensed."

"Yes," said the other, nodding his head in sign of agreement.

"Very well," the guide resumed. "But what will be my recompense?"

"What do you ask?" the captain said. "We must know what your conditions are before we agree to satisfy them."

"Oh! my terms are very moderate."

"Well, but what are they?"

The guide hesitated, or, rather, he calculated mentally the chances of gain and loss the affair offered; then in an instant, he replied:

"These Mexicans are very rich."

"Probably," said the captain.

"Therefore it appears to me——"

"Speak without tergiversation, Babbler; we have not time to listen to your circumlocutions. Like all half-bloods, the Indian nature always prevails in you, and you never come frankly to the purpose."

"Well, then," the guide bluntly replied, "I will have five thousand duros, or nothing shall be done."

"For once you speak out; now we know what we have to trust to; you demand five thousand dollars?"

"I do."

"And for that sum you agree to deliver up to us, the general, his niece, and all the individuals who accompany them."

"At your first signal."

"Very well! Now listen to what I am going to say to you."

"I listen."

"You know me, do you not?"

"Perfectly."

"You know dependence is to be placed upon my word?"

"It is as good as gold."

"That's well. If you loyally fulfil the engagements you freely make with me, that is to say, deliver up to me, not all the Mexicans who comprise your caravan, very respectable people no doubt, but for whom I care very little, but only the girl, called, I think, Doña Luz, I will not give you five thousand dollars as you ask, but eight thousand—you understand me, do you not?"

The eyes of the guide sparkled with greediness and cupidity.

"Yes!" he said emphatically.

"That's well."

"But it will be a difficult matter to draw her out of the camp alone."

"That's your affair."

"I should prefer giving them all up in a lump."

"Go to the devil! What could I do with them?"

"Hum! what will the general say?"

"What he likes; that is nothing to me. Yes or no—do you accept the offer I make you?"

"Oh! I accept it."

"Do you swear to be faithful to your engagements?"

"I swear."

"Now then, how long does the general reckon upon remaining in this new encampment?"

"Ten days."

"Why, then, did you tell me that you did not know how to draw the young girl out, having so much time before you?"

"Hum! I did not know when you would require her to be delivered up to you?"

"That's true. Well, I give you nine days; that is to say, on the eve of their departure the young girl must be given up to me."

"Oh! in that way——"

"Then that arrangement suits you?"

"It could not be better."

"Is it agreed?"

"Irrevocably."

"Here, then, Babbler," said the captain, giving the guide a magnificent diamond pin which he wore in his hunting shirt, "here is my earnest."

"Oh!" the bandit exclaimed, seizing the jewel joyfully.

"That pin," said the captain, "is a present I make you in addition to the eight thousand dollars I will hand over to you on receiving Doña Luz."

"You are noble and generous, captain," said the guide; "it is a pleasure to serve you."

"Still," the captain rejoined, in a rough voice, and with a look cold as a steel blade, "I would have you remember I am called he who kills; and that if you deceive me, there does not exist in the prairie a place sufficiently strong or sufficiently unknown to protect you from the terrible effects of my vengeance.

"I know that, captain," said the half-breed, shuddering in spite of himself; "but you may be quite satisfied I will not deceive you."

"I hope you will not! Now let us separate; your absence may be observed. In nine days I shall be here."

"In nine days I will place the girl in your hands."

After these words the guide returned to the camp, which he entered without being seen.

As soon as they were alone, the two men with whom the Babbler had just made this hideous and strange bargain, retreated silently among the underwood, through which they crawled like serpents.

They soon reached the banks of a little rivulet which ran, unperceived and unknown, through the forest. Kennedy whistled in a certain fashion twice.

A slight noise was heard, and a horseman, holding two horses in hand, appeared at a few paces from the spot where they had stopped.

"Come on, Frank," said Kennedy, "you may approach without fear."

The horsemen immediately advanced.

"What is there new?" Kennedy asked.

"Nothing very important," the horseman replied.

"I have discovered an Indian trail."

"Ah! ah!" said the captain, "numerous?"

"Rather so."

"In what direction?"

"It cuts the prairie from east to west."

"Well done, Frank, and who are these Indians?"

"As well as I can make out, they are Comanches."

The captain reflected a moment.

"Oh! it is some detachment of hunters," he said.

"Very likely," Frank replied.

The two men mounted.

"Frank and you, Kennedy," said the captain, at the expiration of a minute, "will go to the passage of the Buffalo, and encamp in the grotto which is there; carefully watching the movements of the Mexicans, but in such a manner as not to be discovered."

"Be satisfied of that, captain."

"Oh; I know you are very adroit and devoted comrades, therefore I perfectly rely upon you. Watch the Babbler, likewise; that half-breed only inspires me with moderate confidence."

"That shall be done!"

"Farewell, then, till we meet again. You shall soon hear of me."

Notwithstanding the darkness, the three men set off at a gallop, and were soon far in the desert, in two different directions.

CHAPTER XII.

PSYCHOLOGICAL.

The general had kept the causes which made him undertake a journey into the prairies from the west of the United States so profound a secret, that the persons who accompanied him had not even a suspicion of them.

Several times already, at his command, and without any apparent reason, the caravan had

encamped in regions completely desert, where he had passed a week, and sometimes a fortnight, without any apparent motive for such a halt.

In these various encampments the general would set out every morning, attended by one of the guides, and not return till evening.

What was he doing during the long hours of his absence?

For what object were these explorations made, at the end of which a greater degree of sadness darkened his countenance?

No one knew.

During these excursions, Doña Luz led a sufficiently monotonous life, isolated among the rude people who surrounded her. She passed whole days seated sadly in front of her tent, or, mounted on horseback and escorted by Captain Aguilar or the fat doctor, she took rides near the camp, without object and without interest.

It happened this time again, exactly as it had happened at the preceding stations of the caravan.

The young girl, abandoned by her uncle, and even by the doctor, who was pursuing, with increasing ardour, the great research for his imaginary plant, and set out resolutely every morning herbalizing, was reduced to the company of Captain Aguilar.

But Captain Aguilar was, we are forced to admit, although young, elegant and endowed with a certain relative intelligence, not a very amusing companion for Doña Luz.

A brave soldier, with the courage of a lion, entirely devoted to the general, to whom he owed everything, the captain entertained for the niece of his chief great attachment and respect; he watched with the utmost care over her safety, but he was completely unacquainted with the means of rendering the time shorter by those attentions and that pleasant chat which are so agreeable to girls.

This time Doña Luz did not become so *ennuyée* as usual. Since that terrible night—from the time that one of those fabulous heroes whose history and incredible feats she had so often read, Loyal Heart, had appeared to her to save her and those who accompanied her—a new sentiment, which she had not even thought of analyzing, had germinated in her maiden heart, had grown by degrees, and in a very few days had taken possession of her whole being.

The image of the hunter was incessantly present to her thoughts, encircled with that ennobling glory which is won by the invincible energy of the man who struggles, body to body, with some immense danger, and forces it to acknowledge his superiority. She took delight in recalling to her partial mind the different scenes of that tragedy of a few hours, in which the hunter had played the principal character.

Her implacable memory, like that of all pure young girls, retraced with incredible fidelity the smallest details of those sublime phases.

In a word, she reconstructed in her thoughts the series of events in which the hunter had mingled, and in which he had, thanks to his indomitable courage and his presence of mind, extricated in so happy a fashion those he had suddenly come to succour, at the instant when they were without hope.

The hurried manner in which the hunter had left them, disdaining the most simple thanks, and appearing even unconcerned for those he had saved, had chilled the girl; she was piqued more than can be imagined by this real or affected indifference. And, consequently, she continually revolved means to make her preserver repent that indifference, if chance should a second time bring them together.

It is well known, although it may at the first glance appear a paradox, that from hatred, or, at least, from curiosity to love, there is but one step.

Doña Luz passed it at full speed, without perceiving it.

As we have said, Doña Luz had been educated in a convent, at the gates of which the sounds of the world died away without an echo. Her youth had passed calm and colourless, in the religious, or, rather, superstitious practices, upon which in Mexico religion is built. When her uncle took her from the convent to lead her with him through the journey he meditated into the prairies, the girl was ignorant of the most simple exigences of life, and had no more idea of the outward world, in which she was so suddenly cast, than a blind man has of the effulgent splendour of the sun's beams.

This ignorance, which seconded admirably the projects of the uncle, was for the niece a stumbling block against which she twenty times a day came into collision in spite of herself.

But, thanks to the care with which the general surrounded her, the few weeks which passed away before their departure from Mexico had been spent without too much pain by the young girl.

We feel called upon, however, to notice here an incident, trifling in appearance, but which left too deep a trace in the mind of Doña Luz not to be related.

The general was actively employed in getting together the people he wanted for his expedition, and was therefore obliged to neglect his niece more than he would have wished.

As he, however, feared that the young girl would be unhappy at being left so much alone with an old duenna in the palace he occupied, in the Calle de los Plateros, he sent her frequently to spend her evenings at the house of a female relation who received a select society, and with whom his

niece passed her time in a comparatively agreeable manner.

Now one evening when the assembly had been more numerous than usual, the party did not break up till late.

At the first stroke of eleven, sounded by the ancient clock of the convent of the Merced Doña Luz and her duenna, preceded by a peon carrying a torch to light them, set off on their return home, casting anxious looks, right and left, on account of the character of the streets at that time of night. They had but a short distance to go, when all at once, on turning the corner of the Calle San Agustin to enter that of Plateros, four or five men of bad appearance seemed to rise from the earth, and surrounded the two women, after having previously, by a vigorous blow, extinguished the torch carried by the peon.

To express the terror of the young lady at this unexpected apparition, is impossible.

She was so frightened that, without having the strength to utter a cry, she fell on her knees, with her hands clasped, before the bandits.

The duenna, on the contrary, sent forth deafening screams.

The Mexican bandits, all very expeditious men, had, in the shortest time possible, reduced the duenna to silence, by gagging her with her own rebozo; then, with all the calmness which these worthies bring to the exercise of their functions, assured as they are of the impunity granted to them by that justice with which they generally go halves, proceeded to plunder their victims.

The operation was shortened by the latter, for, so far from offering any resistance, they tore off their jewels in the greatest haste, and the bandits pocketed them with grins of satisfaction.

But, at the very height of this enjoyment, a sword gleamed suddenly over their heads, and two of the bandits fell to the ground, swearing and howling with fury.

Those who were left standing, enraged at this unaccustomed attack, turned to avenge their companions, and rushed all together upon the aggressor.

The latter, heedless of their numbers, made a step backwards, placed himself on guard, and prepared to give them a welcome.

But, by chance, with the change in his position, the moonlight fell upon his face. The bandits instantly drew back in terror, and promptly sheathed their machetes.

"Ah, ah!" said the stranger, with a smile of contempt, as he advanced towards them, "you recognise me, my masters, do you? By the Virgin! I am sorry for it—I was preparing to give you a rather sharp lesson. Is this the manner in which you execute my orders?"

The bandits remained silent, contrite and repentant, in appearance at least.

"Come, empty your pockets, you paltry thieves, and restore to these ladies what you have taken from them!"

Without a moment's hesitation, the thieves unbandaged the duenna, and restored the rich booty which, an instant before, they had so joyfully appropriated to themselves.

Doña Luz could not overcome her astonishment, she looked with the greatest surprise at this strange man, who possessed such authority over bandits acknowledging neither faith nor law.

"Is this really all?" he said, addressing the young lady, "are you sure you miss nothing, señora?"

"Nothing—nothing, sir!" she replied, more dead than alive, and not knowing at all what she said.

"Now, then, begone, you scoundrels," the stranger continued; "I will take upon myself to be the escort of these ladies."

The bandits did not require to be twice told; they disappeared like a flight of crows, carrying off the wounded.

As soon as he was left alone with the two women, the stranger turned towards Doña Luz—

"Permit me, señorita," he said, with refined courtesy of manner, "to offer you my arm as far as your palace; the fright you have just experienced must render your steps uncertain."

Mechanically, and without reply, the young girl placed her hand within the arm so courteously offered to her, and they moved forward.

"When they arrived at the palace, the stranger knocked at the door, and then taking off his hat, said,—

"Señorita, I am happy that chance has enabled me to render you a slight service. I shall have the honour of seeing you again. I have already, for a long time, followed your steps like your shadow. God, who has granted me the favour of an opportunity of speaking with you once, will, I feel assured, grant me a second, although, in a few days, you are to set out on a long journey. Permit me then to say not *adieu*, but *au revoir*."

After bowing humbly and gracefully to the young lady, he departed at a rapid pace.

A fortnight after this strange adventure, of which she did not think fit to speak to her uncle, Doña Luz quitted Mexico, without having again seen the unknown. Only, on the eve of her departure, when retiring to her bedchamber, she found a folded note upon her *prie-dieu*. In this note were the following words, written in an elegant hand:—

"You are going, Doña Luz! Remember that I told you I should see you again.

"Your preserver of the Calle de los Plateros."

For a long time this strange meeting strongly occupied the mind of the young girl; for an instant, she had even believed that Loyal Heart and her unknown preserver were the same man; but this supposition had soon faded away. What probability was there in it? With that object could Loyal Heart, after having saved her, so quickly have departed? That would have been absurd.

But, by one of those consequences (or those inconsequences, whichever the reader pleases) of the human mind, in proportion as the affair of Mexico was effaced from her thoughts, that of Loyal Heart, became more prominent.

She longed to see the hunter and talk with him.

Why?

She did not herself know. To see him,—-to hear his voice,—to meet his look, at once so soft and so proud,—nothing else; all maidens would have done the same.

But how was she to see him again?

In reply to that question arose an impossibility, before which the poor girl dropped her head with discouragement.

And yet something at the bottom of her heart, perhaps that voice divine which in the reflections of love whispers to young girls, told her that her wish would soon be accomplished.

She hoped, then?

What for?

For some unforeseen incident,—a terrible danger, perhaps,—which might again bring them together.

True love may doubt sometimes, but it never despairs.

Four days after the establishment of the camp upon the hill, in the evening, when retiring to her tent, Doña Luz smiled inwardly as she looked at her uncle, who was pensively preparing to go to rest.

She had at length thought of a means of going in search of Loyal Heart.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE BEE-HUNT.

The sun was scarcely above the horizon, when the general, whose horse was already saddled, left the reed cabin which served him as a sleeping apartment, and prepared to set out on his usual daily ride. At the moment when he was putting his foot in the stirrup, a little hand lifted the curtain of the tent, and Doña Luz appeared.

"Oh! oh! what, up already!" said the general, smiling. "So much the better, dear child. I shall be able to have a kiss before I set out; and that perhaps may bring me good luck," he added, stifling a sigh.

"You will not go thus, uncle," she replied, presenting her cheek, upon which he placed a kiss.

"Why not, fair lady?" he asked gaily.

"Because I wish you to partake of something I have prepared for you before you mount on horseback; you cannot refuse me, can you, dear uncle?" she said, with that coaxing smile of spoilt children which delights the hearts of old men.

"No, certainly not, dear child, upon condition that the breakfast you offer me so gracefully be not delayed. I am rather in a hurry."

"I only ask for a few minutes," she replied, returning to the tent.

"For a few minutes be it then," said he, following her.

The young girl clapped her hands with joy.

In the twinkling of an eye, the breakfast was ready, and the general at table with his niece. Whilst assisting her uncle, and taking great care that he wanted for nothing, the young girl looked at him from time to time in an embarrassed manner, and did it so evidently, that the old soldier ended by observing it.

"It is my opinion," he said, laying down his knife and fork, and looking at her earnestly, "that you have something to ask me, Lucita; you know very well that I am not accustomed to refuse you anything."

"That is true, dear uncle; but this time, I am afraid, you will be more difficult to be prevailed upon."

"Ah! ah!" the general said, gaily; "it must be something serious, then!"

"Quite the contrary, uncle; and yet, I confess, I am afraid you will refuse me."

"Speak, notwithstanding, my child," said the old soldier; "speak without fear; when you have told me what this mighty affair is, I will soon answer you."

"Well, uncle," the girl said, blushing, but determined on her purpose, "I am compelled to say that the residence in the camp has nothing agreeable about it."

"I can conceive that, my child; but what do you wish me to do to make it otherwise?"

"Everything."

"How so, dear?"

"Nay, dear, uncle, if you were always here, it would not be dull; I should have your company."

"What you say is very amiable; but, as you know I am absent every morning, I cannot be here, and——-

"That is exactly where the difficulty lies."

"That is true."

"But, if you were willing, it could be easily removed."

"Do you think so?"

"I am sure of it."

"Well, I don't see too clearly how, unless I remained always with you, and that is impossible."

"Oh; there are other means that would arrange the whole affair."

"Nonsense!"

"Yes, uncle, and very simple means too."

"Well, then, darling, what are these means?"

"You will not scold me, uncle?"

"Silly child! do I ever scold you?"

"That is true! You are so kind."

"Come, then; speak out, little pet?"

"Well, uncle, these means——"

"These means are?"

"That you should take me with you every morning."

"Oh! oh!" said the general, whose brows became contracted; "do you know what you ask me, my dear child?"

"Why, a very natural thing, uncle, as I think."

The general made no reply; he reflected. The girl watched anxiously the fugitive traces of his thoughts upon his countenance.

At the end of a few instants, he raised his head.

"Well, perhaps," he murmured, "it would be better so;" and fixing a piercing look upon his niece, he said, "it would give you pleasure, then, to accompany me?"

"Yes, uncle, yes!" she replied.

"Well, then, get ready, my dear child; henceforth you shall accompany me in my excursions."

She arose from her seat with a bound, kissed her uncle warmly, and gave orders for her horse to be saddled.

A quarter of an hour later, Doña Luz and her uncle, preceded by the Babbler, and followed by two lanceros, quitted the camp, and plunged into the forest.

"Which way would you wish to direct your course, today, general?" the guide asked.

"Conduct me to the huts of those trappers you spoke of yesterday."

The guide bowed in sign of obedience. The little party advanced slowly and with some difficulty along a scarcely traced path, where, at every step, the horses became entangled in the creeping plants, or stumbled over the roots of trees above the level of the ground.

Doña Luz was gay and happy. Perhaps in these excursions she might meet with Loyal Heart.

The Babbler, who was a few paces in advance, suddenly uttered a cry.

"Eh!" said the general, "what extraordinary thing has happened, Master Babbler, to induce you to speak?"

"The bees, señor."

"What! bees! are there bees here?"

"Yes; but lately only."

"How only lately?"

"Why, you know, of course, that bees were brought into America by the whites."

"That, I know. How is it, then, they are met with here?"

"Nothing more simple; the bees are the advanced sentinels of the whites. In proportion as the whites penetrate into the interior of America, the bees go forward to trace the route for them, and point out the clearings. Their appearance in an uninhabited country always presages the arrival of a colony of pioneers or squatters."

"That is something strange," the general murmured; "are you sure of what you are telling me?"

"Oh! quite sure, señor; the fact is well known to all Indians, they are not mistaken in it, be assured; for as soon as they see the bees arrive, they retreat."

"That is truly singular."

"The honey must be very good," said Doña Luz.

"Excellent, señorita, and if you wish for it, nothing is more easy than to get it."

"Get some, then," said the general.

The guide, who some moments before had placed a bait for the bees upon the bushes, to which, with his piercing sight, he had already seen several bees attracted, made a sign to those behind him to stop.

The bees had, in fact, lighted upon the bait, and were examining it all over; when they had made their provision, they rose very high into the air, and then took flight in a direct line with the velocity of a cannon ball.

The guide carefully watched the direction they took, and making a sign to the general, he sprang after them, followed by the whole party, clearing themselves a way through interlaced roots, fallen trees, bushes and briars, their eyes directed all the while towards the sky.

In this fashion they never lost sight of the laden bees, and after a difficult pursuit of an hour, they saw them arrive at their nest, constructed in the hollow of a dead ebony tree; after buzzing for a moment, they entered a hole situated at more than eighty feet from the ground.

Then the guide, after having warned his companions to keep at a respectful distance, in order to be out of the way of the falling tree and the vengeance of its inhabitants, seized his axe and attacked the ebony vigorously near the base.

The bees did not seem at all alarmed by the strokes of the axe; they continued going in and out, carrying on their industrial labours in full security. A violent cracking even, which announced the splitting of the trunk, did not divert them from their occupations.

At length the tree fell, with a horrible crash, opening the whole of its length, and leaving the accumulated treasures of the community exposed to view.

The guide immediately seized a bundle of hay which he had prepared, and to which he set fire to defend himself from the bees.

But they attacked nobody; they did not seek to avenge themselves. The poor creatures were stupefied; they ran and flew about in all directions round their destroyed empire, without thinking of anything but how to account for this unlooked-for catastrophe.

Then the guide and the lanceros set to work with spoons and knives to get out the comb and put it into the wineskins.

Some of the comb was of a deep brown, and of ancient date, other parts were of a beautiful white; the honey in the cells was almost limpid.

Whilst they were hastening to get possession of the best combs, they saw arrive on the wing from all points of the horizon numberless swarms of honey bees, who, plunging into the broken cells, loaded themselves, whilst the ex-proprietors of the hive, dull and stupefied, looked on, without seeking to save the least morsel, at the robbery of their honey.

It is impossible to describe the astonishment of the bees that were absent at the moment of the catastrophe, as they arrived at their late home with their cargoes; they described circles in the air round the place the tree had occupied, astonished to find it empty; at length, however they seemed to comprehend their disaster, and collected in groups upon the dried branch of a neighbouring tree, appearing to contemplate thence the fallen ruin, and to lament the destruction of their empire.

Doña Luz felt affected in spite of herself, at the trouble of these poor creatures.

"Let us go," she said, "I repent of having wished for honey; my greediness has made too many unhappy."

"Let us be gone," said the general, smiling; "leave them these few combs."

"Oh!" said the guide, shrugging his shoulders, "they will soon be carried away by the vermin."

"The vermin! What vermin do you mean?" the general asked.

"Oh! the raccoons, the opossums, but particularly the bears."

"The bears?" said Doña Luz.

"Oh, señorita!" the guide replied, "they are the cleverest vermin in the world in discovering a tree of bees, and getting their share of the honey."

"Do they like honey, then?" said the lady, with excited curiosity.

"Why, they are mad after it, señorita," the guide, who really seemed to relax of his cynical

humour, rejoined. "Imagine how greedy they are after it, when they will gnaw a tree for weeks, until they succeed in making a hole large enough to put their paws in, and then they carry off honey and bees, without taking the trouble to choose."

"Now," said the general, "let us resume our route, and seek the residence of the trappers."

"Oh! we shall soon be there, señor," replied the guide; "the great Canadian river is within a few paces of us, and trappers are established all along the streams which flow into it."

The little party proceeded on their way again.

The bee hunt had left an impression of sadness on the mind of the young lady, which, although unconscious of it, she could not overcome. Those poor little creatures, so gentle and so industrious, attacked and ruined for a caprice, grieved her, and, in spite, of herself, made her thoughtful.

Her uncle perceived this disposition of her mind.

"Dear child!" he said, "what is passing in your little head? You are no longer so gay as when we set out; whence comes this sudden change?"

"Good heavens! uncle, do not let that disturb you; I am, like other young girls, rather wild and whimsical; this bee hunt, from which I promised myself so much pleasure, has left a degree of sadness behind it that I cannot get rid of."

"Happy child!" the general murmured, "whom so futile a cause has still the power to trouble. God grant, darling, that you may continue long in that disposition, and that greater and more real troubles may never reach you!"

"My kind uncle, shall I not always be happy while near you?"

"Alas! my child, who knows whether God may permit me to watch over you long!"

"Do not say so, uncle; I hope we have many years to pass together."

The general only responded to this hope by a sigh.

"Uncle," the girl resumed, after a few moments, "do you not find that the aspect of the grand and sublime nature which surrounds us has something striking in it that ennobles our ideas, elevates the soul, and renders man better? How happy must they be who live in these boundless deserts!"

The general looked at her with astonishment.

"Whence come these thoughts to your mind, dear child?" he said.

"I do not know, uncle," she replied, timidly; "I am but an ignorant girl, whose life, still so short, has flowed on to this moment calm and peaceful, under your protection. And yet there are moments when it seems to me that I should be happy to live in these vast deserts."

The general, surprised, and inwardly charmed at the ingenuous frankness of his niece, was preparing to answer her, when the guide, suddenly coming up to them, made a sign to command silence, by saying, in a voice as low as a breath,—

"A man!"

CHAPTER XIV.

BLACK ELK.

Everyone stopped.

In the desert, this word man almost always means an enemy. Man in the prairies is more dreaded by his fellow than the most ferocious wild beast. A man is a rival, a forced associate, who, by the right of being the stronger, comes to share with the first occupant, and often, if we may not say always, strives to deprive him of the fruits of his thankless labour.

Thus, whites, Indians, or half-breeds, when they meet in the prairies, salute each other with eye on the watch, ears open, and the finger on the trigger of the rifle.

At this cry of a man, the general and the lanceros, at all hazards, prepared against a sudden attack by cocking their guns, and concealing themselves as much as possible behind the bushes.

At fifty paces before them stood an individual, who, the butt on the ground, and his two hands leaning on the barrel of a long rifle, was observing them attentively.

He was a man of lofty stature, with energetic features and a frank, determined look. His long hair, arranged with care, was plaited, mingled with otter skins and ribbons of various colours. A hunting blouse of ornamented leather fell to his knees; gaiters of a singular cut, ornamented with strings, fringes, and a profusion of little bells covered his legs; his shoes consisted of a pair of superb moccasins, embroidered with false pearls.

A scarlet blanket hung from his shoulders, and was fastened round his middle by a red belt, through which were passed two pistols, a knife, and an Indian pipe.

His rifle was profusely decorated with vermilion and little copper nails.

At a few paces from him his horse was browsing on the mast of the trees.

Like its master, it was equipped in the most fantastic manner, spotted and striped with vermilion, the reins and crupper ornamented with beads and bunches of ribbon, while its head, mane, and tail, were abundantly decorated with eagle's feathers floating in the wind.

At sight of this personage the general could not restrain a cry of surprise.

"To what Indian tribe does this man belong?" he asked the guide.

"To none," the latter replied.

"How, to none?"

"No; he is a white trapper."

"And so dressed?"

The guide shrugged his shoulders.

"We are in the prairies;" he said.

"That is true," the general murmured.

In the meantime, the individual we have described, tired, no doubt, of the hesitation of the little party before him, and wishing to know what their disposition was, resolutely accosted them.

"Eh! eh!" he said in English, "Who the devil are you—and what are you seeking here?"

"*Caramba!*" the general replied, throwing his gun behind him, and ordering his people to do the same; "we are travellers, fatigued with a long journey; the sun is hot, and we ask permission to rest a short time in your rancho."

These words being spoken in Spanish, the trapper replied in the same language,—

"Approach without fear; Black Elk is a good sort of fellow when people do not seek to thwart him; you shall share the little he possesses, and much good may it do you."

At the name of Black Elk the guide could not repress a movement of terror; he wished even to say a few words, but he had not time, for the hunter, throwing his gun upon his shoulder, and leaping into his saddle with a bound, advanced towards the Mexicans.

"My rancho is a few paces from this spot," said he to the general; "if the señorita is inclined to taste the well-seasoned hump of a buffalo, I am in a position to offer her that piece of politeness."

"I thank you, caballero," the young lady replied, with a smile; "but I confess that at this moment I stand in more need of repose than anything else."

"Everything will come in its time," the trapper said sententiously. "Permit me, for a few moments, to take the place of your guide."

"We are at your orders," said the general; "go on, we will follow you."

"Forward! then," said the trapper, placing himself at the head of the little troop.

At this moment his eyes fell by chance upon the guide—his thick eyebrows contracted. "Hum!" he muttered to himself, "what does this mean? We shall see," he added.

And without taking further notice of the man, without appearing to recognise him, he gave the signal for departure.

After riding for some time silently along the banks of a moderately wide rivulet, the trapper made a sharp turn, and departing from the stream suddenly, plunged again into the forest.

"I crave your pardon," he said, "for making you turn out of your way; but this is a beaver pond, and I do not wish to frighten them."

"Oh!" the young lady cried, "how delighted I should be to see those industrious animals at work!"

The trapper stopped.

"Nothing more easy, señorita," he said, "if you will follow me, while your companions remain here, and wait for us."

"Yes, yes!" Doña Luz replied eagerly; but checking herself all at once, added, "Oh, pardon me, dear uncle."

The general cast a look at the trapper.

"Go, my child," he said, "we will wait for you here."

"Thank you, uncle," the young girl remarked joyfully, as she leaped from her horse.

"I will be answerable for her," the trapper said frankly; "fear nothing."

"I fear nothing when trusting her to your care, my friend," the general replied.

"Thanks!" And making a sign to Doña Luz, Black Elk disappeared with her among the bushes and trees.

When they had gone some distance, the trapper stopped. After listening and looking around him on all sides, he stooped towards the young girl, and laying his hand lightly on her right arm, said,—

"Listen!"

Doña Luz stood still, uneasy and trembling.

The trapper perceived her agitation.

"Be not afraid," he rejoined; "I am an honest man; you are in as much safety here alone with me in this desert as if you were in the Cathedral of Mexico, at the foot of the high altar."

The young girl cast a furtive glance at the trapper. In spite of his singular costume, his face wore such an expression of frankness, his eye was so soft and limpid, when fixed upon her, that she felt completely reassured.

"Speak," she said.

"You belong," the trapper resumed, "I perceive now, to that party of strangers who, for some days past, have been exploring the prairies in every direction. Do you not?"

"Yes."

"Among you is a sort of madman, who wears blue spectacles and a white wig, and who amuses himself—for what purpose I cannot tell—with making a provision of herbs and stones, instead of trying, like a brave hunter, to trap a beaver, or knock over a deer."

"I know the man you speak of; he, as you suppose, forms part of our troop; he is a very learned physician."

"I know he is; he told me so himself. He often comes this way. We are very good friends. By means of a powder, which he persuaded me to take, he completely checked a fever which had tormented me two months, and of which I could not get rid."

"Indeed! I am happy to hear of such a result."

"I should like to do something for you, to show my gratitude for that service."

"I thank you, my friend, but I cannot see anything in which you can be useful to me, unless it be in showing me the beavers."

The trapper shook his head.

"Perhaps in something else," he said, "and that much sooner than you may fancy. Listen to me attentively, señorita. I am but a poor man; but here in the prairie, we know many things that God reveals to us, because we live face to face with Him. I will give you a piece of good advice. That man who serves you as a guide is an arrant scoundrel, and is known as such throughout all the prairies of the West. I am very much deceived if he will not lead you into some ambush. There is no lack here of plenty of rogues with whom he may lay plans to destroy you, or least, rob you."

"Are you sure of what you say?" the girl exclaimed, terrified at words which coincided so strangely with what Loyal Heart had said to her.

"I am as sure as a man can be who affirms a thing of which he has no proof; that is to say, after the antecedents of the Babbler everything of the sort must be expected from him. Believe me, if he has not already betrayed you, it will not be long before he will."

"Good God! I will go and warn my uncle."

"Beware of doing that! that would ruin all! The people with whom your guide will soon be in collusion, if he be not so already, are numerous, determined, and thoroughly acquainted with the prairie."

"What is to be done, then?" the young lady asked in great alarm.

"Nothing. Wait; and, without appearing to do so, carefully watch all your guide's proceedings."

"But——"

"You must be sure," the trapper interrupted, "that if I lead you to mistrust him, it is not with a view of deserting you when the moment comes for requiring my help."

"Oh! I believe that."

"Well, then, this is what you must do: as soon as you are certain that your guide has betrayed you, send your old mad doctor to me,—you can trust him, can you not?"

"Entirely!"

"Very well. Then, as I have said, you must send him to me, charging him only to say this to me. 'Black Elk'—I am Black Elk."

"I know you are; you told us so."

"That is right. He will say to me, 'Black Elk, the hour is come,' and nothing else. Shall you remember these words?"

"Perfectly. Only, I do not clearly understand how that can serve us."

The trapper smiled in a mysterious manner.

"Hum!" he said, after a short pause, "these few words will bring to you, in two hours, fifty men, the bravest in the prairies,—men who, at a signal from their leader, would allow themselves to be killed rather than leave you in the hands of those who will have possession of you, if what I expect should happen."

There was a moment of silence,—Doña Luz appeared very thoughtful.

The trapper smiled.

"Do not be surprised at the warm interest I take in you," he said, "a man who has entire power over me, has made me swear to watch over you, during an absence he has been compelled to make."

"What do you mean by that?" she said with awakened curiosity. "And who is this man?"

"He is a hunter who commands all the white trappers of the prairies. Knowing that you had the Babbler for a guide, he suspects that the half-breed intends to draw you into some snare?

"But the name of the man?" she cried, in an anxious, excited tone.

"Loyal Heart. Will you have confidence in me now?"

"Thanks, my friend, thanks!" the young lady replied, with great emotion. "I will not forget your instructions; and when the moment comes—if unfortunately it should come—I will not hesitate to remind you of your promise."

"And you will do well, señorita, because it will then be the only means of safety left you. You understand me perfectly, and all is well. Be sure to keep our conversation to yourself. Above all, do not appear to have any secret understanding with me; that devil of a half-breed is as cunning as a beaver; if he suspect anything, he will slip through your fingers, like the viper he is."

"Be satisfied; I will be mute."

"Now let us pursue our way to the Beaver Pond. Loyal Heart watches over you."

"He has already saved our lives on the occasion of the conflagration of the prairies," she said with emotion.

"Ah! ah!" the trapper murmured, fixing his eyes upon her with a singular expression, "everything is for the best, then." And he added in a loud voice: "Be without fear, señorita, if you follow strictly the advice I have given you, no evil will happen to you in the prairies, whatever be the treachery to which you may be exposed."

"Oh!" the girl cried, with great warmth, "in the hour of danger I will not hesitate to have recourse to you—I swear I will not!"

"That is settled," said the Black Elk, smiling; "now let us go and see the beavers."

They resumed their walk, and at the end of a few minutes arrived on the verge of the forest. The trapper then stopped, and making a sign to the young girl to be motionless, turned towards her, and whispered—

"Look!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE BEAVERS.

Doña Luz gently pushed aside the branches of the willows and bending her head forward, she surveyed the scene.

The beavers had not only intercepted the course of the river by means of their industrious community, but, still further, all the rivulets that ran into it had their courses stopped, so as to transform the surrounding ground into one vast marsh.

One beaver alone was at work, at the moment, on the principal dam; but very shortly five others appeared, carrying pieces of wood, mud, and bushes. They then all together directed their course towards a part of the barrier which, as the lady could perceive, needed repair. They deposited their load on the broken part, and plunged into the water, but only to reappear almost instantly on the surface.

Everyone brought up a certain quantity of slimy mud, which they employed as mortar to join and render firm the pieces of wood and the bushes; they went away and returned again with more wood and mud; in short, this work of masonry was carried on till the breach had entirely disappeared.

As soon as all was in order, the industrious animals enjoyed a moment's recreation; they pursued each other in the pond, plunged to the bottom of the water, or sported on the surface, striking the water noisily with their tails.

Doña Luz beheld this singular spectacle with increasing interest. She could have remained the whole day watching these strange animals.

Whilst the first were amusing themselves thus, two other members of the community appeared. For some time they looked gravely on at the sports of their companions, without showing any inclination to join them; then climbing up the steep bank not far from the spot where the trapper and the young girl were watching, they seated themselves upon their hind paws, leaning the fore ones upon a young pine, and beginning to gnaw the bark of it. Sometimes they detached a small piece, and held it between their paws, still remaining seated; they nibbled it with contortions and grimaces pretty much resembling those of a monkey shelling a walnut.

The evident object of these beavers was to cut down the tree, and they laboured at it earnestly. It was a young pine of about eighteen inches in diameter at the part where they attacked it, as straight as an arrow, and of considerable height. No doubt they would soon have succeeded in cutting it through; but the general, uneasy at the prolonged absence of his niece, made up his mind to go in search of her, and the beavers, terrified at the noise of the horses, dived into the water and disappeared.

The general reproached his niece gently for her long absence; but she, delighted with what she had seen, did not heed him, and promised herself to be frequently an invisible spectator of the proceedings of the beavers.

The little party, under the direction of the trapper, directed their course towards the rancho, in which he had offered them shelter from the burning rays of the sun, which was now at its zenith.

Doña Luz, whose curiosity was excited to the highest pitch by the attractive spectacle at which she had been present, determined to make up for her uncle's unwelcome interruption by asking Black Elk all the particulars of the habits of the beavers, and the manner in which they were caught.

The trapper, like all men who live much alone, had no objection, when opportunity offered, to relax from the silence he was generally obliged to preserve, and therefore did not require much pressing.

"Oh, oh, señorita," he said, "the redskins say that the beaver is a man who does not speak; and they are right—he is brave, wise, prudent, industrious, and economical. Thus, when winter arrives, the whole family go to work to prepare provisions; young as well as old, all work. They are often obliged to make long journeys to find the bark they prefer. They sometimes bring down moderately large trees, cutting off the branches, whose bark is most to their taste; they cut it into pieces about three feet long, and transport them to the water, where they set them floating towards their huts, in which they store them. Their habitations are clean and convenient. They take great care, after their repasts, to throw into the current of the river, below the dam, the piece of wood off which they have gnawed the bark. They never permit a strange beaver to come and establish himself near them, and often fight with the greatest fury to secure the freedom of their territories."

"Oh! nothing can be more curious than all this!" Doña Luz exclaimed.

"Ah, but," the trapper rejoined, "that is not all. In the spring, which is the generating season, the male leaves the female in the house, and goes, like a great lord, on a tour of pleasure; sometimes to a great distance, sporting in the limpid waters he falls in with, And climbing their banks to gnaw the tender branches of the young poplars and willows. But when summer comes, he abandons his bachelor life and returns to his mate and her new progeny, which he leads to forage in search of provisions for winter."

"It must be confessed," said the general, "that this animal is one of the most interesting in creation."

"Yes," Doña Luz added, "and I cannot understand how people can make up their minds to hunt them as if they were mischievous beasts."

"What is to be said for it, señorita?" the trapper replied, philosophically; "all animals were created for man—this one above others, its fur is so valuable."

"That is true," said the general; "but," he added, "how do you set about this chase? All beavers are not so confiding as these; there are some that conceal their huts with extreme care."

"Yes," Black Elk replied; "but habit has given the experienced trapper so certain a glance, that he discovers, by the slightest sign, the track of a beaver; and although the hut be concealed by thick underwood and the willows which shade it, it is very seldom that he cannot guess the exact number of its inhabitants. He then places his trap, fastens it to the bank, two or three inches under water, and secures it by a chain to a pole strongly fixed in the mud or sand. A little twig is then deprived of its bark, and soaked in the medicine, for so we call the bait we employ; this twig is so placed as to rise three or four inches above the water, whilst its extremity is fixed in the opening of the trap. The beaver, which is endowed with a very subtle smell, is quickly attracted by the odour of the bait. As soon as it advances its snout to seize it, its foot is caught in the trap. In great terror, it tries to dive into the water, but the chained trap resists all its efforts; it struggles for some time, but at last, its strength being exhausted, it sinks to the bottom of the water, and is drowned. This, señorita, is the way in which beavers are generally taken. But in rocky beds, where it is not possible to fix the poles to retain the trap, we are often obliged to search for a length of time for the captured beavers, and even to swim to great distances. It also happens that when several members of the same family have been taken, the others become mistrustful. Then, whatever stratagems we have recourse to, it is impossible to get them to bite the bait. They approach the traps with precaution, let off the spring with a stick, and often even turn the traps upside down, dragging them under their dam, and burying them in the mud.

"What do you do then?" Doña Luz asked.

"Why, then," Black Elk replied, "we have but one thing left to do, and that is, throw our traps upon our backs, own ourselves beaten by the beavers, and go further afield to seek others less Cunning. But here is my rancho."

At this moment the travellers arrived at a miserable hut, made of interlaced branches of trees, scarcely capable of sheltering them from the rays of the sun, and in every respect resembling, as

regarded convenience, those of other trappers of the prairies, who are men that trouble themselves the least about the comforts of life.

Nevertheless, such as it was, Black Elk did the honours of it very warmly to the strangers.

A second trapper was squatting before the hut, occupied in watching the roasting of the buffalo's hump which Black Elk had promised his guests.

This man, whose costume was in all respects like that of Black Elk, was scarcely forty years old; but the fatigue and numberless miseries of his hard profession had dug upon his face such a network of inextricable wrinkles as made him look older than he was in reality.

In fact, there does not exist in the world a more dangerous, more painful, or less profitable trade than that of a trapper. These poor people are often, whether by Indians or hunters, robbed of their hard-earned gains, scalped, and massacred, and no one troubles himself to learn what has become of them.

"Take your place, señorita; and you also, gentlemen," said Black Elk, politely. "However poor my hut may be, it is large enough to contain you all."

The travellers cheerfully accepted his invitation; they alighted from their horses, and were soon stretched comfortably upon beds of dry leaves, covered with the skins of bears, elks, and buffaloes.

The repast—truly a hunter's repast—was washed down with some cups of excellent mezcal which the general always carried with him in his expeditions, and which the trappers appreciated as it deserved.

Whilst Doña Luz, the guide, and the lanceros, took a siesta of a few minutes, till the heat of the sun's rays should be a little abated, the general, begging Black Elk to follow him, went out of the hut.

As soon as they were at a sufficient distance, the general seated himself at the foot of an ebony tree, motioning for his companion to follow his example which he immediately did.

After a moment's silence, the general said,—

"Allow me, my friend, in the first place, to thank you for your frank hospitality. That duty performed, I wish to put a few questions to you."

"Caballero!" the trapper replied, evasively, "you know what the redskins say: between every word smoke your calumet, in order to weigh your words well."

"You speak like a sensible man; but be satisfied that I have no intention of putting questions to you that concern your profession, or any object that can affect you personally."

"If I am able to answer you, caballero, be assured I will not hesitate to satisfy you."

"Thank you, friend, I expected no less from you. How long have you been an inhabitant of the prairies?"

"Ten years, already, sir; and God grant I may remain here as many more."

"This sort of life pleases you then?"

"More than I can tell you. A man must, as I have done, begin it almost as a boy, undergo all the trials, endure all the sufferings, partake all its hazards, in order to understand all the intoxicating charms it procures, the celestial joys it gives, and the unknown pleasures into which it plunges us! Oh! caballero, the most beautiful and largest city of old Europe is very little, very dirty, very mean compared with the desert. Your cramped, regulated, compassed life is miserable compared to ours! It is here only that man feels the air penetrate easily into his lungs, that he lives, that he thinks. Civilization brings him down almost to the level of the brute, leaving him no instinct but that which enables him to pursue sordid interests. Whereas, in the desert, in the prairie, face to face with God, his ideas enlarge, his spirit grows, and he becomes really what the Supreme Being meant to make him; that is to say, the king of the creation."

Whilst pronouncing these words the trapper was, in a manner, transfigured; his countenance assumed an inspired expression, his eyes flashed fire, and his gestures were impressed with that nobleness which passion alone gives.

The general sighed deeply, a furtive tear trickled over his grey moustache.

"That's true," he said, sadly; "this life has strange charms for the man who has tasted it, and they attach him by bonds nothing can break. When you arrived in the prairies, whence did you come?"

"I came from Quebec, sir; I am a Canadian."

"Ah!"

A silence of a few minutes ensued, but it was, at length, broken by the general.

"Have you many Mexicans among your companions?"

"Many."

"I should like to obtain some information respecting them."

"There is only one man who could give you any, sir; and, unfortunately, that man is not at this moment here."

"And he is called?"

"Loyal Heart."

"Loyal Heart!" the general replied, warmly; "surely I know that man."

"Yes, you do."

"Good heavens! what a fatality!"

"Perhaps it will be more easy than you suppose to meet with him again, if you really wish to see him."

"I have an immense interest in wishing it."

"Then make your mind easy; you will soon see him."

"How so?"

"Oh! very simply. Loyal Heart lays his traps near me; at the present time I am watching them; but it cannot be long before he returns."

"God grant it may be so!" said the general, with great agitation.

"As soon as he comes I will send you word, if between this and then you have not quitted your camp."

"Do you know where my troop is encamped?"

"We know everything in the desert," the trapper said, with a smile.

"I accept your promise."

"You have my word, sir."

"Thank you."

At that moment Doña Luz came out of the hut; after having made Black Elk a sign to recommend silence, the general hastened to join her.

The travellers remounted their horses, and after thanking the trappers for their cordial hospitality, they again took the road to the camp.

CHAPTER XVI.

TREACHERY.

The return was dull, the general was plunged in profound reflections, caused by his conversation with the trapper. Doña Luz was thinking of the warning that had been given her; the guide embarrassed by the two conversations of Black Elk with the general, had a secret presentiment, which told him to keep on his guard. The two lanceros alone rode on carelessly, ignorant of the drama that was being played around them, and thinking but of one thing—the repose which awaited them on regaining the camp.

The Babbler incessantly cast anxious looks around him, appearing to seek for auxiliaries amidst the thickets which the little party passed silently through.

Day was drawing to a close; it would not be long before the sun disappeared, and already the mysterious denizens of the forest at intervals sent forth dull roarings.

"Are we still far from the camp?" the general said, all at once.

"No," the guide replied; "scarcely an hour's ride."

"Let us mend our speed, then; I should not like to be surprised by the night in this woody country."

The troop fell into a quick trot, which, in less than half an hour, brought them to the first barricades of the camp.

Captain Aguilar and the doctor came to receive the travellers on their arrival.

The evening repast was prepared, and had been waiting some time.

They seated themselves at table.

But the sadness which for some time past seemed to have taken possession of the general and his niece increased instead of diminishing. It had its effect upon the repast; all swallowed their food hastily, without exchanging a word. As soon as they had finished, under pretext of the fatigues of the journey, they separated, ostensibly to seek repose, but, in reality, for the sake of being alone, and reflecting upon the events of the day.

On his part, the guide was not more at his ease; a bad conscience, a sage has said, is the most annoying night companion a man can have; the Babbler possessed the worst of all bad consciences, therefore he had no inclination to sleep. He walked about the camp, seeking in vain in his mind, harassed by anxiety and perhaps remorse, for some means of getting out of the scrape in which he found himself. But it was in vain for him to put his imagination to the rack, nothing suggested itself to calm his apprehensions.

In the meantime, night was advancing, the moon had disappeared, and a thick darkness hovered over the silent camp.

Everyone was asleep, or appearing to sleep; the guide alone, who had taken upon himself the first watch, was seated on a bale; with his arms crossed upon his breast, and his eyes fixed upon vacancy, he became more and more absorbed in gloomy reveries.

All at once a hand was placed upon his shoulder, and a voice murmured in his ear the single word,

"Kennedy!"

The guide, with that presence of mind, and that imperturbable phlegm which never abandons the Indian or the half-breed, cast a suspicious glance around him, to assure himself that he was really alone; then he seized the hand which had remained resting upon his shoulder, and dragged the individual who had spoken to him, and who followed him without resistance, to a retired spot, where he thought he was certain of being overheard by nobody.

At the moment when the two men passed by the tent, the curtains opened softly, and a shadow glided silently after them.

When they were concealed amidst the packages, and standing near enough to each other to speak in a voice as low as a breath, the guide muttered:

"God be praised! I have been expecting your visit with impatience, Kennedy."

"Did you know that I was about to come?" the latter remarked suspiciously.

"No, but I hoped you would!"

"Is there anything fresh?"

"Yes, and much!"

"Speak, and make haste!"

"That is what I am going to do. All is lost!"

"Hem! what do you mean by that?"

"What do I mean is, that today the general, guided by me, went——"

"Ah! yes, I know all that. I saw you."

"Maldición! why did you not attack us, then?"

"There were but two of us."

"I should have made the third, the party would then have been equal; the general had but two lanceros."

"That's true; but I did not think of it."

"You were wrong. All would now be ended, instead of which all is now probably lost."

"How so?"

"Eh! *caray!* It is clear enough. The general and his niece held long conversations with that sneaking hound, Black Elk, and you know he has been acquainted with me a long while. There is no doubt he has made them suspicious of me."

"Why did you lead them to the beaver pond, then?"

"How could I tell I should meet that cursed trapper there?"

"In our trade we must be awake to everything."

"You are right. I have committed an error. At present I believe the evil to be without remedy, for I have a presentiment that Black Elk has completely edified the general with respect to me."

"Hum! that is more than probable. What is to be done, then?"

"Act as soon as possible, without giving them time to put themselves on their guard."

"For my part, I ask no better than that, you know."

"Yes, but where is the captain? Has he returned?"

"He arrived this evening. All our men are concealed in the grotto; there are forty of us.

"Bravo! Why did you not come all together, instead of you by yourself? Only see, what a fine opportunity you have lost? They are all sleeping like dormice. We could have seized them all in less than ten minutes."

"You are right; but one cannot foresee everything; besides, the affair was not so agreed upon with the captain."

"That is true. Why did you come then?"

"To warn you that we are ready, and only await your signal to act."

"Let us consider, then, what is best to be done? Advise me."

"How the devil can you expect me to advise you? Can I tell what is going on here so as to tell you what you must do?"

The guide reflected for a minute, then he raised his head, and surveyed the heavens attentively.

"Listen," he replied, "it is but two o'clock in the morning."

"About that."

"You are going back to the grotto?"

"Immediately!"

"Yes."

"Very well. What next?"

"You will tell the captain that, if he wishes it, I will deliver the girl up to him this night."

"Hum! that appears to me rather difficult."

"You are stupid."

"Very possibly, but I don't see how."

"Attend then. The guarding of the camp is thus distributed:—In the daytime the soldiers guard the intrenchments; but as they are not accustomed to the life of the prairies, and as in the night their assistance would do more harm than good, the other guides and I are charged with the guard whilst the soldiers repose."

"That's cleverly managed," Kennedy said, laughing.

"Is it not?" the Babbler said. "You get on horseback then? when you arrive at the bottom of the hill, six of the bravest of you must come and join me with their aid I undertake to bind, while they sleep, all the soldiers and the general himself."

"There is something in that; that's a good idea."

"Don't you think so?"

"By my faith do I."

"Very well. When once our folks are safely bound, I will whistle, and the captain will come up with the rest of the troop. Then he may arrange his matters with the girl as well as he is able; that is his concern; my task will be accomplished. Now, what do you think of all that?"

"Capital!"

"In this fashion we shall avoid bloodshed and blows, for which I have no great fancy, when I can do without them."

"We know your prudence in that respect."

"Zounds! my dear fellow, when we have affairs like this on hand, which, when they succeed, present great advantages, we should always endeavour so to arrange matters as to have all the chances in our favour.

"Perfectly well reasoned; besides which, your idea pleases me much, and, without delay, I will put it into execution; but, in the first place, let us make things clear, to avoid misunderstandings, which are always disagreeable."

"Very well."

"If, as I believe he will, the captain finds your plan good, and very likely to succeed, as soon as we are at the foot of the hill, I will come up with six resolute fellows, whom I will pick out myself. On which side must we introduce ourselves into the camp?"

"The devil! why on the side you have already entered: you ought to know it."

"And you, where will you be?"

"At the spot where you enter, ready to assist you."

"That's well. Now all is agreed and understood. You have nothing more to say to me?"

"Nothing."

"I am off, then."

"The sooner the better."

"You are always right. Guide me to the place I am to go out at; it is so cursedly dark, that I may lose my way, and tumble over some sleeping soldier, and that would not help our business at all."

"Give me your hand."

"Here it is."

The two men rose, and prepared to proceed to the place where the captain's emissary was to leave the camp; but, at the same moment, a shadow interposed itself between them, and a firm voice said;—

"You are traitors, and shall die!"

In spite of their self-possession, the two men remained for an instant stupefied. Without giving them time to recover their presence of mind, the person who had spoken discharged two pistols, point blank at them.

The miserable wretches uttered a loud cry. One fell, but the other, bounding like a tiger-cat, scrambled over the intrenchments and disappeared before a second shot could be fired at him.

At the double report and the cry uttered by the bandits, the whole camp was roused, and all rushed to the barricades.

The general and Captain Aguilar were the first to arrive at the spot where the scene we have described had taken place.

They found Doña Luz, with two smoking pistols in her hands, whilst, at her feet, a man was writhing in the agonies of death.

"What does all this mean, niece? What has happened, in the name of Heaven! Are you wounded?" the terrified general asked.

"Be at ease, dear uncle, on my account, I am not wounded," the young lady replied. "I have only punished a traitor. Two wretches were plotting in the dark against our common safety; one of them has escaped, but I believe the other is at least seriously wounded."

The general eagerly examined the dying man. By the light of the torch he held in his hand he at once recognized Kennedy, the guide whom the Babbler pretended had been burnt alive in the conflagration of the prairie.

"Oh, oh!" he said, "what does all this mean?"

"It means, uncle," the girl replied, "that if God had not come to my aid, we should have been, this very night, surprised by a troop of bandits, lying in ambush close to us."

"Let us lose no time, then!"

And the general, assisted by Captain Aguilar, hastened to prepare everything for a vigorous resistance, in case an attack should be attempted.

The Babbler had fled, but a large track of blood proved that he was seriously wounded. If it had been light enough, they would have attempted to pursue him, and, perhaps, might have taken him; but, in the midst of darkness, and suspecting that their enemies were in ambush in the neighbourhood, the general was not willing to risk his soldiers out of the camp. He preferred leaving the villain that chance of saving himself.

As to Kennedy, he was dead.

The first moment of excitement past, Doña Luz, no longer sustained by the danger of her situation, began to be sensible she was a woman. Her energy disappeared, her eyes closed, a convulsive trembling shook her whole frame; she fainted, and would have fallen, if the doctor, who was watching her, had not caught her in his arms.

He carried her in that state into the tent, and lavished upon her all the remedies usual in such cases.

The young lady gradually recovered: her spirits were calmed, and order was re-established in her ideas.

The advice given her that very day by Black Elk then naturally recurred to her mind; she deemed the moment was coming for claiming the execution of his promise, and she made a sign to the doctor to approach her.

"My dear doctor," she said, in a sweet but weak voice, "are you willing to render me a great service?"

"Dispose of me as you please, señorita."

"Do you know a trapper named Black Elk?"

"Yes; he has a hut not a great way from us, near a beaver pond."

"That is the person, my good doctor. Well, as soon as it is light, you must go to him from me."

"For what purpose, señorita?"

"Because I ask you," she said, in a calm tone.

"Oh! then you may be at ease; I will go," he replied.

"Thank you, doctor."

"What shall I say to him?"

"You will give him an account of what has taken place here tonight."

"The deuce!"

"And then you will add—retain my exact words, you must repeat them to him to the very letter."

"I listen with all my ears, and will engrave them on my memory."

"Black Elk, the hour is come! You understand that, do you not?"

"Perfectly, señorita."

"You swear to do what I ask of you?"

"I swear it," he said, in a solemn voice. "At sunrise, I will go to the trapper; I will give him an account of the events of the night, and will add—Black Elk, the hour is come. Is that all you desire of me?"

"Yes, all, my kind doctor."

"Well, then, now endeavour to get a little sleep, señorita; I swear to you by my honour, that what

you wish shall be done."

"Again, thank you!" the young girl murmured, with a sweet smile, and pressing his hand.

Then, quite broken down by the terrible emotions of the night, she sank back upon her bed, where she soon fell into a calm, refreshing sleep.

At daybreak, in spite of the observations of the general, who in vain endeavoured to prevent his leaving the camp, by presenting to him all the dangers he was needlessly going to expose himself to, the worthy doctor who had shaken his head at all that his friend said to him, persisted, without giving any reason, in his project of going out, and set off down the hill at a sharp trot.

When once in the forest, he put spurs to his horse, and galloped at best speed towards the hut of Black Elk.

CHAPTER XVII.

EAGLE HEAD.

Eagle Head was a chief as prudent as he was determined; he knew he had everything to fear from the Americans, if he did not succeed in completely concealing his trail.

Hence, after the surprise he had effected against the new establishment of the whites, upon the banks of the great Canadian river, he neglected nothing to secure his troop from the terrible reprisals which threatened them.

It is scarcely possible to form an idea of the talent displayed by the Indians when the object is to conceal their trail.

Twenty times do they repass the same place, entangling, as it were, the traces of their passage in each other, in such a manner that they end by becoming inextricable; neglecting no accident of the ground, marching in each other's footsteps to conceal their number, following for whole days the course of rivulets, frequently with the water up to their waist, carrying their precautions and patience so far as ever to efface with their hands, and, so to speak, step by step the vestiges which might denounce them to the keen, interested eyes of their enemies.

The tribe of the Serpent, to which the warriors commanded by Eagle Head belonged, had entered the prairies nearly five hundred warriors strong, in order to hunt the buffalo, and give battle to the Pawnees and Sioux, with whom they were continually at war.

It was Eagle Head's object, as soon as his campaign should be over, to join his brothers immediately, in order to place in safety the booty gained by the capture of the village, and to take part in a grand expedition which his tribe was preparing against the white trappers and half-breeds spread over the prairies, whom the Indians, with reason, considered as implacable enemies.

Notwithstanding the extreme precaution displayed by the chief, the detachment had marched rapidly.

On the evening of the sixth day that had passed away since the destruction of the fort, the Comanches halted on the banks of a little river without a name, as is the case sometimes in these wilds, and prepared to encamp for the night.

Nothing is more simple than the encamping of Indians upon the warpath.

The horses are hobbled, that they may not stray away; if the savages do not fear a surprise, they kindle a fire; if the contrary, everyone manages to get a little food and rest as well as he can.

Since their departure from the fort, no indication had given the Comanches reason to think they were pursued or watched, and their scouts had discovered no suspicious track. They were at but a short distance from the camp of their tribe,—their security was complete.

Eagle Head ordered a fire to be lit, and himself posted sentinels to watch over the safety of all.

When he had taken these prudent measures, the chief placed his back against an ebony tree, took his calumet, and ordered the old man and the Spanish woman to be brought before him.

When they appeared, Eagle Head saluted the old man cordially, and offered him his calumet, a mark of kindness which the old man accepted, carefully preparing himself for the questions which the Indian was, doubtless, about to put to him.

As he expected, after a silence of a few moments, the latter spoke.

"Does my brother find himself comfortable with the redskins?" asked he.

"I should be wrong to complain, chief," the Spaniard replied; "since I have been with you I have been treated very kindly."

"My brother is a friend," the Comanche said, emphatically.

The old man bowed.

"We are at length in our own hunting grounds," the chief continued; "my brother, the White Head, is fatigued with a long life; he is better at the counsel fire than on horseback, hunting the

elk or the buffalo—what does my brother wish?"

"Chief," the Spaniard replied, "your words are true; there was a time when, like every other child of the prairies, I passed whole days in hunting upon a fiery unbroken mustang; my strength has disappeared, my members have lost their elasticity, and my eye its infallibility; I am worth nothing now in an expedition, however short it may be."

"Good!" the Indian replied, imperturbably, blowing clouds of smoke from his mouth and nostrils; "let my brother tell his friend what he wishes, and it shall be done."

"I thank you, chief, and I will profit by your kindness; I should be happy if you would consent to furnish me with means of gaining, without being disturbed, some establishment of men of my own colour, where I might pass in peace the few days I have yet to live."

"Eh! why should I not do it? Nothing is more easy; as soon as we have rejoined the tribe, since my brother is not willing to dwell with us, his desires shall be satisfied."

There was a moment of silence. The old man, believing the conversation terminated, prepared to retire; with a gesture, the chief ordered him to remain.

After a few instants, the Indian shook the ashes out of his pipe, passed the shank of it through his belt, and fixing upon the Spaniard a glance marked by a strange expression, he said, in a sad voice,—

"My brother is happy, although he has seen many winters, he does not walk alone in the path of life."

"What does the chief mean?" the old man asked; "I do not understand."

"My brother has a family," the Comanche replied.

"Alas! my brother is deceived; I am alone in this world."

"What does my brother say? Has he not his mate?" A sad smile passed over the pale lips of the old man.

"No," he said, after a moment's pause; "I have no mate."

"What is that woman to him, then?" said the chief, with feigned surprise, and pointing to the Spanish woman, who stood pensive and silent by the side of the old man.

"That woman is my mistress."

"Wah! Can it be that my brother is a slave?" said the Comanche, with an ill-omened smile.

"No," the old man replied haughtily! "I am not the slave of that woman, I am her devoted servant."

"Wah!" said the chief, shaking his head, and reflecting deeply upon this reply.

But the words of the Spaniard were unintelligible to the Indian; the distinction was too subtle for him to seize it. At the end of two or three minutes he shook his head, and gave up the endeavour to solve the, to him, incomprehensible problem.

"Good!" he said, darting an ironical glance through his half-closed eyelids; "the woman shall go with my brother."

"That is what I always intended," the Spaniard replied.

The aged woman, who to this moment had preserved a prudent silence, judged it was now time to take part in the conversation.

"I am thankful to the chief," she said; "but since he is good enough to take interest in our welfare, will he permit me to ask him a favour?"

"Let my mother speak; my ears are open."

"I have a son who is a great white hunter; he must at this moment be in the prairie; perhaps, if my brother would consent to keep us a few days longer with him, it would be possible to meet with him; under his protection we should have nothing to fear."

At these imprudent words the Spaniard made a gesture of terror.

"Señorita!" he said sharply in his native language, "take care lest——"

"Silence!" the Indian interrupted in an angry tone; "why does my white brother speak before me in an unknown tongue? Does he fear I should understand his words?"

"Oh, chief!" said the Spaniard, in a tone of denial.

"Let my brother, then, allow my palefaced mother to speak; she is speaking to a chief."

The old man was silent, but a sad presentiment weighed upon his heart.

The Comanche chief knew perfectly well to whom he was speaking; he was playing with the two Spaniards, as a cat does with a mouse; but, allowing none of his impressions to appear, he turned towards the woman, and bowing with that instinctive courtesy which distinguishes the Indians, said in a mild voice, and with a sympathetic smile,—

"Oh! oh! the son of my mother is a great hunter, is he? So much the better."

The heart of the poor woman dilated with joy.

"Yes," she said, with emotion, "he is one of the bravest trappers on the Western prairies."

"*Wah!*" said the chief, in a still more amiable manner, "this renowned warrior must have a name respected through the prairies?"

The Spaniard suffered a martyrdom; held in awe by the eye of the Comanche, he did not know how to warn his mistress not to pronounce the name of her son.

"His name is well known," said the woman.

"Oh!" the old man cried eagerly, "all women are thus; with them all their sons are heroes: this one, although an excellent young man, is no better than others; certes, his name has never reached my brother."

"How does my brother know that?" said the Indian, with a sardonic smile.

"I suppose so," the old man replied; "or, at least, if by chance my brother has heard it pronounced, it must long ago have escaped his memory, and does not merit being recalled to it. If my brother will permit us, we will retire; the day has been fatiguing; the hour of repose is come."

"In an instant," said the Comanche quietly; and turning to the woman, "What is the name of the warrior of the palefaces?" he asked, in a peremptory tone.

But the old lady, placed upon her guard by the intervention of her servant, with whose prudence and devotion she was well acquainted, made no answer, conscious that she had committed a fault, and not knowing how to remedy it.

"Does not my mother hear me?" said the chief.

"Of what use would it be to repeat to you a name which, according to all probability, is unknown to you, and which cannot interest you? If my brother will permit me, I will retire."

"No; not before my mother has told me the name of her son, the great warrior," said the Comanche, knitting his brow and stamping his foot with ill-restrained anger.

The old Spaniard saw an end must be put to this; his determination was formed in a second.

"My brother is a great chief," he said, "although his hair is still brown, his wisdom is immense. I am his friend, and am sure he would not abuse the chance that has delivered into his hands the mother of his enemy: the name of that woman's son is Loyal Heart."

"Wah!" said Eagle Head, with a sinister smile, "I knew that well enough: why have the palefaces two hearts and two tongues? and why do they always seek to deceive the redskins?"

"We have not sought to deceive you, chief."

"I say you have. Since you have been with us, you have been treated as children of the tribe. I have saved your life!"

"That is true."

"Very well," he resumed, with an ironical smile, "I will prove to you that Indians do not forget, and that they know how to render good for evil. These wounds that you see me bear, who inflicted them? Loyal Heart! We are enemies; his mother is in my power; I could at once tie her to the stake of torture; it is my right to do so."

The two Spaniards hung their heads.

"The law of the prairies is an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Listen to me well, Old Oak. In remembrance of our ancient friendship, I grant you a respite. Tomorrow at sunrise, you shall set out in search of Loyal Heart; if, within four days, he does not come to deliver himself up into my hands, his mother shall perish; my young men shall burn her alive at the stake of blood, and my brothers shall make war whistles of her bones. Begone! I have spoken!"

The old man eagerly implored mercy. He threw himself on his knees before the chief; but the vindictive Indian spurned him with his foot, and turned away.

"Oh! madam," the old man murmured, in despair, "you are lost!"

"But be sure, Eusebio," the mother replied, choking with tears, "be sure not to bring back my son! Of what consequence is my death! Alas! has not my life already been long enough?"

The old servant cast a glance of admiration at his mistress.

"Ever the same!" he said affectionately.

"Does not the life of a mother belong to her child?" she said, with a cry which seemed to come from her very heart.

The old people sank, overwhelmed with grief, at the foot of a tree, and passed the night in praying to God.

Eagle Head did not appear to have an idea of this despair.

CHAPTER XVIII.

NÔ EUSEBIO.

The precautions taken by Eagle Head to conceal his march were good as regarded the whites, whose senses, less kept upon the watch than those of partisans and hunters, and little acquainted with Indian stratagems, are almost incapable of directing their course in these vast solitudes without a compass; but for men like Loyal Heart and Belhumeur they were, in every respect, insufficient.

The two bold partisans did not lose the track for an instant.

Accustomed to the zig-zags and devices of the Indian warriors, they did not allow themselves to be deceived by the sudden turns, the counter marches, the false halts, in a word, by any of the obstacles which the Comanches had planted so freely on their route.

And then, there was one thing of which the Indians had not dreamed, and which revealed as clearly the direction of their march as if they had taken the pains to mark it with stakes.

We have said that the hunters had, close to the ruins of a cabin, found a bloodhound fastened to a tree, and that this bloodhound, when set free, after bestowing a few caresses on Belhumeur, had set off; his nose to the wind, to rejoin his master, who was no other than the old Spaniard—in fact, he did rejoin him.

The traces of the bloodhound, which the Indians never dreamed of effacing, for the very simple reason that they did not observe that he was with them, were to be seen all along, and for hunters so skilful as Loyal Heart and Belhumeur, this was an Ariadne's thread which nothing could break.

The hunters therefore rode tranquilly on with their guns across the saddle and accompanied by their rastreros, in the track of the Comanches, who were far from suspecting that they had such a rearguard.

Every evening Loyal Heart stopped at the precise place where Eagle Head had, on the previous day, established his camp, for such was the diligence of the two men that the Indians only preceded them by a few leagues; the trappers could easily have passed them, if it had been their wish to do so; but, for certain reasons, Loyal Heart confined himself to following them for some time longer.

After having passed the night in a quiet glade, on the banks of a clear rivulet, whose soft murmur had lulled them to sleep, the hunters were preparing to resume their journey, their horses were saddled, they were eating a slice of elk, standing, like people in a hurry to depart, when Loyal Heart, who, during the whole morning had not spoken a word, turned towards his companion, and said:

"Let us sit down a minute, there is no occasion to hurry, since Eagle Head has rejoined his tribe."

"Be it so," replied Belhumeur, laying himself down upon the grass. "We can talk a bit."

"I cannot think how it was I did not imagine these cursed Comanches had a war detachment in the neighbourhood! It is impossible for us two to think of taking a camp in which there are five hundred warriors."

"That's true," said Belhumeur, philosophically; "they are a great many, and yet, you know, my dear friend, that if your heart bids you, we can but try; who knows what may happen?"

"Thanks!" said Loyal Heart, smiling; "but I think it useless."

"As you like."

"Stratagem alone can assist us."

"Let us try stratagem, then; I am at your orders."

"We have some traps near here, I believe?"

"Pardieu!" said the Canadian, "within half a mile, at most, there is a large pond of beavers."

"That's true; for the last few days, Belhumeur, I scarcely know what I am thinking about; this captivity of my mother makes me mad; I must deliver her, cost what it may."

"That is my opinion, Loyal Heart, and I will aid you in it with all my soul."

"Tomorrow morning, at daybreak, you will repair to Black Elk, and beg him, in my name, to collect as many white hunters and trappers as he can."

"Very well."

"In the meantime I will go to the camp of the Comanches, to treat for the ransom of my mother; if they will not restore her to me, we will have recourse to arms, and we will see if a score of the best rifles of the frontiers will not give a good account of five hundred of these plunderers of the prairies."

"And if they should make you prisoner?"

"In that case I will send you my bloodhound, who will come to you in the river grotto; on seeing it come alone, you will know what that means, and will act accordingly."

The Canadian shook his head.

"No," said he, "I shall not do so."

"What! you will not do so?" the hunter exclaimed, in great surprise.

"Certainly no, I will not do so, Loyal Heart. Compared with you, who are so brave and so

intelligent, I am but little worth, I know; but if I have only one good quality, nothing can deprive me of it, and that quality is my devotedness to you."

"I know it, my friend; you love me like a brother."

"And you would have me leave you, as they say in my country beyond the great lakes, to go cheerfully into the jaws of the wolf; and yet my comparison is humiliating for the wolf, for the Indians are a thousand times more ferocious! No, I repeat, I will not do that; it would be a wicked action, and if any harm happened to you, I should never forgive myself."

"Explain yourself, Belhumeur," said Loyal Heart, with a little impatience; "upon my honour I cannot possibly understand you."

"Oh! that will be easy enough," the Canadian answered; "if I am not very clever, and am not an able speaker, I have good common sense, and can see my way clearly when those I love are concerned; and I love nobody better than you, now my poor father is dead."

"Speak then, my friend," said Loyal Heart, "and pardon the little ill-humour I could not repress."

Belhumeur reflected for a few seconds, and then continued:—

"You know," he said, "that the greatest enemies we have in the prairies are the Comanches; by an inexplicable fatality, whenever we have had a struggle to maintain, it has been against them, and never have they been able to boast of the smallest advantage over us; hence has arisen between them and us an implacable hatred, a hatred which has latterly been increased by our quarrel with Eagle Head, whose arm you had the good chance, or rather the ill chance, of breaking, when it would have been so easy for you to have broken his head; a joke which I am convinced the chief has taken in very bad part, and will never forgive you. Besides, I must confess that in his place I should entertain exactly the same sentiments; I bear him no malice on that account."

"To the purpose! to the purpose!" Loyal Heart interrupted.

"The purpose! Well, this is it," Belhumeur replied, displaying no surprise at his friend's interruption: "Eagle Head is anxious, by any means, to obtain your scalp, and it is evident that if you commit the imprudence of placing yourself in his hands, he will not let the opportunity slip of finally settling his accounts with you."

"But," Loyal Heart replied, "my mother is in his power."

"Yes," said Belhumeur; "but he does not know who she is. You are aware, my friend, that the Indians only treat captured women ill in exceptional cases; generally they behave to them with the greatest respect."

"That is true," said the hunter.

"Therefore, as no one will go and tell Eagle Head that his prisoner is your mother, unless she does so herself, through the uneasiness she may feel on your account, she is as safe among the redskins as if she were on the great square of Quebec. It is useless, then, to commit an imprudence. Let us get together a score of good fellows; I don't ask for more; and let us watch the Indians. On the first opportunity that offers we will fall upon them vigorously, we will kill as many as we can, and deliver your mother. Now that, I think, is the wisest course we can take; what do you think of it?"

"I think, my friend," Loyal Heart replied, pressing his hand, "that you are the best creature in existence; that your advice is good, and I will follow it."

"Bravo!" Belhumeur exclaimed, joyfully; "that is speaking something like."

"And now——" said Loyal Heart, rising.

"Now?" Belhumeur asked.

"We will get on horseback; we will carefully avoid the Indian camp, using all possible caution not to be tracked; and will then go to the hatto of our brave companion Black Elk, who is a man of good counsel, and who will certainly be useful to us in what we purpose doing."

"Be it so, then," said Belhumeur cheerfully, leaping into his saddle.

The hunters quitted the glade they had slept in, and making a *détour* to avoid the Indian camp, the smoke of which they perceived within a league of them, they directed their course towards the spot where, in all probability, Black Elk was philosophically employed in laying snares for beavers, the interesting animals that Doña Luz had admired so much.

They had been thus riding on for nearly an hour, chatting and laughing, for the reasonings of Belhumeur had succeeded in convincing Loyal Heart, who, thoroughly knowing the manners of the Indians, was persuaded that his mother was in no danger, when his hounds on a sudden showed signs of excitement, and rushed forward, yelping with symptoms of joy.

"What's the matter with our rastreros?" said Loyal Heart; "one would think they smelt a friend."

"Pardieu! they have scented Black Elk, and we shall probably see them come back together."

"That is not unlikely," the hunter said pensively; and they continued their course.

At the expiration of a few minutes they perceived a horseman riding towards them at full speed, surrounded by the dogs, who ran barking by his side.

"It is not Black Elk," Belhumeur cried.

"No," said Loyal Heart, "it is Nô Eusebio; what can this mean? He is alone; can anything have

happened to my mother?"

"Let us mend our pace," said Belhumeur, clapping spurs to his horse, which sprang forward with the greatest velocity.

The hunter followed him, a prey to mortal alarm.

The three horsemen were soon together.

"Woe! woe!" the old man cried, in great agitation, as he approached.

"What is the matter, Nô Eusebio? speak, in the name of Heaven."

"Your mother, Don Rafaël! your mother!"

"Well, speak!—oh, speak!" the young man cried frantically.

"Oh, my God!" said the old man, wringing his hands, "it is too late!"

"Speak, then, in the name of Heaven!—you are killing me."

The old man cast on him a look of utter desolation.

"Don Rafaël," he said, "have courage!—be a man!"

"My God! my God! what fearful news are you going to communicate to me, my friend?"

"Your mother is a prisoner to Eagle Head."

"I know she is."

"If this very day, this morning even, you do not deliver yourself up to the chief of the Comanches —"

"Well, well!"

"She will be burnt alive."

"Ah!" the young man exclaimed, with a cry amounting to a shriek.

His friend supported him, otherwise he would have fallen from his saddle.

"But," Belhumeur asked, "is it today—do you say, old man, that she is to be burnt?"

"Yes."

"Is there still time, then?"

"Alas! it was to be at sunrise; and see," he said, with an agonized gesture, pointing to the heavens.

"Oh!" Loyal Heart cried, with a vehemence impossible to be described, "I will save my mother!"

And, bending over the neck of his horse, he set off with frantic rapidity.

The others followed.

He turned round towards Belhumeur.

"Where are you going?" he asked, in a short, sharp tone.

"To help you save your mother, or to die with you."

"Come on, then!" Loyal Heart replied, plunging his spurs into the bleeding sides of his horse.

There was something fearful and terrible in the desperate course of these three men who, formed in line, with pale brows, compressed lips, and fiery looks, cleared torrents and ravines, surmounted all obstacles, incessantly urging their horses, which seemed to devour space, while panting painfully, bounding madly, and dripping with perspiration and blood.

At intervals Loyal Heart shouted one of those cries peculiar to the Mexican jinetes, and the reanimated horses redoubled their exertions.

"My God! my God! save—save my mother!" the hunter kept repeating in a hollow voice, as he rode furiously onward.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE COUNCIL OF THE GREAT CHIEFS.

Notwithstanding the stormy conversation he had had with Eusebio, Eagle Head had continued to treat the prisoners with the greatest kindness, and that extreme delicacy of proceeding which is innate in the red race, and which we should be far from expecting on the part of men whom, without any plausible reason that I am acquainted with, we brand with the name of savages.

There is one fact worthy of being noticed, and upon which we cannot too strongly dwell, and that is the manner in which Indians generally treat their prisoners. Far from inflicting useless tortures upon them, or tormenting them without cause, as has been too often repeated, they take the greatest care of them, and appear, in some sort, to compassionate their misfortune.

In the circumstance of which we speak, the sanguinary determination of Eagle Head with regard

to the mother of Loyal Heart was but an exception, the reason for which was naturally found in the hatred the Indian chief had sworn to the hunter.

The separation of the two prisoners was most painful and agonizing; the old servant set off, despair in his soul, in search of the hunter, whilst the poor mother, with a broken heart, followed the Comanche warriors.

On the second day, Eagle Head arrived at the *rendez-vous* appointed by the great chiefs of the nation; all the tribe was assembled.

Nothing can be more picturesque and singular than the aspect presented by an Indian camp.

When the Indians are on an expedition—whether of war or hunting—on encamping, they confine themselves to erecting, on the spot where they stop, tents of buffalo hides stretched upon poles planted cross-wise. These tents, the bottom parts of which are filled up with mounds of earth, have all a hole at the top, to leave a free issue for the smoke, which, without that precaution, would render them uninhabitable.

The camp presented the most animated picture possible; the squaws passed here and there, loaded with wood and meat, or guided the sledges drawn by dogs, which conveyed their wealth; the warriors, gravely squatted around fires lighted in the open air, on account of the mildness of the temperature, were smoking and chatting together.

And yet it was easy to guess that something extraordinary was about to happen; for notwithstanding the early hour—the sun scarcely appearing above the horizon—the principal chiefs were assembled in the council lodge, where, judging from the grave and reflective expression of their countenances, they were about to discuss some serious question.

This day was the last of those granted by Eagle Head to Eusebio.

The Indian warrior, faithful to his hatred, and in haste to satisfy his vengeance, had convoked the great chiefs in order to obtain their authority for the execution of his abominable project.

We repeat it here, in order that our readers may be perfectly convinced—Indians are not cruel for the pleasure of being so. Necessity is their first law; and never do they order the punishment of a prisoner, particularly a woman, unless the interest of the nation requires it.

As soon as the chiefs were assembled round the fire of council, the pipe bearer entered the circle, holding in his hand the calumet ready lighted; he bowed towards the four cardinal points, murmuring a short prayer, and then presented the calumet to the oldest chief, but retaining the bowl of the pipe in his hand.

When all the chiefs had smoked, one after the other, the pipe bearer emptied the ashes of the pipe into the fire, saying—

"Chiefs of the great Comanche nation, may *Natosh* (God) give you wisdom, so that whatever be your determination, it may be conformable to justice."

Then, after bowing respectfully, he retired.

A moment of silence followed, in which everyone seemed meditating seriously upon the words that had just been pronounced.

At length the most aged of the chiefs arose.

He was a venerable old man, whose body was furrowed with the scars of innumerable wounds, and who enjoyed among his people a great reputation for wisdom. He was named Eshis (the Sun).

"My son Eagle Head has," he said, "an important communication to make to the council of the chiefs; let him speak, our ears are open. Eagle Head is a warrior as wise as he is valiant; his words will be listened to by us with respect."

"Thanks!" the warrior replied; "my father is wisdom itself. Natosh conceals nothing from him."

The chiefs bowed, and Eagle Head continued.

"The palefaces, our eternal persecutors, pursue and harass us without intermission, forcing us to abandon to them, one by one, our best hunting grounds, and to seek refuge in the depths of the forest like timid deer; many of them even dare to come into the prairies which serve us as places of refuge, to trap beavers and hunt elks and buffaloes which are our property. These faithless men, the outcasts of their people, rob us and assassinate us when they can do it with impunity. Is it just that we should suffer their rapine without complaining? Shall we allow ourselves to be slaughtered like timid ashahas without seeking to avenge ourselves? Does not the law of the prairies say, 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth?' Let my father reply; let my brothers say if that is just?"

"Vengeance is allowable," said the Sun; "it is the undoubted right of the weak and the oppressed; and yet it ought to be proportioned to the injury received."

"Good! My father has spoken like a wise man; what think you of it, my brothers?"

"The Sun cannot lie; all that he says is right," the chiefs replied.

"Has my brother cause to complain of anyone?" the old man asked.

"Yes," Eagle Head replied; "I have been insulted by a white hunter; he has several times attacked my camp; he has killed some of my young men in ambush; I myself have been wounded, as you may see—the scar is not yet closed. This man, in short, is the most cruel enemy the Comanches have, for he pursues them like wild beasts, that he may enjoy their tortures, and hear their cries

of agony."

At these words, pronounced with an imposing expression, a shudder of anger ran through the assembly. The astute chief, perceiving that his cause was gained in the minds of his auditors, continued, without showing the internal joy he experienced—

"I might have been able, if it had only concerned myself," he said, "to pardon these injuries, however serious they may be; but we have now to deal with a public enemy, with a man who has sworn the destruction of our nation. Hence, however painful be the necessity which constrains me, I ought not to hesitate to strike him in that which is dearest to him. His mother is in my hands. I have hesitated to sacrifice her; I have not allowed myself to be carried away by my hatred. I have wished to be just; and though it would have been so easy for me to kill this woman, I have preferred waiting till you, revered chiefs of our nation, should yourselves give me the order to do so. I have done still more: so repugnant was it to me to shed blood uselessly, and punish the innocent for the guilty, that I have granted this woman a respite of four days, in order to give her son the power of saving her, by presenting himself to suffer in her place. A paleface made prisoner by me is gone in search of him; but that man is a rabbit's heart—he has only the courage to assassinate unarmed enemies. He is not come! he will not come! This morning, at sunrise, expires the delay granted by me. Where is this man? He has not appeared! What say my brothers? Is my conduct just? Ought I to be blamed? Or shall this woman be tied to the stake, so that the palefaced robbers, terrified by her death, may acknowledge that the Comanches are formidable warriors, who never leave an insult unpunished? Have I spoken well, men of power?"

After having pronounced this long speech, Eagle Head resumed his seat, and crossing his arms on his breast, he awaited, with his head cast down, the decision of the chiefs.

A tolerably long silence followed this speech. At length the Sun arose.

"My brother has spoken well," he said. "His words are those of a man who does not allow himself to be governed by his passions; all he has said is just; the whites, our ferocious enemies, are eager for our destruction; however painful for us may be the punishment of this woman, it is necessary."

"It is necessary!" the chiefs repeated, bowing their heads.

"Go!" the Sun resumed, "make the preparations; give to this execution the appearance of an expiation, and not that of a vengeance; everybody must be convinced that the Comanches do not torture women for pleasure, but that they know how to punish the guilty. I have spoken."

The chiefs arose, and after respectfully bowing to the old man, they retired.

Eagle Head had succeeded; he was about to avenge himself, without assuming the responsibility of an action of which he comprehended all the hideousness, but in which he had had the heart to implicate all the chiefs of his nation under an appearance of justice, for which, inwardly, he cared but very little.

The preparations for the punishment were hurried on as fast as possible.

The women cut thin splinters of ash to be introduced under the nails, others prepared elder pith to make sulphur matches, whilst the youngest went into the forest to seek for armfuls of green wood destined to burn the condemned woman slowly, while stifling her with the smoke it would produce.

In the meantime, the men had completely stripped the bark off a tree which they had chosen to serve as the stake of torture; they had then rubbed it well with elk fat mixed with red ochre; round its base they had placed the wood of the pyre, and this done, the sorcerer had come to conjure the tree by means of mysterious words, in order to render it fit for the purpose to which they destined it.

These preparations terminated, the condemned was brought to the foot of the stake, and seated, without being tied, upon the pile of wood intended to burn her; and the scalp dance commenced.

The unfortunate woman was, in appearance, impassible. She had made the sacrifice of her life; nothing that passed around her could any longer affect her.

Her eyes, burning with fever and swollen with tears, wandered without purpose, over the vast crowd that enveloped her with the roarings of wild beasts. Her mind watched, nevertheless, as keenly and as lucidly as in her happiest days. The poor mother had a fear which wrung her heart and made her endure a torture, compared with which those which the Indians were preparing to inflict upon her were as nothing; she trembled lest her son, warned of the horrid fate that awaited her, should hasten to save her, and give himself up to his ferocious enemies.

With her ear attentive to the least noise, she seemed to hear every instant the precipitate steps of her son flying to her assistance. Her heart bounded with fear. She prayed God from the very depths of her soul to permit her to die instead of her beloved child.

The scalp dance whirled ferociously around her.

A crowd of warriors, tall, handsome, magnificently dressed, but with their faces blackened, danced, two by two, round the stake, led by seven musicians armed with drums and chicikoués, who were striped with black and red, and wore upon their heads feathers of the screech owl, falling down behind.

The warriors had in their hands guns and clubs, ornamented with black feathers and red cloth, of which they brought the butts to the ground as they danced.

These men formed a vast semicircle around the stake; in face of them, and completing the circle, the women danced.

Eagle Head, who led the warriors, carried a long staff, at the end of which was suspended a human scalp, surmounted by a stuffed pie with its wings out-spread; a little lower on the same stick were a second scalp, the skin of a lynx, and some feathers.

When they had danced thus for an instant, the musicians placed themselves by the side of the condemned, and made a deafening noise, singing, whilst beating the drums with all their force, and shaking the chicikoués.

This dance continued a considerable time, accompanied by atrocious howlings, enough to madden with terror the unfortunate woman to whom they presaged the frightful tortures that awaited her.

At length Eagle Head touched the condemned lightly with his stick. At this signal the tumult ceased as if by enchantment, the ranks were broken, and everyone seized his weapons.

The punishment was about to begin!

CHAPTER XX.

THE TORTURE.

As soon as the scalp dance was over, the principal warriors of the tribe ranged themselves before the stake, their arms in hand, whilst the women, particularly the most aged, fell upon the condemned, abusing her, pushing her, pulling her hair, and striking her, without her opposing the least resistance, or seeking to escape the ill-treatment with which they loaded her.

The unfortunate woman only hoped for one thing, and that was to see her punishment begin.

She had watched with feverish impatience the whirlings of the scalp dance, so greatly did she fear to see her beloved son appear and place himself between her and her executioners.

Like the ancient martyrs, she in her heart accused the Indians of losing precious time in useless ceremonies; if she had had the strength, she would have reprimanded them, and rallied them upon their slowness and the hesitation they seemed to display in the sacrifice.

The truth was, that in spite of themselves, and although this execution appeared just, the Comanches had a repugnance to torture a helpless woman, already aged, and who had never injured them, either directly or indirectly.

Eagle Head himself, notwithstanding his hatred, felt something like a secret remorse for the crime he was committing. Far from hastening on the last preparations, he only assisted with an indecision and a disgust that he could not succeed in surmounting.

For intrepid men, accustomed to brave the greatest perils, it is always a degrading action to torture a weak creature, or a woman who has no other defence than her tears. If it had been a man, the agreement would have been general throughout the tribe to tie him to the stake.

Indian prisoners laugh at punishment, they insult their executioners, and, in their death songs, they reproach their conquerors with their cowardice, their inexperience in making their victims suffer; they enumerate their own brave deeds, they count the enemies they scalped before they themselves yielded; in short, by their sarcasms and their contemptuous attitudes, they excite the anger of their executioners, reanimate their hatred, and, to a certain point, justify their ferocity.

But a woman, weak and resigned, presenting herself like a lamb to the shambles, already half dead, what interest could such an execution offer?

There was no glory to be gained, but, on the contrary, a general reprobation to draw upon themselves.

The Comanches comprehended all this, thence their repugnance and hesitation. Nevertheless, the business must be gone through.

Eagle Head approached the prisoner, and delivering her from the harpies who annoyed her, said in a solemn voice—

"Woman, I have kept my promise; your son is not come, you are about to die."

"Thanks," she said, in a tremulous voice, leaning against a tree to avoid falling.

"Are you not afraid of death?" he asked.

"No," she replied, fixing upon him a look of angelic mildness; "it will be most welcome; my life has been nothing but one long agony; death will be to me a blessing."

"But your son?"

"My son will be saved if I die; you have sworn it upon the bones of your fathers."

"I have sworn it."

"Deliver me up to death, then."

"Are the women of your nation, then, like Indian squaws, who view torture without trembling?" the chief asked, with astonishment.

"Yes," she replied with great agitation; "all mothers despise it when the safety of their children is at stake."

"Listen," said the Indian, moved with involuntary pity; "I also have a mother whom I love; if you desire it, I will retard your punishment till sunset."

"What should you do that for?" she replied with terrible simplicity. "No, warrior; if my grief really touches you, there is one favour, one favour alone which you can grant me."

"Name it," he said earnestly.

"Put me to death immediately."

"But if your son arrives?"

"Of what importance is that to you? You require a victim, do you not? Very well, that victim is before you, you may torture her at your pleasure. Why do you hesitate? Put me to death, I say."

"Your desire shall be satisfied," the Comanche replied in a melancholy tone. "Woman, prepare yourself."

She bowed her head upon her breast, and waited. Upon a signal from Eagle Head, two warriors seized the prisoner, and tied her to the stake round the waist.

Then the exercise of the knife began; this is what it consists of:—

Every warrior seizes his scalping knife by the point with the thumb and the first finger of his right hand, and launches it at the victim, so as to inflict only slight wounds.

Indians, in their punishments, endeavour to make the tortures continue as long as possible, and only give their enemy the *coup de grâce* when they have torn life from him by degrees, and, so to say, piecemeal.

The warriors launched their knives with such marvellous skill, that all of them just grazed the unfortunate woman, inflicting nothing more than scratches.

The blood, however, flowed, she closed her eyes, and, absorbed in herself, prayed fervently for the mortal stroke.

The warriors, to whom her body served as a target, grew warmer by degrees; curiosity, the desire of showing their skill, had taken in their minds the place of the pity they had at first felt. They applauded with loud shouts and laughter the prowess of the most adroit.

In a word, as it always happens, as well among civilized people as among savages, blood intoxicated them; their self-love was brought into play; everyone sought to surpass the man who had preceded him; all other considerations were forgotten.

When all had thrown their knives, a small number of the most skilful marksmen of the tribe took their guns.

This time it was necessary to have a sure eye, for an ill-directed ball might terminate the punishment, and deprive the spectators of the attractive spectacle which promised them so much pleasure.

At every discharge the poor creature shrank within herself, though giving no signs of life beyond a nervous shudder which agitated her whole body.

"Let us have an end of this," said Eagle Head, who felt, in spite of himself, his heart of bronze soften before so much courage and abnegation. "Comanche warriors are not jaguars; this woman has suffered enough; let her die at once."

A few murmurs were heard among the squaws and the children, who were the most eager for the punishment of the prisoner.

But the warriors were of the opinion of their chief; this execution, shorn of the insults that victims generally address to their conquerors, possessed no attraction for them, and, besides, they were ashamed of such inveteracy against a woman.

Hence they spared the unfortunate woman the splinters of wood inserted under the nails, the sulphur matches fastened between the fingers, the mask of honey applied to the face that the bees might come and sting them, together with other tortures too long and hideous to enumerate, and they prepared the funeral pile upon which she was to be burnt.

But before proceeding to the last act of this atrocious tragedy, they untied the poor woman; for a few minutes they allowed her to take breath and recover from the terrible emotions she had undergone.

She sank on the ground almost insensible.

Eagle Head approached her.

"My mother is brave," he said; "many warriors would not have borne the trials with so much courage."

A faint smile passed over her violet lips.

"I have a son," she replied with a look of ineffable sweetness; "it is for him I suffer."

"A warrior is happy in having such a mother."

"Why do you defer my death? It is cruel to act thus; warriors ought not to torment women."

"My mother is right, her tortures are ended."

"Am I going to die at last?" she asked with a sigh of relief.

"Yes, they are preparing the pile."

In spite of herself, the poor woman felt a shudder of horror thrill her whole frame at this fearful intimation.

"Burn me!" she cried with terror; "why burn me?"

"It is the usual custom."

She let her head sink into her hands; but soon recovering, she drew herself up, and raised an inspired glance towards Heaven,—

"My God!" she murmured with resignation, "Thy will be done!"

"Does my mother feel herself sufficiently recovered to be fastened to the stake?" the chief asked in something like a tone of compassion.

"Yes!" she said rising resolutely.

Eagle Head could not repress a gesture of admiration. Indians consider courage as the first of virtues.

"Come, then," he said.

The prisoner followed him with a firm step—all her strength was restored, she was at length going to die!

The chief led her to the stake of blood, to which she was bound a second time; before her they piled up the faggots of green wood, and at a signal from Eagle Head, they were set on fire.

The fire did not for some time take, on account of the moisture of the wood, which discharged clouds of smoke; but, after a few moments, the flame sparkled, extended by degrees, and then acquired great intensity.

The unfortunate woman could not suppress a cry of terror.

At that moment a horseman dashed at full speed into the midst of the camp; at a bound he was on the ground, and before anyone could have opposed him, he tore away the burning wood from the pile, and cut the bonds of the victim.

"Oh! why have you come?" the poor mother murmured, sinking into his arms.

"My mother! ho, pardon me!" Loyal Heart cried, "my God! how you must have suffered."

"Begone, begone, Rafaël!" she repeated, smothering him with kisses; "leave me to die in your place; ought not a mother to give her life for her child?"

"Oh do not speak so, my mother! you will drive me mad," said the young man, clasping her in his arms with despair.

By this time the emotion caused by the sudden appearance of Loyal Heart had subsided, the Indian warriors had recovered that stoicism which they affect under all circumstances.

Eagle Head advanced towards the hunter.

"My brother is welcome," he said, "I had given over expecting him."

"I am here; it was impossible to arrive sooner; my mother is free, I suppose?"

"She is free."

"She may go where she pleases?"

"Where she pleases."

"No," said the prisoner, placing herself resolutely in front of the Indian chief, "it is too late, it is I who am to suffer; my son has no right to take my place."

"Dear mother, what are you saying?"

"That which is just," she replied with animation; "the time at which you were to have come is past, you have no right to be here to prevent my death. Begone, begone, Rafaël, I implore you!—Leave me to die to save you," she added, bursting into tears and throwing herself into his arms.

"My mother," the young man replied, returning her caresses, "your love for me misleads you; I cannot allow such a crime to be accomplished, I alone ought to be here."

"My God! my God!" the poor mother exclaimed, sobbing, "he will not understand anything! I should be so happy to die for him."

Overcome by emotions too powerful for nature, the poor mother sunk fainting into the arms of her son.

Loyal Heart impressed a long and tender kiss upon her brow, and placing her in the hands of Nô Eusebio, who had arrived some minutes before: said in a voice choked with grief.

"Begone, poor mother, may she be happy, if happiness can exist for her without her child."

The old servant sighed, pressed the hand of Loyal Heart warmly, and placing the lifeless form of his mistress before him in the saddle, he turned his horse's head and left the camp slowly, no one

attempting to oppose his departure.

Loyal Heart looked after his mother as long as he could see her; then, when she disappeared, and the steps of the horse that bore her could no longer be heard, he breathed a deep, broken sigh, and passing his hand over his brow, murmured,—

"All is ended! My God, watch over her!"

Then, turning towards the Indian chief who surveyed him in silence, mingled with respect and admiration—he said in a firm clear voice, and with a contemptuous look,—

"Comanche warriors! you are all cowards! brave men do not torture women!"

Eagle Head smiled.

"We shall see," he said ironically, "if the pale trapper is as brave as he pretends to be."

"At least I shall know how to die like a man," he replied haughtily.

"The mother of the hunter is free."

"Yes. Well! what do you want with me?"

"A prisoner has no arms."

"That's true," he said, with a smile of contempt, "I will give you mine."

"Not yet, if you please, good friend!" said a clear, sarcastic voice; and Belhumeur rode up, bearing across the front of his saddle a child of four or five years of age, and a rather pretty young Indian Squaw securely fastened to the tail of his horse.

"My son! my wife!" cried Eagle Head, in great terror.

"Yes," said the Canadian jeeringly, "your wife and child, whom I have made prisoners. Ah ah! that is pretty well played, is it not?"

At a signal from his friend, Loyal Heart bounded on the woman, whose teeth chattered with fear, and who cast terrified looks on all sides.

"Now," Belhumeur continued with a sinister smile, "let us talk a bit; I think I have equalized the chances a little—what say you?"

And he placed the muzzle of a pistol to the brow of the little creature, which uttered loud cries on feeling the cold iron.

"Oh!" cried Eagle Head, in a tone of despair, "my son! restore me my son!"

"And your wife—do you forget her?" Belhumeur replied, with an ironical smile, and shrugging his shoulders.

"What are your conditions?" Eagle Head asked.

END OF THE FIRST PART.

PART II.

WAKTEHNO—"he who kills."

CHAPTER I.

LOYAL HEART.

The position was completely changed.

The hunters, who a moment before were at the mercy of the Indians, felt they were not only in a manner free, but that they had it in their power to impose hard conditions.

Many guns were levelled in the direction of the Canadian—many arrows were pointed towards him; but, at a signal from Eagle Head, the guns were recovered, and the arrows were returned to the quivers.

The shame of being foiled by two men who audaciously braved them in the middle of their own camp, made the hearts of the Comanches burn with anger. They were sensible of the impossibility of contending with their desperate adversaries. In fact, what could they do against these intrepid wood rangers, who reckoned life as nothing?

Kill them?

But, in falling, they would slaughter without pity the prisoners whom the Comanches were anxious to save. The most strongly developed feeling among redskins is love of family.

For the sake of his children or his wife, the fiercest warrior would not hesitate to make concessions which the most frightful tortures, under other circumstances, could not force from

him. Thus, at the sight of his wife and child fallen into the power of Belhumeur, Eagle Head only thought of their safety.

Of all men, Indians are perhaps those who know how to bend with the greatest facility to the exigencies of an unforeseen situation.

The Comanche chief concealed in the depths of his heart the hatred and anger which devoured him. With a movement full of nobleness and disinterestedness, he threw back the blanket which served him as a cloak, and with a calm countenance and a smile on his lips, he approached the hunters.

The latter, long accustomed to the mode of action of the redskins, remained in appearance impassible, awaiting the result of their bold *coup de main.*

"My pale brothers," the chief said, "are full of wisdom, though their hair is black; they are acquainted with all the stratagems familiar to great warriors; they have the cunning of the beaver and the courage of the lion."

The two men bowed in silence, and Eagle Head continued,—

"As my brother Loyal Heart is in the camp of the Comanches of the great lakes, the hour has at length arrived for dispersing the clouds which have arisen between him and the redskins. Loyal Heart is just; let him explain himself without fear; he is in the presence of renowned chiefs, who will not hesitate to acknowledge their wrongs, if they have any towards him."

"Oh! oh!" the Canadian replied with a sneer; "Eagle Head has quickly changed his sentiments with respect to us; does he believe he can deceive us with vain words?"

A flash of hatred sparkled in the savage eye of the Indian; but, with an extraordinary effort, he succeeded in restraining himself.

Suddenly a man stepped between the interlocutors.

This man was Eshis, the most highly venerated warrior of the tribe.

The old man slowly raised his arm.

"Let my children listen to me," he said; "everything should be cleared up today; the pale hunters will smoke the calumet in council."

"Be it so," said Loyal Heart.

Upon a signal from the Sun the principal chiefs of the tribe came and ranged themselves around him.

Belhumeur had not changed his position; he was ready, at the slightest doubtful gesture, to sacrifice his prisoners.

When the pipe had gone the round of the circle formed near the hunters, the old chief collected himself; then, after bowing to the whites, he spoke as follows:—

"Warriors, I thank the Master of Life for loving us redskins, and for having this day sent us two pale men, who may at length open their hearts. Take courage, young men; do not allow yourselves to be cast down, and drive away the evil spirit far from you. We love you, Loyal Heart; we have heard of your humanity towards Indians. We believe that your heart is open, and that your veins flow clear as the sun. It is true that we Indians have not much sense when the firewater has power over us, and that we may have displeased you in various circumstances. But we hope you will think no more of it; and that, as long as you and we shall be in the prairies, we shall hunt side by side, as warriors who respect and love each other ought to do."

To which Loyal Heart replied:—

"You, chiefs and other members of the nation of the Comanches of the great lakes, whose eyes are opened, I hope you will lend an ear to the words of my mouth. The Master of Life has opened my brain, and caused friendly words to be breathed into my breast. My heart is filled with feelings for you, your wives, and your children; and what I say to you now proceeds from the roots of the feelings of myself and my friend. Never in the prairie has my hatto been closed against the hunters of your nation. Why then do you make war against us? Why should you torture my mother, who is an old woman, and seek to deprive me of life? I am averse to the shedding of Indian blood; for, I repeat to you, that notwithstanding all the ill you have done me, my heart leaps towards you!"

"Wah!" interrupted Eagle Head; "my brother speaks well: but the wound he inflicted upon me is not yet healed."

"My brother is foolish," the hunter replied; "does he think me so unskilful that I could not have killed him, if such had been my intention? I will prove to you what I am capable of, and what I understand by the courage of a warrior. If I make but a sign, that woman and that child *will have ceased to live!*"

"Yes!" Belhumeur added.

A shudder ran through the ranks of the assembly. Eagle Head felt a cold perspiration pealing on his temples.

Loyal Heart preserved silence for a minute, fixing an indefinable look upon the Indians; then, raising his shoulders with disdain, he threw his weapons at his feet, and crossing his arms upon his breast, he turned towards the Canadian.

"Belhumeur," he said, in a calm, clear voice, "restore these two poor creatures to liberty."

"How can you dream of such a thing?" cried the astonished hunter; "why, that would be your sentence of death!"

"I know it would."

"Well?"

"I beg you to do it."

The Canadian made no reply. He began to whistle between his teeth, and, drawing his knife, he, at a stroke, cut the bonds which confined his captives, who bounded away like jaguars, uttering howlings of joy, to conceal themselves among their friends. He then replaced his knife in his belt, threw down his weapons, dismounted, and went and placed himself resolutely by the side of Loyal Heart.

"What are you doing?" the latter cried. "Make your escape, my friend."

"What! save myself and leave you?" the Canadian replied, carelessly. "No, thank you. As I must die once, I had quite as lief it should be today as hereafter. I shall never, perhaps, find so good an opportunity."

The two men shook hands with an energetic grip.

"Now, chiefs," Loyal Heart said, addressing the Indians in his clear, calm voice, "we are in your power, do with us as you think proper."

The Comanches looked at each other for an instant in a state of stupor. The stoical abnegation of these two men, who, by the bold action of one of them, might not only have escaped, but have dictated terms to them, and who, instead of profiting by this immense advantage, threw down their weapons and delivered themselves into their hands, appeared to them to exceed all instances of heroism celebrated in their nation.

There followed a sufficiently long silence, during which the hearts might be heard beating in the breasts of those men of bronze, who, by their primitive impulsive education, are more apt than might be believed to understand all true feelings, and appreciate all really noble actions.

At length Eagle Head, after a little hesitation, threw down his arms, and approaching the hunters, said, in an agitated voice, which contrasted with the stoical and indifferent appearance he sought in vain to preserve,—

"It is true, warriors of the palefaces, that you have great sense, that it sweetens the words you address to us, and that we all understand you; we know also that truth opens your lips. It is very difficult for us Indians, who have not the reason of the whites, to avoid often committing, without wishing to do so, reprehensible actions; but we hope that Loyal Heart will take the skin from his heart, so that it may be as clear as ours, and that between us the hatchet may be buried so deeply that the sons of the sons of his grandsons, in a thousand moons and a hundred more, will not be able to find it."

And placing his two hands upon the shoulders of the hunter, he kissed him upon the eyes, adding,—

"May Loyal Heart be my brother!"

"Be it so!" said the hunter, rejoiced at this conclusion; "henceforth I shall entertain for the Comanches as much friendship as, up to this time, I have had mistrust."

The Indian chiefs crowded round their new friends, upon whom they lavished, with the ingenuousness that characterizes primitive natures, marks of affection and respect.

The two hunters had been long known in the tribe of the Serpent; their reputation was established. Often at night, around their campfire, their exploits had struck with admiration the young men to whom the old warriors related them.

The reconciliation was frank between Loyal Heart and Eagle Head; there did not remain between them the least trace of their past hatred. The heroism of the white hunter had conquered the animosity of the redskin warrior.

The two men were chatting, peaceably seated at the entrance of a hut, when a great cry was heard, and an Indian, with his features distorted by terror, rushed into the camp.

All crowded round this man to learn his news; but the Indian, perceiving Eagle Head, advanced towards him.

"What is going on?" the chief asked.

The Indian cast a ferocious look at Loyal Heart and Belhumeur, who had no more idea than the others of the cause of this panic.

"Take care that these two palefaces do not escape; we are betrayed," he said, in a broken voice, panting from the speed with which he had come.

"Let my brother explain himself more clearly," said Eagle Head.

"All the white trappers, the long knives of the west, are assembled; they form a war detachment of near a hundred men; they are advancing and spreading themselves in such a manner, as to invest the camp on all sides at once."

"Are you sure these hunters come as enemies?" said the chief again.

"What else can they be?" the Indian warrior replied. "They are creeping like serpents through the high grass, with their guns before them, and their scalping knives in their teeth. Chief, we are betrayed; these men have been sent among us to lull our vigilance to sleep."

Eagle Head and Loyal Heart exchanged a glance of an undefinable expression, and which was an enigma for all but themselves.

The Comanche chief turned towards the Indian.

"Did you see," he said, "who marched at the head of the hunters?"

"Yes, I saw him."

"Was it Amick (Black Elk), the principal guardian of Loyal Heart's traps?"

"Who else could it be?"

"Very well! Retire," said the warrior, dismissing the messenger with a nod of the head; then, addressing the hunter, he asked,

"What is to be done?"

"Nothing," Loyal Heart replied, "this concerns me, my brother must leave me to act alone."

"My brother is master!"

"I will go and meet these hunters; let Eagle Head keep his young men in the camp till my return."

"That shall be done."

Loyal Heart threw his gun upon his shoulder, gave Belhumeur a shake of the hand, and a smile to the Comanche chief, and then directed his course to the forest, at that pace, at once firm and easy, which was habitual to him.

He soon disappeared among the trees.

"Hum;" said Belhumeur, lighting his Indian pipe, and addressing Eagle Head, "you see, chief, that in this world, it is not often a bad speculation, to allow ourselves to be guided by our hearts."

And satisfied beyond measure with this philosophical fancy, which appeared to him quite to the purpose, the Canadian enveloped himself in a thick cloud of smoke.

By the orders of the chief, all the sentinels spread round the outskirts of the camp were called in.

The Indians awaited with impatience the result of Loyal Heart's proceedings.

CHAPTER II.

THE PIRATES.

It was evening, at a distance nearly equal from the camp of the Mexicans, and that of the Comanches.

Concealed in a ravine, deeply enclosed between two hills, about forty men were assembled around several fires, dispersed in such a manner that the light of the flames could not betray their presence.

The strange appearance offered by this assemblage of adventurers, with gloomy features, ferocious glances, and strange and mean attire, offered a feature worthy of the crayon of Callot, or the pencil of Salvator Rosa.

These men, a heterogeneous mixture of all the nationalities that people the two worlds, from Russia to China, were the most complete collection of scoundrels that can be imagined; thorough food for the gallows, without faith or law, fire or home, the true outcasts of society, which had rejected them from its bosom, obliged to seek a refuge in the depths of the prairies of the west; even in these deserts they formed a band apart, fighting sometimes against the hunters, sometimes against the Indians, excelling both in cruelty and roguery.

These men were, in a word, what people have agreed to call, the pirates of the prairies.

A denomination which suits them in every way, since, like their brothers of the ocean, hoisting all colours, or rather tramping them all underfoot, they fall upon every traveller who ventures to cross the prairies alone, attack and plunder caravans, and when all other prey escapes them, they hide themselves traitorously in the high grass to entrap the Indians, whom they assassinate in order to gain the premium which the paternal government of the United States gives for every aboriginal scalp, as in France they pay for the head of a wolf.

This troop was commanded by Captain Waktehno, whom we have already had occasion to bring on the scene.

There prevailed at this moment among these bandits an agitation that presaged some mysterious expedition.

Some were cleaning and loading their arms, others mending their clothes; some were smoking and drinking mezcal, others were asleep, folded in their ragged cloaks.

The horses, all saddled and ready for mounting, were fastened to pickets.

At stated distances, sentinels, leaning on their long rifles, silent and motionless as statues of bronze, watched over the safety of all.

The dying flashes of the fires, which were expiring by degrees, threw a reddish reflection upon this picture that gave the pirates a still fiercer aspect.

The captain appeared a prey to extreme anxiety; he walked with long strides among his subordinates, stamping his foot with anger, and stopping at intervals to listen to the sound of the prairies.

The night became darker and darker, the moon had disappeared, the wind moaned hoarsely among the hills, and the pirates had eventually fallen asleep one after another.

The captain alone still watched.

All at once he fancied that he heard at a distance the report of firearms, then a second, and all again was silent.

"What does this mean?" the captain murmured, angrily; "have my rascals allowed themselves to be surprised?"

Then, folding himself carefully in his cloak, he hastily directed his course to the side whence the reports appeared to come.

The darkness was intense; and, notwithstanding his knowledge of the country, the captain could only advance with difficulty through brambles, thistles, and briars, which, at every step, impeded his progress. He was several times obliged to stop and look about him to be sure of his route, from which the turnings and windings necessitated by blocks of rock and thickets, continually diverted him.

During one of these halts, he fancied he could perceive, at a small distance from him, the rustling of leaves and boughs, like that which is produced by the passage of a man or a wild beast through underwood.

The captain concealed himself behind the trunk of a gigantic acajou, drew his pistols, and cocked them, in order to be prepared for whatever might happen; then, bending his head forward, he listened.

All was calm around him; it was that mysterious time of night when Nature seems to sleep, and when all the nameless sounds of the solitude are quieted down, so that, as the Indians express it, nothing is to be heard but silence.

"I must have been deceived," the pirate muttered; and he began to retrace his steps. But, at that moment, the noise was repeated, nearer and more distinctly, and was immediately followed by a stifled groan.

"The devil!" said the captain; "this begins to be interesting: I must clear this up."

After a hasty movement forward of a few steps, he saw, gliding along, at a short distance from him, the scarcely distinguishable shadow of a man. This person, whoever he was, seemed to walk with difficulty; he staggered at every step, and stopped at intervals, as if to recover strength. He frequently allowed a smothered complaint to escape him. The captain sprang forward, to bar his passage. When the unknown perceived him, he uttered a cry of terror, and fell on his knees, murmuring in a voice broken by terror—

"Pardon! pardon! do not kill me!"

"Why!" exclaimed the astonished captain, "it is the Babbler! Who the devil has treated him in this fashion?"

And he bent over him.

It was indeed the guide.

He had fainted.

"Plague stifle the fool!" the captain muttered, with vexation. "What's the use of asking him anything now?"

But the pirate was a man of resources; he replaced his pistols in his belt, and raising the wounded man, he threw him over his shoulders.

Loaded with his burden, which scarcely seemed to lessen his speed, he hastily returned to the camp by the way he had left it.

He deposited the guide close to a half-extinguished brazier, into which he threw an armful of dry wood to revive it. A clear blaze soon enabled him to examine the man who lay senseless at his feet.

The features of the Babbler were livid, a cold perspiration stood in drops upon his temples, and the blood flowed in abundance from a wound in his breast.

"*Cascaras!*" the captain muttered; "here is a poor devil who has got his business done! I hope before he departs he will, however, tell me who has done him this favour, and what has become of Kennedy!"

Like all the wood rangers, the captain possessed a small practical knowledge of medicine; it was nothing new to him to dress a shot wound.

Thanks to the attentions he lavished on the bandit, the latter was not long in coming to himself. He breathed a heavy sigh, opened his haggard eyes, but remained for some time unable to speak; after several fruitless efforts, however, aided by the captain, he succeeded in sitting up, and shaking his head repeatedly, he murmured in a low, broken voice:

"All is lost, captain! Our plan has failed!"

"A thousand thunders!" the captain cried, stamping his feet with rage. "How has this happened?"

"The girl is a demon!" the guide replied, whose difficult respiration and gradually weaker voice showed that he had but a few minutes to live.

"If you can manage, anyhow," said the captain, who had understood nothing by the exclamation of the wounded man, "tell me how things have gone on, and who is your assassin, that I may avenge you."

A sinister smile painfully crossed the violet lips of the guide.

"The name of my assassin?" he said, in an ironical tone.

"Yes."

"Well, her name is Doña Luz."

"Doña Luz!" the captain cried, starting with surprise, "impossible!"

"Listen," the guide resumed; "my moments are numbered; I shall soon be a dead man. In my position people don't lie. Let me speak without interrupting me. I don't know whether I shall have time to tell you all, before I go to render my account to Him who knows everything."

"Speak!" said the captain.

And, as the voice of the wounded man became weaker and weaker, he went down upon his knees close to him, in order to lose none of his words.

The guide closed his eyes, collected himself for a few seconds, and then, with great effort, said,—

"Give me some brandy?"

"You must be mad! brandy will kill you!"

The wounded man shook his head.

"It will give me the necessary strength to enable me to tell you all I have to say. Am I not already half dead!"

"That's true," muttered the captain.

"Do not hesitate, then," the wounded man replied, who had heard him; "time presses; I have important things to inform you of."

"If it must be so, it must," said the captain, after a moment's hesitation; and taking his gourd, he applied it to the lips of the guide.

The latter drank eagerly and copiously; a feverish flush coloured his hollow cheeks, his almost extinguished eyes flashed and gleamed with an unnatural fire.

"Now," he said, in a firm and pretty loud voice, "do not interrupt me: when you see me become weak, let me drink again. I, perhaps, shall have time to tell you all."

The captain made a sign of assent, and the Babbler began.

His recital was rendered long by the repeated weakness with which he was seized; when it was terminated, he added,—

"You see, that this woman is, as I have told you, a demon; she has killed both Kennedy and me. Renounce the capture of her, captain; she is game you cannot bring down; you will never get possession of her."

"Hum!" said the captain, knitting his brows; "do you imagine that I give up my projects in that fashion?"

"I wish you luck, then," the guide murmured; "as for me, my business is done—my account is settled. Adieu, captain!" he added, with a strange sort of smile, "I am going to all the devils—we shall meet again yonder."

And he sank back.

The captain endeavoured to raise him again; but he was dead.

"A good journey to you!" he muttered, carelessly. He took the corpse upon his shoulders, carried it into a thicket, in the middle of which he made a hole, and placed it in it; then, this operation being achieved in a few minutes, he returned to the fire, wrapped himself in his cloak, stretched himself on the sod, with his feet towards the brazier, and fell asleep, saying,—

"In a few hours it will be light, and we will than see what we have to do."

Bandits do not sleep late. At sunrise all were on the alert in the camp of the pirates; everyone was preparing for departure.

The captain, far from renouncing his projects, had, on the contrary, determined to hasten the execution of them, so as not to allow the Mexicans time to find among the white trappers of the prairies auxiliaries who might render success impossible.

As soon as he was certain that the orders he had issued were understood, the captain gave the signal for departure. The troop set off in the Indian fashion, that is to say, literally turning their backs towards the point to which they directed their course. When they arrived at a spot which appeared to present to them the security they desired, the pirates dismounted; the horses were confided to a few determined men, and the rest, crawling along upon the ground like a swarm of vipers, or jumping from branch to branch, and from tree to tree, advanced, with all the customary precautions, towards the camp of the Mexicans.

CHAPTER III.

DEVOTEDNESS.

As we said in a preceding chapter, the doctor had left the camp of the Mexicans, charged by Doña Luz with a message for Black Elk.

Like all learned men, the doctor was absent by nature, and that with the best intentions in the world.

During the first moments, according to the custom of his brethren, he puzzled his brain to endeavour to make out the signification of the words, somewhat cabalistical in his opinion, that he was to repeat to the trapper.

He could not comprehend what assistance his friends could possibly obtain from a half-wild man, who lived alone in the prairie, and whose existence was passed in hunting and trapping.

If he had accepted this mission so promptly, the profound friendship he professed for the niece of the general was the sole cause: although he expected no advantageous result from it, as we have said, he had set out resolutely, convinced that the certainty of his departure would calm the uneasiness of the young lady. In short, he had rather meant to satisfy the caprice of a patient, than undertake a serious affair.

In the persuasion, therefore, that the mission with which he was charged was a useless one, instead of going full speed, as he ought to have done, to the toldo of Black Elk, he dismounted, passed his arm through his bridle, and began to look for simples, an occupation which, ere long, so completely absorbed him, that he entirely forgot the instructions of Doña Luz, and the reason why he had left the camp.

In the meanwhile, time passed slowly because anxiously; half the day was gone, and the doctor, who ought long before to have returned, did not appear.

The uneasiness became great in the camp, where the general and the captain had organized everything for a vigorous defence in case of attack.

But nothing appeared.

The greatest calm continued to prevail in the environs; the Mexicans were not far from thinking it a false alarm.

Doña Luz alone felt her inquietude increase every instant; with her eyes fixed upon the plain, she looked in vain in the direction her expected messengers should arrive by.

All at once, it struck her that the high grass of the prairie had an oscillating motion which was not natural to it.

There was not a breath in the air; a heavy, stifling heat weighed down all nature; the leaves of the trees, scorched by the sun, were motionless; the high grass alone, agitated by a slow and mysterious movement, continued to oscillate.

And, what was most extraordinary, this almost imperceptible motion, which required close attention to be observed, was not general; on the contrary, it was successive, approaching the camp by degrees, with a regularity which gave reason for supposing an organized impulsion; so that, in proportion as it was communicated to the nearest grass, the most distant returned by degrees to a state of complete immobility, from which it did not change.

The sentinels placed in the intrenchments could not tell to what to attribute this movement, of which they understood nothing.

The general, as an experienced soldier, resolved to know what it meant; although he had never personally had to do with the Indians, he had heard too much of their manner of fighting not to suspect some stratagem.

Not wishing to weaken the camp, which stood in need of all its defenders, he resolved himself to undertake the adventure, and go out on the scout.

At the instant he was about to climb over the intrenchments, the captain stopped him, by placing his hand respectfully on his shoulders.

"What do you want with, me, my friend?" the general asked, turning round.

"I wish, with your permission, to put a question to you, general."

"Do so."

"You are leaving the camp?"

"I am."

"To go in search of intelligence, no doubt?"

"I admit that is my intention."

"Then, general, it is to me that mission belongs."

"Ay! how is that?" said the astonished general.

"Good God! general, that is very plain; I am but a poor devil of an officer, and owe everything to you."

"What then?"

"The peril I shall run, if peril there be, will not in any way compromise the success of the expedition; whereas——"

"If you are killed."

The general started.

"Everything must be foreseen and provided for," continued the captain, "when we have before us such adversaries as those that threaten us."

"That is true. What then?"

"Well, the expedition will fail, and not one of us will ever see a civilized country again. You are the head; we are but the arms; remain, therefore, in the camp."

The general reflected for a few seconds; then pressing the hand of the young man cordially, he said,—

"Thank you, but I must see for myself what is being plotted against us. The circumstance is too serious to allow me to trust even to you."

"You must remain in the camp, general," persisted the captain, "if not for our sake, at least for that of your niece, that innocent and delicate creature, who, if any misfortune should happen to you, would find herself alone, abandoned amidst ferocious tribes, without support, and without a protector. Of what consequence is my life to me, a poor lad without a family, who owes everything to your kindness? The hour is come to prove my gratitude—let me discharge my debt."

"But——" the general tried to speak.

"You know," the young man continued, warmly, "if I could take your place with Doña Luz, I would do it with joy; but I am as yet too young to play that noble part. Come, general, let me go instead of you, it is my duty to do so."

Half by persuasion, half by force he succeeded in drawing the old soldier back; he sprang upon the intrenchments, leaped down on the other side, and set off at full speed, after making a last sign of farewell.

The general looked after him as long as he could perceive him; then he passed his hand across his careful brow, murmuring,—

"Brave boy! excellent nature!"

"Is he not, uncle?" Doña Luz replied, who had approached and listened without being seen.

"Ah! were you there, dear child?" he said, with a smile, which he endeavoured in vain to render cheerful.

"Yes, dear uncle, I have heard all."

"That is well, dear little one," the general said, with an effort; "but this is not the time to give way to feeling. I must think of your safety. Do not remain here longer; come with me; an Indian bullet might easily reach you here."

Taking her by the hand, he led her affectionately to the tent.

After leading her in, he gave her a kiss upon her brow, advised her not to go out again, and returned to the intrenchments, where he set himself to watch with the greatest care what was going on in the plain; calculating the while, mentally, the time that had passed since the departure of the doctor, and feeling astonished at not seeing him return.

"He must have fallen in with the Indians," he said; "I only hope they have not killed him."

Captain Aguilar was an intrepid soldier, trained in the incessant wars of Mexico; he knew how to unite prudence with courage.

When he arrived at a certain distance from the camp, he laid himself on the ground, face downwards, and reached, by creeping along thus, a rough piece of rock, admirably situated for concealment and observation.

Everything appeared quiet around him; nothing denoted the approach of an enemy. After spending a sufficient time in keenly exploring with his eyes the country beyond him, he was preparing to return to the camp, with a conviction that the general was deceived, and no imminent peril existed, when suddenly, within ten paces of him, an asshata bounded up in great terror, with ears erect and head thrown back, and fled away with extreme velocity.

"Oh! oh!" the young man said to himself, "there is something here, though. Let us try if we cannot

make out what."

Quitting the rock behind which he had been screened, he, with great precaution, advanced a few steps, in order to satisfy his suspicions.

The grass became powerfully agitated, half a score men arose suddenly from various points, and surrounded him before he had time to put himself on the defensive, or regain the shelter he had imprudently quitted.

"Well," he said, with disdainful coolness, "luckily I know now with whom I have to deal."

"Surrender!" one of the men nearest to him shouted.

"No, thank you," he replied, with an ironical smile. "You are fools if you expect that. You must kill me out and out before you take me."

"Then we will kill you, my dainty spark," the first speaker answered, brutally.

"I reckon upon that," said the captain, in a jeering tone; "but I mean to defend myself; that will make a noise, my friends will hear us, your surprise will be a failure, and that is exactly what I wish."

These words were pronounced with a coolness that made the pirates pause. These men belonged to the band of Captain Waktehno, who was himself among them.

"Yes," retorted the captain of the bandits, "your idea is not a bad one, only you forget that we can kill you without making a noise; and so your clever plan will come to nothing."

"Bah! who knows?" said the young man, and before the pirates could prevent him, he made an extraordinary spring backwards, by which he overset two men, and ran with his best speed in the direction of the camp.

The first surprise over, the bandits darted forward in pursuit of him.

This trial of speed lasted a considerable time without the pirates being able to perceive that they gained ground on the fugitive. Though not relaxing in the pursuit, as they tried as much as possible to avoid being seen by the Mexican sentinels, whom they hoped to surprise, they were obliged to make turnings which necessarily impeded their course.

The captain had arrived within hearing of his friends, and he cast a glance behind him. Profiting by a moment in which he had paused to take breath, the bandits had gained upon him considerably, and the young man became aware that if he continued to fly, he should cause the misfortune he wished to avoid.

His determination was formed in an instant; he was satisfied he must die, but he wished to die as a soldier, and make his fall useful to those for whom he devoted himself.

He placed his back against a tree, laid his machete within reach, drew his pistols from his belt, and facing the bandits, who were not more than thirty paces from him, he cried in a loud voice, in order to attract the attention of his friends:—

"To arms! to arms! Be on your guard! The enemies are here!"

Then, with the greatest coolness, he discharged his weapons as if at a target—he had four double-barrelled pistols—repeating as every pirate fell, as loud as he could shout,—

"To arms! the enemies are here! they will surround you! Be on your guard! Be on your guard!"

The bandits, exasperated by this brave defence, rushed upon him with great rage, forgetting all the precautions they had till that time taken.

Then commenced a horrible but an almost superhuman struggle of one man against twenty or thirty; for it seemed, as every pirate fell, that another took his place.

The conflict was fearful! The young man had determined to make the sacrifice of his life, but he was equally resolved to sell it dearly.

We have said that at every shot he fired he had uttered a warning cry; his pistols being discharged, at every stroke of his machete that he dealt he did the same, to which the Mexicans replied by keeping up, on their part, a rolling fire of musketry upon the pirates, who showed themselves openly, blindly bent upon the destruction of a man who so audaciously barred their passage with the impenetrable barrier of his loyal breast.

At length the captain was brought down on one knee. The pirates rushed upon him, pell-mell, wounding each other in their frantic efforts to destroy him.

Such a combat could not last long.

Captain Aguilar fell, but in falling he drew with him a dozen pirates he had immolated, and who formed a bloody escort on his passage to the tomb.

"Hum!" muttered Captain Waktehno, surveying him with admiration, whilst staunching the blood of a large wound he had received in the breast; "a roughish sort of fellow! If the others are like him, we shall have more than our work to do. Come!" he continued turning towards his companions, who awaited his orders, "do not let us stand here any longer to be shot at like pigeons. To the assault, in God's name!—to the assault!"

The pirates rushed after him, brandishing their arms, and began to climb the rock, vociferating, "To the assault! to the assault!"

On their side, the Mexicans, witnesses of the heroic death of Captain Aguilar, prepared to avenge

him.

CHAPTER IV.

THE DOCTOR.

Whilst these terrible events were being accomplished, the doctor was quietly herbalizing. The worthy *savant*, enraptured by the rich *flora* he had beneath his eyes, had forgotten everything but the thoughts of the ample harvest he could make. He proceeded with his body bent towards the ground, stopping for a long time before every plant he admired, ere he resolved to pull it up.

When he had loaded himself with an infinite number of plants and herbs exceedingly valuable to him, he resolved at length to seat himself quietly at the foot of a tree, and classify them at his ease, with all the care that celebrated professors are accustomed to bring to this delicate operation, mumbling in the meantime, some morsels of biscuit which he drew from his bag.

He remained a long time absorbed in this occupation, which procured him one of those extreme delights which the learned alone can enjoy, and which are unknown to the vulgar. He would probably have forgotten himself in this labour until night had surprised him, and forced him to seek shelter, had not a dark shadow come between him and the sun, and projected its reflection upon the plants he had classified with so much care.

He mechanically raised his head.

A man, leaning on a long rifle, had stopped before him, and was contemplating him with a kind of laughing attention. This man was Black Elk.

"He! he!" he said to the doctor, "what are you doing there, my good sir? Seeing the grass moved about so, I thought there was a doe in the thicket, and, devil take me! if I was not on the point of sending a bullet at you."

"The deuce!" the doctor cried, eyeing him with an expression of terror, "you should be careful; do you know you might have killed me?"

"Well, I might," the trapper replied, laughing; "but don't be afraid! I perceived my error in time."

"God be praised!"

And the doctor, who had just perceived a rare plant stooped eagerly to seize it.

"Then you won't tell me what you are doing?" the hunter continued.

"Why, can't you see, my friend?"

"Who, I? Yes; I see you are amusing yourself with pulling up the weeds of the prairie, that is all; and I should like to know what for?"

"Oh! ignorance!" the savant murmured, and then added aloud with that tone of doctorial condescension peculiar to the disciples of Æsculapius: "my friend, I am gathering simples, which I collect, in order to classify them in my herbal; the *flora* of these prairies is magnificent; I am convinced that I have discovered at least three new species of the *Chirostemon pentadactylon,* of which the genus belongs to the *Flora Mexicana*."

"Ah!" said the hunter, staring with all his eyes, and making strong efforts to refrain from laughing in the doctor's face. "You think you have really found three new species of—"

"Chirostemon pentadactylon, my friend," said the doctor, patronizingly.

"Ah! bah!"

"At least; perhaps there may be a fourth!"

"Oh! oh! there is some use in it, then?"

"Some use in it, indeed!" the doctor cried, much scandalized.

"Well, don't be angry, I know nothing about it."

"That is true!" said the savant, softened by the tone of Black Elk; "You cannot comprehend the importance of these labours, which advance science at an immense speed."

"Well, only to think! And it was only for the purpose of pulling up herbs in this manner that you came into the prairie?"

"For nothing else."

Black Elk looked at him with the admiration created by the sight of an inexplicable phenomenon; the hunter could not succeed in comprehending how a sensible man should resolve willingly to endure a life of privation and perils for the, to him, unintelligible object of pulling up useless plants; therefore he soon came to a conviction that he must be mad. He cast upon him a look of commiseration; shaking his head, and shouldering his rifle, he prepared to go on his way.

"Well! well!" he said, in the tone usually employed towards children, and idiots; "you are right, my good sir; pull away! pull away! you do nobody any harm, and there will always be plenty left. I wish you good sport; such as it is. I shall see you again."

And, whistling his dogs, he proceeded a few steps, but almost immediately returned.

"One word more," he said, addressing the doctor, who had already forgotten him, and was again busied in the employment which the arrival of the hunter had forced him to interrupt.

"Speak!" he replied, raising his head.

"I hope that the young lady who came to visit my hatto yesterday, in company with her uncle, is well? Poor dear child, you cannot imagine how much I am interested in her, my good sir!"

The doctor rose up suddenly, striking his forehead.

"Fool that I am!" he cried, "I had completely forgotten it."

"Forgotten what?" the astonished hunter asked.

"This is always my way!" the savant muttered; "fortunately the mischief is not great; as you are here, it can easily be repaired."

"What mischief are you talking about?" said the trapper, beginning to feel uneasy.

"You may imagine," the doctor continued, quietly, "that if science absorbs me so completely as to make me often forget to eat and drink, I am likely sometimes not to remember the commissions I am charged with."

"To the point! to the point!" said the hunter impatiently.

"Oh! good Lord, it's very simple. I left the camp at daybreak to come to your hatto; but when I arrived here, I was so charmed with the innumerable rare plants that my horse trod under foot, that without thinking of pursuing my route, I stopped at first to pull up one plant, then I perceived another that was not in my herbal, and another after that, and so on.—In short, I thought no more of coming to you, and was, indeed, so absorbed by my researches, that even your unexpected presence, just now, did not recall to my mind the commission I had to you."

"And did you leave the camp at daybreak?"

"Good Heavens, yes!"

"And do you know what o'clock it is now?"

The savant looked at the sun.

"Almost three!" he said, "but I repeat that it is of little consequence. You being here, I can report to you what Doña Luz charged me to tell you, and all will be right, no doubt."

"God grant that your negligence may not prove the cause of a great misfortune," said the hunter, with a sigh.

"What do you mean by that?"

"You will soon know. I hope I may be deceived. Speak, I am listening to you."

"This is what Doña Luz begged me to repeat to you——"

"Was it Doña Luz that sent you to me?"

"Herself!"

"Has anything serious taken place at the camp, then?"

"Ah! why, yes; and that, perhaps, may make it more important than I at first imagined. This is what has happened: Last night one of our guides——"

"The Babbler?"

"The same. Do you know him?"

"Yes. Go on."

"Well! It appears that the man was plotting with another bandit of his own sort, to deliver up the camp to the Indians. Doña Luz, most probably by chance, overheard the conversation of these fellows, and, at the moment they were passing her, she fired two pistols at them, quite close."

"Did she kill them?"

"Unfortunately, no. One of them, although no doubt grievously wounded, was able to escape."

"Which of them?"

"The Babbler."

"Well, and then?"

"Why, then Doña Luz made me swear to come to you, and say stop a bit," said the savant, trying to recollect the words.

"Black Elk, the hour is come!" the hunter, impetuously interrupted.

"That's it! that's it!" said the savant, rubbing his hands for joy, "I had it at the tip of my tongue. I must confess it appeared rather obscure to me, I could not fancy what it meant; but you will explain it, will you not?"

The hunter seized him vigorously by the arm, and drawing his face close to his own, he said, with an inflamed look and features contracted by anger,—

"Wretched madman! why do you not come to me as quickly as possible, instead of wasting your

time like an idiot? Your delay will, perhaps, cause the death of all your friends!"

"Is it possible!" cried the chapfallen doctor, without noticing the somewhat rough manner in which the hunter shook him.

"You were charged with a message of life and death, fool that you are! Now, what is to be done? Perhaps it is too late!"

"Oh! do not say so," said the savant, in great agitation, "I should die with despair if it were so."

The poor man burst into tears, and gave unequivocal proofs of the greatest grief.

Black Elk was obliged to console him.

"Come, come, courage, my good sir!" he said, softening a little. "What the devil, perhaps all is not lost?"

"Oh! if I were the cause of such a misfortune, I should never survive it!"

"Well, what is done, is done; we must act accordingly," said the trapper philosophically. "I will think how they are to be assisted. Thanks be to God, I am not so much alone as might be supposed—I hope within two hours to have got together thirty of the best rifles in the prairies."

"You will save them, will you not?"

"At least, I will do all that can be done, and, if it please God, I shall succeed."

"May Heaven hear you!"

"Amen!" said the hunter, crossing himself devoutly. "Now, listen to me; you must return to the camp."

"Immediately!"

"But no more gathering of flowers, or pulling up of grass, if you please."

"Oh, I swear I will not. Cursed be the hour in which I set myself to herbalize!" said the doctor, with comic despair.

"Very well, that's agreed. You must comfort the young lady as well as her uncle; you must recommend them to keep good guard, and, in case of an attack, to make a vigorous resistance; and tell them they shall soon see friends come to their assistance."

"I will tell them all that."

"To horse, then, and gallop all the way to the camp."

"Be satisfied, I will; but you, what are you going to do?"

"Oh! don't trouble yourself about me. I shall not be idle; all you have to do is to rejoin your friends as soon as possible."

"Within an hour I shall be with them."

"Courage and good luck, then! Above all, don't despair."

Black Elk let go the bridle which he had seized, and the doctor set off at a gallop, a pace to which the good man was so little accustomed, that he had great trouble to preserve his equilibrium.

The trapper watched his departure for an instant, then, turning round, he strode with hasty steps into the forest.

He had scarcely walked ten minutes when he met Nô Eusebio, who was conveying the mother of Loyal Heart across his saddle, in a fainting state.

This meeting was for the trapper a piece of good fortune, of which he took advantage to obtain from the old Spaniard some positive information about the hunter—information which Eusebio hastened to give him.

The two men then repaired to the hatto of the trapper, from which they were but a short distance, and in which they wished to place the mother of their friend for the present.

CHAPTER V.

THE ALLIANCE.

We must now return to Loyal Heart.

After walking straight forward about ten minutes, without giving himself the trouble to follow one of those innumerable paths that intersect the prairie in all directions, the hunter stopped, put the butt end of his gun to the ground, looked round carefully on all sides, lent his ear to those thousands of noises of the desert which all have a meaning for the man accustomed to a prairie life; and, probably satisfied with the result of his observations, he imitated, at three different equal intervals the cry of the pie, with such perfection, that several of those birds, concealed among the thickest of the trees, replied to him immediately.

The third cry had scarcely ceased to vibrate in the air, ere the forest, mute till that moment, and

apparently plunged in complete solitude, became animated as if by enchantment.

On all sides arose, from the midst of bushes and grass, in which they had been concealed, a crowd of hunters with energetic countenances and picturesque costumes, who formed, in an instant, a dense crowd round the trapper.

It chanced that the two first faces that caught the eye of Loyal Heart were those of Black Elk and Nô Eusebio, both posted at a few paces from him.

"Oh!" he said, holding out his hand eagerly; "I understand it all, my friends. Thanks! a thousand thanks for your cordial coming; but, praise be to God! your succour is not necessary."

"So much the better!" said Black Elk.

"But how did you get out of the hands of those devilish redskins?" the old servant asked, eagerly.

"Don't speak ill of the Comanches," Loyal Heart replied, with a smile; "they are now my brothers."

"Do you speak seriously?" cried Black Elk, with warmth; "can you really be on good terms with the Indians?"

"You shall judge for yourself. Peace is made between them and me, my friends. If agreeable to you, I will introduce you to each other."

"By Heaven! at the present moment nothing could fall out more fortunately," said Black Elk; "and as you are free, we shall be able to concern ourselves for other people, who are, at this moment, in great peril, and stand in need of our immediate assistance."

"What do you mean?" Loyal Heart asked, with a curiosity mingled with interest.

"I mean, that some people to whom you have already rendered great services, on the occasion of the last fire in the prairie, are at this moment surrounded by a band of pirates, who will soon attack them, if they have not already done so.

"We must fly to their assistance!" cried Loyal Heart, with an emotion he could not control.

"Well, that was our intention; but we wished to deliver you first, Loyal Heart. You are the soul of our association; without you we should have done no good."

"Thanks! my friends. But now, you see, I am free, so there is nothing to stop us; let us set forward immediately."

"I crave your pardon," Black Elk replied; "but we have to deal with a strong body. The pirates, who know they have no pity to look for, fight like so many tigers. The more numerous we are, the better will be our chance of success."

"That is true; but what do you aim at?"

"At this—since you have made, in our name, peace with the Indians, it could be so managed that they——"

"By Heavens! you are right, Black Elk," Loyal Heart interrupted him, eagerly. "I did not think of that. The Indian warriors will be delighted at the opportunity we shall offer them of showing their valour. They will joyfully assist us in our expedition. I take upon myself to persuade them. Follow me, all of you. I will present you to my new friends."

The trappers drew together, and formed a compact band of forty men.

Arms were reversed, in sign of peace, and all, following the steps of the hunter, directed their course towards the camp of the Comanches.

"And my mother?" Loyal Heart asked Eusebio, with a broken voice.

"She is in safety in the hatto of Black Elk."

"And how is she?"

"As well as you could expect, though suffering from great uneasiness," the old man replied. "Your mother is a woman who only lives by the heart. She is endowed with immense courage, the greatest physical pains glide over her. She now feels but slightly the effects of the atrocious tortures she had begun to undergo."

"God be praised! But she must no longer be left in these mortal doubts; where is your horse?"

"Hidden, close by."

"Mount, and return to my mother. Assure her of my safety, and then both of you retire to the grotto of Verdigris, where she will be out of all danger. You will remain with her. That grotto is easily found; it is situated at a small distance from the rock of the Dead Buffalo. When you get there, you have nothing to do but to let loose my rastreros, which I will leave you, and they will lead you straight to it. Do you clearly understand me?"

"Perfectly."

"Begone then. Here we are at the camp; your presence is useless here, whilst yonder it is indispensable."

"I am gone!"

"Adieu! we'll meet again."

Nô Eusebio whistled the bloodhounds, which he leashed together; he then, after another shake of

the hand with his young master, left the troop, turned to the right, and resumed the way to the forest. The hunters, in the meantime, arrived at the entrance of the glade in which the camp of the Indians was established.

The Comanches formed, a few paces behind the first lines of their camp, a vast semicircle, in the centre of which stood their chiefs.

To do honour to their newly-arrived friends, they had put on their handsomest costumes. They were painted and armed for war.

Loyal Heart halted his troop, and continuing to march on alone, he unfolded a buffalo robe, which he waved before him.

Eagle Head then quitted the other chiefs, and advanced on his part to meet the hunter, also waving a buffalo robe in sign of peace.

When the two men were within three paces of each other they stopped. Loyal Heart spoke the first.

"The Master of Life," he said, "sees into our hearts. He knows that among us the road is good and open, and that the words which our lungs breathe and our mouths pronounce are sincere. The white hunters come to visit their red friends."

"They are welcome!" Eagle Head replied cordially, bowing with the grace and majestic nobleness which characterize Indians.

After these words the Comanches and the hunters discharged their pieces into the air, amidst long and loud cries of joy. Then all ceremony was banished; the two bands mingled, and were confounded so thoroughly that, at the end of a few minutes, they only formed one.

Loyal Heart, however, who knew from what Black Elk had told him how precious the moments were, took Eagle Head aside, and explained to him frankly what he expected from his tribe.

The chief smiled at this request.

"My brother shall be satisfied," he said, "let him but wait a little."

Leaving the hunter, he joined the other chiefs. The crier quickly mounted upon the roof of a hut, and convoked with loud cries the most renowned warriors to a meeting in the hut of council.

The demand of Loyal Heart met with general approbation. Ninety chosen warriors, commanded by Eagle Head, were selected to accompany the hunters, and co-operate with all their power to secure the success of the expedition.

When the decision of the chiefs was made known, it created a general joy throughout the tribe.

The allies were to set forward at sunset, in order to surprise the enemy.

The great war-dance, with all the ceremonies usual upon such occasions, was danced, the warriors the while continually repeating in chorus:—

"Master of Life, look upon me with a favourable eye, thou hast given me the courage to open my veins."

When they were on the point of setting out, Eagle Head, who knew what dangerous enemies they were going to attack, selected twenty warriors upon whom he could depend, and sent them forward as scouts, after having given them some scotte wigwas, or bark wood, in order that they might immediately light a fire as a warning in case of alarm.

He then examined the arms of his warriors, and, satisfied with the inspection, he gave the orders for departure.

The Comanches and the trappers took the Indian file, and, preceded by their respective chiefs, they quitted the camp, amidst the good wishes and exhortations of their friends, who accompanied them to the first trees of the forest.

The little army consisted of a hundred and thirty resolute men, perfectly armed, and commanded by chiefs whom no obstacle could stop, no peril could make recede.

The darkness was dense; the moon, veiled by large black clouds, which floated heavily in space, only shed at intervals a dull, rayless light, which, when it disappeared, gave objects a fantastic appearance.

The wind blew in gusts, and filled the ravines with dull, plaintive moans.

In short, this night was one of those which in the history of humanity seemed destined to witness the accomplishment of dismal tragedies.

The warriors marched in silence; they looked in the darkness like a crowd of phantoms escaped from a sepulchre, hastening to accomplish a work without a name, accursed of God, which night alone could veil with its shadow.

At midnight the word "halt" was pronounced in a low voice.

They encamped to await news of the scouts.

That is to say, everyone, whether well or ill placed, laid himself down exactly where he happened to be, in order to be ready at the first signal.

No fire was lighted.

The Indians, who depend upon their scouts, never post sentinels when they are upon the

warpath.

Two hours passed away.

The camp of the Mexicans was not more than three miles distant at most; but, before venturing nearer, the chief wished to ascertain whether the route were free or not; in case it should not be so, what were the numbers of the enemy who barred the passage, and what plan of attack they had adopted.

At the moment when Loyal Heart, a prey to impatience, was preparing to go himself to ascertain what was going on, a rustling, almost imperceptible at first, but which by degrees increased in enormous proportions, was heard in the bushes, and two men appeared.

The first was one of the Comanche scouts, the other was the doctor.

The state of the poor savant was truly pitiable.

He had lost his wig; his clothes were in rags; his face was convulsed with terror; in short, his whole person bore evident traces of struggle and combat.

When he was brought before Loyal Heart and Eagle Head, he fell head-foremost to the ground and fainted.

Earnest endeavours were immediately made to restore him to life.

CHAPTER VI.

THE LAST ASSAULT.

The lanceros posted behind the entrenchments had received the pirates warmly.

The general, exasperated by the death of Captain Aguilar, and perceiving that with such enemies there was no quarter to be expected, had resolved to resist to the last, and to kill himself rather than fall into their hands.

The Mexicans, reckoning the peons and guides, in whom they scarcely dared to trust, amounted to only seventeen, men and women included.

The pirates were at least thirty.

The numerical disproportion was then great between the besiegers and the besieged; but thanks to the strong position of the camp, situated on the summit of a chaos of rocks, this disproportion partly disappeared, and the forces were nearly equal.

Captain Waktehno had not for an instant deceived himself with regard to the difficulties of the attack he meditated—difficulties almost insurmountable in an open assault; therefore he had depended upon a surprise, and more particularly upon the treachery of the Babbler. It was only from having been carried away by circumstances, and being furious at the loss Captain Aguilar had caused him, that he had ventured upon an assault.

But the first moment of effervescence over, when he saw his men falling around him like ripe fruit, unrevenged, and without gaining an inch of ground, he resolved not to retreat, but to change the siege into a blockade, hoping to be more fortunate during the night by some bold *coup de main*, or, in the end, certain of reducing the besieged sooner or later by famine.

He believed himself certain that they would find it impossible to obtain succour in the prairies, where there were none but Indians, hostile to the whites, whoever they might be, or trappers and hunters, who cared very little to intermeddle in affairs that did not at all concern them.

His resolution once taken, the captain put it in execution immediately.

He cast an anxious look around him; his situation was still the same; notwithstanding their almost superhuman efforts to climb the abrupt ascent which led to the entrenchments, the pirates had not gained a single step. The moment a man showed himself openly, a ball from a Mexican carbine sent him rolling down the precipice.

The captain gave the signal for retreat; that is to say, he imitated the cry of the prairie dogs.

The combat ceased instantly.

The spot, which an instant before was animated by the cries of combatants and the continued report of firearms, sank suddenly into the completest silence.

Only, as soon as the men had paused in their work of destruction, the condors, the vultures, and urubus commenced theirs.

After pirates, birds of prey! that is according to the order of things.

Swarms of condors, vultures, and urubus came hovering over the dead bodies, upon which they fell uttering sharp cries, and made a horrible carnage of human flesh, in sight of the Mexicans, who did not dare to leave their entrenchments, and were forced to remain spectators of this hideous banquet of the wild creatures.

The pirates rallied in a ravine, out of reach of the fire, and counted their numbers.

Their losses were enormous; out of forty, nineteen only remained.

In less than an hour they had had twenty-one killed, more than half of their whole band.

The Mexicans, with the exception of Captain Aguilar, had neither killed nor wounded.

The loss the pirates had sustained made them reflect seriously upon the affair.

The greater number were of opinion it would be best to retire, and give up an expedition which presented so many dangers and so few hopes of success.

The captain was even more discouraged than his companions.

Certes, if it had only been to gain gold or diamonds, he would, without hesitation, have resigned his projects; but a feeling more strong than the desire of wealth influenced his actions, and excited him to carry the adventure through, whatever might be the consequences to him.

The treasure he coveted—a treasure of incalculable price—was Doña Luz, the girl whom he had, in Mexico, rescued from the hands of his own bandits, and for whom he entertained a violent, boundless, characteristic passion.

From Mexico he had followed her step by step, watching, like a wild beast, for an opportunity of carrying off his prey, for the possession of which no sacrifice was too great, no difficulty insuperable, and no danger worthy of consideration.

Therefore did he bring into play upon his bandits all the resources that speech gives to a man influenced by passion, to keep them with him, to raise their courage, and to induce them to attempt one more attack before retiring and definitely renouncing the expedition.

He had much trouble in persuading them; as generally happens in such cases, the bravest had been killed, and the survivors did not feel themselves at all inclined to expose themselves to a similar fate. By dint, however, of persuasions and menaces, the captain succeeded in getting from the bandits the promise of remaining till the next day, and of attempting a decisive blow during the night.

This being agreed upon between the pirates and their chief, Waktehno ordered his men to conceal themselves as well as they could, but, above all, not to stir without his orders, whatever they might see the Mexicans do.

The captain hoped, by remaining invisible, to persuade the besieged that, discouraged by the enormous difficulties they had met with, the pirates had resolved to retreat, and had, in fact, done so.

This plan was not at all unskilful, and it, in fact, produced almost all the results which its author expected.

The glowing fires of the setting sun gilded with their last rays the summits of the rocks and the trees; the evening breeze, which was rising, refreshed the air; the great luminary was about to disappear on the horizon, in a bed of purple vapours.

Silence was only disturbed by the deafening cries of the birds of prey, that continued their cannibal banquet, quarrelling with ferocious inveteracy over the fragments of flesh which they tore from the dead bodies.

The general, with a heart deeply moved by this spectacle, when he reflected that Captain Aguilar, a man whose heroic devotion had saved them all, was exposed to this horrible profanation, resolved not to abandon his body, and, cost what it might, to go and bring it in, in order to give it sepulture,—a last homage due to the young man who had not hesitated to sacrifice himself for him.

Doña Luz, to whom he communicated his intention, although perfectly sensible of the danger, had not the heart to oppose it.

The general selected four resolute men, and scaling the entrenchments, he advanced at their head towards the spot where the body of the unfortunate captain lay.

The lanceros left in the camp kept a watchful eye upon the plain, ready to protect their bold companions with energy, if they were interrupted in their pious task.

The pirates concealed in the clefts of the rocks did not lose one of their movements, but were most careful not to betray their presence.

The general was able, therefore, to accomplish unmolested the duty he had imposed upon himself.

He had no difficulty in finding the body of the young man.

He lay half prostrate at the foot of a tree, holding a pistol in one hand and his machete in the other, his head elevated, his look fixed, and a smile upon his lips, as if even after death he still defied those who had killed him.

His body was literally covered with wounds; but, by a strange chance, which the general remarked with joy, up to that moment the birds of prey had respected it.

The lanceros placed the body upon their crossed guns, and returned to the camp at quick march.

The general followed at a short distance from them, observing and watching every bush and thicket.

But nothing stirred; the greatest tranquillity prevailed everywhere; the pirates had disappeared,

without leaving any other traces but their dead, whom they appeared to have abandoned.

The general began to hope that his enemies were really gone, and he breathed a sigh, as if relieved from an oppression of the heart.

Night came on with its habitual rapidity; all eyes were fixed upon the lanceros, who bore back their dead officer, but no one remarked a score of phantoms who glided silently over the rocks, drawing, by degrees, nearer to the camp, close to which they concealed themselves, keeping their ferocious looks fixed upon its defenders.

The general caused the body to be placed upon a bed prepared in haste, and taking a spade, he insisted upon himself digging the grave in which the young man was to be deposited. All the lanceros ranged themselves around him, leaning on their arms. The general took off his hat, and from a prayer book read with a loud voice the Service of the Dead, to which his niece and all present responded.

There was something grand and impressive in this simple ceremony, in the midst of the desert, whose thousand mysterious voices appeared likewise to modulate a prayer, in face of that sublime nature upon which the finger of God is traced in so visible a manner.

This white-headed old man, piously reading the office of the dead over the body of a young man, little more than a boy, full of life but a few hours before, having around him that young girl, and these sad, pensive soldiers, whom the same fate, perhaps, threatened soon to overtake, but who, calm and resigned, prayed with fervour for him who was no more; this noble prayer, rising in the night, accompanied by the moanings and the breezes of evening, which passed quivering through the branches of the trees, recalled the early times of Christianity, when, persecuted and forced to hide itself, it took refuge in the desert, to be nearer to God.

Nothing occurred to disturb the accomplishment of this last duty.

After every person present had once again taken a melancholy farewell of the dead, he was lowered into the grave, enveloped in his cloak; his arms were placed by his side, and the grave was filled up.

A slight elevation of the sod, which would soon disappear, alone marked the place where reposed for ever the body of a man whose unfamed heroism had saved by a sublime devotedness those who had confided to him the care of their safety.

The mourners separated, swearing to avenge the dead, or that failing, to do as he had done.

Darkness was now spread over all.

The general, after having made a last round, to satisfy himself that the sentinels were steady at their posts, wished his niece a good night, and laid himself down across the entrance of her tent, on the outside.

Three hours passed away in perfect quiet.

All at once, like a legion of demons, a score of men silently scaled the entrenchments, and before the sentinels, surprised by this sudden attack, could attempt the least resistance, they were seized and slaughtered.

The camp of the Mexicans was invaded by the pirates, and in their train entered murder and pillage!

CHAPTER VII.

THE BATTLE.

The pirates bounded into the camp like jackals, howling and brandishing their weapons.

As soon as the camp was invaded, the captain left his people to pillage and kill at their pleasure. Without concerning himself any more about them, he rushed towards the tent.

But there his passage was barred. The general had rallied seven or eight men round him, and awaited the bandit firmly, resolved to die rather than allow one of those wretches to touch his niece.

At the sight of the old soldier, with his flashing eye, his pistol in one hand and his sword in the other, the captain paused.

But this pause did not last longer than a flash of lightning; he got together a half-score of pirates by a shout for help.

"Give way!" he said, brandishing his machete.

"Come on!" the general said, biting his moustache with fury.

The two men rushed upon each other, their people imitated them, and the *mêlée* became general.

Then followed a terrible and merciless struggle between men who, on both sides, knew they had no pity to expect.

Everyone endeavoured to make his blows mortal, without taking the trouble to parry those dealt

upon himself, satisfied with falling, provided that in his fall he could drag down his adversary.

The wounded endeavoured to rise, for the purpose of burying their poniards in the bodies of those who were fighting around them.

This fierce contest could not last long; all the lanceros were massacred; the general fell in his turn, struck down by the captain, who threw himself upon him and bound him tightly with his belt, in order to prevent the possibility of his resisting any further.

The general had only received slight wounds, which had scarcely penetrated to the flesh; for the captain, for reasons best known to himself, had carefully protected him during the combat, parrying with his machete the blows which the bandits tried to inflict upon him.

He wished to take his enemy alive, and he had succeeded.

All the Mexicans had fallen, it is true, but the victory had cost the pirates dear; more than half of them were killed.

The general's Negro, armed with an enormous club, which he had made of the trunk of a young tree, for a long time resisted all who attempted to take him, crushing without mercy all who imprudently came within reach of the weapon which he handled with such uncommon dexterity.

His enemies at length succeeded in lassoing him, and casting him half-strangled to the ground; the captain, however, came to his rescue at the moment when a pirate was raising his arm to put an end to him.

As soon as the captain found the general incapable of moving, he uttered a cry of joy, and without stopping to stanch the blood of two wounds he had received he bounded like a tiger over the body of his enemy, who was writhing powerless at his feet, and penetrated into the tent.

It was empty!

Doña Luz had disappeared.

The captain was thunderstruck!

What could have become of the girl?

The tent was small, almost void of furniture, it was impossible she could be concealed in it.

A disordered bed proved that at the moment of the surprise, Doña Luz had been sleeping peaceably.

She had vanished like a sylph, without leaving any trace of her flight.

A flight perfectly incomprehensible to the pirate, as the camp had been invaded on all sides at once.

How was it possible for a young girl, awakened suddenly, to have had courage and presence of mind enough to fly so quickly, and pass unperceived amidst conquerors whose first care had been to guard all the issues?

The captain sought in vain the solution of this enigma. He stamped with anger, and plunged his poniard into the packages that might serve as temporary places of refuge for the fugitive; but all without success.

Convinced at length that all his researches in the tent were in vain, he rushed out, prowling about like a wild beast, persuaded that if by a miracle she had succeeded in escaping, alone in the night, half dressed, wandering in the desert, he should easily find her again.

In the meantime, the pillage went on with a celerity and an order in its disorder, which did honour to the practical knowledge of the pirates.

The conquerors, fatigued with killing and robbing, plunged their poniards into the skins filled with mezcal, and an orgie soon succeeded theft and murder.

All at once a loud and fierce cry resounded at a little distance, and a shower of bullets came pattering full upon the bandits.

Surprised in their turn, they flew to their arms, and endeavoured to rally.

At the same instant, a mass of Indians appeared, bounding like jaguars among the packages, closely followed by a troop of hunters, at the head of whom were Loyal Heart, Belhumeur, and Black Elk.

The position became critical for the pirates.

The captain, recalled to himself by the peril his people ran, left with regret the fruitless search he was engaged in, and grouping his men around him, he carried off the only two prisoners he had made, that is to say, the general and his black servant, and taking skilful advantage of the tumult inseparable from an eruption like that of the allies, he ordered his men to disperse in all directions, in order to escape more easily the blows of their adversaries.

After one sharp fire, which caused a slight pause among the Indians, the pirates flew away like a cloud of unclean birds of prey, and disappeared in the darkness. But, whilst flying, the captain, left last to support the retreat, did not cease, as he glided along the rocks, still to seek, as much as was possible in the precipitation of his night, for traces of the young girl; but he could discover nothing.

The disappointed captain retired with rage in his heart, revolving in his head the most sinister projects.

Loyal Heart, warned by the Indian scout, and more particularly by the recital of the doctor, of the proposed attack upon the camp, had marched immediately, in order to bring succour to the Mexicans as soon as possible.

Unfortunately, in spite of the celerity of their march, the trappers and the Comanches arrived too late to save the caravan.

When the leaders of the expedition became assured of the flight of the pirates, Eagle Head and his warriors set off on their track.

Left master of the camp, Loyal Heart ordered a general battue in the neighbouring thickets and high grass, which the bandits had not had time to explore in detail, for they had scarcely obtained possession of the camp before they were driven out of it again.

This battue brought to light Phoebe, the young servant of Doña Luz, and two lanceros, who had taken refuge in the trunk of a tree, and who arrived more dead than alive, conducted by Black Elk and some hunters, who tried in vain to re-assure them, and revive their courage.

The poor devils still believed themselves in the hands of the pirates, and Loyal Heart had great difficulty in persuading them that the people they saw were friends who had come too late to succour them, but who would not do them any harm.

As soon as they were sufficiently restored to speak collectedly, Loyal Heart went with them into the tent, and required of them a succinct account of all that had taken place.

The young quadroon, when she saw with whom she had to do, all at once, regained her wonted assurance; and besides, haying recognized Loyal Heart, she did not require much coaxing to set her tongue going, and in a few minutes made the hunter acquainted with all the terrible events of which she had been a spectatress.

"So," he asked, "Captain Aguilar was killed, was he?"

"Alas! yes!" the young girl replied, with a sigh of regret for the poor young officer.

"And the general?" said the hunter.

"Oh! as to the general," said the girl briskly, "he defended himself like a lion, and only fell after a heroic resistance."

"Is he dead, then?" Loyal Heart asked, with great emotion.

"Oh! no!" she said almost cheerfully, "he is only wounded. I saw the bandits pass as they carried him away; I even believe that his wounds are slight, so much did the ladrones spare him during the combat."

"I am glad to hear it!" said the hunter; and he hung his head with a pensive air: then, after a pause of an instant, he added, hesitatingly, and with a slight tremor in his voice, "your young mistress, what has become of her?"

"My mistress, Doña Luz?"

"Yes, Doña Luz—for so I believe she is called; I would give much to know where she is, and to be certain she is in safety."

"She is so, since she is near you," said a harmonious voice.

And Doña, Luz appeared, still pale from the poignant emotions she had undergone, but calm; she had a smile on her lips, and her eyes sparkled brilliantly.

No one present could repress a movement of extreme surprise at the unexpected apparition of the young lady.

"Oh! God be praised!" the hunter cried; "our succour has not, then, been completely useless."

"No," replied she, kindly; but she shortly added with sadness, whilst a shade of melancholy clouded her features, "now that I have lost him who was to me as a father, I come to ask your protection, Caballero."

"It is yours, madam," he replied with warmth. "And as to your uncle, oh! depend upon me; I will restore him to you, if the enterprise costs me my life. You know," he added, "that before today I have proved my devotion to you and him."

The first emotion over, it became a question how the young girl had succeeded in escaping the researches of the pirates.

Doña Luz gave as simple an account as possible of what had passed.

The young lady had thrown herself, with all her clothes on, upon the bed; but anxiety kept her awake, a secret presentiment warned her to be on her guard.

At the cry uttered by the pirates, she started from her bed in terror and amazement, and at once perceived that flight was impossible.

Whilst casting a terrified look around her, she perceived some clothes thrown in a disorderly manner into a hammock, and hanging over the sides of it.

An idea, which appeared to come to her from Heaven, shot across her brain like a luminous flash.

She glided under these clothes, and curling herself up into as little space as possible, she crouched at the bottom of the hammock, without altering the disordered state of the things.

God had ordained it that the chief of the bandits, while searching, as he thought, everywhere,

never dreamt of plunging his hand into what seemed an empty hammock.

Saved by this chance, she remained thus huddled up for full an hour, a prey to fears of the most appalling nature.

The arrival of the hunters, together with the voice of Loyal Heart, which she soon recognized, restored her to hope; she left the place of her concealment, and had impatiently waited for a favourable moment to present herself.

The hunters were wonderstruck at a recital at once so simple and so affecting; they cordially congratulated the young lady upon her courage and presence of mind, which alone had saved her.

When a little order was re-established in the camp Loyal Heart waited upon Doña Luz.

"Señora," he said, "it will not be long before day appears; when you have taken a few hours' repose, I will conduct you to my mother, who is a pious, good woman; when she knows you, I feel certain she will love you as a daughter. And then, as soon as you are in safety, I will set earnestly about restoring your uncle to you."

Without waiting for the thanks of the young lady, he bowed respectfully, and left the tent.

When he had disappeared, Doña Luz sighed, and sank pensively down upon a seat.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CAVERN OF VERDIGRIS.

Ten days had passed away since the events related in our last chapter.

We will conduct the reader, between three and four o'clock in the afternoon, into the grotto discovered by Belhumeur, of which Loyal Heart had made his chosen habitation.

The interior of the cavern, lighted by numerous torches of that wood which the Indians call candlewood, which burned, fixed at distances on the projections of the rock, presented the aspect of a halt of gipsies, or of an encampment of bandits, whichever the stranger might fancy, who should chance to be admitted to visit it.

Forty trappers and Comanche warriors were dispersed about here and there; some were sleeping, others smoking, other cleaning their arms or repairing their clothes; a few, crouching before two or three fires, over which were suspended cauldrons, and where enormous joints of venison were roasting, were preparing the repast for their companions.

At each place of issue two sentinels, motionless, but with eyes and ears on the watch, silently provided for the common safety.

In a compartment separated naturally from the larger one by a block of projecting rock, two women and a man, upon seats rudely cut with the hatchet, were conversing in a low voice.

The two women were Doña Luz and the mother of Loyal Heart; the man who looked at them, while smoking his husk cigarette, and mingled occasionally in the conversation by an interjection drawn from him by surprise, admiration, or joy, was Eusebio, the old Spanish servant, of whom we have often spoken in the course of our narrative.

At the entrance of this compartment, which formed a kind of separate chamber in the cavern, another man was walking backwards and forwards, with his hands behind his back, whistling between his teeth an air which he probably composed as his thoughts dictated.

This man was Black Elk.

Loyal Heart, Eagle Head, and Belhumeur were absent.

The conversation of the two women appeared to interest them greatly. The mother of the hunter often exchanged significant looks with her old servant, who had allowed his cigarette to go out, but who kept on smoking it mechanically, without perceiving it.

"Oh!" said the old lady, clasping her hands with fervour, and raising her eyes toward heaven, "the finger of the Almighty is in all this!"

"Yes," Eusebio replied, with profound conviction; "it is He who has done it!"

"Tell me, my darling; during the two months of your journey, did your uncle, the general, never give you a glimpse, by his words, his actions, or his proceedings, of the object of this expedition?"

"Never!" Doña Luz replied.

"That is strange!" the old lady murmured.

"Strange, indeed," Eusebio repeated, who still persisted in endeavouring to draw smoke from his extinguished cigarette.

"But tell me," the mother of Loyal Heart resumed, "when you arrived in the prairies, how did your uncle employ his time? Pardon me, my child, these questions which must surprise you, but which are not at all dictated by curiosity; hereafter you will understand me, and you will then

acknowledge that the lively interest I take in you alone leads me to interrogate you."

"I do not at all doubt it, señora," Doña Luz replied, with a charming smile; "therefore I have no difficulty in replying to you. My uncle, after our arrival in the prairies, became dull and preoccupied; he sought for the society of men accustomed to the life of the desert, and when he met with one, he would converse with him and interrogate him for hours together."

"And about what did he interrogate him, my child? Do you recollect?"

"Good heavens! señora, I must confess to my shame," the young girl replied, blushing slightly, "that I did not give great attention to this conversation, which I thought at least could interest me but little. I, a poor child, whose life up to that period had glided away sadly and monotonously, and who had seen nothing of the world but through the gratings of my convent, admired the magnificent nature which had, as if by enchantment, risen before me; I had only eyes enough to contemplate these wonders; and I adored the Creator whose infinite power had been revealed to me thus suddenly."

"That is true, dear child; pardon me these questions, which fatigue you, and whose object you cannot perceive," said the good lady, imprinting a kiss upon her brow; "if you wish it, we will speak of something else."

"As you please, señora," the young girl answered, returning her kiss. "I am most happy to talk with you, and whatever subject you choose, I am sure I shall always take great interest in it."

"But we are talking idly, and forgetting my poor son, who has been absent since morning, and who, according to what he told me, ought to have returned by this time."

"Oh! I hope nothing can have happened to him," cried Doña Luz.

"You take great interest in him, then?" the old lady remarked, with a smile.

"Ah! señora," she replied, with emotion, whilst a vivid blush rose to her cheeks, "can I do otherwise, after the services he has rendered us, and will continue to render us, I am sure?"

"My son has promised to deliver your uncle; be assured that he will fulfil his promise."

"Oh! I do not at all doubt it, señora. What a noble, grand character!" she cried with warmth; "how justly is he named Loyal Heart!"

The old lady and Eusebio looked at her and smiled; they were delighted with the enthusiasm of the young girl.

Doña Luz perceived the attention with which they were looking at her. She stopped short in confusion, hung down her head, and blushed more than ever.

"Oh!" said the old lady, taking her hand, "you may go on, my child; I am pleased to hear you speak thus of my son. Yes," she added, in a melancholy tone, and as if talking to herself, "yes; his is a grand and noble character. Like all exalted natures, he is misunderstood: but patience! God is trying him, and the day will come when justice will be rendered him in the face of all men."

"Can he, then, be unhappy?" the young girl ventured to ask, timidly.

"I do not say he is, my child," the good mother answered, with a stifled sigh. "In this world who can flatter himself with being happy? Everyone has his troubles, which he must bear; the Almighty measures the burden according to the strength of every man."

A movement was heard in the grotto; several men entered.

"Here is your son, señora," said Black Elk.

"Thank you, my friend," she replied.

"Oh! I am so glad!" said Doña Luz, springing up joyfully.

But ashamed of this inconsiderate movement, the girl sank back, confused and blushing, into her seat again.

It was, in fact Loyal Heart, but he was not alone. Belhumeur and Eagle Head accompanied him, as did several other trappers.

As soon as he was in the grotto, the young man directed his steps hastily towards his mother's retreat; he kissed her, and then turning towards Doña Luz, he bowed to her with a degree of embarrassment that was not natural to him, and which the old lady could not but remark.

The young lady returned him a salutation not less confused than his own.

"Well," he said, with a cheerful smile, "you must have been very tired of waiting for me, my noble prisoners. Time must travel slowly in this horrible grotto. Pardon me for having confined you to such a hideous dwelling, Doña Luz—you are made to inhabit splendid palaces. Alas! this is the most magnificent of my habitations."

"With the mother of him who has saved my life, señor," the girl replied, nobly, "I think myself lodged like a queen, whatever be the place I inhabit."

"You are a thousand times too good, señora," the hunter stammered; "you really make me confused."

"Well, my son," the old lady interrupted, with the evident intention of giving another turn to the conversation, which began to be embarrassing for the two young people, "what have you done today? Have you any good news to give us? Doña Luz is very uneasy about her uncle; she longs to see him again."

"I can quite understand the señora's anxiety," the hunter replied, "which I hope soon to be able to put an end to. We have not done much today; we have found it impossible to get upon the track of the bandits. It is enough to drive a man wild with vexation. Fortunately, as we returned, at a few paces from the grotto, we met with the doctor, who, according to his praiseworthy custom, was seeking herbs in the clefts of the rocks, and he told us that he has seen a man of suspicious appearance prowling about the neighbourhood. We immediately went upon the hunt, and were not long in discovering an individual whom we took prisoner, and have brought hither with us."

"You see, señor," said Doña Luz, with a playful air, "that it is sometimes of use to be seeking simples. Our dear doctor has, according to all appearance, rendered you a great service."

"Without his will being concerned in the matter," said Loyal Heart, laughing.

"I do not say the contrary," the young girl rejoined, banteringly, "but it exists none the less; it is to the herbs you owe it."

"Seeking for herbs may have a good purpose, I agree; but everything in its proper time; without unjustly reproaching him, the doctor has not always known when to choose it."

Notwithstanding the seriousness of the facts to which these words referred, the hearers could not repress a smile at the expense of the unlucky savant.

"Come! come!" said Doña Luz, "I will not have my poor doctor attacked; he has been sufficiently punished for his forgetfulness by the grief to which he has been a prey since that inauspicious day."

"You are right, señora, and I will say no more about it. Now I must beg your permission to leave you; my companions are literally dying of hunger, and the brave fellows wait for me to take their repast."

"But," Eusebio asked, "the man you have taken—what do you mean to do with him?"

"I do not know yet; as soon as our meal is over, I mean to interrogate him; his replies will most likely dictate my conduct with regard to him."

The cauldrons were taken off the fire, the quarters of venison were cut into slices, and the trappers and Indians sat down fraternally near each other, and ate their repast with a good appetite.

The ladies were served apart in their retreat by Nô Eusebio, who performed the delicate functions of house steward with a care and a seriousness worthy of a more suitable scene.

The man who had been arrested near the grotto had been placed under the guard of two stout trappers, armed to the teeth, who never took their eyes off him; but he seemed to entertain no wish to escape; on the contrary, he did honour vigorously to the food that was placed before him.

As soon as the meal was over, the chiefs drew together apart, and conversed for a few minutes among themselves in a low voice. Then, upon the order of Loyal Heart, the prisoner was brought forward, and they prepared to interrogate him.

This man, at whom they had scarcely looked, was recognized the moment he was face to face with the chiefs, who could not repress an expression of surprise.

"Captain Waktehno!" said Loyal Heart, in perfect astonishment.

"Himself, gentlemen!" the pirate replied, with haughty irony; "what have you to ask of him? He is here ready to answer you."

CHAPTER IX.

DIPLOMACY.

It was an unheard-of piece of audacity in the captain, after what had taken place, to come thus and deliver himself up, without the slightest resistance, into the hands of men who would not hesitate to inflict upon him a severe vengeance.

The hunters were consequently astonished at the proceeding of the pirate, and began to suspect a snare; their surprise increased in proportion as they reflected upon his apparent madness.

They perfectly understood that if they had taken him, it was because he was willing that it should be so; that he had probably some powerful motive for acting thus, particularly after all the pains he had taken to conceal his track from all eyes, and find a retreat so impenetrable that the Indians themselves, those cunning bloodhounds whom nothing generally could throw off the scent, had given up searching for him.

What did he want amidst his most implacable enemies? What reason sufficiently strong had been able to induce him to commit the imprudence of delivering himself up?

This is what the trappers asked each other, whilst looking at him with that curiosity and that interest which, in spite of ourselves, we are forced to accord to the intrepid man who accomplishes a bold action, whatever otherwise may be his moral character.

"Sir," said Loyal Heart, after the pause of a few minutes, "as you have thought proper to place

yourself in our hands, you certainly will not refuse to reply to the questions we may think proper to put to you?"

A smile of an undefinable expression passed over the thin, pale lips of the pirate.

"Not only," he replied, in a calm, clear voice, "will I not refuse to reply to you, gentlemen, but still further, if you will permit, I will forestall your questions by telling you myself spontaneously all that has passed, which will enlighten you, I am sure, with regard to the facts which have appeared obscure, and which you have in vain endeavoured to make out."

A murmur of stupefaction pervaded the ranks of the trappers, who had drawn near by degrees, and listened attentively.

The scene assumed strange proportions, and promised to become extremely interesting.

Loyal Heart reflected for a moment, and then addressed the pirate.

"Do so, sir," he said; "we listen to you."

The Captain bowed, and, with a jeering tone, commenced his recital; when he arrived at the taking of the camp, he continued thus:—

"It was cleverly played, was it not, gentlemen? Certes, I can look for nothing but compliments from you who are past masters in such matters; but there is one thing of which you are ignorant, and which I will tell you. The capture of the Mexican general's wealth was but of secondary importance to me, I had another aim, and that aim I will make you acquainted with—I wished to obtain possession of Doña Luz. From Mexico I followed the caravan, step by step; I had corrupted the principal guide, the Babbler, an old friend of mine; abandoning to my companions the gold and jewels, I desired nothing but the young girl."

"Well, but it seems you missed your aim," Belhumeur interrupted him, with a sardonic smile.

"Do you think so?" the other replied, with imperturbable assurance. "Well, you appear to be in the right; I have, for this time, missed my aim, but all is not yet said, and I may not always miss."

"You speak here, amidst a hundred and fifty of the best rifles of the prairies about this odious project, with as much confidence as if you were in safety, surrounded by your own bandits, and concealed in the depths of one of your most secret dens, captain. This is either an act of great imprudence or a still more rare piece of insolence," Loyal Heart said, sternly.

"Bah! the peril is not so great for me as you would make me believe; you know I am not a man easily intimidated, therefore a truce to threats, if you please, and let us reason like serious men."

"We hunters, trappers, and Indian warriors, assembled in this grotto, have the right, acting in the name of our common safety, to apply to you the laws of the frontiers, an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth, as attainted and convicted, even by your own confession, of robbery, murder, and an attempt at abduction. This law we mean to apply to you immediately. What have you to say in your defence?"

"Everything in its turn, Loyal Heart; we will talk about that presently; but, in the first place, let us terminate, if you please, what I had to say to you. Be satisfied, it is but the delay of a few minutes; I will myself revert to that question which you seem to have so much at heart, as you instal yourself, by your own private authority, judge in the desert."

"That law is as ancient as the world, it emanates from God himself; it is the duty of all honest people to run down a wild beast when they meet with one in their passage."

"The comparison is not flattering," the pirate replied, perfectly unmoved, "but I am not at all susceptible; I do not easily take offence. Will you, once for all, allow me to speak?"

"Speak, then, and let us have an end of this."

"That is exactly what I ask; listen to me, then. In this world, every one comprehends life after his own fashion, some widely, others in a narrow way; for me, my dream is to retire, a few years hence, to the depths of one of our beautiful Mexican provinces with a moderate competency—you see I am not ambitious. A few months back, at the termination of several tolerably lucrative affairs which I had happily effected in the prairies by means of courage and address, I found myself master of a pretty round sum, which, according to my custom, I resolved to invest, in order to procure me hereafter the moderate competency of which I was speaking to you. I went to Mexico to place my money in the hands of an honourable French banker established in that city, who answered all my expectations, and whom I recommend to you, if you have occasion for such a person."

"What is all this verbiage to us?" Loyal Heart interrupted, hotly. "You are laughing at us, captain."

"Not the least in the world. I will go on. In Mexico, chance afforded me an opportunity of rendering Doña Luz a rather important service."

"You?" said Loyal Heart, angrily.

"Why not?" the other replied. "The affair is very simple. I delivered her from the hands of four bandits, who were plundering her. I saw her, and became madly in love with her."

"Man! man!" said the hunter, colouring with vexation; "this exceeds all bounds. Doña Luz is a young lady who ought never to be spoken of without the greatest respect. I will not allow her to be insulted in my presence."

"We are exactly of the same opinion," the other continued, jeeringly; "but it is none the less true that I fell in love with her. I skilfully obtained information concerning her; I learnt who she was, the journey she was about to take; I played successfully, as you see. Then my plan was laid, which, as you just now said, has completely failed; but which, nevertheless, I have not yet given up."

"We will endeavour to settle that once for all."

"And you will do well, if you can."

"Now, I suppose, you have finished?"

"Not yet, if you please; but at this point what remains for me to say renders the presence of Doña Luz indispensable. Upon her alone depends the success of my mission to you."

"I do not understand you."

"It would be useless for you to understand me at this moment; but rest satisfied, Loyal Heart, you shall soon have the key to the enigma."

During the whole of this long discussion, the pirate had not for a moment lost that self-possession, that sneering smile, that bantering tone, and that freedom of manner, that confounded the hunters.

He bore much more the resemblance to a gentleman on a visit at the house of a country neighbour, than to a prisoner on the point of being shot. He did not appear to care the least in the world about the danger he was running. As soon as he had finished speaking, whilst the trappers were consulting in a low voice, he employed himself in rolling a husk cigarette, which he lit and smoked quietly.

"Doña Luz," Loyal Heart resumed, with ill-disguised impatience, "has nothing to do with these debates; her presence is not necessary."

"You are entirely mistaken, my dear sir," the pirate coolly replied, puffing out a volume of smoke; "she is indispensable, and for this reason:—You understand perfectly, do you not, that I am too cunning a fox to give myself up thus voluntarily into your hands, if I had not behind me someone whose life would answer for mine. That someone is the uncle of the young lady. If I am not at midnight in my den, as you do me the honour to call it, with my brave companions, at precisely ten minutes after midnight the honourable gentleman will be shot without fail or pity."

A shudder of anger ran along the ranks of the hunters.

"I know very well," the pirate continued, "that you, personally, care very little for the life of the general, and would generously sacrifice it in exchange for mine; but, fortunately for me, Doña Luz, I am convinced, is not of your opinion, and attaches great value to the existence of her uncle; be good enough, therefore, to beg her to come here, in order that she may hear the proposal I have to make her. Time presses, the way to my encampment is long; if I arrive too late, you alone will be responsible for the misfortunes that may be caused by my involuntary delay."

"I am here, sir," said Doña Luz, coming forward. Concealed amidst the crowd of hunters, she had heard all that had been said.

The pirate threw away his half-consumed cigarette, bowed courteously to the young lady, and saluted her with respect.

"I am proud of the honour, señora, that you deign to do me."

"A truce to ironical compliments, if you please. I am listening to you; what have you to say to me?"

"You judge me wrongly, señora," the pirate replied; "but I hope to reinstate myself in your good opinion hereafter. Do you not recognise me? I thought I had left a better remembrance in your mind."

"It is possible, sir, that during a certain time I retained a favourable remembrance of you," the young lady answered, with some degree of emotion; "but, after what has taken place within these few days, I can only see in you a robber and a murderer!"

"The terms are harsh, señora."

"Pardon them, if they wound you, sir; but I have not yet recovered from the terrors you have caused me—terrors which your proceedings of today augment instead of diminishing. Be pleased, then, without further delay, to let me know your intentions."

"I am in despair at being thus ill-understood by you, señora. Attribute, I implore you, all that has happened solely to the violence of the passion I feel for you, and believe——"

"Sir! you insult me," the young lady interrupted, drawing herself up haughtily: "what can there be in common between me and the leader of bandits?"

At this cutting reproof a flush passed over the face of the pirate: he bit his moustache with anger; but, making a strong effort, he kept down in the depths of his heart the feelings which agitated him, and replied in a calm, respectful tone,—

"So be it, señora; crush me—I have deserved it."

"Is it for the purpose of uttering these commonplaces that you have required my presence here, sir? In that case you will please to allow me to retire; a lady of my rank is not accustomed to such manners, nor to listen to such language."

She made a movement as if to rejoin the mother of Loyal Heart, who, on her side, advanced towards her.

"One instant, señora," the pirate cried, savagely; "since you despise my prayers, listen to my orders!"

"Your orders!" the hunter shouted, springing close to his side. "Have you forgotten where you are, miserable scoundrel?"

"Come, come! a truce to threats and abuse, my masters!" the pirate replied, in a commanding voice, as he crossed his arms upon his breast, threw up his head, and darted a look of supreme disdain upon all present. "You know very well you dare do nothing against me—that not a single hair of my head will fall."

"This is too much!" the hunter ejaculated.

"Stop! Loyal Heart," said Doña Luz, placing herself before him; "this man is unworthy of your anger. I prefer seeing him thus he is best in his part of a bandit—he at least plays that without a mask."

"Yes! I have thrown off the mask," the pirate shouted, furiously: "and now, listen to me, silly girl. In three days I will return—you see I keep my word," he added, with a sinister smile. "I give you time to reflect. If you do not then consent to follow me, your uncle shall be given up to the most atrocious tortures; and, as a last remembrance of me, I will send you his head."

"Monster!" the poor girl exclaimed, in an accent of despair.

"Ah! you see," said he, shrugging his shoulders, and with the grin of a demon, "everyone makes love after his own fashion. I have sworn that you shall be my wife!"

But Doña Luz could hear no more. Overcome by grief as well as other feelings, she sank senseless into the arms of the mother of the hunter, who with Nô Eusebio, bore her out of the larger apartment.

"Enough!" said Loyal Heart, with a stern accent, as he laid his hand upon his shoulder, "be thankful to God, who allows you to go safe and sound from our hands."

"In three days, at the same hour, you will see me again, my masters," he said, disdainfully.

"Between this and then luck may turn," said Belhumeur.

The pirate made no reply, but by a grin and a contemptuous shrug of the shoulders; and left the cavern with a step as firm and free as if nothing extraordinary had happened, without even deigning to turn round, so certain was he of the profound feeling he had caused—of the effect he had produced.

He had scarcely disappeared, when, from the other outlets of the grotto, Belhumeur, Black Elk, and Eagle Head rushed upon his track.

Loyal Heart remained thoughtful for an instant, and then went, with a pale face and a pensive brow to inquire after Doña Luz.

CHAPTER X.

LOVE.

Doña Luz and Loyal Heart were placed with regard to each other, in a singular position.

Both young, both handsome, they loved without daring to confess it to themselves, almost without suspecting it.

Both, although their lives had been spent in conditions diametrically opposite, possessed equal freshness of feeling, equal ingenuousness of heart.

The childhood of the maiden had passed away, pale and colourless, amidst the extravagant religious practices of a country where the religion of Christ is rather a paganism than the pure, noble, and simple faith of Europe.

She had never felt a beating of the heart. She was as ignorant of love as she was of sorrow.

She lived thus like the birds of heaven, forgetting the days gone by, careless of the morrow.

The journey she had undertaken had completely changed the colour of her existence.

At the sight of the immense horizons which spread out before her in the prairie, of the majestic rivers which she crossed, of the grand mountains round whose feet she was often obliged to travel, and whose hoary heads seemed to touch heaven, her ideas had become enlarged, a bandage was, so to say, removed from her eyes, and she had learnt that God had created her for something else than to drag out a useless existence in a convent.

The appearance of Loyal Heart, under the extraordinary circumstances in which he had presented himself to her, had won upon her mind, which was at that time particularly open to all sensations, and ready to retain all the strong impressions it might receive.

In presence of the exalted nature of the hunter, of that man in wild costume, but possessing a manly countenance, handsome features and noble bearing, she had felt agitated without comprehending the reason.

The fact was, that unknown to herself, by the force of the secret sympathies which exist between all the beings of the great human family, her heart had met the heart she sought for.

Delicate and frail, she stood in need of this energetic man, with the fascinating glance, the leonine courage, and an iron will, to support her through life, and defend her with his omnipotent protection.

Thus had she, therefore, from the first moment, yielded with a feeling of undefinable happiness, to the inclination which drew her towards Loyal Heart; and love had installed himself as master in her heart, before she was aware of it, or had even thought of resisting.

Recent events had awakened with intense force the passion which had been slumbering at the bottom of her heart. Now that she was near him, that she heard, at every instant, his praises from the mouth of his mother, or from those of his companions, she had come to consider her love as forming part of her existence, she could not comprehend how she could have lived so long without loving this man, whom it appeared she must have known from her very birth.

She no longer lived but for him and by him; happy at a look or a smile, joyful when she saw him, sad when he remained long absent from her.

Loyal Heart had arrived at the same result by a very different route.

Brought up, so to say, in the prairies, face to face with the Divinity, he was accustomed to adore in the great works he had constantly before his eyes, the sublime spectacles of nature; the incessant struggles he had to sustain, whether against Indians or wild beasts, had developed him, morally and physically, in immense proportions. As, by his muscular strength and his skill with his weapons, he had overcome all obstacles that had been opposed to him; so, by the grandeur of his ideas and the delicacy of his sentiments, he was capable of comprehending all things. Nothing that was good and nothing that was great seemed to be unknown to him. As it always happens with superior organisations early placed at war with adversity, and given up without other defences than themselves to the terrible chances of life, his mind had developed itself in gigantic proportions, still remaining in strange unconsciousness of certain sensations, which were unknown to him, and would always have remained so, but for a providential chance.

The daily wants of the agitated and precarious life he led, had stifled within him the germ of the passions; his solitary habits had, unknown to himself, led him to a taste for a contemplative life.

Knowing no other woman but his mother, for the Indians, by their manners, inspired him with nothing but disgust, he had reached the age of six-and-thirty without thinking of love, without knowing what it was, and, what is more, without ever having heard pronounced that word which contains so many things in its four letters, and which, in this world, is the source of so many sublime devotions and so many horrible crimes.

After a long day's hunting through woods and ravines, or after having been engaged fifteen or sixteen hours in trapping beavers, when, in the evening, they met in the prairie at their bivouac fire, the conversation of Loyal Heart and his friend Belhumeur, who was as ignorant as himself in this respect, could not possibly turn upon anything but the events of the day.

Weeks, months, years passed away without bringing any change in his existence, except a vague uneasiness, whose cause was unknown, but which weighed upon his mind, and for which he could not account. Nature has her imprescriptible rights, and every man must submit to them, in whatever condition he may chance to be placed.

Thus, therefore, when accident brought Doña Luz before him, by the same sentiment of instinctive and irresistible sympathy which acted upon the young girl, his heart flew towards her.

The hunter, astonished at the sudden interest he felt for a stranger, whom, according to all appearances, he might never see again, was almost angry with her on account of that sentiment which was awakening within him, and gave to his intercourse with her an asperity which was unnatural to him.

Like all exalted minds, who have been accustomed to see everything bend before them without resistance, he felt himself irritated at being subdued by a girl, at yielding to an influence from which he no longer could extricate himself.

But when, after the fire in the prairie, he quitted the Mexican camp, notwithstanding the precipitation of his departure, he carried away the remembrance of the fair stranger with him.

And this remembrance increased with absence.

He always fancied he heard the soft and melodious notes of the young girl's voice sounding in his ears, however strong the efforts he made to forget her; in hours of watching or of sleep, she was always there, smiling upon him, and fixing her enchanting looks upon him.

The struggle was severe. Loyal Heart, notwithstanding the passion that devoured him, knew what an insuperable distance separated him from Doña Luz, and how senseless and unrealizable this love was. All the objections possibly to be made in such cases, he made, in order to prove he was mad.

Then, when he had convinced himself that an abyss separated him from her he loved, overcome by the terrible conflict he had maintained against himself, supported perhaps by that hope which

never abandons energetic men, far from frankly acknowledging his defeat, but yielding to the passion which was from that time to constitute his sole joy, his sole happiness, he continued doggedly to struggle against it, despising himself for a thousand little weaknesses which his love was continually making him commit.

He shunned, with an obstinacy that ought to have offended the maiden, all opportunities of meeting her. When by chance they happened to be together, he became taciturn and sullen, only answering with difficulty the questions she put to him, and, with that awkwardness peculiar to unpractised lovers, seizing the first opportunity for leaving her.

The young lady looked after him sadly, sighed quietly but deeply, and sometimes a liquid pearl flowed silently down her rosy cheeks at seeing this departure, which she took for indifference, and which was in reality love.

But during the few days that had passed since the taking of the camp the young people had progressed without suspecting it, and this was greatly assisted by the mother of Loyal Heart, who, with that second sight with which all mothers worthy of the name are endowed, had divined this passion, and the honourable combats of her son, and had constituted herself the secret confidante of their love, assisting it unknown to them, and protecting it with all her power, whilst both lovers were persuaded that their secret was buried in the depths of their own hearts.

Such was the state of things two days after the proposal made by the captain to Doña Luz.

Loyal Heart appeared more sad and more preoccupied than usual; he walked about the grotto with hasty strides, showing signs of the greatest impatience, and at intervals casting uneasy glances around him.

At length, leaning against one of the projections of the grotto, he let his head sink on his chest, and remained plunged in profound meditation.

He had stood thus for some time, when a soft voice murmured in his ear—

"What is the matter, my son? Why are your features clouded with such sadness? Have you received any bad news?"

Loyal Heart raised his head, like a man suddenly awakened from sleep.

His mother and Doña Luz were standing before him, their arms interlaced, and leaning upon each other.

He cast upon them a melancholy glance, and replied with a stifled sigh,—

"Alas! mother, tomorrow is the last day. I have as yet been able to imagine nothing that can save Doña Luz, and restore her uncle to her."

The two women started.

"Tomorrow!" Doña Luz murmured; "that is true; it is tomorrow that that man is to come!"

"What will you do, my son?"

"How can I tell, mother?" he replied impatiently. "Oh! this man is stronger than I am. He has defeated all my plans. Up to the present moment we have not possibly been able to discover his retreat. All our researches have proved useless."

"Loyal Heart," the young lady said, softly, "will you then abandon me to the mercy of this bandit? Why, then, did you save me?"

"Oh!" the young man cried, "that reproach kills me."

"I am not reproaching you, Loyal Heart," she said warmly; "but I am very unhappy. If I remain, I cause the death of the only relative I have in the world; if I depart, I am dishonoured!"

"Oh, to be able to do nothing!" he cried, with great excitement. "To see you weep, to know that you are unhappy, and to be able to do nothing! Oh!" he added, "to spare you the least anxiety I would sacrifice my life with joy. God alone knows what I suffer from this want of power."

"Hope, my son, hope!" the old lady said, with an encouraging accent. "God is good. He will not abandon you."

"Hope! how can you tell me to do so, mother? During the last two days my friends and I have attempted things that would appear impossible—and yet without result. Hope! and in a few hours this miserable wretch will come to claim the prey he covets! Better to die than see such a crime consummated."

Doña Luz cast upon him a glance of a peculiar expression, a melancholy smile for a moment passed over her lips, and then she gently laid her delicate little hand upon his shoulder,—

"Loyal Heart," she said, with her melodious, clear voice, "do you love me?"

The young man started; a tremor pervaded every limb.

"Why that question?" he said, in a deeply agitated tone.

"Answer me," she replied, "without hesitation, as I put the question to you; the hour is a solemn one; I have a favour to ask of you."

"Oh! name it, señora; you know I can refuse you nothing!"

"Answer me, then," she said, trembling with emotion; "do you love me?"

"If it be love to desire to sacrifice my life for you—if it be love to suffer martyrdom at witnessing

the flowing of a tear which I would purchase with my whole blood—if it be love to have the courage to see you accomplish the sacrifice that will be required from you tomorrow in order to save your uncle—oh! yes, señora, I love you with all my soul! Therefore, speak without fear: whatever you ask of me I will perform with joy."

"That is well, my dear friend," she said, "I depend upon your word; tomorrow I will remind you of it when that man presents himself; but, in the first place, my uncle must be saved, if it were to cost me my life. Alas! he has been a father to me: he loves me as his daughter. It was on my account that he fell into the hands of the bandits. Oh! swear to me, Loyal Heart, that you will deliver him," she added, with an expression of anguish impossible to be described.

Loyal Heart was about to reply when Belhumeur and Black Elk entered the grotto.

"At last!" he cried, springing towards them.

The three men talked for a few minutes together in a low voice: then the hunter returned hastily towards the two women.

His face was glowing with animation.

"You were right, my dear mother," he exclaimed, in a cheerful tone, "God is good: He will not abandon those who place their confidence in Him. Now it is my turn to say, Hope, Doña Luz, I will soon restore your uncle to you."

"Oh!" she cried, joyfully, "can it be possible?"

"Hope! I repeat! Adieu, mother! Implore God to second me; I am about, more than ever, to stand in need of His help!"

Without saying more the young man rushed out of the grotto, followed by the greater part of his companions.

"What did he mean by what he said?" Doña Luz asked, anxiously.

"Come with me, my daughter," the old lady replied, sorrowfully; "come, let us pray for him."

She drew her softly towards the retired part of the grotto which they inhabited.

There only remained about half a score men charged with the defence of the two women.

CHAPTER XI.

THE PRISONERS.

When the redskins and the hunters had recaptured the camp of the Mexicans, the pirates, according to the orders of their leader, had spread about in all directions, in order the more easily to escape the researches of their enemies.

The captain and the four men who carried off the general and his Negro, both bound and gagged, had descended the declivity of the rocks, at the risk of being dashed to pieces a thousand times by falling down the precipices which gaped at their feet.

On arriving at a certain distance, reassured by the silence which reigned around them, and still more by the extraordinary difficulties they had surmounted in reaching the place where they found themselves, they stopped to take breath.

A profound darkness enveloped them; over their heads, at an immense height, they perceived, twinkling like little stars, the torches borne by the hunters who pursued them, but who took care not to venture in the dangerous path they had followed.

"This is lucky," said the captain; "now, my boys, let us rest for a few minutes, we have nothing at the present time to fear: place your prisoners here, and go, two of you, and reconnoitre."

His orders were executed; a few minutes later the two bandits returned, announcing that they had discovered an excavation, which, might temporarily offer them shelter and safety.

"The devil!" cried the captain, "let us go to it."

And setting the example he started off in the direction pointed out by the scouts.

They soon arrived at a hollow nook which appeared tolerably spacious, and which was situated a few fathoms lower down than the place they had stopped at.

When they were concealed in this hiding place, the captain's first care was to close the entrance hermetically, which was not difficult, for that entrance was very narrow, the bandits having been obliged to stoop to penetrate into it.

"There," said the captain, "now we are snug; in this fashion we need not be afraid of impertinent visitors."

Drawing a steel from his pocket, he lit a torch of candlewood, with which, with that foresight that never abandons persons of his stamp even in the most critical circumstances, he had taken care to provide himself.

As soon as they could distinguish objects, the bandits uttered a cry of joy. What in the darkness

they had taken for a simple excavation proved to be one of those natural grottos of which so many are found in these countries.

"Eh! eh!" said the captain, laughing, "let us see what sort of quarters we have got into; remain here, my men, and keep strict watch over your prisoners; I will go and reconnoitre our new domain."

After lighting a second torch, he explored the grotto.

It dipped deep under the mountain by a gentle descent; the walls were everywhere lofty, and sometimes they were widened into large compartments.

The cavern must have received external air by imperceptible fissures, for the light burned freely and the captain breathed without difficulty.

The farther the pirate advanced, the more perceptible the air became, which led him to conclude he was approaching an entrance of some kind.

He had been walking nearly twenty minutes, when a puff of wind came sharply in his nice and made the flame of his torch flicker.

"Hum!" he muttered, "here is a place of exit—let us be prudent and put out our lights, we know not whom we may meet with outside."

He crushed the light of his torch beneath his feet, and remained a few instants motionless, to allow his eyes to become accustomed to the darkness.

He was a prudent man, and thoroughly acquainted with his trade of a bandit, was this captain. If the plan he had formed for the attack of the camp had failed, it had required for that a concurrence of fortuitous circumstances impossible to have been foreseen by anybody.

Therefore, after the first moment of ill-humour caused by the check he had received, he had bravely taken his part; resolving, *in petto*, to take his revenge as soon as an opportunity should present itself.

Besides, it seemed as if Fortune was willing to smile on him afresh, by offering him, just at the moment when he had the greatest want of it, a refuge not likely to be discovered.

It was therefore with an almost unspeakable joy and hope that he waited till his eyes should be accustomed to the darkness, to permit him to distinguish objects and know if he were really going to find a place of exit, which would render him master of an almost impregnable position.

His expectations were not disappointed.

As soon as the dazzling effect of the blaze of the torch was got rid of, he perceived, at a considerable distance before him, a feeble light.

He walked resolutely forward, and at the end of a few minutes came to the so much desired outlet.

Decidedly fortune was once more propitious to him!

The outlet of the grotto opened upon the banks of a little river, the water of which came murmuring close to the mouth of the cavern, so that the bandits might, by swimming or constructing a raft, go in and out without leaving any traces, and thus defeat all researches.

The captain was too well acquainted with the prairies of the West, in which he had for nearly ten years exercised his honourable and lucrative profession, not to be able to know at once where he was on looking around him.

He perceived that this river flowed at some distance from the camp of the Mexicans, from which its numberless meanderings tended still more to remove it. He breathed a sigh of satisfaction when he had well examined the environs, no longer fearing discovery and thenceforward at ease regarding his position. He lit his torch again, and retraced his steps.

His companions, with the exception of one who watched the prisoners, were fast asleep.

The captain aroused them.

"Come, be alive! be alive!" he said; "this is not the time for sleeping; we have something else to do."

The bandits arose with a very ill grace, rubbing their eyes, and yawning enough to dislocate their jaws.

The captain made them, in the first place, securely close up the hole by which they had entered, then he ordered them to follow him with the prisoners, whose legs they unbound, in order that they might walk.

They stopped in one of the numerous halls, if we may so term them, which the captain had discovered on his route; one man was appointed to guard the prisoners, who were left in this place, and the captain, with the three other bandits continued their way to the outlet.

"You see," he said to them, pointing to the outlet, "that sometimes misfortune has its good, since chance has allowed us to discover a place of refuge where no one will come to seek us. You, Frank, set off directly for the rendez-vous I have appointed with your comrades, and bring them hither, as well as all the rest of our men who did not form part of the expedition. As for you, Antonio, you must procure us some provisions. Go, both of you. It is needless to tell you that I shall await your return with impatience."

The two bandits plunged into the river without reply, and disappeared.

"As to you, Gonzalez," he said, "employ yourself in gathering wood together for firing, and dry leaves for bedding; come, to work! to work!"

An hour later, a clear fire sparkled in the grotto, and upon soft beds of dry leaves the bandits slept soundly.

At sunrise the rest of the troop arrived.

There were still thirty of them!

The worthy leader felt his heart dilate with joy at the sight of the rich collection of scoundrels he had still at his disposal. With them he did not despair of re-establishing his affairs, and of soon taking a signal revenge.

After an abundant breakfast, composed of venison, copiously washed down with mezcal, the captain at length turned his attention to his prisoners. He repaired to the hall which served for their dungeon.

Since he had fallen into the hands of the bandits, the general had remained silent, apparently insensible to the ill-treatment to which he had been exposed.

The wounds he had received, being neglected, had festered, and gave him terrible pain; but he did not utter a complaint.

A deep grief took possession of his mind from the moment of his capture; he saw all his hopes overthrown of being able to resume the execution of the project that had brought him into the prairies.

All his companions were dead, and he knew not what fate awaited himself.

The only thing that brought a slight consolation to his pains was the certainty that his niece had succeeded in escaping.

But what was to become of her in this desert, where nothing was to be met with but wild beasts, and still more ferocious Indians? How could a young girl, accustomed to all the comforts of life, support the hazards of this existence of privations?

This idea redoubled his sufferings.

The captain was terrified at the state in which he found him.

"Come, general," he said, "courage! What the devil! luck often changes; I know something of that! *Caray!* never despair; nobody can tell what tomorrow will bring about. Give me your parole not to endeavour to escape, and I will immediately restore you the freedom of your limbs."

"I cannot give you that parole," the general replied with firmness; "I should take a false oath if I did. On the contrary, I swear to endeavour to fly by all possible means."

"Bravo! well answered!" said the pirate, laughing; "in your place, I should have replied just the same; only, at the present moment, I believe, with the best will in the world, it would be impossible for you to go a step. In spite, therefore, of all you have said to me, I will restore both you and your servant to liberty, and you may make what use you like of it, but it is freedom of your limbs, please to recollect, that is all."

With a stroke of his machete he cut the cords which bound the arms of the general, and then performed the same service for the Negro, Jupiter.

The latter, as soon as he was free in his movements, began jumping and laughing, exhibiting two rows of formidable teeth of dazzling whiteness.

"Come, be prudent, blacky," said the pirate; "be quiet here, if you do not want to have a bullet through your head."

"I will not go without my master," Jupiter replied, rolling his great wild-looking eyes.

"That is right!" the pirate remarked with a sneer; "that is agreed upon; such devotedness does you honour, blacky."

Turning next to the general, the captain bathed his wounds with cold water, and dressed them carefully; then, after placing provisions before the prisoners, to which the Negro alone did honour, the pirate retired.

Towards the middle of the day, the captain called together the principal men of his band.

"Caballeros," he said, "we cannot deny that we have lost the first game; the prisoners we have made are far from reimbursing our expenses; we cannot remain quiet under the effects of a check, which dishonours us, and renders us ridiculous. I am going to play a second game; this time if I do not win I shall be unlucky indeed. During my absence, watch well over the prisoners. Pay attention to the last orders I give you: if tomorrow, at midnight, I have not returned, safe and sound among you, at a quarter past midnight, I say, you will shoot the two prisoners without remission; you perfectly understand what I say, do you not?—without remission."

"Be at your ease, captain," Frank replied, in the name of his companions; "you may go as soon as you please; your orders shall be executed."

"I know they will; but be sure not to shoot them a minute too soon, or a minute too late."

"Exactly at the time named."

"That is understood. Adieu, then; do not be too impatient for my return."

Upon this the captain left the grotto, to throw himself in the way of Loyal Heart.

We have seen what the bandit wanted with the trapper.

CHAPTER XII.

A RUSE DE GUERRE.

After his strange proposal to the hunters, the leader of the pirates retook, at his best speed, the road to his den.

But he was too much accustomed to the life of the prairies not to suspect that several of his enemies would follow his track at a distance. Therefore, he had put in practice, to mislead them, all the tricks which his inventive mind could furnish with him, making *détours* without number, retracing incessantly his steps, or, as it is vulgarly said, going back ten yards to advance one.

These numerous precautions had excessively retarded his journey.

When he arrived on the banks of the river whose waters bathed the entrance to the cavern, he cast a last look around him, to make certain that no busy eye was watching his movements.

Everything was calm, nothing suspicious appeared, and he was about to launch into the stream the raft concealed beneath the leaves, when a slight noise in the bushes attracted his attention.

The pirate started; promptly drawing a pistol from his belt, he cocked it, and advanced boldly towards the spot whence this alarming noise proceeded.

A man bent towards the ground, was busy digging up herbs and plants with a small spade.

The pirate smiled, and replaced his pistol in his belt.

He had recognized the doctor, who was as much absorbed in his favourite passion as usual; so much so, indeed, that he had not perceived him.

After surveying him for an instant with disdain, the pirate was turning his back upon him, when an idea occurred to him, which made him, on the contrary,—advance towards the *savant*, upon whose shoulder he somewhat roughly laid his hand.

At this rude salutation, the poor doctor drew himself up in a fright, letting fall both plants and spade.

"Holla! my good fellow," said the captain, in a jeering tone, "what madness possesses you to be herbalizing thus at all hours of the day and night?"

"How!" the doctor replied, "what do you mean by that?"

"Zounds! it's plain enough! Don't you know it is not far from midnight?"

"That is true," the *savant* remarked ingenuously; "but there is such a fine moon."

"Which you, I suppose, have taken for the sun," said the pirate, with a loud laugh; "but," he added, becoming all at once serious, "that is of no consequence now; although half a madman, I have been told that you are a pretty good doctor."

"I have passed my examinations," the doctor replied, offended by the epithet applied to him.

"Very well! you are just the man I want, then."

The *savant* bowed with a very ill grace; it was evident he was not much flattered by the attention.

"What do you require of me?" he asked; "are you ill?"

"Not I, thank God! but one of your friends, who is at this moment my prisoner, is; so please to follow me."

"But——" the doctor would fain have objected.

"I admit of no excuses; follow me, or I will blow your brains out. Besides, don't be afraid, you run no risk; my men will pay you all the respect science is entitled to."

As resistance was impossible, the worthy man did as he was bidden with a good grace—with so good a grace, even, that for a second he allowed a smile to stray across his lips, which would have aroused the suspicions of the pirate if he had perceived it.

The captain commanded the *savant* to walk on before him, and both thus reached the river.

At the instant they quitted the place where this conversation, had taken place, the branches of a bush parted slowly, and a head, shaved with the exception of a long tuft of hair at the top, on which was stuck an eagle's feather, appeared, then a body, and then an entire man, who bounded like a jaguar in pursuit of them.

This man was Eagle Head.

He was a silent spectator of the embarkation of the two whites, saw them enter the grotto, and then, in his turn, disappeared in the shade of the woods, after muttering to himself in a low voice

the word—

"*Och!*" (good) the highest expression of joy in the language of the Comanches.

The doctor had plainly only served as a bait to attract the pirate, and cause him to fall into the snare laid by the Indian chief.

Now, had the worthy *savant* any secret intelligence with Eagle Head? That is what we shall soon know.

On the morrow, at daybreak, the pirate ordered a close battue to be made in the environs of the grotto; but no track existed.

The captain rubbed his hands with joy; his expedition had doubly succeeded, since he had managed to return to his cavern without being followed.

Certain of having nothing to dread, he was unwilling to keep about him so many men in a state of inactivity; placing, therefore, his troop provisionally under the command of Frank, a veteran bandit, in whom he had perfect confidence, he only retained ten chosen men with him, and sent away the rest.

Although the affair he was now engaged in was interesting, and his success appeared certain, he was not, on that account, willing to neglect his other occupations, and maintain a score of bandits in idleness, who might, at any moment, from merely having nothing else to do, play him an ugly turn.

It is evident that the captain was not only a prudent man, but was thoroughly acquainted with his honourable associates.

When the pirates had left the grotto, the captain made a sign to the doctor to follow him, and conducted him to the general.

After having introduced them to each other with that ironical politeness in which he was such a master, the bandit retired, leaving them together.

Only before he departed, the captain drew a pistol from his belt, and clapping it to the breast of the *savant*—

"Although you may be half a madman," he said, "as you may, nevertheless, have some desire to betray me, observe this well, my dear sir; at the least equivocal proceeding that I see you attempt, I will blow your brains out; you are warned, so now act as you think proper."

And replacing his pistol in his belt, he retired with one of his eloquent sneers on his lips.

The doctor listened to this admonition with a very demure countenance, but with a sly smile, which, in spite of himself, glided over his lips, but which, fortunately, was not perceived by the captain.

The general and his Negro, Jupiter, were confined in a compartment of the grotto at some distance from the outlet.

They were alone, for the captain had deemed it useless to keep guards constantly with them.

Both seated upon a heap of leaves, with heads cast down and crossed arms, they were reflecting seriously, if not profoundly.

At sight of the *savant*, the dismal countenance of the general was lighted up by a fugitive smile of hope.

"Ah, doctor, is that you?" he said, holding out to him a hand which the other pressed warmly hut silently, "have I reason to rejoice or to be still sad at your presence?"

"Are we alone?" the doctor asked, without answering the general's question.

"I believe so," he replied, in a tone of surprise; "at all events, it is easy to satisfy yourself."

The doctor groped all round the place, carefully examined every corner; he then went back to the prisoners.

"We can talk," he said.

The *savant* was habitually so absorbed by his scientific calculations, and was naturally so absent, that the prisoners had but little confidence in him.

"And my niece?" the general asked, anxiously.

"Be at ease on her account; she is in safety with a hunter named Loyal Heart, who has a great respect for her."

The general breathed a sigh of relief; this good news had restored him all his courage.

"Oh!" he said, "of what consequence is my being a prisoner? Now I know my niece is safe, I can suffer anything."

"No, no," said the doctor, warmly, "on the contrary, you must escape from this place tomorrow, by some means."

"Why?"

"Answer me in the first place."

"I ask no better than to do so."

"Your wounds appear slight; are they progressing towards cure?"

"I think so."

"Do you feel yourself able to walk?

"Oh, yes!"

"But let us understand each other. I mean, are you able to walk a distance?"

"I believe so, if it be absolutely necessary."

"Eh! eh!" said the Negro, who, up to this moment had remained silent, "am I not able to carry my master when he can walk no longer?"

The general pressed his hand.

"That's true, so far," said the doctor; "all is well, only you must escape."

"I should be most glad to do so, but how?"

"Ah! that," said the *savant*, scratching his head, "is what I do not know, for my part! But be at ease, I will find some means; at present, I don't know what."

Steps were heard approaching, and the captain appeared.

"Well!" he asked, "how are your patients going on?"

"Not too well!" the doctor replied.

"Bah! bah!" the pirate resumed; "all that will come round; besides, the general will soon be free, then he can get well at his ease. Now, doctor, come along with me; I hope I have left you and your friend long enough together to have said all you wish."

The doctor followed him without reply, after having made the general a parting sign to recommend prudence.

The day passed away without further incident.

The prisoners looked for the night with impatience; in spite of themselves, a confidence in the doctor had gained upon them—they hoped.

Towards evening the worthy *savant* reappeared. He walked with a deliberate step, his countenance was cheerful, he held a torch in his hand.

"What is there fresh, doctor?" the general asked; "you appear to be quite gay."

"In fact, general, I am so," he replied with a smile, "because I have found the means of securing your escape—not forgetting my own."

"And those means?"

"Are already half executed," he said, with a little dry smile, which was peculiar to him when he was satisfied.

"What do you mean by that?"

"By Galen! something very simple, but which you never would guess: all our bandits are asleep, we are masters of the grotto."

"That may be possible; but if they should wake?"

"Don't trouble yourself about that; they will wake, of that there is no doubt, but not within six hours at least."

"How the devil can you tell that?"

"Because I took upon myself to send them to sleep; that is to say, at their supper I served them with a decoction of opium, which brought them down like lumps of lead, and they have all been snoring ever since like so many forge bellows."

"Oh, that is capital!" said the general.

"Is it not?" the doctor observed, modestly. "By Galen, I was determined to repair the mischief I had done you by my negligence! I am not a soldier, I am but a poor physician; I have made use of my proper weapons; you see that in certain cases they are as good as others."

"They are a hundred times better! Doctor, you are a noble fellow!"

"Well, come, let us lose no time."

"That is true, let us be gone; but the captain, what have you done with him?"

"Oh, as to him, the devil only knows where he is. He left us after dinner without saying anything to anybody; but I have a shrewd suspicion I know where he is gone, and am much mistaken if we do not see him presently."

"All, then, is for the best; lead on."

The three men set off at once. In spite of the means employed by the doctor, the general and the Negro were not quite at ease.

They arrived at the compartment which now served as a dormitory for the bandits; they were lying about asleep in all directions.

The fugitives passed safely through them.

When they arrived at the entrance of the grotto, at the moment they were about to unfasten the raft to cross the river, they saw, by the pale rays of the moon, another raft, manned by fifteen men, who steadily directed their course towards them.

Their retreat was cut off.

How could they possibly resist such a number of adversaries?

"What a fatality!" the general murmured, despondingly.

"Oh!" said the doctor, piteously, "a plan of escape that cost me so much trouble to elaborate!"

The fugitives threw themselves into a cavity of the rocks, to avoid being seen, and there waited the landing of the newcomers, whose manoeuvres appeared more and more suspicious.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE LAW OF THE PRAIRIES.

A considerable space of ground, situated in front of the grotto inhabited by Loyal Heart, had been cleared, the trees cut down, and from a hundred and fifty to two hundred huts erected.

The whole tribe of the Comanches was encamped on this spot.

Among trappers, hunters, and redskin warriors there existed the best possible understanding.

In the centre of this temporary village, where the huts of buffalo hides painted of different colours were arranged with a degree of symmetry, one much larger than the others, surmounted by scalps fixed to long poles, and in which a large fire was continually kept up, served as the council lodge.

The greatest bustle prevailed in the village.

The Indian warriors were armed and in their war paint, as if preparing to march to battle.

The hunters had dressed themselves in their best costumes, and cleaned their arms with the greatest care, as if expecting soon to make use of them.

The horses completely caparisoned, stood hobbled, and held by half a score warriors, ready to be mounted.

Hunters and redskins were coming and going in a busy, preoccupied manner.

A rare and almost unknown thing among Indians, sentinels were placed at regular distances to signal the approach of a stranger, whoever he might be.

In short, everything denoted that one of the ceremonies peculiar to the prairies was about to take place. But, strange to say, Loyal Heart, Eagle Head, and Black Elk were absent.

Belhumeur alone watched over the preparations that were being made, talking, the while, to the old Comanche chief *Eshis*, or the Sun.

But their countenances were stern, their brows thoughtful, they appeared a prey to an overpowering preoccupation.

It was the day fixed upon by the captain of the pirates for Doña Luz to be delivered up to him.

Would the captain venture to come? or was his proposition anything more than a rodomontade?

Those who knew the pirate, and their number was great—almost all having suffered by his depredations—inclined to the affirmative.

This man was endowed, and it was the only quality they acknowledged in him, with a ferocious courage and an iron will.

If once he had affirmed he would do a thing, he did it, without regard to anybody or any danger.

And then, what had he to dread in coming a second time amongst his enemies? Did he not hold the general in his power? the general, whose life answered for his own; all knew that he would not hesitate to sacrifice him to his safety.

It was about eight o'clock in the morning, a brilliant sun shed its dazzling rays in profusion upon the picture we have endeavoured to describe.

Doña Luz left the grotto, leaning upon the arm of the mother of Loyal Heart, and followed by Nô Eusebio.

The two women were sad and pale, their faces looked worn, and their red eyes showed they had been weeping.

As soon as Belhumeur perceived them, he advanced towards them, bowing respectfully.

"Has not my son returned yet?" the old lady asked, anxiously.

"Not yet," the hunter replied, "but keep up your spirits, señora, it will not be long before he is here."

"Good God! I do not know why, but it seems as if he must be detained at a distance from us by

some untoward event."

"No, señora, I should know if he were so. When I left him last night, for the purpose of tranquillizing you, and executing the orders he gave me, he was in an excellent situation; therefore, believe me, be reassured, and, above all, have confidence."

"Alas!" the poor woman murmured, "I have lived for twenty years in continual agony, every night dreading not to see my son on the morrow; my God! will you not then have pity on me!"

"Have comfort, dear señora," said Doña Luz, affectionately, and with a gentle kiss: "Oh! I know that if Loyal Heart at this moment be in danger, it is to save my poor uncle; my God!" she added, fervently, "grant that he may succeed!"

"All will soon be cleared up, ladies, be assured by me, and you know I would not deceive you."

"Yes," said the old lady, "you are good, you love my son, and you would not be here if he had anything to dread."

"You judge me rightly, señora, and I thank you for it. I cannot, at the present moment, tell you anything, but I implore you to have a little patience; let it suffice for you to know that he is labouring to render the señorita happy."

"Oh! yes," said the mother, "always good, always devoted!"

"And therefore was he named Loyal Heart," the maiden murmured, with a blush.

"And never was name better merited," the hunter exclaimed proudly. "A man must have lived a long time with him, and know him as well as I know him, in order to appreciate him properly."

"Thanks, in my turn, for all you say of my son, Belhumeur," the old lady replied, pressing the callous hand of the hunter.

"I speak nothing but the truth, señora; I am only just, that is all. Oh! things would go on well in the prairies if all hunters were like him."

"Good heavens! time passes, will he never come?" she murmured, looking around with feverish impatience.

"Very soon, señora."

"I wish to be the first to see him and salute him on his arrival!"

"Unfortunately that is impossible."

"Why so?"

"Your son charged me to beg you, as well as Señora Luz, to retire into the grotto; he is anxious that you should not be present at the scene that is about to take place here."

"But," said Doña Luz, anxiously, "how shall I know if my uncle be saved or not?"

"Be assured, señorita, that you shall not remain in uncertainty long. But I beg you not to remain here. Go in, go in."

"Perhaps it will be best to do so," the old lady observed. "Let us be obedient, darling," she added, smiling on the girl; "let us go in, since my son requires it."

Doña Luz followed her without resistance, but casting furtive looks behind her, to try if she could catch a glimpse of him she loved.

"How happy are those who have mothers!" murmured Belhumeur, stifling a sigh, and looking after the two women, who disappeared in the shade of the grotto.

All at once the Indian sentinels uttered a cry, which was immediately repeated by a man placed in front of the council lodge.

At this signal the Comanche chiefs arose and left the hut in which they were assembled.

The hunters and Indian warriors seized their arms, ranged themselves on either side of the grotto, and waited.

A cloud of dust rolled towards the camp with great rapidity, but was soon dispersed, and revealed a troop of horsemen riding at full speed. These horsemen, for the most part, wore the costume of Mexican gambusinos.

At their head, upon a magnificent horse, black as night, came a man whom all immediately recognized.

This was Captain Waktehno, who came audaciously at the head of his troop, to claim the fulfilment of the odious bargain he had imposed three days before.

Generally, in the prairies, when two troops meet, or when warriors or hunters visit a village, it is the custom to execute a sort of *fantasia*, by rushing full speed towards each other, yelling and firing off guns.

On this occasion, however, nothing of the kind took place.

The Comanches and the hunters remained motionless and silent, awaiting the arrival of the pirates.

This cold, stern reception did not astonish the captain; though his eyebrows were a little contracted, he feigned not to perceive it, and entered the village intrepidly at the head of his band.

When he arrived in front of the chiefs drawn up before the council lodge, the twenty horsemen stopped suddenly, as if they had been changed into statues of bronze.

This bold manoeuvre was executed with such dexterity that the hunters, good judges of horsemanship, with difficulty repressed a cry of admiration.

Scarcely had the pirates halted, ere the ranks of the warriors placed on the right and left of the lodge deployed like a fan, and closed behind them.

The twenty pirates found themselves by this movement, which was executed with incredible quickness, enclosed within a circle formed of more than five hundred men, well armed and equally well mounted.

The captain felt a slight tremor of uneasiness at the sight of this manoeuvre, and he almost repented having come. But surmounting this involuntary emotion, he smiled disdainfully; he believed he was certain he had nothing to fear.

He bowed slightly to the chiefs ranged before him, and addressed Belhumeur in a firm voice,—

"Where is the girl?" he demanded.

"I do not know what you mean," the hunter replied, in a bantering tone; "I do not believe that there is any young lady here upon whom you have any claim whatever."

"What does this mean? and what is going on here?" the captain muttered, casting around a look of defiance. "Has Loyal Heart forgotten the visit I paid him three days ago?"

"Loyal Heart never forgets anything," said Belhumeur, in a firm tone; "but the question is not of him now. How can you have the audacity to present yourself among us at the head of a set of brigands?"

"Well," said the captain jeeringly, "I see you want to answer me by an evasion. As to the menace contained in the latter part of your sentence, it is worth very little notice."

"You are wrong; for since you have committed the imprudence of throwing yourself into our hands, we shall not be simple enough, I warn you, to allow you to escape."

"Oh, oh!" said the pirate; "what game are we playing now?"

"You will soon learn."

"I can wait," the pirate replied, casting around a provoking glance.

"In these deserts, where all human laws are silent," the hunter replied, in a loud clear voice, "the law of God ought to reign in full vigour. This law says, 'An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.'"

"What follows?" said the pirate, in a dry tone.

"During ten years," Belhumeur continued impassively, "at the head of a troop of bandits, without faith and without law, you have been the terror of the prairies, pillaging and assassinating white men and red men; for you are of no country, plunder and rapine being your only rule; trappers, hunters, gambusinos, or Indians, you have respected no one, if murder could procure you a piece of gold. Not many days ago you took by assault the camp of peaceful Mexican travellers, and massacred them without pity. This career of crime must have an end, and that end has now come. We have Indians and hunters assembled here to try you, and apply to you the implacable law of the prairies."

"An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth," the assembled Indians and hunters cried, brandishing their arms.

"You deceive yourselves greatly, my masters," the pirate answered, with assurance, "If you believe I shall hold my throat out peaceably to the knife, like a calf that is being led to the shambles. I suspected what would happen, and that is why I am so well accompanied. I have with me twenty resolute men, who well know how to defend themselves. You have not got us yet."

"Look around you, and see what is left for you to do."

The pirate cast a look behind him, and saw five hundred guns levelled at his band.

A shudder passed through his limbs, a mortal pallor covered his face, the pirate understood that he was confronted by a terrible danger; but after a second of reflection, he recovered all his coolness, and addressing the hunter, he replied in a jeering voice:—

"What is the use of all these menaces, which do not frighten me? You know very well that I am screened from all your violence. You have told me that I attacked some Mexican travellers a few days ago, but you are not ignorant that the most important of those travellers has fallen into my power. Dare but to touch a single hair of my head, and the general, the uncle of the girl you would in vain ravish from my power, will immediately pay with his life for the insult you offer me. Believe me, then, my masters, you had better cease endeavouring to terrify me; give up to me with a good grace her whom I come to demand, or I swear to you, by God, that within an hour the general will be a dead man."

All at once a man broke through the crowd, and placing himself in front of the pirate, said—

"You are mistaken, the general is free!"

That man was Loyal Heart.

A hum of joy resounded from the ranks of the hunters and Indians, whilst a shudder of terror agitated the pirates.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE CHASTISEMENT.

The general and his two companions had not remained long in a state of uncertainty.

The raft, after several attempts, came to shore at last, and fifteen men, armed with guns advanced, and rushed into the grotto, uttering loud cries.

The fugitives ran towards them with joy; for they recognized at the head of them Loyal Heart, Eagle Head, and Black Elk.

This is what had happened.

As soon as the doctor had entered the grotto with the captain, Eagle Head, certain of having discovered the retreat of the pirates, had rejoined his friends, to whom he imparted the success of his stratagem, Belhumeur had been despatched to Loyal Heart, who had hastened to come. All, in concert, had resolved to attack the bandits in their cavern, whilst other detachments of hunters and redskin warriors, spread about the prairies, and concealed among the rocks should watch the approaches to the grottos and prevent the escape of the pirates.

We have seen the result of this expedition.

After having devoted the first moment entirely to joy, and the pleasure of having succeeded without a blow being struck, the general informed his liberators that half a score bandits were sleeping in the grotto, under the influence of the worthy doctor's opium.

The pirates were strongly bound and carried away; then, after calling in the various detachments, the whole band again bent their way to the camp.

Great had been the surprise of the captain at the exclamation of Loyal Heart; but that surprise was changed into terror, when he saw the general, whom he thought so safely guarded by his men, standing before him.

He saw at once that all his measures were defeated, and his tricks circumvented, and that this time he was lost without resource.

The blood mounted to his throat, his eyes darted lightning, and turning towards Loyal Heart, he said, in a hoarse loud voice—

"Well played! but all is not yet ended between us. By God's help I shall have my revenge!"

He made a gesture as if to put his horse in motion; but Loyal Heart held it resolutely by the bridle.

"We have not done yet," he remarked.

The pirate looked at him for an instant with eyes injected with blood, and then said in a voice broken by passion, whilst urging on his horse to oblige the hunter to quit his hold.

"What more do you want with me?"

Loyal Heart, thanks to a wrist of iron, still held the horse, which plunged furiously.

"You have been brought to trial," he replied, "and the law of the prairies is about to be applied to you."

The pirate uttered a terrible, sneering, maniac laugh, and tore his pistols from his belt:—

"Woe be to him who touches me!" he cried, with rage, "give me way!"

"No," the impassive hunter replied, "you are fairly taken, my master; this time you shall not escape me."

"Die then!" cried the pirate, aiming one of his pistols at Loyal Heart.

But, quick as thought, Belhumeur, who had watched his movements closely, threw himself before his friend with a swiftness increased tenfold by the seriousness of the situation.

The shot was fired. The ball struck the Canadian, who fell bathed in his blood.

"One!" cried the pirate, with a ferocious laugh.

"*Two*!" screamed Eagle Head, and with the bound of a panther, he leaped upon the pirate's horse behind him.

Before the captain could make a movement to defend himself, the Indian seized him with his left hand, by the long hair, of which he formed a tuft, and pulled him backwards violently, with his head downwards.

"Curses on you!" cried the pirate, in vain endeavouring to free himself from his enemy.

And then took place a scene which chilled the spectators with horror.

The horse, which Loyal Heart had left his hold of, when at liberty, furious with being urged on by its master and checked by Loyal Heart, and with the double weight imposed upon it, sprang forward, mad with rage, breaking and overturning in its course every object that opposed its passage. But it still carried, clinging to its sides, the two men struggling to kill each other, and

who on the back of the terrified animal writhed about like serpents.

Eagle Head had, as we have said, pulled back the head of the pirate; he placed his knee against his loins, uttered his hideous war cry, and flourished with a terrible gesture his knife around the brow of his enemy.

"Kill me, then, vile wretch!" the pirate cried, and with a rapid effort he raised his left hand, still armed with a pistol, but the bullet was lost in space.

The Comanche chief fixed his eyes upon the captain's face.

"Thou art a coward!" he said, with disgust, "and an old woman, who is afraid of death!"

At the same time he pushed the bandit forcibly with his knee, and plunged the knife into his skull.

The captain uttered a piercing cry, which arose into the air, mingled with the howl of triumph of the chief.

The horse stumbled over a root; the two enemies rolled upon the ground.

Only one rose up.

It was the Comanche chief, who brandished the bleeding scalp of the pirate.

But the latter was not dead. Almost mad with pain and fury, and blinded with the blood which trickled into his eyes, he arose and rushed upon his adversary, who had no expectation of such an attack.

Then, with limbs entwined, each endeavoured, by strength and artifice, to throw his antagonist, and plunge into his body the knife with which he was armed.

Several hunters sprang forward to separate them, but when they reached them all was over.

The captain lay upon the ground with the knife of Eagle Head buried to the hilt in his heart.

The pirates, held in awe by the white hunters and the Indian warriors who surrounded them, did not attempt a resistance, which they knew would be useless.

When he saw his captain fall, Frank, in the name of his companions, proclaimed that they surrendered. At a signal from Loyal Heart they laid down their arms and were bound.

Belhumeur, the brave Canadian, whose devotedness had saved the life of his friend, had received a serious wound, but, happily, it was not mortal. He had been instantly lifted up and carried into the grotto, where the mother of the hunter paid him every attention.

Eagle Head approached Loyal Heart, who stood pensive and silent, leaning against a tree.

"The chiefs are assembled round the fire of council," he said, "and await my brother."

"I follow, my brother," the hunter replied, laconically.

When the two men entered the hut, all the chiefs were assembled; among them were the general, Black Elk, and several other trappers.

The calumet was brought into the middle of the circle by the pipe bearer; he bowed respectfully towards the four cardinal points, and then presented the long tube to every chief in his turn.

When the calumet had made the round of the circle, the pipe bearer emptied the ashes into the fire, murmuring some mystic words, and then retired.

Then the old chief named the Sun, arose, and after saluting the members of the council, said—

"Chiefs and warriors, listen to the words which my lungs breathe and which the Master of Life has placed in my heart. What do you purpose doing with the twenty prisoners who are now in your hands? Will you release them that they may continue their life of murder and rapine? that they may carry off your wives, steal your horses, and kill your brothers? Will you conduct them to the stone villages of the great white hearts of the East? The route is long, abounding in dangers, traversed by mountains and rapid rivers; the prisoners may escape in the journey, or may surprise you in your sleep and massacre you. And then, you know, warriors, when you have arrived at the stone villages, the long knives will release them, for there exists no justice for red men. No, warriors, the Master of Life, who has, at length, delivered up these men into our power, wills that they should die. He has marked the term of their crimes. When we find a jaguar or a grizzly bear upon our path, we kill them; these men are more cruel than jaguars or grizzlies, they owe a reckoning for the blood they have shed, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Let them, then, be fastened to the stake of torture. I cast a necklace of red wampums into the council. Have I spoken well, men of power?"

After these words, the old chief sat down again. There was a moment of solemn silence. It was evident that all present approved of his advice.

Loyal Heart waited for a few minutes; he saw that nobody was preparing to reply to the speech of the Sun; then he arose:—

"Comanche chiefs and warriors, and you white trappers, my brothers," he said in a mild, sad tone, "the words pronounced by the venerable sachem are just; unfortunately, the safety of the prairies requires death of our prisoners. This extremity is terrible, but we are forced to submit to it, if we desire to enjoy the fruit of our rude labours in peace. But if we find ourselves constrained to apply the implacable law of the desert, let us not show ourselves barbarians by choice; let us punish, since it must be so, but let us punish like men of heart, and not like cruel men. Let us prove to these bandits that we are executing justice, that in killing them it is not for the purpose

of avenging ourselves, but the whole of society. Besides, their chief, by far the most guilty of them, has fallen before the courage and weapons of Eagle Head. Let us be clement without ceasing to be just. Let us leave them the choice of their death. No useless torture. The Master of Life will smile upon us, he will be content with his red children, to whom he will grant abundance of game in their hunting grounds. I have spoken: have I spoken well, men of power?"

The members of the council had listened attentively to the words of the young man. The chiefs had smiled kindly at the noble sentiments he had expressed; for all, both Indians and trappers, loved and respected him.

Eagle Head arose.

"My brother, Loyal Heart has spoken well," said he; "his years are few in number, but his wisdom is great. We are happy to find an opportunity of proving our friendship for him; we seize it with eagerness. We will do what he desires."

"Thank you!" Loyal Heart replied warmly; "thank you, my brothers! The Comanche nation is a great and noble nation, which I love; I am proud of having been adopted by it."

The council broke up, and the chiefs left the lodge. The prisoners, collected in a group, were strictly guarded by a detachment of warriors.

The public crier called together all the members of the tribe, and the hunters dispersed about the village.

When all were assembled, Eagle Head arose to speak, and, addressing the pirates, said—

"Dogs of palefaces, the council of the great chiefs of the powerful nation of the Comanches, whose vast hunting grounds cover a great part of the earth, has pronounced your fate. Try, after having lived like wild beasts, not to die like timid old women; be brave, and then, perhaps, the Master of Life will have pity on you, and will receive you after death into the eskennane,—that place of delights where the brave who have looked death in the face hunt during eternity."

"We are ready," replied Frank, unmoved; "fasten us to the stakes, invent the most atrocious tortures; you will not see us blench."

"Our brother, Loyal Heart," the chief continued, "has interceded for you. You will not be fastened to the stake; the chiefs leave to yourselves the choice of your death."

Then was awakened that characteristic trait in the manners of the whites, who, inhabiting the prairies for any length of time, end by forsaking the customs of their ancestors, and adopt those of the Indians.

The proposition made by Eagle Head was revolting to the pride of the pirates.

"By what right," Frank cried, "does Loyal Heart intercede for us? Does he fancy that we are not men? that tortures will be able to draw from us cries and complaints unworthy of us? No! no! lead us to punishment; whatever you can inflict upon us will not be so cruel as what we make the warriors of your nation undergo when they fall into our hands."

At these insulting words a sensation of anger pervaded the ranks of the Indians, whilst the pirates, on the contrary, uttered cries of joy and triumph.

"Dogs! rabbits!" they shouted; "Comanche warriors are old women, who ought to wear petticoats!"

Loyal Heart advanced, and silence was re-established.

"You have wrongly understood the words of the chief," he said; "in leaving you the choice of your death, it was not an insult, but a mark of respect that he paid you. Here is my dagger; you shall be unbound, let it pass from hand to hand, and be buried in all your hearts in turn. The man who is free, and without hesitation kills himself at a single blow, is braver than he who, fastened to the stake of torture, and unable to endure the pain, insults his executioner in order to receive a prompt death."

A loud acclamation welcomed these words of the hunter.

The pirates consulted among themselves for an instant with a look, then, with one spontaneous movement, they made the sign of the cross, and cried with one voice—

"We accept your offer!"

The crowd, an instant before, so tumultuous and violent, became silent and attentive, awed by the expectation of the terrible tragedy which was about to be played before them.

"Unbind the prisoners," Loyal Heart commanded.

This order was immediately executed.

"Your dagger!" said Frank.

The hunter gave it to him.

"Thank you, and farewell!" said the pirate, in a firm voice; and, opening his vestments, he deliberately, and with a smile, as if he enjoyed death, buried the dagger up to the hilt in his heart.

A livid pallor gradually invaded his countenance, his eyes rolled in their orbits, and casting round wild and aimless glances, he staggered like a drunken man, and rolled upon the ground.

He was dead.

"My turn!" cried the pirate next him, and plucking the still reeking dagger from the wound, he plunged it into his heart.

He fell upon the body of the first victim.

After him came the turn of another, then another, and so on; not one hesitated, not one displayed weakness,—all fell smiling, and thanking Loyal Heart for the death they owed to him.

The spectators were awestruck by this terrible execution; but, fascinated by the frightful spectacle,—drunk, so to say, with the odour of blood, they stood with haggard eyes and heaving breasts, without having the power to turn away their looks.

There soon remained but one pirate. This man contemplated for a moment the heap of bodies which lay before him; then, drawing the dagger from the breast of him who had preceded him, he said with a smile,—

"A fellow is lucky to die in such good company; but where the devil do we go to after death? Bah! what a fool I am! I shall soon know!"

And with a gesture quick as thought he stabbed himself.

He fell instantly quite dead.

This frightful slaughter did not last more than a quarter of an hour.[1]

Not one of the pirates had struck twice; all were killed by the first blow.

"The dagger is mine!" said Eagle Head, drawing it smoking from the still palpitating body of the last bandit. "It is a good weapon for a warrior;" and he placed it coolly in his belt, after having wiped it upon the grass.

The bodies of the pirates were scalped, and borne out of the camp.

They were abandoned to the vultures and the urubus, for whom they would furnish an ample feast, and who, attracted by the odour of blood, were already hovering over them, uttering lugubrious cries of joy.

The formidable troop of Captain Waktehno was thus annihilated. Unfortunately there were other pirates in the prairies.

After the execution, the Indians re-entered their huts carelessly; for them it had only been one of those spectacles to which they had been for a long time accustomed, and which have no effect upon their nerves.

The trappers, on the contrary, notwithstanding the rough life they lead, and the frequency with which they see blood shed—either their own or that of other people, dispersed silently and noiselessly, with hearts oppressed by the spectacle of this frightful butchery.

Loyal Heart and the general directed their steps towards the grotto.

The ladies, shut up in the interior of the cavern, were ignorant of the terrible drama that had been played, and of the sanguinary expiation which had terminated it.

[1] All this scene is historical, and strictly true; the author was present in Apacheria, at a similar execution.

CHAPTER XV.

THE PARDON.

The interview between the general and his niece was most touching.

The old soldier, so roughly treated for some time past, was delighted to press to his bosom the innocent child who constituted his whole family, and who, by a miracle, had escaped the misfortunes that had assailed her.

For a long time they forgot themselves in a delightful interchange of ideas; the general anxiously inquiring how she had lived while he was a prisoner—the young girl questioning him upon the perils he had run, and the ill-treatment he had suffered.

"Now, uncle," she said at length, "what is your intention?"

"Alas! my child," he replied, in a tone of sadness, and stifling a sigh; "we must without delay leave these terrible countries, and return to Mexico."

The heart of the young girl throbbed painfully, although she inwardly confessed the necessity for a prompt return. To leave the prairies would be to leave him she loved—to separate herself, without hope of a reunion, from a man whose admirable character every minute passed in sweet intercourse had made her more duly appreciate, and who had now become indispensable to her life and her happiness.

"What ails thee, my child? You are sad, and your eyes are full of tears," her uncle asked, pressing her hand affectionately.

"Alas! dear uncle," she replied, in a plaintive tone; "how can I be otherwise than sad after all that

has happened within the last few days? My heart is oppressed."

"That is true. The frightful events of which we have been the witnesses and the victims are more than enough to make you sad; but you are still very young, my child. In a short time these events will only remain in your thoughts as the remembrance of facts which, thanks to Heaven! you will not have to dread in future."

"Then shall we depart soon?"

"Tomorrow, if possible. What should I do here now? Heaven itself declares against me, since it obliges me to renounce this expedition, the success of which would have made the happiness of my old age; but God is not willing that I should be consoled. His will be done!" he added, in a tone of resignation.

"What do you mean, dear uncle?" the maiden asked, eagerly.

"Nothing that can interest you at present, my child. You had better, therefore, be ignorant of it, and that I should suffer alone. I am old. I am accustomed to sorrow," he said, with a melancholy smile.

"My poor uncle!"

"Thank you for the kindness you evince, my child; but let us quit this subject that saddens you; let us speak a little, if you please, of the worthy people to whom we owe so many obligations."

"Of Loyal Heart?" Doña Luz murmured, with a blush.

"Yes," the general replied. "Loyal Heart and his mother; the excellent woman whom I have not yet been able to thank, on account of the wound of poor Belhumeur, and to whom it is due, you say, that you have not suffered any privations."

"She has had all the cares of a tender mother for me!"

"How can I ever acquit myself towards her and her noble son? She is blessed in having such a child! Alas! that comfort is not given to me—I am alone!" the general said, letting his head sink into his hands.

"And I?" said the maiden, in a faint voice.

"Oh! you?" he replied, embracing her tenderly; "you are my beloved daughter, but I have no son!"

"That is true!" she murmured, thoughtfully.

"Loyal Heart," the general continued, "is of too proud a nature to accept anything of me. What am I to do? how acquit myself towards him? how acknowledge, as I ought, the immense services he has rendered me?"

There was a moment of silence.

Doña Luz inclined towards the general, and kissing his brow, she said to him in a low tremulous voice, concealing her face upon his shoulder:

"Uncle, I have an idea."

"Speak, my darling," he replied, "speak without fear; it is, perhaps, God who inspires you."

"You have no son to whom you can bequeath your name and your immense fortune, have you, uncle?"

"Alas! I thought for a time, I might recover one, but that hope has vanished for ever; you know, child, I am alone."

"Neither Loyal Heart nor his mother would accept anything from you."

"That I believe."

"And yet, I think there is a way of obliging them, of forcing them even."

"What is it?" he said, eagerly.

"Dear uncle, since you regret so much not having a son to whom you could, after you, leave your name, why not adopt Loyal Heart?"

The general looked at her, she was covered with blushes, and trembling like a leaf.

"Oh! darling!" he said, embracing her, "your idea is a charming one, but it is impracticable. I should be happy and proud to have a son like Loyal Heart. You yourself have told me how his mother adores him; she must be jealous of his love, she will never consent to share it with a stranger."

"Perhaps she might!" the young girl murmured.

"And then," the general added, "if even, which is impossible, his mother through love of him, in order to give him a rank in society, should accept my offer, mothers being capable of the noblest sacrifices to secure the happiness of their children, he himself would refuse. Can you believe, dearest, that this man, brought up in the desert, whose whole life has been passed among unexpected, exciting scenes, in face of a sublime nature, would consent, for the sake of a little gold which he despises, and a name that is useless to him, to renounce that glorious life of adventures so full of pleasant and terrible emotions, which has become necessary to him? Oh, no! he would be stifled in our cities; to an exalted organization like his our civilization would be mortal. Forget this idea, my dear daughter. Alas! I feel convinced he would refuse."

"Who knows?" she said, shaking her head.

"God is my witness," the general resumed, earnestly, "that I should be most happy to succeed; all my wishes would be fulfilled. But why should I flatter myself with wild chimeras? He will refuse, I tell you! And I am forced to confess he would be right in doing so!"

"Well, but try, uncle!" she said, coaxingly; "if your proposal be repulsed, you will at least have proved to Loyal Heart that you are not ungrateful, and that you have known how to appreciate him at his just value."

"Do you wish it?" said the general, who asked no better than to be convinced.

"I *do* wish it, uncle," she answered, embracing him to conceal her joy and her blushes. "I do not know why, but it appears to me you will succeed."

"Well, so be it, then," the general murmured, with a melancholy smile. "Request Loyal Heart and his mother to come to me."

"In five minutes they shall be here!" she cried, radiant with joy.

And, bounding like a gazelle, the young girl disappeared, running along the windings of the grotto.

As soon as he was alone, the general hung down his pensive head, and fell into melancholy and deep reflections.

A few minutes later, Loyal Heart and his mother, brought by Doña Luz, were before him.

The general raised his head, bowed with courtesy as they entered, and with a sign desired his niece to retire.

The young girl complied in great agitation.

There only prevailed in this part of the grotto a faint light, which did not allow objects to be seen distinctly; by a strange caprice, the mother of Loyal Heart had put on her rebozo in such a manner that it almost entirely covered her face; so that, notwithstanding the attention with which the general looked at her, he could not succeed in discerning her features.

"You have sent for us, general," Loyal Heart said, cheerfully, "and, as you see, we have hastened to comply with your desire."

"Thank you for your prompt attention, my friend," the general replied. "In the first place, receive the expression of my gratitude for the important services you have rendered me. What I say to you, my friend—I entreat you to permit me to give you that title—is addressed likewise to your good and excellent mother, for the tender care she has bestowed on my niece."

"General," the hunter replied, with emotion, "I thank you for these kind words, which amply repay me for what you think you owe me. In coming to your aid, I only accomplished a vow I have made never to leave my neighbour without help. Believe me I desire no other recompense but your esteem, and I am overpaid for the little I have done by the satisfaction I at this moment experience."

"I should wish, notwithstanding, permit me to repeat—I should wish notwithstanding to reward you in another fashion."

"Reward me!" the fiery young man cried, colouring deeply, and drawing back.

"Allow me to finish," the general resumed, warmly; "if the proposition I wish to submit to you displeases you, well then you can answer me, and answer me as frankly as I am about to explain myself."

"Speak, general, I will listen to you attentively."

"My friend, my journey into the prairies had a sacred object, which I have not been able to attain; you know the reason why—the men who followed me have died at my side. Left almost alone, I find myself forced to renounce a search which, if it had been crowned with success, would have constituted the happiness of the few years I have yet to live. God is chastising me severely. I have seen all my children die around me; one alone would, perhaps, still be left to me, but him, in a moment of senseless pride, I drove from my presence. Now, in the decline of life, my house is empty, my hearth, is solitary. I am alone, alas! without relations, without friends, without an heir to whom I could bequeath not my fortune, but my name, which a long line of ancestors have transmitted to me without stain. Will you replace for me the family I have lost? answer me, Loyal Heart, will you be to me a son?"

Whilst pronouncing these words, the general rose from his seat, seized the hand of the young man and pressed it warmly, his eyes filled with tears.

At this unexpected offer the hunter stood astonished, breathless, and not knowing what to reply.

His mother suddenly threw back her rebozo, and displaying her countenance glowing and transfigured, so to speak, with intense joy, stepped between the two men, placed her hand upon the shoulder of the general, looked at him earnestly, and in a voice rendered tremulous by emotion, exclaimed—

"At length, Don Ramón de Garillas, you recall that son whom twenty years ago you so cruelly abandoned!"

"Woman! what do you mean?" the general asked, in a broken voice.

"I mean, Don Ramón," she replied, with an air of supreme majesty, "that I am Doña Jesuita, your wife, and that Loyal Heart is your son Rafaël, whom you cursed."

"Oh!" the general cried, falling on his knees, and with his face bathed in tears, "pardon, pardon, my son!"

"My father!" Loyal Heart cried, springing towards him, and endeavouring to raise him up; "what are you doing?"

"My son," said the old man, almost wild with grief and joy, "I will not quit this posture till I have obtained your pardon."

"Arise, arise, Don Ramón!" said Doña Jesuita, in an affectionate tone; "it is long since the hearts of the mother and the son have felt anything for you but love and respect."

"Oh!" cried the old man, embracing them closely by turns; "this is too much happiness—I do not deserve to be so happy after my cruel conduct."

"Father," the young man replied, nobly, "it is owing to the merited chastisement you inflicted upon me that I have become an honest man; forget the past, then, which is now nothing but a dream, think only of the future, which smiles upon you."

At this moment Doña Luz appeared, blushing and timid.

As soon as he perceived her, the general sprang towards her, took her by the hand, and led her to Doña Jesuita, whose arms were opened to receive her.

"My niece!" he said, with a face radiant with joy, "you may love Loyal Heart without fear, for he is really my son. God, in his infinite goodness has permitted that I should find him again at the moment when I despaired of such happiness!"

The young girl uttered a cry of joy, and concealed her blushing face in the bosom of Doña Jesuita, abandoning her hand to Rafaël, who covered it with kisses, while he fell at her feet.

EPILOGUE.

It was a few months after the expedition of the Count de Raousset Boulbon.

At that period the name of Frenchmen stood high in Sonora.

All travellers of that nation whom chance brought into that part of America were certain, no matter where they stopped, to meet with a most kind and sympathetic welcome.

Urged on by my vagabond humour, without any other object but that of seeing fresh countries, I had quitted Mexico.

Mounted upon an excellent mustang, which a friend of mine, wood ranger, had lassoed and made me a present of I had traversed the whole American continent; that is to say, I had made, by short journeys and always alone, according to my custom, a ramble of some hundreds of leagues, crossing mountains covered with snow, immense deserts, rapid rivers, and impetuous torrents, simply as an amateur, in order to visit the Spanish cities which rise along the coast of the Pacific Ocean.

I had been travelling for fifty-seven days as a mere wanderer, stopping wherever caprice invited me to pitch my tent.

I was, however, approaching the object I had determined on, and I found myself within a few leagues of Hermosillo, that city which, surrounded by walls, possessing a population of fifteen thousand souls, and defended by eleven hundred regular troops commanded by General Bravo, one of the best and most courageous officers of Mexico, had been audaciously attacked by the Count de Raousset, at the head of less than two hundred and fifty Frenchmen, and carried, at the point of the bayonet, in two hours.

The sun had set, and the darkness became greater every second. My poor horse, fatigued with a journey of more than fifteen leagues, and which I had overridden some days before in my endeavours to arrive at Guaymas sooner, advanced with great difficulty, stumbling at every step over the sharp stones of the route.

I was myself excessively fatigued and was dying with hunger, so that I contemplated with very pitiable feelings the prospect of passing still another night under the starry canopy of heaven.

I dread losing my way in the darkness; my eyes in vain scanned the horizon for a light that might guide me towards a habitation. I knew that several haciendas (farms) were to be met within the neighbourhood of the city of Hermosillo.

Like all men who have for a long time led a wandering life, during which they have been incessantly the sport of events more or less contrary, I am endowed with a good stock of philosophy, an indispensable thing when one is travelling, particularly in America, where, for the most part, one is left to one's own industry without having the resource of being able to reckon upon any foreign aid.

I made up my mind, like a brave traveller, renouncing with a sigh of regret the hope of supper and shelter. As the night grew darker and darker, and as it was useless to ride where I could not see, perhaps in a direction diametrically opposite to the one I ought to follow, I looked about me

for a suitable place to establish my bivouac, light a fire, and find a little grass for my nag, which, as well as myself, was dying with hunger.

This was not an easy matter in these countries calcined by a devouring sun, and covered with a sand as fine as dust. I, however, after a long search, discovered a miserable tree, in the shade of which a very scanty vegetation had sprung up.

I was about to dismount, when my ear was struck with the distant sound of the steps of a horse, which appeared to be following the same route as myself, and which advanced rapidly.

I remained motionless.

Meeting with a horseman at night in the Mexican plains always suggests ample matter for reflection.

The stranger we meet with may be an honest man, but it would be a safer wager to lay that he is a rogue.

In this state of doubt, I cocked my revolver, and waited.

My waiting was not long.

At the end of five minutes the horseman came up to me.

"*Buenas noches, caballero*," (Good evening, sir,) said he, as he passed.

There was something so frank in the tone in which this salute was, as it were, thrown at me, that my suspicions vanished instantly.

I replied.

"Where are you going so late?" he said.

"In good faith," I replied, ingenuously, "I should be quite delighted if I knew myself; I think I have lost my way, and, in that doubt, I was preparing to pass the night under this tree."

"A poor bed that!" said the horseman, shaking his head.

"Yes," I remarked philosophically; "but for want of a better I must content myself with it. I am dying with hunger, my horse is knocked up, and we do not either of us care to wander further in search of problematic hospitality, particularly at this hour of the night."

"Hum!" said the stranger, casting a glance at my mustang, who, with his head lowered, was endeavouring to snap a few blades of grass, "your horse appears to be well bred; do you think he is so much fatigued that he could not manage to go a couple of miles, at most?"

"Oh! he would go for two hours if necessary," I said, with a smile.

"Follow me, then, in God's name," the stranger answered, in a jovial tone; "I promise you both a good bed and a good supper."

"Which offer I accept for both with thanks," I said, making my horse feel the spur.

The noble beast, which appeared to understand what was going on, fell into a very fair trot.

The stranger was, as well as I could judge, a man of about forty, with an open countenance and intelligent features; he wore the costume of the inhabitants of the country, a broad brimmed felt hat, the crown of which was encircled by a gold band three fingers broad, a variegated zarapé fell from his shoulders to his thighs, and covered the quarters of his horse, and heavy silver spurs were fastened by straps to his vaquero boots.

Like all Mexicans, he had, hanging at his left side, a machete, which is a sort of short and straight sabre, very much like the sword-bayonets of French foot soldiers.

Conversation soon commenced between us, and was not long in becoming expansive.

At the end of about half an hour, I perceived at some distance before me, issuing from the darkness, the imposing mass of a large house; it was the hacienda in which my unknown guide had promised me a good welcome, a good supper, and a good bed.

My horse snorted several times, and of its own accord mended its pace.

I cast a curious glance around me, and could discern the lofty trees of a huerta well kept up, and every appearance of comfort.

I inwardly rendered thanks to my good star, which had brought about so fortunate a rencontre.

At our approach a horseman, placed, no doubt, as a vidette, uttered a loud challenge; while seven or eight rastreros of pure blood, came yelping with joy, bounding around my guide, and smelling me one after another.

"It is I," my companion replied.

"Eh! come along, Belhumeur," replied the sentry; "we have been expecting you more than an hour."

"Go and inform the master that I bring a traveller with me," cried my guide, "and be sure not to forget to tell Black Elk that he is a Frenchman."

"How do you know that?" I asked, a little annoyed, for I piqued myself upon speaking Spanish with great purity.

"*Pardi!*" he said laughing, "we are almost compatriots."

"How so?"

"*Dame!* I am a Canadian, you understand, and I soon recognised the accent."

During the exchange of these few words, we had arrived at the door of the hacienda, where several persons waited to receive us.

It appeared that the announcement of my quality of Frenchman, made by my companion, had produced a certain sensation.

Ten or twelve domestics held torches, by favour of which I could distinguish six or eight persons at least, men and women, coming forward to welcome us.

The master of the hacienda, whom I recognized as such at once, advanced towards me with a lady hanging on his arm, who must have been a great beauty, and might yet pass for handsome, although she was near forty years of age.

Her husband was a man of about fifty, of lofty stature, and endowed with a marked, manly countenance; around them clung, with staring eyes, five or six charming children, who resembled them too strongly not to belong to them.

A little behind them, half concealed, in the shade, was a lady of about seventy and an old gentleman apparently not far from a hundred.

I took in at a glance the whole of this family, the aspect of which had something patriarchal in it that attracted sympathy and respect.

"Sir," said the hacendero kindly, seizing the bridle of my horse to assist me to dismount, "Esa casa se dé a vm (This house is yours); I can only thank my friend Belhumeur for having succeeded in bringing you to my house."

"I must admit, señor," I said with a smile, "that he had not much trouble in doing so, and that I accept with gratitude the offer he was so kind as to make me."

"If you will permit it, señor, as it is getting late," the hacendero replied, "and particularly as you stand in need of repose, we will go at once into the eating room; we were on the point of sitting down to table when your arrival was announced."

"Señor, I thank you a thousand times," I remarked with a bow; "your kind welcome has made me forget all my fatigue."

"We can easily recognise French politeness," said the lady, with a pleasing smile.

I offered my arm to the lady of the house, and we proceeded to the eating-room, where, upon an immense table, was served an Homeric repast, the appetizing odour of which reminded me that I had fasted for nearly twelve hours.

We took our seats. Forty persons, at least, were assembled round the table.

In this hacienda was kept up the patriarchal custom which is now falling into desuetude, of allowing the servants to eat with the masters of the house.

All that I saw, all that I heard, charmed me in this abode; it had a perfume of kindness about it which made the heart beat responsively.

When the sharp edge of appetite was a little blunted, the conversation, which had languished at first, became general.

"Well! Belhumeur," the grandfather asked my guide, who, seated beside me, was vigorously employing his fork, "have you found the track of the jaguar?"

"I have not only found one track, general, but I fear the jaguar is not alone, and has a companion."

"Oh! oh!" said the old man, "are you sure of that?"

"I may be deceived, general, and yet I don't think I am. Ask Loyal Heart; I had something of a reputation yonder, in the prairies of the West."

"Father," said the hacendero, making an affirmative sign, "Belhumeur must be right, he is too old a hunter to be at fault."

"Then we must have a battue, to rid ourselves of these dangerous enemies. Is not that your opinion, Don Rafaël?"

"That was my intention, father. I am glad you approve of it. Black Elk is warned, and everything is ready."

"The hunt may take place as soon as is agreeable, everything is in order," said an individual of a certain age, seated not far from me.

The door opened, and a man entered.

His arrival was saluted with cries of joy. Don Rafaël rose eagerly, and went towards him, followed by his lady.

I was the more astonished at this welcome, from the newly arrived guest being nothing but an Indian *bravo*, or independent; he wore the complete costume of the warriors of his nation. Thanks to the numerous sojourns I had made among the redskins, I thought that this man must belong to one of the numerous tribes of the Comanches.

"Oh! Eagle Head! Eagle Head!" shouted the children, surrounding him with glee.

The Indian took them in his arms, one after the other, kissed them, and got rid of them by giving them some of those little toys which the aborigines of America cut with such exquisite taste.

He then advanced smiling, saluted the numerous company assembled in the hall with perfect ease, and took his place between the master and the mistress of the house.

"We expected you before sunset, chief," said the lady, in a friendly manner: "it is not right to disappoint your friends."

"Eagle Head was on the track of the jaguars," said the chief, sententiously; "my daughter must not have cause for fear; the jaguars are dead."

"What! have you already killed the jaguars, chief?" said Don Rafaël, eagerly.

"My brother will see. The skins are very handsome; they are in the court."

"Well, chief," said the old gentleman, holding out his hand to him, "I see you are determined always to be our Providence."

"My father speaks well," the chief answered, bowing; "the Master of Life counsels him; the family of my father is my family."

After the repast, I was conducted by Don Rafaël to a comfortable bedroom, where I was not long in falling asleep, though my dreams were very busy with all I had seen and heard during the evening.

On the morrow my host my hosts would not hear of my leaving them; and I must confess that I did not very strongly insist upon continuing my journey. Not only was I charmed with the friendly welcome I had received, but still further, a secret curiosity urged me to stay a few days longer.

A week thus passed away.

Don Rafaël and his family overwhelmed me with kindnesses; life passed with me as if in a continual enchantment.

I do not know why, but ever since my arrival in the hacienda, all that I was witness of augmented that curiosity which had seized upon me from the first moment.

It appeared to me that at the bottom of the happiness which I saw beaming in every face of this united family, there had been a long train of misfortunes.

They were not, as I believed, people whose lives had flowed on calmly and tranquilly; I imagined, though I scarcely know why, that after being a long time tossed about upon the ocean of some trouble, they had at length found a port.

Their countenances were impressed with that majesty which great sorrows alone can give, and the wrinkles which furrowed their brows appeared to me too deep to have been traced by anything but grief.

This idea was so strongly impressed upon my brain that, in spite of all my efforts to drive it away, it incessantly returned, more tenaciously and more incisively.

In a few days, I had become the friend of the family nothing regarding myself was unknown to them; they had admitted me to the closest intimacy. In this state, I had constantly one question on my lips, but I knew not how to shape it, so much did I fear committing a serious indiscretion or reviving old causes of grief.

One evening, as Don Rafaël and I were returning from hunting, when we were within a few steps of the house, he placed his arm in mine.

"What is the matter with you, Don Gustavio?" he said; "you are dull and preoccupied; do you begin to be tired of us?"

"You cannot imagine that," I replied warmly; "on the contrary, I have no words to express how happy I am with you."

"Well, remain then," he cried frankly; "there is still plenty of room for a friend at our hearth."

"Thanks," I said, much affected, and pressing his hand; "I would that it could be so; but, alas! it is impossible. Like the Jew of the legend, I have within me a demon which, incessantly cries 'Move on!' I must accomplish my destiny."

And I sighed.

"Now, come," he resumed, "be frank! tell me what it is that occupies your thoughts; for several days past you have made us all very uncomfortable; nobody has dared to question you about it," he added, with a smile; "but I have taken my courage with both hands, as you Frenchmen say, and made up my mind to ask you."

"Well!" I replied, "as you desire it, I will tell you; but I entreat you not to take my frankness ill, and to be assured that there is at least as much interest as curiosity in the matter."

"Well, then," he said, with an indulgent smile, "confess yourself to me; don't be afraid, I will give you absolution—go on!"

"I really should like to make 'a clean breast of it,' and tell you everything."

"That is the way,—speak."

"I have formed an idea, although I do not know why, that you have not always been as happy as you are now, and that it has been by long misfortunes that you have purchased the blessings you

at present enjoy."

A melancholy smile passed over his lips.

"Pardon me!" I cried eagerly; "pardon the indiscretion I have committed! What I feared has come to pass! Let there be no more question between us, I conjure you, of my silly fancy!"

I was really very much hurt at reflecting on my impertinence.

Don Rafaël replied to me with kindness.

"Why not?" he said; "I see nothing indiscreet in your question; it arises solely from the interest you have conceived for us: it is only when we love people that we become so clear-sighted. No, my friend, you are not wrong, we have all undergone a rude trial. Since you desire it, you shall know all; and perhaps you will confess, after having heard the recital of what we have suffered, that we have indeed purchased dearly the happiness we enjoy. But let us go in; they are probably waiting for us to sit down to table."

That evening Don Rafaël retained several members of the family round him, and, after having ordered cigarettes and some wine to be placed upon the table, he said,—

"My friend, I am about to satisfy your excusable curiosity. Belhumeur, Black Elk, and Eagle Head, my father and mother, as well as my dear wife, who have all been actors in the drama of which you are going to hear the strange recital, will come to my assistance if my memory fails me."

Then, reader, Don Rafaël related to me what you have just read.

I must confess that these adventures, told by the man who had played the principal character, and before those who had so great a share in them,—I confess, I say, that these adventures interested me to the highest degree, which cannot be expected to be the case with you; they, necessarily, lose much coming from my mouth, for I cannot impart to them that animation which constituted their principal charm.

A week afterwards I left my amiable hosts, but instead of embarking at Guaymas, as I had at first intended, I set out with Eagle Head on an excursion into Apacheria, an excursion during which chance made me the witness of extraordinary scenes, which I will, perhaps, relate to you some day, if these you have now read have not been too wearisome to you.

THE END.

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