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Title: The Silent Rifleman! A tale of the Texan prairies

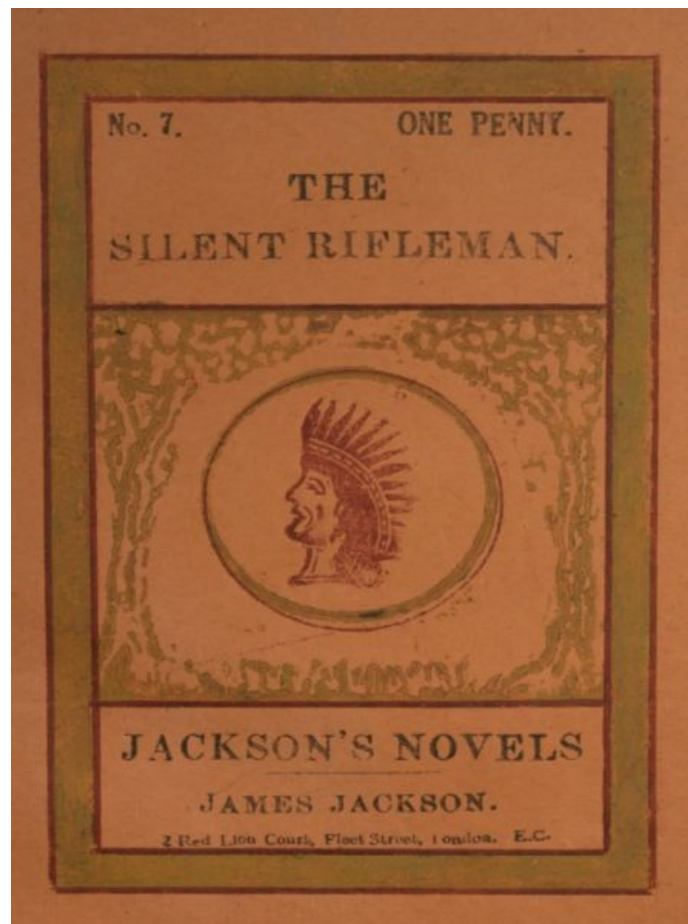
Author: Henry William Herbert

Release date: July 16, 2014 [EBook #46304]

Language: English

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JACKSON'S NOVELS.

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**THE SILENT RIFLEMAN!**  
**A TALE OF THE TEXAN PRAIRIES.**

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# CHAPTER I.

## THE HORSE AND THE RIDER.

It wanted an hour or two of sunset on a lovely evening in the latter part of September, when a single horseman might have been seen making his way to the westward, across the high dry prairie land, which lies between the upper portion of the river Nueces and the Bravo del Norte.

He was a small, spare man, of no great personal power, but of a figure which gave promise of great agility and capability of enduring fatigue, the most remarkable feature of which was the extraordinary length of his arms.

His countenance, without being in the least degree handsome, was pleasing and expressive.

A short, heavy English rifle, carrying a ball of twelve to the pound, was slung by a black leather belt across his shoulder, the braided strap which supported his large buffalo-horn powder flask and bullet pouch of otter skin crossing it on his breast. From a leather girdle, which was buckled about his waist, he had hung a long, straight, two-edged sword in a steel scabbard with a silver basket hilt on the left side, which was counterbalanced by a long, broad-bladed hunting knife with a buck-horn hilt, resting upon his right hip. There were holsters at the bow of his large Mexican saddle, containing a pair of fine duelling pistols with ten inch barrels; and in addition to these, there was suspended from the pommel a formidable hatchet with a bright steel head and a spike at the back, like an Indian tomahawk, but in all respects a more ponderous and superior instrument.

On the croupe of his horse, and attached to the cantle of the saddle, he carried a small valise of untanned leather, with a superb Mexican blanket of blue and scarlet strapped upon it, and a large leathern bottle with a horn drinking-cup swinging from it on one side; while to the other was fastened a portion of the loin of a fat buck, which had fallen in the course of the morning by the rifle of the traveller.

The horse which carried this well-appointed rider was a dark-brown thorough-bred.

At length, when the sun was no longer above three times the width of his own disc from the level line of the lowest plain, he set his spurs to his horse, and put him from the high slashing trot which he had hitherto maintained, into a long slinging gallop, which carried him over the ground at the rate of some sixteen miles the hour.

After he had ridden at this rate for thirty or forty minutes, he reached the brow of one of the low rolling waves of earth, which constitute the surface of the prairie, and thence saw the land falling away in a long gentle slope for some six miles toward the west, at which distance it was bounded by a long continuous line of hills, whose range seemed interminable. At the base of this range appeared a dense line, looking sombre enough at that distance, but which the experienced eye of the horseman well knew indicated a heavy growth of timber—perhaps a deep forest, and, within its shadowy depths, a wide and never-failing stream.

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A short half-hour brought them to the forest just as the sun was setting.

Through this wild paradise the mighty river rolled its pellucid waves, rapid, and deep, and strong, and as transparent as the purest crystal.

Galloping his horse joyously over the rich green turf, the traveller soon reached the river, at a spot where it was bordered by a little beach or margin of pure white sand, as firm, and almost as hard as marble; and springing into the cool clear water till it laved the heaving flanks of his charger he suffered it to drink long and deep of the pure beverage, which had not touched its thirsty lips since the early morning.

This duty done, he returned to the shore, and, selecting an oak tree about two feet in girth, around which the grass grew unusually tall and luxuriant, tied his companion to its stem by the lasso, or cord of plaited hide which was coiled at his saddle-bow.

Then, after polishing his accoutrements, as if for parade, he hung his rifle and his broad-sword from the fork of a stunted oak tree, collecting some dry leaves and branches, and, striking a light from the ready flint and steel, soon had a clear bright fire glancing and flashing in a sheltered nook surrounded on all sides but one, that where his horse was tethered, by a dense and impenetrable thicket of bays, prickly pear and holly.

Within a few minutes, half a dozen twigs, fixed in the ground about the blazing fire, supported as many steaks of fat venison, each with a biscuit under it imbibing the delicious gravy, and a second with salt and pepper, all of which unusual dainties were supplied from the small valise of the provident and epicurean frontiers-man.

While his supper was cooking thus, and sending forth rich and unwonted odours through the forest, our traveller had prepared his simple couch, spreading his handsome poncho on the deep herbage, with his saddle arranged for his pillow.

If, however, he had hoped to enjoy his coming meal and his night's repose without interruption, he had reckoned without his host; for, at the same instant in which his charger ceased from feeding, snuffed the air eagerly, and uttered a low whining; the traveller started to his feet and listened anxiously for a moment, although there were so sounds which could have

been distinguished by any human ear unsharpened by the necessities and habits of a woodman's life.

Satisfied apparently that something was at hand which might mean mischief, he quietly took up his pistols and thrust them into his girdle, reached down his rifle from the branch on which it hung, loosened his wood-knife in its scabbard, and passed the handle of the hatchet through a loop in his sword-belt, so that the head rested in a sort of fold or pocket in the leather, evidently prepared for its reception, and the haft lay close on his left thigh.

These preparations made silently, promptly, yet deliberately, he stooped and laid his ear to the ground; nor did he raise himself to his full height for several minutes.

"Two, four, six, eight," he muttered to himself at intervals. "Yes, there are eight of them."

Again he laid his ear to the ground and listened.

"Yes, there are eight of them, sure enough," he again muttered; and then, after a pause, he added: "But two of them are mules, I think; and they are coming right down hitherward."

Then he looked to his rifle lock, and cocked his piece.

"Unless they turn aside when they reach the timber, they will be on me in five minutes; and if they know the forest, they will not turn, that's certain; for here's the only place where you can find hard bottom to ride in and out of the old Bravo, for ten miles up and down."

He paused from his soliloquy, listened again, and then a smile crept across his intelligent face.

"Bah!" he said, "I have been disquieting myself for nothing—they are dragoon horses; I can tell their managed pace; though, what the devil brings dragoons hither, the devil himself best knows."

Then he hung up his arms as before, again removed saddle and bridle from his horse, threw down his pistols and his hatchet on the grass, and, instead of concealing himself in ambush, unarmed, except his wood-knife, stepped quite at his ease forth from the cover of his thicket, and strode boldly forward to meet the new-comers.

He had not advanced above a hundred yards from the spot where his horse was tethered and his fire burning, before he discovered the little band of travellers just entering the belt of timber, at not above a hundred yards distance from the point where he himself had ridden into it from the open prairie.

That, however, which instantly caught the eye of the rover, was the form of a female—and a female, evidently, of the superior classes, forming one of the party, which, beside herself, consisted, as he saw at half a glance, of an officer and four privates of dragoons, or mounted riflemen.

"Precious lads, truly, these," he muttered through his teeth, "to be travelling the prairies, and not see my trail at a short hundred yards. By Jove! I believe they will cross it without notice. However, I'll give them a fright anyhow—so here goes," and with the words, he clapped his hand to his mouth, and uttered a long-drawn Indian yell, which made the arches of the forest echo and re-echo its cadences, till it died quavering in the far distance.

The rifles of the little party were cocked in an instant, and two or three were instinctively cast up, and levelled in the direction whence the sound proceeded.

But the woodman did not wait for any further demonstrations of hostility, but stepped calmly forth from his covert, calling out, as he did so, in a loud, clear voice:

"Whither, and whence, friends, so carelessly this bright evening?"

But ere his words were half out of his lips, he was interrupted by the sharp crack of a rifle, discharged at him within twenty paces, the ball of which sang past his head, perhaps at a foot's distance. But, entirely unmoved by the assault or by the peril he had run, he finished his sentence quietly, and then added:

"A miserably bad shot that, my lad; and a most unsoldierly act to fire a shot at all, without waiting orders. Do not you say so, lieutenant?"

"You are very much to blame yourself, fellow; first, for yelling in that wild fashion, for the purpose of creating an alarm, and then for approaching a command so rashly. Who are you, fellow, speak?"

"Fellow! fellow!" replied the other, half soliloquizing, "and a command, hey! command, truly; a couple of camaudus, or one of Jack Hays' men would make an end of such a command, before it had seen where to throw away one bullet."

"Well, sir, and who are you, then, I pray?"

"Pierre Delacroix, at your service."

"What! he who is commonly known as Pierre—"

"The Partisan, lieutenant," interrupted the other, quietly. "Yes, I am the man, and my horse,

Emperor, of whom you have heard, since you have heard of me, is down in the brake yonder; and, what is the better thing just now, there is a good fire burning, and some venison steaks ready by this time, if they be not over done, and a flask of good sherry wine and some cool water; and if you and your fair lady will share the supper of the Partisan, I shall be happy to think that I am pardoned for the slight alarm I gave you; and after supper, we will hear what has brought you hither, and what I can do to serve you. Is it a bargain?"

"Surely it is; and very thankful shall we be for your hospitality, and yet more for your advice. This is the famous soldier, Julia," he continued turning to the lady who accompanied him, "of whom you have heard so much, and whom we had hoped to meet at San Antonio." 4

No more words were spoken until they reached the spot which Delacroix had selected for his bivouac; but, as they did so, an exclamation of pleasure burst from Julia's lips at the romantic beauty of the scene.

The travellers immediately dismounted.

Now, as Julia stood erect before the Partisan, with the clear light of the blazing wood-fire falling full on her face, and revealing all the charms of a figure, tall as the tallest of her sex, voluptuous and fully rounded, yet slight withal, and delicate and slender as the fairest ideal of a poet's dream, he thought that he had never looked upon anything so perfectly and femininely lovely.

For some moments he stood gazing at her, mute, and positively breathless with admiration; then, suddenly recollecting himself, he called to the nearest of the dragoons, bidding him lead the lady's horse down to the river, and water him; and then conducted her respectfully to the place where he had spread his poncho on the grass, and with the aid of that and his large saddle, arranged for her an extemporaneous arm-chair near the fire, which the fresh coolness of the woods rendered not wholly needless, even at that season; while the thin smoke that rose from the wood embers, kept the mosquitoes at a distance.

Meanwhile, some of the dragoons applied themselves to clean the horses and accoutrements, while others unloaded the pack mules, and unbuckling the bags and cases which they carried, produced camp-kettles and canteens, and a small India-rubber tent and camp-bed, which was speedily set up and prepared in the methodical manner of the old soldier, and promised better accommodation for the lady.

"My cooking is ready, lady, such as it is," said the Partisan, "and I fancy you have the Spartan sauce, which even makes the black broth palatable."

Julia started a little at the classical allusion, and cast a quick glance toward her young husband, whose attention had been fixed on another portion of the roving soldier's speech, and said quickly, repeating the Partisan's word:

"Lady! Indeed I have been strangely remiss and discourteous, Major Delacroix. In the first hurry of our introduction, I forgot to name ourselves to you, though Yankee like; yet, I assure you, I am not a Yankee; I by no means forgot to exhort from you all that I wished to know. I should have imagined, Jule, that you would have found tongue enough by this time to make yourself known to Major Delacroix, but since it seems you have not done so, better late than never. Allow me, Major Delacroix, to present you to Mrs. Arthur Gordon, six weeks ago Miss Julia Forester, of New Orleans; and that done, to call your attention to my very humble and unworthy self, Arthur Gordon, First Lieutenant of the Second Dragoons."

When Arthur Gordon pronounced the words, Julia Forester, he started forward, and exclaimed:

"What—what! it cannot be—the daughter of my best and oldest friend, Colonel John Forester? I recollect his wife's name, whom I never saw, was Julia."

Julia Gordon blushed crimson as he spoke, and then in an instant turned as pale as ashes.

"My mother!" she gasped out, with a great exertion of the will compelling herself to speak at all. "My poor mother, I never saw her either, at least not within my recollection. Yes, Major Delacroix, I am Colonel John Forester's wild and wilful daughter. God bless him," she continued, a big tear swelling to her eye, "as he deserves a better child."

"Not so, not so, young lady. I am certain that it is not so. A brighter or more beautiful, he could not have, and it will be hard to convince me he could have a better, Lieutenant Gordon, allow me to shake your hand, and congratulate you; your father-in-law, and your sweet lady's father, was, I may say, to me more than a father; for, when Nature robbed me of both my parents, he supplied both their places. God bless John Forester, and all who love and honour him." 5

So thoroughly was the Partisan engrossed by his own warm and generous feelings, that he did not perceive at all, what would at any other time have been sufficiently apparent to a man of his keen and intuitive sagacity, that there was something of evident discomposure in the manner of the young officer as he spoke to him of his father-in-law.

The green carpet of the meadow was spread with their simple fair, and the Partisan did the honours of his camp with a singular blending of the frontiers-man's bluntness, and the easy manners of the gentleman and soldier.

There was, however, an inexplicable gloom hanging over the little party, and scarcely was the

frugal meal ended before, on the pretext of weariness, the lady retired to her tent, and the husband went away for a few minutes, as he said, to inspect his sentries, while Pierre Delacroix filled his Indian pipe with kinnikinnick, and, stretching himself at full length on his blanket, in the warmth of the fire, rested his head on his elbow, and mused more deeply than he had done for many a year, rolling out all the time great volumes of the odoriferous smoke of that Indian mixture, which he had learned to prefer to the Havana.

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## CHAPTER II.

### THE LIEUTENANT'S STORY.

The Partisan had not sat long alone, ere the young officer returned and joined him; yet, in that brief space, almost all the actions and adventures of a not uneventful life had passed through his mind; so strongly had his imagination been excited by the occurrences of the evening.

"Come, Mr. Gordon," said the Partisan, "I fancy that by this time you have got your men settled for the night. Had you not better take your pipe, and sit down with me, that we may talk matters over. By something you let fall a while ago, it seems that you have been expecting to meet me at San Antonio, although I knew it not, nor have been there these two months. Now, you must have had some end in seeking me; and, until I know what end that is, I am at a loss to see how I can aid you."

"To make you understand that, Major Delacroix—"

"Pardon me, sir," replied the Partisan, hastily, "I have no great respect for titles of any kind, least of all for military titles, when not backed by military rank and command. So, if you please, you will call me Pierre, or Delacroix, or Partisan."

"Very well," replied Gordon. "It is on you that we have counted all along for taking us safely to our journey's end."

"Well, we have gained something at least. Now where may that very definite place, which you call your journey's end, be? And, as the next question, what made you count upon me?"

"Our journey's end—Taylor's camp, of course—where else *should* it be?"

"Anywhere else, I should think, considering the means you have of getting thither, and the company you have with you. You do not really mean to say that you contemplate carrying that beautiful and delicate young woman with you to head-quarters?—the thing is utter madness."

"And yet my destination is headquarters; and she has no home, save my tent."

"Julia Forester—John Forester's daughter no home!" cried the Partisan, in far louder tones than he was wont to use, and starting to his feet, half indignant and half astonished. "Did I understand you aright, young sir? Did you say Julia Forester has no home save in the tent of a second lieutenant of dragoons?"

"I did say precisely that, Pierre Delacroix," answered the soldier, nettled a little by the manner of the questioner, and shaking off his momentary embarrassment the instant he was put upon his mettle.

"When I knew Colonel John Forester, he was reputed to be worth a million of dollars," said Pierre.

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"When I knew him," replied Arthur Gordon, "he was reputed to be worth two, at the lowest figure."

"And has he become a bankrupt since then, or a beggar?" asked the other, sharply.

"Neither, that I ever heard. *Au contraire*, he is, all but one or two, the richest man they say in Louisiana."

"And why the devil, then, did he give you his daughter for a wife, and not give you the means to sustain her?"

"I never said that he did give her to me," said the other, steadily.

"You said she was your wife."

"I did say so, and do. But I will substitute a short story for a long debate."

"Pray let us do so."

"It is six years since I first visited New Orleans; and being the bearer of letters to Colonel Forester was received hospitably and entertained in his house, where he then lived nominally alone, with the exception of his only daughter, Julia, at that time a beautiful girl of fourteen. Being very young myself, we were thrown much together, a sort of childish affection, half-liking and half love, grew up between us—not altogether childish either; for it constantly increased during the three years which I spent in the city, until it became a powerful passion. When I

entered the army, on the first raising of the second dragoon regiment, and before leaving the city for the north-west, I had an explanation with the colonel; and it was understood, and agreed, that at some future period, which was left undecided, Julia should be my wife. We were permitted to correspond, and I mounted my horse and rode away with my regiment, as light-hearted and as happy a soldier as ever set jack boot in steel stirrup. I received letters from my betrothed, of which I shall only say that they were all that the most sanguine lover could desire.

"After a while, however, a difference in their tone became apparent. Not, indeed, in the manifestation of affection, but of hope. At length her letters ceased altogether; and I was months without receiving any tidings from her. When the present war broke out I was eastward to recruit and had no opportunity of visiting New Orleans, although my brain and my heart were both on fire to do so. Three months since I received, the first time for nearly a year, a short, hurried, agonizing note from Julia, entreating me to come near her, without an instant's delay, as her mistress was too great to be endured, and one way or other she must release herself from it. For once, fortune favoured me; for the same post which brought her letter brought orders to the captain of my company to send me forward instantly with the men we had raised, to the very city in which I most desired to be. A fortnight afterward I was on the spot, and learned all the infamous and horrid truth.

"Your friend, the high and honoured soldier, whom I had known of old—the very pattern and impersonation of uprightness, and chivalry, and true nobility of soul—had so far lapsed in the decline of his intellectual powers from his once glorious standard, as to have made a coloured woman—his own emancipated slave, and formerly his mistress—his lawful wife and the partner of his fortunes; placing her openly at the head of his table, and bringing his illegitimate daughters, the offspring of his foul concubinage, into equality of station and society with his own beautiful, and pure, and noble child—with my Julia!"

"Great God!" exclaimed the Partisan, bounding to his feet almost in fury; "great God! can this be so? Would that I had been near to him; for, by the Lord that liveth, if neither argument nor entreaty should have been power to prevail over such low and beast-like passion, my hand—my own hand, which has caressed his cheeks and played with his grey hairs so often—my own hand should have spared him the infamy, and slain him in his untainted honour."

"But this was not all, nor half of all, that poor Julia suffered; for the incarnate devil, whom I must call Mrs. Forester, not content with forcing the deluded old man into the rescinding of his will, and bequeathing all but a mere pittance to herself and base-born children, never ceased persecuting him day or night, till she procured his promise to send Julia secretly away to Europe, there to be immured in a convent; fearing unquestionably that if she should be married to an American gentleman and soldier, her husband would find some means to frustrate the enormities she had planned so artfully, and secure a share at least of the partial old man's fortunes. I had an interview with him, though not without much difficulty; I offered to forego all—to sign away all claim on her behalf and my own, provided he would give me her hand, portionless and alone. For a while I thought I had prevailed; but the fiend entered the room, and I saw the old man quail before the gaze of her fierce, snake-like eye, and all was lost. Then, I, too, lost my temper; and I swore by the God who made me, and by the hell to which that woman's deeds were leading her, that her plans should be frustrated, and that Julia should be my wife in spite of man or devil. I got brief leave of absence on the promise to join at head-quarters before the last day of the present month—embarked my recruits with my second lieutenant; and on the third day after, Forester's garden wall was scaled, his daughter's window broken, and before the day dawned she was my bride.

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"Still flight was needful, and we fled; for by his wrath, and the unscrupulous wickedness of her who prompted him, we might still have been separated for a while, if not for ever. We fled, I say, to Natchez, and thence to Natchitoches, where by good fortune I found the little squad of dragoons who escort me, making their way down the river to join my party, which they had been detailed to enter as a veteran nucleus. With them, and this letter to yourself from an old friend of mine, who has, I believe, lived with you, Frank Arrowsmith of ours, I have made my way thus far safely.

"He gave me a letter to you, commending us to your care. He told me that if you would undertake it, you could guide us in safety into Taylor's camp, through all the guerrillas in Mexico."

"He did me too little and too much justice. Too little, in supposing that there was any *if* about it. The idea of Pierre Delacroix refusing to guide or assist a lady in the midst of danger. As to my being *able* to carry you safely into Taylor's camp, that's quite another thing."

"Is there so much danger?"

"The country is alive with horse. Every village is in arms, every rancho has turned out its riders; and keen riders they are, I assure you. Why, between us and the fences, and all the way towards Encinos, there are not less than a thousand men scattered about in little bands, from six to fifty and upward. And now, you go and bid your men to put no more wood on the fires, and lie down one and all, and get all the sleep they can. They will need it before we reach Monterey."

"What! will you have no sentinel?"

"I would rather have my brown horse, Emperor, for a sentinel, than all the dragoons in the United States, or out of it. Do what I bid you, and then get to your bed yourself. I will wake you

before the morning star is up to-morrow."

Gordon arose, well satisfied that the Partisan knew his business far better than he, and went away to do his bidding, much to the delight of the unfortunate dragoon, who was pacing up and down with his carbine in the hollow of his arm, envying his more lucky comrades their sound and healthy slumbers.

This duty done, the young officer hurried back to his tent and his fair bride; and, in doing so, passed close to the bivouac of the Partisan.

He had wrapped himself close in the handsome blanket, with his knife drawn in one hand, and his pistol in the other, ready for instant defense on the least alarm; and, with his head resting in the hollow of his large Spanish saddle, was already buried in deep and dreamless sleep.

In ten minutes more there was not an eyelid open, of man or animal, in the encampment; and the broad, lustrous, Northern moon, sailing in a flood of silver glory through the azure firmament, alone watched over them, like the unsleeping eye of an all-seeing Providence.

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## CHAPTER III.

### THE PASSAGE OF THE BRAVO.

The stars were beginning to grow pale in the heavens, and a faint greyish tint was creeping gradually upward from the Eastern horizon, and usurping the dark azure of the cloudless sky, when the light sleep of the Partisan was interrupted by the long, tremulous, low, whining of his favourite horse.

He started to his feet in an instant, and listening eagerly, and again laying his ear to the ground, as on the previous evening, speedily became aware that a large body of horse was passing along the hard prairie, not far from the skirts of the timber. Instantly awakening the young lieutenant, and his dragoons, he bade them strike tent, load the mules, and saddle the chargers with the possible speed and silence, keeping their arms ready, for that danger was at hand.

This done, he took up his trusty rifle, and stole away with a noiseless step to reconnoiter the party, which had now come so near that the clank of the steel scabbards against the stirrup irons was distinctly audible above the hollow sound of the horses' tramps.

The noise, however, gradually died away, the troopers having evidently ridden down the outer edge of the forest to the Southward, without noticing the track left by the horses of our company.

Within ten minutes, Pierre returned with a very serious countenance.

"There are above a hundred of them," he said; "regular lancers of Carrera's band. They have gone Southward for the present; but we may expect them back within an hour, for they are evidently on the look-out for our trail, which they must have followed from the last bottom, and lost at night on the dry prairie; had the morning been one hour advanced, they must have seen it, and we should have been all killed before this time; for they make no prisoners."

"There is no time to lose, then," said Gordon, hastily, looking with an anxious eye to the face of his wife, who was already equipped and ready to mount. "Let us get to horse at once, and put the river between them and us."

"That is soon done, so far as we men are concerned," replied the Partisan; "but how do you get *her* across rivers such as this?"

"We have an India-rubber pontoon here," he answered, pointing to a sort of oval bag of that material, depending from two air cylinders of the same stuff, which, when inflated, and distended by two or three short staves, form a rude boat.

"Let her get in, in God's name!" replied the Partisan, "for all this takes time, and we have little enough of that to spare."

And, with the words, he led his own horse, now fully accoutered, down to the shore, at the spot where he had watered the animal on the previous evening, followed by the dragoons, three of whom led the beasts, while one carried the light pontoon.

Gordon brought up the rear, with his fair, delicate wife hanging upon his arm, and smiling with serene and beautiful confidence in the protection of her gallant husband. Arrived on the bank, all the dragoons mounted and entered the broad and rapid river, which could not at this spot have been less than five hundred yards in width. Three of them leading the pack mules and the lady's jinnet, and the fourth carrying in his hand the reel on which was wound the tough cord of twisted hide, by which the frail bark was to be drawn across the whirling current.

So strong was the stream that, although the horses swam well and stoutly, and although the dragoons were as well trained to the management of their horses in the water as on dry land, they were carried a great distance down the river before they were enabled to make the opposite bank.

Then with a bright eye and a cheerful smile on her lovely face, the soft and delicate young woman entered the frail vessel, which sunk so deeply in the water, even under her slight burthen, that the extreme edges only of the cylinders which supported it were visible above the surface of the swift glancing waters.

Scarce was she landed, ere she was seated on the back of her beautiful and docile palfrey, which, recruited by its night's rest and plentiful pasture, pawed the earth, eager to be once more in motion. Gordon had already ridden a yard or two into the river, when he was attracted by the singular aspect and expression of the Partisan. Both horse and man stood like statues.

The charger's fine limbs positively trembled with excitement; his small, thin ears were pricked acutely forward; his large eyes dilated; and his nostrils distorted to the utmost, and as red as blood.

Pierre sat erect in his saddle; gazing with his keen dark eye into the recesses of the forest, his left hand raised to his ear, for he had let fall his reins on the disciplined charger's neck, and his cocked rifle ready in the right.

The next instant, a single Mexican came into view, wheeling his small but fiery horse round the thicket, which had sheltered their encampment, at full gallop.

The rifle of the Partisan rose slowly, and, with a steady motion, to his shoulder, and there remained as still and firm as though it and the extended arm which supported it, had been wrought in bronze or iron.

And now the ranchero—for such he seemed to be—was within forty yards of Pierre, when he saw the horse, the man, the levelled rifle—when he recognized the being he most feared on earth—the far-famed Partisan. Wheeling his horse in an instant, by dint of his cruel massive bit, which threw him on his haunches, as if by magic, the terrified wretch turned to fly in the direction of the troopers, who had gone down to the southward, and were not probably even now more than a mile distant.

Satisfied by the man's flight that he was unsupported, Pierre rapidly uncocked his rifle, and threw it to the ground, turning as he did so to forbid Gordon—who had unslung his carbine, and now half suspecting treachery in his guide, was raising it to his eye—from firing.

"Not for your life!" he cried—"not for your life! Cross the river, and ride westward. I will deal with this dog."

And, with the word, gathering up the reins in his left hand, he gave Emperor the spur so suddenly that he bounded six feet into the air, with all his feet together, and dashed at once into his tearing gallop.

Meanwhile the rider had uncoiled the lasso, which hung from the pommel of his saddle, and whirling it around his head in the true Spanish fashion, thundered along in pursuit of the fugitive at a tremendous pace.

The Mexican had, it is true, some fifty yards the start of his pursuer, and knowing that he was riding for his life, or at least for his liberty, plied his long-roweled spurs with desperate energy.

On drove the Emperor, covering sixteen feet at every stroke, and gaining every second upon the trembling fugitive. Now he was within twenty yards distance, when the ranchero, turning in his saddle, deliberately levelled his escopeta at the Partisan.

In another moment his carbine would have been discharged, and the alarm communicated to the other troopers; but ere he could pull the trigger, the Partisan wheeled Emperor by a quick movement of his hand and thigh, and hurled the tremendous missile as sure and almost as swift as his own unerring bullet.

Aimed by an eagle eye, and launched by a master hand, the terrible noose of the lasso encircled both the forelegs of the Mexican horse as he sprang forward, was drawn taut on the instant by the very speed of the trammelled captive, and hurled horse and rider headlong to the earth, with a violence which left both for an instant senseless.

The next moment Pierre leaped from his saddle and sprang upon his captive.

"Life!" he cried, piteously, in Spanish, "life, for the love of God, and the most holy Virgin! For charity, give me my life, Senor American!"

"Mount your horse, fool!" replied the Partisan, sternly, "who the devil do you think would trouble himself to take such a miserable life as yours."

Admonished thus, the man climbed awkwardly to his saddle, and when once there was secured in his seat by Pierre, who, cutting the lasso from the Mexican saddle, fastened his feet with it under his horse's belly, though not so tightly as to deprive him of the necessary command of the animal.

This done, he released his arms, and bidding him in a stern, quiet voice followed him close and silently, if he did not desire to be strangled, he leaped lightly into his own saddle, and cantered back toward the river, followed by his captive, who took admirable care to keep so nigh to his conqueror that the strain of the harsh cord about his neck should not be drawn any tighter.



In the meantime, Lieutenant Gordon, who had first watched the chase with some apprehension, and very great anxiety lest the fugitive should escape, had no sooner seen the lasso hurled, and the downfall of man and horse, than, perfectly content to trust all to the skill and judgment of a man who had exhibited such readiness of thought and action, he addressed himself to obey his directions; and, putting his horse steadily down the bank into the river, swam it gallantly, holding his pistols above his head in his right hand, in order to keep the powder dry in case of future emergency.

Before he was half way across, the Partisan came up at a brisk, hard canter, with his trembling prisoner in tow, whose sword, pistols, and escopeta he threw into the river, and then taking his own pistols from the holsters, and holding them aloft, like Gordon, plunged in himself and swam stoutly over, dragging the unfortunate ranchero in mortal terror after him.

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## CHAPTER IV.

### THE DOUBLE TRAITOR.

There was no need of discussion or debate, so evidently correct was the plan of the Partisan; nor, had his views been much more questionable than they were, is it at all probable that any opposition would have been made, so completely had he gained the confidence of the whole party, by his promptitude, his gallantry, and his extraordinary coolness in danger. The heads of all the horses, therefore, were turned westward, and away they rode at as rapid a rate as the nature of the ground permitted. In the present order of the march, the most danger being anticipated from the rear, the oldest and most intelligent of the dragoons was detached to a hundred yards in front, followed by the three others; two leading the pack mules, and the third having charge of the prisoner, about whose neck one end of the lasso was still secured, while the other was made fast to the pommel of the soldier's saddle.

After these, Gordon and his fair bride rode together, conversing at times in a low voice, but yet oftener keeping silence.

In the rear of all rode the Partisan, alone, at nearly a hundred yards distance from the little group which preceded him.

As they galloped onward, however, through the belt of timber which bordered the Western as well as the Eastern marge of the Bravo del Norte, time slipped away and brought no sounds of pursuit from the rear.

Just as they were approaching so nearly to the margin of the open ground, that the dragoon, who acted as vidette, was looking round for orders, Pierre uttered a shrill, long-drawn whistle, which was the preconcerted signal for a halt; and, after the rest of the party had pulled up their horses, galloped forward himself till he reached the extreme verge of the covert, where, without speaking a single word, he dismounted, fastening his charger to a tree, and advanced stealthily into the open prairie.

After being absent about twenty minutes, during which the remainder of his party had lost sight of him altogether, he returned with a thoughtful expression on his strongly-marked features, and walked through the little group of dragoons and pack mules, until he reached Gordon and his fair bride, who sat on their panting horses, eagerly awaiting his approach.

"Have you heard anything," he asked, quietly, "from the forest in our rear?"

"Not a sound," replied the young officer.

"There are three smokes, one hereaway, some six miles to the southward. Now there are three plans, of which we must choose one, and then act on it for life or death. We must work twenty miles due north, up this forest land, and so get above their posts—which were the safest plan of all, if it would not carry us so far out of our route, and bring us far too soon into the settled country, quite out of the line of our communications—or we must strike due southward for that extinguished fire, and so strive to make our way down to our posts at Mier and Camargo, which would do well enough did not the whole of that country swarm with guerilleros—or, again, we must drive right onward, and take the chance of falling on the party at the little fire unawares, and finding them as few that we can master them. If we succeed in doing so, we have the best chance of reaching Monterey in safety. For, once through these frontier parties, we shall, it is likely, find the country clear until we reach our outposts."

"The risk of the three, then, is nearly equal," said Gordon, musing deeply.

"The immediate risk of the last is greatest; the ultimate risk the least; but, in truth, it is chance, anyhow."

Gordon desired him to help the lady to mount, replaced his slender baggage on the back of the good horse Emperor, and then, without setting a foot in the stirrup, laid his hand lightly on the pommel, and vaulted into the saddle.

After this, miles and miles vanished beneath the feet of their horses, as they pressed onward steadily and swiftly; Pierre, once again in the van, leading them on, rifle unslung and ready, at

Emperor's fast slashing trot.

Now they were within a mile or less of the digy brow, steeper and more abrupt than any which they had yet passed, from the other side of which the smoke rose in grey volumes, having been fed with recent fuel. Here, then, Pierre halted, and caused the pack-mules to be securely tethered to stakes driven into the moist earth of the prairie bottom, together with the horse of the Mexican.

The prisoner—after being once more interrogated, and persisting in his tale that there were but six men; that there was a large stream at the base of the descent; and that the fire was on this side of the stream—was dismounted, gagged, bound hand and foot, and laid on his back upon the grass.

This done, Gordon arranged his handful of men, himself leading on the right, while Pierre rode forward some six horse-lengths in advance, and Julia, who had refused positively to remain behind the pack-mules, followed a length or two behind.

Now they were within twenty paces of the extreme brow of the ridge, which alone separated them from their enemy—three paces more would have brought their heads into relief against the sky above the summit of the hill, and discovered them to the sentinel, if there were one, on duty. At this moment, Pierre pulled his horse short up, dismounted silently, and with a gesture to the well-trained and gallant animal, which, it was evident, he understood—for he stood stock still on the instant, with ears erect, expanded nostril, straining eye, quivering in every limb with fiery eagerness—cast himself down, rifle in hand, among the shorter herbage which clothed the steep ascent.

There were, as the prisoner had stated, six men only; two of whom were awake, the one a sentinel stalking to and fro with the escopeta in his hand, the other, a non-commissioned officer, who sat smoking his cigarillo by the fire, over which a camp kettle, filled with some savory mess, was simmering.

The death-shot, which sped its bullet crashing through the brain of the hapless sentinel, aroused them all, and brought them to their feet, amazed and terrified, and unprepared for action.

Meantime, the dragoons crossed the bridge and poured down all abreast, receiving as they came, a straggling volley from the escopetas of the lancers, who seeing that flight was hopeless, stood to their arms like men, and making a desperate defense.

12

Then came a desperate race, for life or death, across the firm dry prairie, which echoed under the thundering horse-tramps firm, solid, and elastic.

The Mexican had, perhaps, gained a start of some fifty yards before his foe was across the brook, and his small but high-bred horse, being the fresher of the two, held his own for a little way, and even widened the gap at first, between himself and his pursuer. Ere long, however, the tremendous stride and power of the Anglo-American thorough-bred horse began to tell; and, at every stroke, the Partisan closed on him. Nor was the other slow to perceive the disadvantage. He stood up in his stirrups, looked quietly behind him, and seeing that none of the dragoons had passed the brook, but had dismounted and were now grouped about the fire, deliberately pulled his horse up, and, unslinging his escopeta, took a deliberate aim at Pierre Delacroix.

He fired. The ball whizzed through the air, so close to the head of the Partisan, that it severed one of his long, dark locks; but it passed onward harmless. Then, seeing the failure of his missile, the Mexican couched his long lance and rode at the frontiers-man with a savage yell.

Silently Pierre charged right upon him; but, when he was within a horse's length of the spear's point, he wheeled suddenly to the left, and as the Mexican was borne past him, delivered a straight lunge, *en carte*, which emptied his saddle in an instant, and left him but a minute's life to wrestle out on the greensward.

The Partisan had no time to give mercy, and he rode away to join Gordon and the lady; but, ere he did so, he met the prisoner in charge of the two soldiers who had brought up the mules, and the fellow, looking at him half askance, asked him in Spanish, with a sullen and almost savage intonation, whether he had not told him truly.

Pierre replied only by two words—"Very truly." But he noted the accent and half-sneering smile; and the first words he spoke as he joined the lieutenant, were:

"Confound that scoundrel! I have half a mind to reward him with one ounce of lead instead of two of gold."

"That were scarce worthy of you, Partisan," said Gordon, "and scarce worth the time. What harm can one poor devil like that do to six stout, well-armed fellows, such as we?"

"I do not know," answered Pierre, "I do not know; but right sure I am, that he is a double traitor."

# CHAPTER V.

## THE NIGHT ALARM.

All day they rode across the open plains, presenting still the same invariable aspect of rich prairie land, for the most part nearly level, but now very rich and fertile, and becoming more and more so, with every mile our party traversed.

At noon, they halted for three hours under the shelter of a clump of magnificent oaks over-canopying a little pool, the well-head of as clear a streamlet as ever was the haunt of Grecian woodnymph. The sylvan meal was spread with all the simple luxury of a frontiers-man's fare.

After the meal was over, the Partisan said:

"Now try to sleep for an hour or so, while I go and take a round on the prairie. I see a flock of buzzards yonder, whose motives I don't exactly understand, and I would have a nearer look at them."

And with the word, he took up his rifle, tried it with the ramrod to see that the ball had not fallen out, from the speed at which he had ridden, as the gun hung muzzle downward at his back; renewed the copper caps, loosened his wood-knife in its sheath, and walked off unaccompanied toward the spot in the plain above which a flight of the black vultures, commonly known as Turkey Buzzards, were hovering and swooping, at a distance so great that they looked no larger than flies, and that no ordinary eye could have distinguished what they were.

13

As he moved away slowly, Julia's eyes followed his departing figure, and her face wore a very thoughtful expression, as she turned round to her husband.

"There goes an extraordinary man," she said, with an expression of deep feeling. "A very singular, and very noble character. I never have seen and very seldom read of anything like him."

"By Heaven! I believe he is in love with you, Julia," replied Frank Gordon, half laughing, half in earnest. "I have thought so all the morning."

"Silly, silly, Frank!" she answered, slapping his hand playfully. "Do you know that they say jealous husbands make false wives? and that you should not imagine that I could like any man but you."

About an hour elapsed before the Partisan returned, bearing on his shoulders the saddle of a fat buck, which he had shot during his reconnaissance, wrapped in his own hide, and in his right hand, together with his rifle, a long Comanche arrow reddened with dry gore.

He found the whole party sleeping so soundly that he walked into the very midst of them without disturbing one of the number.

For many hours, not a sound was heard in the neighbourhood of the little encampment. The moon rose and soared above it in her silver beauty, and bathed everything for miles and miles around in soft lustre—the stars rose and set—and the first grey ray of morning was just beginning to pale the eastern horizon, when a deep, continuous, hollow sound, like the roar of the distant surf, aroused every one in an instant.

"Indians! it is Indians!" exclaimed Gordon. "Stand to the horses, lads. Strike the tent like lightning. If one of the beasts neigh or stir, we are lost."

Three of the dragoons, who had risen to their feet on the first alarm, obeyed his orders in an instant, as regarded the horses; Gordon himself struck the tent, and in deep silence, speechless and almost breathless, they awaited the result.

Nearer and nearer drew the din. Gordon was right; it was the fast falling tramp of unshodden horse hoofs. Five minutes, or less, after the first alarm, the mounted horde swept by the mouth of the gorge, so near that the travellers could see their shaven and plumed scalps, their easy martial seats on their wild horses, and their long lances in relief against the sky. But the darkness which brooded over the little basin protected them, and almost as soon as it was there, the danger had passed over.

But as it ended, and the men had time to look around them, it was perceived at once that one of their number—Pierre, the Partisan—was missing, and that the sergeant, although that din might have aroused the dead, still lay asleep on the greensward.

Asleep, indeed! in that sleep which knows no waking. Three deep knife-wounds in his bosom, his throat cut from ear to ear, the cords severed which had bound him to the prisoner—these sufficed to tell the tale.

But the Mexican and the sergeant's charger had vanished, and the Partisan and brown Emperor were absent.

Horror, and a sense near akin to despair, fell on the party thus abandoned. For a little while they gazed in each other's faces, mute and white with surprise, if not with terror. Gordon was the first to recover from his consternation, and he spoke cheerfully.

"The prisoner has escaped, and the Partisan has gone in pursuit of him, that is clear," he said.

"We have nothing to do but to wait here until he returns. We have food in abundance; and water and forage for the horses, and we can keep this pass against all the Indians in the universe, so long as our ammunition lasts—and we can fire five hundred rounds, if the Comanches find us out, which I think they will not. Keep good heart, therefore, men, and, trust me, Pierre Delacroix will be back here before sunset."

14

"But the Comanches! have not they cut him off?" whispered Julia, who had not spoken one word since the first alarm, but had behaved with the cool, passive fortitude of a brave, noble woman, awaiting the end in silent resignation.

"Surely not," replied Gordon, confidently. "Had they fallen in with him, his brave horse would surely have outstripped them, and in his flight he would surely have led them in a contrary direction from this, our stronghold."

"Sure he would. You are right! you are right!" said the quick-witted girl—"God's name be praised; you are right, Frank; he is safe."

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## CHAPTER VI.

### THE BELEAGUERED CAMP.

"Now I will post a sentinel on yon hillock, and then we will pass the day as easily as we can. I and my fellows will lay poor Sergeant Davis in the earth, which, if it be not consecrated, will at least shield him from the ravening wolf and the loathsome vulture."

The sabres of his dragoons, and an axe or two, which had been brought with them as part of the camp equipments, sufficed to scoop out a little hollow in the rich soil of the moist basin, hard by the streamlet's bed, and in it, wrapped in his watch-cloak, with his plumed shako on his head, and his good sword on his thigh, all that was earthly of the gallant veteran was laid to take its long sleep.

Gordon secured his telescope, and, mounting a steep hill, surveyed the country, expecting to see the Partisan.

All at once he exclaimed in a full, manly, and clear tone:

"Julia, huzza! huzza! He is here—come forth and greet him. The Partisan is here already."

And just as the highly-bred brown horse bore him up the low bank from the rivulet's bed, she came out quickly from the little tent with a warm flush on her soft cheeks and a bright light in her clear blue eye, and a fleet step, and an out-stretched hand, which showed that the joy which she manifested at his coming was from the heart, sincere and earnest.

"Oh!" she cried, "Major Delacroix!" and her sweet low voice faltered as she spoke, as if she were on the point of bursting into tears, "how glad, how very glad I am to see you."

"Too glad, I am afraid, dear lady," answered the gallant soldier, bowing almost to the saddle bow, "too glad, I am afraid; for your pleasure almost looks as if you thought I had deserted you."

"Oh! no, indeed—indeed!" she answered, clapping her hands together in the intensity of her earnestness; "I knew that you would die a thousand deaths before you would desert me—before you would desert, I mean," she added, with some slight embarrassment, "any woman in distress or danger."

"You need not have modified your first expression, lady," replied the Partisan, quietly; "as for dying a thousand deaths, I cannot say for that, but certainly so far as risking the one life I do possess, I would do that for *you*, willingly."

Julia Gordon was a high-minded, artless, innocent woman, if ever such an one breathed the breath of life; but still she was a woman. She perceived at once that she had struck and fascinated the wild Partisan at first sight, and though she would not for the universe have intentionally caused him a single pang, she did unconsciously encourage him, and lead him on to wilder and more wandering fancies than he had ever entertained before.

"You flatter me, fair lady," he replied, with a smile, as he dismounted from his good horse; "and flattery from such lips as yours were perilous, indeed, to a younger man than I, and to one alienated from the hopes, the wishes, the delights of civilized society. But let us go in to your tent," he continued, "and you shall bestow upon me your hospitality to-day, in requital of the poor meal I set before you on the other side of the Bravo."

When the repast was ended, and coffee set before them, he produced his pipe, and filling it with his favourite mixture of tobacco, applied himself for a few minutes to smoking silently, Gordon following his example, and Julia awaiting patiently the relation, which, with the true woman's instinct, she foresaw to be close at hand.

15

"Now then, lieutenant, since we are about to start, it were, perhaps, as well that we should determine whither."

"Whither," exclaimed Gordon, starting, and looking very anxiously in the old soldier's face. "I thought that had been determined long ago. I thought we were in full route for Taylor's camp before Monterey."

"It is impossible," replied the Partisan. "I did hope at first to effect it, but the hope was delusive—the thing is a sheer impossibility. We are in the midst of out-laying parties of regulars and, what is worse yet, of guerrillas; and, worst of all, of these accursed Comanches."

"And to return?" asked Gordon.

"Is equally impossible."

"What then? For the love of Heaven, speak," cried the young husband, actually trembling with the violence of his anxiety and apprehension.

"It is impossible for a party, at once too strong to avoid discovery, and too weak to resist an enemy, to push on to Monterey, even if we had not a lady with us. I could, myself, run the gauntlet thither, and arrive in safety, though even that is doubtful. You, or she, at least, must remain in concealment until I can bring you such succour as will suffice to her safety."

"Remain in concealment, here?"

"Not here, exactly, nor yet very far distant."

"Can it be done?"

"I think it can, with safety—else had not named it."

"And whence will you seek succour?"

"When God and the fortunes of war shall send it. Perhaps not higher than the general's camp—perhaps I may stumble on Jack Hays, or Walker, or McCulloch, or Gillespie's rangers. They are on the scout almost all the time, either in the van or rear of the army; and now I think it likely they will be down here away, with the intent to open our communication. God send that they may."

"God send it so, indeed," replied Arthur Gordon, earnestly. "But what has led you so completely to alter your views and intentions?"

"That which I have seen with my own eyes, or heard with my own ears, last night."

"And what may that have been?"

"Listen. I was awakened last night by the sound of a scuffle and a faint groan. Before I could get on my feet, however, I had the pleasure of seeing that scoundrel, whose life we spared in the morning—and a stupid thing we did in sparing it—lead his horse out of the circle and leap on his back. There was no use in awakening you, so I untethered Emperor as quickly as I could, and out in pursuit of him. For all the speed I could make, he had got full a half mile away on the open prairie before I was in the saddle; but I cared little enough for that, seeing that in a five miles' race, I knew well enough that I could make up such a gap as that, and overhaul him, too, without much trouble. But what *did* vex me, and set me to thinking, was, that instead of making the best of his way back over the ground we had traversed in the morning, he struck off here to the north-west, riding as straight as if he had been following a beaten track, without a sign of hesitation, or so much as looking behind him."

"That was strange," said Gordon.

"I soon found out whither he was bound, and I was thinking of taking a straight course for the rancho, at which I saw he was aiming, when all at once I heard a yell in the forest, scarcely three hundred yards ahead of me, and before I had time to think, out galloped forty or fifty red skins from the forest, and drove right across the open ground right down upon our runaway. He felt that he was lost, I think, as soon as he saw them, for he made but a very sorry race of it, wheeling and turning to and fro, as if he knew not whither to fly, and the consequence was that they ran him down in less than ten minutes, and that within less than a hundred yards of the brake which hid me. If I had just then had ten rangers with me, armed with good western rifles, they never would have served him as they did, nor would one of them got off scot free. But what could I do? I was but one against fifty, and I knew not how soon my own turn might come: so I had only to stand by and look on while they—"

"Murdered him!" exclaimed Julia, covering both her eyes with her fair hands; "good God! how terrible!"

"Burnt him alive, lady," said the Partisan, coolly.

"Burnt him alive!" exclaimed Julia, whose hands had dropped from before her eyes into her lap at the first words of his reply. "Burnt him alive, and before your eyes!"

"Before my eyes, lady. Not a prayer, not a shriek, not a groan of the wretched devil escaped my ears, and the smell of his roasting flesh sickened and almost choked me," cried the Partisan.

"And why, why did you hold back?" exclaimed Julia, wildly catching him by the arm, "why did you not rush upon them?"

"I could but have died with him."

"Then should you have died with him," she cried, scarce knowing what she said. "Not to have done so, is not like the man I have heard you called—not like the man I took you for."

"Hush, Julia, hush!" cried her husband, springing to his feet. "Be silent, child, if you cannot speak reason—"

But Delacroix interrupted him, speaking very slowly, and with an inexpressibly mournful intonation of voice.

"Let her go on," he said. "It was for *her* sake I did it, and most meet it is that she should pay me for it with ingratitude. Who ever served or loved a woman and met with other guerdon for his services? I was a fool—I am a fool, but I did not expect this at her hands."

He hung down his bold head as he spoke, and one or two big tears, the first he had shed for years, rolled down his swarthy cheeks.

"And now bid your men strike the tent, and pack just what baggage your lady cannot spare. Pack it on the dragoon horse, whose saddle is left empty by that murderer's deed, who has dearly rued it. The rest with the tent and pontoon must be abandoned, and the mules that bore them must be slain. Let them hide everything in the chaparral; the sun will have set within an hour. Meanwhile, I will go forth and see that the coast is clear."

"But whither, whither are you about to lead us?" inquired Gordon, anxiously.

"If you trust me you will follow me, lieutenant, whithersoever I lead you. If not, you will not follow me at all, for if it be my intent to deceive you, I can do so by words as well as by actions.

"Oh, Major Delacroix!" exclaimed Julia, who had recovered from her bewilderment, and was sensible of the error she had committed, "you are offended, you are angry with me, and justly—I have been most ungrateful."

"Not angry, lady—not offended. A man cannot be angry with such a one as you, do what you will with him. I *am* disappointed, perhaps hurt, but certainly neither angry nor offended."

"You must forgive me," she exclaimed, springing passionately forward, and catching his hand in both her own, "you must—you must forgive me. I knew not *then*, I know not even now, what it was I said—will you but forgive me?"

"Surely I would, had I anything to forgive, sweet lady," he replied, with a grave, sad smile. "But I have nothing, unless it be," he added, with a low sigh, "my own folly. But a truce to this, we have indeed no time for parleying. Will you trust me and follow me? As we ride onward I will tell you whither."

"To the world's end," answered the beautiful girl, clasping her hands and blushing crimson with the violence of her own emotions. "To the world's end, if you will not forgive me." 17

"Now will you be so kind as to issue your orders to your men, lieutenant, and you, madam, to make your preparations for a ride which may extend through the night until day-break tomorrow?"

He spoke so decidedly that there was no excuse for attempting to prolong the conversation, and Gordon left the little tent immediately in order to give his directions, while the Partisan lifted his rifle from the ground where he had deposited it on entering, and turned to follow the young officer without saying another word.

But ere he had reached the entrance, Julia, who had been standing with down-cast eyes and a strange expression, half sad, half passionate on her beautiful features, sprang forward to intercept him, and again caught him by the arm.

"What have I done," she cried, passionately, "what have I done that you thus spurn me—thus despise me?"

"I, lady!" and he gazed at her in blank astonishment; "I despise you?"

"Yes, yes, miserable *me*, and I deserve it all, aye, more than all. Oh, God! oh, God! I shall go mad. What shall I do to win your forgiveness?"

"I have said, madam," he replied, mastering himself and retaining his self-composure with a mighty effort, "that I had nothing to forgive. But now it is my turn to ask," and his voice assumed a deeper tone of feeling, and his whole manner showed an intenser meaning, "will *you* spare *me*? You know what I mean, lady—all women *know* their power, and, I suppose, all *abuse it*. But as I have endeavoured to serve you truly, as I intend to do to the end—as I am resolved to die for you—will you spare *me*, I say? Spare me my self-respect, my consciousness of right, nay manhood, my repose of soul, my honour. If you will, lady, I forgive, I bless you. If not—if not, tremble, I say, tremble, not at the thought of my vengeance, but of your own remorse. Think of this, lady, and fare you well. We speak no more alone together—no more, forever!"

And he flung her hand, which he had held tightly clasped in his own while he spoke, away from him contemptuously, half indignantly, turned on his heel and left her.

She gazed on him for a moment wistfully, and then sank down upon the bearskin on which he had been sitting, buried her face in the fur, and wept bitterly, as might be seen from the

convulsive sobs which shook her whole frame as she lay prostrate in her desperate sorrow.

Within an hour the Partisan returned to the camp which had been the scene of so much mental suffering and excitement to all the parties who had passed the last weary, long hours within its guarded precincts. But when he did return, he had fully mastered his composure, for he now fully understood his own feelings, and perceived the peril of indulging them. And he found all his comrades collected and self-possessed, at least in appearance, and prepared to set forth at a moment's notice.

The horse of the unhappy sergeant had been equipped, instead of his own demipique, with the pack-saddle of the poor predestined mule, and stood, seemingly conscious of his degradation, loaded with such necessary baggage as could in no way be dispensed with.

The appearance of the Partisan, and the first quick gesture of his hand, gave the signal; and all the men vaulted at once into their saddles.

"All is safe!" he exclaimed, cheerfully. "To horse, to horse, and away!"

And with the word, he laid his hand on the pommel of the brown charger's demipique, and, without setting his foot into the stirrup, sprang at one bound to his back.

Then, after saying a few words in a low voice to Arthur, who communicated them in turn to one of the dragoons, he bowed to the lady, saying:

"And now, if you are ready, we will proceed at once," and rode at an easy gait out of the gorge, followed by all the party.

The heart of Julia sank as she gazed around; and she felt that the least addition to the sense of dread and half superstitious awe which now beset her, would be too much for her powers of endurance. Yet, while she thought thus, another item *was* added—it was the sharp and sudden crack of two rifles, discharged, almost simultaneously, in the small amphitheatre from which they had just departed.

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She started in her saddle as if she had received a blow, and would have fallen from her seat had not her husband thrown his powerful arm around her, and supported her frame on the back of her palfrey.

"It is nothing," he whispered; "it is nothing only the poor mules which we were compelled to shoot, as we could not bring them with us, and dared not leave them to follow, and, by following, betray us."

"More blood!" cried Julia, bursting into a paroxysm of tears; "more blood! my God! when will this have an end?"

"You should have thought of that Julia," replied the young soldier, sharply and bitterly, "before you married a soldier. That done, such thoughts are too late."

"Alas, alas! they are, indeed, too late."

"And do you cry alas! for that, false girl?" exclaimed Gordon, in so loud a tone that his words reached the ears of the Partisan, who instantly reined back his horse, and laying his hand kindly on the young man's arm, said, in a low voice:

"Oh, peace, peace, for shame! Consider what she has borne, what she has yet to bear—and all for you."

"I wish I were in my grave," she answered, raising her mild, soft eyes to meet his. "I never shall be happy more till I lie in it."

"Nay, lady, speak not thus," returned the veteran, warmly. "Death, at the best, is a dread mystery. In God's good time, we must all come to that; to His good wisdom, therefore, let us leave it. And, oh, by no levity or petulance of ours, let us call down His anger on our heads. But, I assure you, it is no gloomy place, no fearful or dark abiding-place, that I hope to conduct you, but to a sort of fairy bower, inhabited," he added, assuming a tone of gayety which he perhaps scarcely felt "by what I thought, till I met your blue eyes, Mistress Gordon, the loveliest woman I e'er looked upon."

Despite herself, Julia Gordon was interested and amused, and yielding, womanlike to the immediate impulse, she cried: "What! a fairy bower, and a fair woman, in this howling wilderness?"

"Aye, lady, even so! and thereby hangs a tale, which, as you will be thrown, I think, upon her hospitality, and as it may beguile the tediousness of our night-march, I will relate to you, if you choose to hear it."

"Oh, tell it, by all means, Partisan," cried Gordon, eager to atone for his late petulance, and to divert his wife's apprehension; "I hope it is a love tale."

"Cato's a proper person!" answered Delacroix, laughing. "You see I quote, lieutenant. But here goes my story."

"It was a little better than a year ago," he began, "that I first visited this part of the country, which I know—every pass, glen, and pond, and rivulet of it—as if it were my own garden. All then

was violence, and fierce, irregular strife, and vengeful indiscriminate warfare and confusion.

"I was alone on this good horse which I now ride, and armed as you now see me. At times I would join this or that band of rangers, when on some actual service which promised excitement and the chance of action, I for the most part scouted by myself.

"On this occasion, however, I had a special duty to perform, being charged with dispatches from the general to the chief of the band, which will not name, nor otherwise designate, except as being ever the most daring and successful in the onslaught, although too often the most merciless in the moment of victory."

"Well, it was a lovely summer's evening, as ever shone out of Heaven, when I passed through this belt of forest; not exactly here, or in this direction, for I came in farther to the southeastward, and approached the clearing which surrounds the plantation, whither we now are bound. When suddenly, as I rode along, following the track of the horse hoofs, which I could easily distinguish in the mossy greensward, and judging by many certain indications that I could not now be far behind them, though I heard nothing to denote their vicinity; when suddenly—I say, I caught the distant sounds of merriment, and revelry; the light cadences of the guitar, the merry laugh of girls, the deep rich voices of the male singers, in the harmonious Spanish tongue, and all the glee and anxiety of fandango.

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"I felt a momentary sense of pleasure, for I knew that I was in time, which I had feared might not be the case; and that the attack, which it was my mission to prevent or at least to render bloodless, had not as yet taken place. The next instant a sudden doubt, a great fear fell upon me. How could it be that I should be so close to the rancho and the band, of which I was in pursuit, yet closer, but unseen, unheard and unsuspected. I knew that not a moment must be lost. That even now the rangers must be stealing with ready arms upon their victims; that even now the doom of the gay lancers must be sealed, unless my presence should arrest it. I gave my good horse the spur, and throwing the rein upon his neck, galloped at the top of his speed along the intricate and mazy wood-track.

"Never, in all my life, did I spur so hard; and never did a road seem so long, or so devious; nor was this the effect of imagination only; for I have since ascertained by actual inspection although the distance, as the bird flies from the spot, where I first heard the music, to the rancho whence it proceeded, is but a short mile, the road by which alone you can reach it, measures three at the least, winding it to and fro to avoid pathless brakes and deep barrancas, and is exceedingly deep and miry.

"The sound of my horse's tramp, splashing through the deep clay, was already heard by the lancers, and heard, alas! by their ambushed foes, when I fear it spurred to accelerated action; when suddenly from the wood to my left, the shrill blast of the bugle rose piercingly upon the night air, and was answered by a second at a little distance. There was an instant's pause, breathless and awful as the lull that precedes the burst of a thunderstorm; and then a long loud shout burst out on all sides, and the quick running rattle of a hundred rifle-shots fired in quick succession. God! what a shriek succeeded! And then the clash of blades, and the blasphemies and yells of the charging Texans, and the deep oaths and dying groans of the slaughtered Spaniards and the howling of hounds and mastiffs; and, above all, piercing my very brain, the maddening screams of women pealed up in horrid dissonance to the peaceful heavens, which, in a moment afterward, were crimsoned with the glare of the rushing flames, making the twilight scenery of the calm forest lurid and ruddy as the fabulous groves of hell!

"When I heard that tremendous uproar, and saw the outburst of that furious conflagration, I spurred my horse the faster, and at last, issuing from the forest, came upon such a scene of horror, blood and devastation, as I trust it may never be my fate to look upon again.

"The rancho or country dwelling-house which had been attacked was of unusually large dimensions, consisting of many buildings, with barns, stables, cattle-folds, and out-houses of every kind.

"Suddenly a pistol shot or two startled me, followed by a shout and the clashing of swords from a distant quarter of the garden.

"I was still mounted, and with the speed of light I galloped toward the spot whence those sole sounds of human life proceeded. Across the smoothly-shaven lawn and luxuriant flowerbeds I drove my charger recklessly. I came up. I was yet in time! It was a small, low building of two rooms only, the inmost of which had windows reaching to the ground, secured with jalousies, and perfectly embowered by the rich leaves and vagrant tendrils of a hundred climbing parasites.

"And this lone bower, evidently the abode of some Spanish beauty, was now the last citadel of the hapless inhabitants, mercilessly attacked and desperately defended. It was fortunate for those within it that the Texans had discovered it from the court-yard, with which it communicated only by one door in a massive wall of stone—all its windows opening into the secluded quarter of the garden, which they had not as yet discovered.

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"From the court-yard, separated from the garden in which I stood by the high and massive wall I have named, the shouts and rush of armed men came clearly to my ears; and, by the English tongue, the wild oaths, and the bitter denouncing, I readily perceived that it was the band of whom I was in pursuit, and that they were forcing their way into the building, in despite of all opposition. Still it was evident to me, by the silence which prevailed in the inner room—opposite



to the casements of which I stood—that this last sanctum was yet unforced, though the rapid discharge of pistol and rifle shots, and the clash of rapier and bowie-knife at the door, announced that its security was menaced, and could not certainly be maintained many minutes longer.

"There was not a second to be lost. Springing down from my horse, with one pistol in my left hand, a second in my belt, my good broad-sword in my right hand, and my wood-knife between my teeth, I drove the frail jalousies asunder with one blow of my foot, and stood the next moment in the scene of terror. And God of mercy! what a scene that was! Should I live centuries I never can forget it. It was but a second that I gazed around me; yet in that fleeting second I took in more minute details than I could recount to you in an hour.

"The chamber was the sleeping-room of some young female. Yet this spot was already the abode of death—might even be the scene of outrage worse than death.

"On the low, virgin bed was stretched—where it had been hastily deposited by the alarmed bearers—the lifeless corpse of an old man—an old Spanish gentleman. A small, round, livid hole in the centre of his forehead, surrounded by a discoloured spot, and the blood which had flowed from the back of his head and deluged all the cambric pillow-covers, showed plainly that he had fallen by the unnerving missile of a Texan rifle. I learned afterward that he was killed, in the very act of offering hospitality, by the first shot discharged that day, on his own threshold; and I do not regret that the perpetrator of the atrocious deed fell, that same day, by my hand and this good weapon.

"But to proceed. On the floor, close to the window by which I made my entrance, lay stretched an aged woman, the wife apparently of him who slept unconscious—happy that he was unconscious—of the horrors which surrounded him. She, too, had been struck down as I judged, not a moment before I entered, by a chance bullet; for she still breathed a little, although life was fast ebbing from her veins in spite of the efforts of the loveliest girl my eyes had then looked upon, who knelt beside her, seemingly unaware of the fierce uproar which was raging, nearer and nearer every moment, in the adjoining apartment; the door of which stood wide open, allowing the horrid din, the hideous imprecations, and the blue sulphurous smoke of the death-shots, which rang incessantly without, to force their way, unhindered, into that quiet chamber.

"I said that one quick glance showed me all this, and, to truth, I had not leisure for a second, for I was not well within the chamber when a tall young Spaniard staggered back to the threshold of the door, and, discharging a pistol at the Texans while in the very act of dropping, fell headlong on the floor upon his back, his left hand, which still grasped the yet smoking pistol, striking the ground within a few inches of the feet of that fair girl. She started at the dreadful interruption, and, for the first time becoming aware of my presence, uttered a long wild shriek; and, believing that her hour had come, arose to her feet with an effort, and laying her hand on her bosom, said, in a low, sweet voice, in the Spanish tongue, 'Strike, if you will; but, in the name of the most Holy Virgin, harm not an orphaned virgin!'

"Alarmed by her cry, a young gentleman richly dressed, who was defending the door, with rapier and dagger, with all the valour of despair, and whose back had been turned toward us, looked around quickly, and as he did so received a sharp wound in the breast from a Texan knife. The murderous weapon was raised to repeat the blow, when I seized him violently by the shoulder, cast him back into the middle of the room, crying, 'Amigo,' and thrust myself into his place, confronting alone the infuriate assailants.

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"The men knew me in an instant, but their blood was up, moreover; and several of them to the intoxication of heated passions and unbridled license had added the intoxication of wine; quantities of which had been found on the premises, and had been drunk without stint.

"It was in vain that I called on them to hold, and demanded their captain. My answer was, that they were all captains there alike, and would take no command from any, coupled to an insolent warning to take myself out of harm's way if I were wise, before worse should come of it.

"A moment or two before he reached the spot, he was informed of my coming, and of the resistance I had met from his men. There was blood on his face, on his hands, on the blade of his sabre, which he bore still unsheathed. But so soon as his eye fell upon the group opposing me, and saw that I was fighting on the defensive, it seemed positively to flash fire—his white cheek gleamed with a red unnatural hectic—and he actually gnashed his teeth with rage. 'Rascals! Dogs! Mutineers!' he shouted. 'Do you dare to resist an officer? Down with them, Pierre; down with the dogs! Spare them no longer! Give them the steel,' and suiting the action to the word, as the hindmost man of the party, turned aghast at finding himself as it were between two fires, he threw himself upon him, and ran his sword through his body. The rest flung down their arms, and with some difficulty I obtained their grace, for he would hear at first of nothing but drum-head, court-martial, and immediate execution.

"And now, my tale is told. That bower is the sole relic of a once rich and noble residence—that fair, pale girl is, with the sole exception of her brother, who was the wounded youth I mentioned, the last scion of a race as noble as ever came from the shores of old Castile."

"But, tell me," exclaimed Julia, who had listened rather impatiently to the late discussion—"her brother!—what became of her brother who was wounded—whom you saved?"

"What could become of him? He pulled his sombrero over his eyes, buckled his father's sword to his side, and his good spurs to his heel, took lance and lasso, backed his best horse, and never

since has given quarter to a man who speaks with an English tongue. I would not bet a dollar that he would spare my life, if I fell into his hands in action."

"And where is he now, or how engaged?" asked Gordon.

"Since Romano Fallon's troop has been broken up, he is Padre Taranta's right hand man. He is the most dangerous enemy America now has in all Mexico."

"And it is to his sister's dwelling that you are leading *me*?" asked Julia, in astonishment.

"Even so, lady. If once you cross her threshold, you are safe against all the force of Mexico, until such time as we can bring you succour, or a flag under which you may enter the lines."

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## CHAPTER VII.

### THE RUINED RANCHO.

The moon by this time had risen, and already far above the horizon was beginning to pour her light into the shadowy recesses of the forest.

Along the road they travelled, and although advancing only at an easy ambling canter, had traversed something better than twenty miles, when the distant barking of a large dog was distinctly heard by all the party, and within a few minutes after that sound became audible, the advanced dragoon, who was a hundred or two yards ahead of the party, reined up and informed the Partisan that a heavy body of horse were coming down the road rapidly toward them.

22

Pierre halted, and telling Julia that there was no danger, and desiring the men not to stir from the spot, or speak, or call out, whatever they might hear or see, dismounted from his horse, cast the rein to a dragoon, and then hurried back on foot, as fast as he could, directly toward the track which they had just left.

"Just as I thought, guerillas," muttered the Partisan to himself. "It is Juan de Alava's squadron, for a thousand."

The squadron was perhaps ten minutes or a quarter of an hour passing him, for there were, as he had conjectured by the sound, while they were yet at a distance, above a hundred of them—in fact, he reckoned about a score beyond that number—and they rode in very open order, and not much faster than a foot pace.

Pierre listened to every word that fell from their lips.

The next glance showed him that his life had not been worth a dollar's purchase had he fully arisen to his feet, for he needed nothing to tell him that the eyes of the two who now passed him—eyes wandering suspiciously at every step of their horses through the forest about them—were very different to encounter from those of the mere troopers who had hitherto passed by him.

These two men were of a wildly different aspect from the rest, and from each other also, though one of them was clad, except that the materials were richer, in the same costume with the men who preceded him.

The other, who rode a little the foremost of the two, and the nearest to the Partisan, was a little old shrivelled man. Yet within that frail and meagre frame, hardened as it was, and exercised into a mere mass of compact bone and sinew, it was easy to perceive that there resided a world of untamed youthful spirit, and all the strength of manhood.

"Now, Padre," exclaimed the younger, "for the love of God, let us set spurs to our horses and get the troop forward at a quicker pace. At this rate, we shall not reach the open ground before day-break; and, in that case, they will have the start of us."

"Not so, not so, Juan," replied the old man, in a clear, hard voice. "If our information be correct, and there be a lady with them, as I doubt not it is, they will have halted for the night, and the later we come upon the ground, the more chance of finding them."

They continued speaking as they rode along; but these were all the words that reached the ears of the Partisan. No more did he require, however, to inform him of all that he wished to know.

So soon as the clatter of their passage had died away into the ordinary silence of the woods, the Partisan hurried back to join his friends, who were awaiting his return in no small anxiety, at least, not to say trepidation.

"All is well," he exclaimed, as soon as he came into ear-shot of the little party; "all is well. It is Padre Taranta and young Juan de Alava, and troop. They are in search of us, too."

They then all hastened back to the main road, and cantered forward at a better pace than they had as yet ventured on trying. Half an hour's ride brought them to the banks of the rivulet which divided the clear grounds that surrounded the once splendid estate from the wild forest.

A minute or two afterward, however, as the hoofs of their horses began to clatter on the

pavement, a fierce baying broke upon the stillness of the night, and two huge sheep-dogs, of the far-famed Mexican breed, came bounding out, furious, as if to attack the intruders.

But the Partisan soon quieted them; and then, as if aroused by the uproar, some one was heard to stir within the rancho, a light flashed through one of the casements, which was immediately thrown open—a loud voice hailing to inquire who came so late.

"Friends, friends!" cried the Partisan, in the Spanish tongue. "It is I, Sanchez; it is Pedro, the Forester."

23

"Thanks be to God!" shouted the old man, who had spoken from within; "welcome, *senor*. Wait till I open the door for you."

The lattice was pulled to, as he ceased speaking; but they could hear him hallooing within to arouse his mistress and the scanty household.

"Ho! *senorita*, *senorita* Marguerita; he, Pedro the Forester, Pedro el Salvador!"

A moment afterward, the bolts were withdrawn and the gate thrown open, and the lady, with her conductors, entered the ruined rancho.

The first sight which met the eyes of Julia Gordon, as she crossed the threshold of the door, and stood within the hall of that lonely dwelling, was the figure of a young, delicate, tall girl, who struck her, at the first glance, as being the very loveliest creature she had ever looked upon. And indeed she was exceedingly lovely.

In her left hand she carried a small lamp, which was the only light in the large apartment.

It seemed that she had not distinguished the words of old Sanchez, when he shouted to arouse her from her slumbers; for, as the Partisan advanced, who had stood hitherto in the back-ground, and had been concealed by the darkness which pervaded the whole room. Marguerita sprang eagerly forward to greet him.

"You! you!" she cried, fervently; "do my eyes tell me truly? Is it, indeed, you? Lord of my life! friend of my soul! preserver of my honour! is it, indeed, you, Pedro el Salvador. Oh, I am happy—oh, very, very happy."

And, as she spoke, in the intensity of her passionate feeling, she clasped her snowy arms about the rough soldier's neck, and letting fall her Madonna-like head on his iron shoulders, burst into a flood of tears.

"Nay, nay!" exclaimed the gallant rover, gently disengaging himself from the innocent girl's embrace; "nay, nay! weep not, sweet *Senorita*, this is no time for tears, for I have come to ask a favour—a favour as great as the lives of us all."

"Ask for *my* life, rather," she answered, emphatically, suffering the tears to trickle down her cheeks unheeded, "for it is yours; ask for my soul, you should have it, were it mine to bestow."

"Impossible, indeed, Marguerita," replied the Partisan; "impossible, indeed, that either I should ask, or you grant, were it to save a world. But, listen to me, and first look upon this beautiful young woman."

"Add one word more, Don Pedro; say that she is *your* wife," said the girl in a singular tone of half-resentful vehemence, which Pierre did not then comprehend.

"She is the wife of my friend, Lieutenant Gordon, lady," he replied; "no volunteer, I assure you, but one of May's dragoons."

"Pardon me," she said, turning to Julia, "pardon me, dear lady; but at times I am half distraught, and my mind wanders, I know not how or whither, since—since that day—but *he* has told you, doubtless. In one word, you are welcome. You are safe as if you were within the temple of your God. You are alone, you are in danger, *he* loves you, and I doubt not *you* love him; and I, Marguerita de Alava, swears it, by all the saints of Heaven, that I will die before one hair of your head, one nail of your finger, be injured. But this," she continued, after a moment's pause, "this is poor hospitality. Without there! Sanchez, Estefania, bring lights, and wine, and pile up the fire; the nights are chilly here among our forests."

The old shepherd, who had been awaiting her commands without, marvelling evidently at the long delay ere he was summoned, appeared instantly, bearing a pair of tall waxen candles, almost torches in size, in two massive silver candle sticks of different patterns, but of great value.

The Partisan then left the room for a minute or two, in order to give some instructions to the dragoons; for, in the present crisis Gordon had delegated the command to him; while the young husband drew near to the stove, unwilling to quit Julia, and more than half suspicious of the Spanish lady's motives.

24

So soon, however, as the girl's eye fell upon her own scanty attire, revealed as it was now by the bright lustre of the candles, she started, as if she had but that instant remembered how slenderly she was clad; blushed crimson, and raising both her hands to conceal her half-uncovered bosom, turned quickly, and fled with a swift step into the inner chamber.

"She is jealous of you, Julia," said Gordon.

"Jealous of me, Arthur?" she exclaimed, blushing deeply as she said the words; and he observed the blush, but observed not the indignant tone in which she spoke.

"Is that a blush of consciousness, or of shame, Julia?" he said, after a moment's pause, gazing at her sternly.

"Of indignation!" she answered, vehemently, her soft blue eyes flashing fire as she answered him. "Of indignation, sir, that any man should dare use such words, entertain such thoughts of me. Yes, Arthur Gordon, she is both in love and jealous. I saw that at a glance; and I will tell you something more; she is *not* jealous without a cause. Is your glance answered? For the man whom she loves, does *not* love her, and *does* love me."

The young man spoke not, stirred not, answered not. He stood abashed, crest-fallen, dumb before her. Conviction was borne in upon his soul by every word she uttered.

"Now listen to me, Arthur Gordon. I trust, I know, I thank my God! I am too proud, if not too pure, ever to do the thing that should make me know what shame is. But, mark me: if there be aught on earth which alienates love, it is to be suspected of not loving. If there be aught on earth that engenders evil thoughts in the heart, it is to be suspected capable of evil thinking. If there be aught on earth that makes a woman doubt herself, it is to be doubted by him who should sustain her; if once she doubt herself, others will soon have cause to doubt, to despise her. If I were not so proud, I should say to you, therefore, 'Make me not that which you would not have me!' I *am* too proud, too strong, too confident in the right to say so. But I *do* say, 'Make me not scorn you, cast you away from me, *hate* you.' I could do all these things, Arthur Gordon, and, though they kill me, I *will* do them, if ever more I hear from your tongue or see in your eye a doubt of my honour—of my love. I have said enough—should have said too much had I not seen in you aforetime the germs of this folly, which, if not nipped in the bud, will make you, will make both of us indeed wretched. Now I will go and join our hostess; and do you seek the Partisan and decide upon our future movements."

He raised his eyes slowly to meet her glance, and as he met it no longer fiery or indignant, but full of confidence and love, a faint smile played over his lips, and he stretched out his arms half timidly toward her, with this one word:

"Julia!"

And she refused not the proffered embrace, but fell on his bosom and kissed him tenderly; and then withdrawing herself gently from his arms, said, with her own bright, beaming smile:

"Now go—go your way, silly boy—and beware how you let that noble man perceive your folly."

"He should not, for my life!" answered the young dragoon, as with a light heart, a firm step, and a mind perfectly re-assured and easy he went forth by one door into the court-yard as she passed by the other into Marguerita's boudoir.

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## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE PARTING SUPPER.

When Arthur Gordon issued out into the quiet court-yard, he found the Partisan tranquilly superintending the preparations of the dragoons, who had already lighted a fire near the fountain and having rubbed down their chargers which were busy about better provender than they had enjoyed for many a day, were now making their arrangements for the night.

25

The Partisan, having seen the baggage all packed securely, went back and entered the rancho, and crossing over to Marguerita asked her to guard Julia as she would a sister.

"I will guard her as my sister; as my life," she answered. "No harm shall come to her, save through my life. You shall find her safe when you return, or you shall find us together."

"I know it," he said, gloomily. "I know it, Marguerita. Yet, I think we shall never meet again," he added, in a whisper.

"We shall—we shall meet again!" she exclaimed, almost triumphantly. "If not on earth—there, there, where there are no wars, and no enemies—where we shall part no more forever!"

"Amen!" replied Pierrie.

Two hours later, and the horse-tramps of the dragoons had died away in the distance, and Julia had wept herself into forgetfulness of her sorrows on the bosom of Marguerita.

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The morning which followed the departure of Pierre Delacroix and his companions from the ruined rancho, dawned as serene and gentle as the waking of a new-born child.

The song of birds and the distant water-fall hailed Julia, as she awoke from her slumbers; and

the soft, melancholy singing of Marguerita suddenly reminded her where she was.

A moment afterwards the song ceased, the door flew open, and Marguerita entered, leaving several choice and dainty eatables, and addressed her guest:

"You must pardon me, lady, if I perform these little offices myself, and intrude my services upon you, for the fortunes of war have imposed the task of such light labours on me, happier than many of my sisters, who are reduced to utter penury and ruin."

"Pardon me, rather, dear Marguerita—for so you must let me call you—that I permit you thus to wait on one, who is so far in every way beneath you. Except," she added, with a winning smile, "that in all times and countries the character of a suppliant has been invested with a sort of mournful dignity."

"Is it so, lady?—is it so, indeed?" cried Marguerita, half eagerly, half-sorrowfully.

"Julia! Julia!" she cried, imploringly, "will you call me Julia? I called you Marguerita, dear, dear Marguerita."

"Julia—dear Julia, then," replied the Spanish girl, soothingly; "believe me, I thought not to wound you, but my heart bleeds, my heart burns when I think of my country and her wrongs. Hark!" she exclaimed in a low whisper, "heard you that?"

"Heard I what?" cried Julia, terrified beyond expression at the sudden change in her tone, manner, and countenance; "I hear nothing but the wind, the birds, the water!"

"There—there again!" said the other, standing erect and motionless, with her finger upraised, her head thrown a little backward, her lips apart, her nostrils dilated, her eyes fixed on vacancy. "There—there it is again—they are coming!"

An instant afterwards the jingling of spurs and the clang of a steel scabbard on the stone pavement of the outer room was heard approaching the door quickly.

Then Marguerita's face lightened for a moment as she sprang to meet the new comer.

"It is Juan!" she cried, "it is my brother, and thanks be to God, alone!"

The door flew open, and on the threshold stood the young guerilla. It was the form of the Antinous, without his effeminacy—it was the head of the conquering Bacchus, without the sensuality. A specimen more perfect of young manhood never walked the earth.

26

"*Madre de Dios*, who is this?" he asked.

"Brother! Juan! brother!" exclaimed Marguerita, seizing him in her arms, and striving to embrace him.

"What have you done, mad girl? Who is this, I say, who is this, Marguerita?"

"A suppliant, a fugitive, a friend, a sister, a sister of the Partisan—of Pedro, my brother, Pedro el Salvador."

"An American," he said, slowly, his brow gradually uniting into a black frown, as he uttered the word, and his eye growing lurid with a concentrated fire, then laying his hand on the hilt of his stiletto, he murmured through his set teeth, "She must die."

"Never, no! for your life! for your soul! for the name of God! for the most holy virgin! no, brother, no; not while I live! He brought her here. He that preserved your life and my honour. He asked me to protect her! and I swore by my mother's soul; and now I swear it!"

"Fool!" he almost shouted in his rage, as he thrust her aside violently, "Carrera will be here within ten minutes, and all our lives are forfeit by your treason."

"We can conceal her. In the niche, you know, in the niche. Sanchez and Estefania and Francisco need but a hint to make them mute as statues. We can conceal her, brother, and be saved."

"He knows that they came hither. We have traced their hoof-tracks to the very gate. A wounded soldier saw them leave their hiding-place, and we met Carrera on their track. I know not how we failed to meet them."

"Where is Estefania?"

"In arrest."

"And Francisco?"

"And he likewise."

"Then we are saved."

"How saved?"

"Go! Tell them, you, to swear that the dragoons forced our hospitality by menace, which we could not resist. They were five strong—young men, well armed. What could we do?"

"It may save us—who knows?"

"It will save us! Do it. Away! Every moment is a life!"

Then, as he left the room in haste, she sprang up on the bed, touched a spring in the wall, and the back of the shallow niche in which the crucifix stood flew open, turning outward on a hinge, disclosing a small circular closet, lighted by a small air-hole, and containing a low stone bench, wrought in the wall.

"Up, up!" she exclaimed, shaking Julia sharply by the arm.

And aroused from her prostration by the dreadful emergency, and nerved by the firmness of the Spanish maiden, Julia did rise, pale as a ghost, but calm and firm, and kissed and blessed her hostess, and mounted into the small hiding place, and drew the secret door close after her.

Nearer and nearer came the bugle horn, and then the clang of hoofs, the orders of the officers, the din of the men dismounting, and the clash and clatter of their arms.

Hurriedly, in the meantime, had Marguerita thrust aside the few articles of Julia's clothing which were scattered about the room, but when she thought that all was safe, and the steps of the officers were heard in the outer hall, she sat down quietly to her embroidery, and took up again her mournful song, and was singing tranquilly and unconcernedly, when her brother again entered the apartment.

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## CHAPTER IX.

27

### SPANISH HONOUR.

"Marguerita, come forth. The General Carrera and his staff request your hospitality."

Marguerita immediately came forward, and was admired by all.

"I regret deeply," the general said, after a few moments spent in ordinary compliments, "that we were unable to arrive hither a few hours sooner, as our presence would have, I hear, relieved you of unpleasant visitors, of whom we have been in pursuit some days."

"We had *unexpected* visitors indeed, if not unwelcome," she replied. "But to say the truth, they were not uncivil, and though we had not the power to refuse them what they asked of us, they behaved courteously, and made but a short stay."

"Be sure of that," answered Carrera, twisting his moustache; "they knew that I was at their heels. But, however, we will take a little refreshment, and then to horse again."

After they had partaken of refreshment, he arose from his chair, and, again bowing, was on the point of leaving the apartment, and the poor girl thought that the crisis was past and the danger over.

When in the very midst of the bustle and hurry of leave-taking, an aid-de-camp rushed in hastily and announced that the riding-horse of the American lady had been found in the stable of the rancho, well groomed, and feeding at a well-filled manger.

"Who groomed him?" asked Carrera, sternly.

"A boy called Francisco."

"Bring him in."

And immediately the shepherd boy was led in between two dismounted lancers, with escopetas trailed in their hands.

"How came the lady's horse in the stable?"

"It was tired, lame, who knows?—they left it behind."

"Now, mark me, if you speak one lie, you shall be shot to death within five minutes. If you speak truth, the Republic will reward you. Where is that lady?"

"Who knows?" was the evasive answer; but as he uttered it his eyes wandered to his master's face, as if to consult his eyes before replying further. He met their steadfast gaze, and continued, firmly: "She went with the rest."

A dragoon entered at this moment, bearing a lady's side-saddle and bridle, with girths and hangings all complete, and cast them down at the general's feet; and then said, as he saluted:

"We have found a dragoon horse dead—shot within a few hours, general—in the corral, with all his accoutrements upon him."

The general's cold, hard eye turned silently and sternly on the miserable boy.

"Speak," he said, "or die. Take your choice. Where is the lady?"

"Quien Sabe?"

"Away with him."

Two stout dragoons seized him, and despite his cries, his struggles and entreaties, dragged him away as if he had been a mere infant.

There were five minutes' dreadful, death-like silence. Marguerita stood cold and impassive as a pillar of stone, with her teeth set and her hands clenched. But for the heaving of her bosom and the quivering of her eyelid, she gave no signs of life.

Juan de Alava preserved his soldier's mien and aspect, but his eye wandered wildly.

The next moment the sharp rattle of a volley, succeeded by one death groan, rang through the hall, and the thin blue smoke drifted in through the open door, and half filled the apartment.

"*Fiel hasta la muerte*," muttered he between his hard set teeth.

"Bring out the other servants," roared the general, furious at being frustrated.

28

"Give them five minutes, also, to confess; if they speak not, shoot them."

After another short pause an orderly entered, and announced that they had fled into the woods.

"Ha! this lies deeper than I thought for, lady," he added, turning to Marguerita; "we must have your presence in an inner chamber. Valdez, call in our major and six captains, a court-martial. Senor de Alava, follow us."

And without more words, he stalked into Marguerita's private chamber, seated himself in her own arm-chair, and ordering his officers to form a half circle round him, proceeded to arraign her as a culprit.

"You know," he said, sternly, but not uncourteously, "you know, Senorita, the doom which our laws have pronounced against all traitors who comfort, protect, or harbour an American?"

"Senor, I know it."

"It is?"

"Death."

"You are very young to die."

"I am young, Senor; but when God calls us hence it is never early."

A slight murmur of admiration ran through the circle at her calm and dauntless resolution, but found no echo from the cold lips of the general.

"Where is the lady gone who was here last night?"

"The boy whom you murdered told you that she went with the rest."

"He lied, and lost his life by his lie."

"On your honour, do you know where the lady is at this moment?"

"I do know."

"Where is she?"

"I have sworn to be silent."

"That oath was treason to your country."

"By your proclamation."

"You know it? You have read it?"

"I do—I have."

"Enough. One question more—will you reveal it?"

"I will not."

"And you know the alternative?"

"Death!"

"And you are prepared to die—so young, so beautiful, to die a traitress?"

"God will forgive me."

"Colonel Don Juan de Alava, on your honour, as a soldier and a gentleman, do you know where this American woman now is?"

"I do know."

"Where is she?"

"Do you think me less firm than a woman?"

"Have you sworn secrecy?"

"I have not sworn."

"Speak, I command you."

He was silent. The general cast his eyes sternly round the circle, reading the judgment of each man by his face, as he asked:

"Are they guilty of high treason?"

And each man nodded in silence as the question came to him in turn.

"And your sentence?"

"Death!" replied Valdez, standing up and uncovering, and all the others arose in their order, and bowed in assent.

"Never!" exclaimed two voices in one cry, and, as if by one movement, brother and sister drew, and raised on high, a sheathless blade.

"Brother—sister—adieu!" and the blades rose as if to strike—but ere the blow was dealt, a calm, sweet voice cried "Hold! I am here."

And at the words, there in the niche, disclosed by the removal of that holiest emblem, the Christian's dying God—there with her golden tresses floating disheveled like a halo of glory round her, with her blue eyes filled with the ineffable lustre—the lustre of a martyred saint, her innocent, artless features glowing with strange exultation, her lovely lips apart, madonna-like, stood Julia Gordon.

29

"I am here, man of blood. Spare them. But with me do your pleasure; I am in the hands of my God, now as ever."

At the command of his general, Valdez arose to assist Julia down; but as he took the first step, he stopped short as if thunder-stricken.

Nor was it wonderful, for as he took that step, one short crack came echoing from without, the well-known death-shot of the certain rifle—then pealed a bugle, high and shrill—the terrified alarm—and then crack! crack! went the deadly rifle of the west.

And high above all other sounds, and high arose the cry of the Texans—"Remember the Alamo, the Alamo?" and Gordon's name was mingled with the din; and the fierce cheer of the Partisan, "Pierre, Pierre! charge for Pierre and glory!" completed the dismay of the surprised and baffled murderers.

As the first din of that surprise fell on the startled ears of the Mexican commander, he sprang to his feet, unsheathed his sword, and the other officers following his example, they dashed forward gallantly to find their men, and lead them to the charge—all save one, Valdez.

"And why does the gallant Colonel Valdez loiter in the rear, when his men are in action?" asked Juan de Alava, sneeringly.

"I might retort the question, sirrah, were it becoming me to reply to a prisoner and a traitor."

"And did you so retort, sirrah," answered Alava quietly, "I might reply that a prisoner has no right to be in action, did it become me to reply to a liar."

"Now mark me. Before these ladies whom you *have* insulted, *would* have outraged, I strike you thus. I spurn you with my foot thus and thus!" and as he spoke he suited the action to the word, giving him a severe blow with the flat of his sword across the shoulders, and actually kicking him twice with his foot.

Both men were in the prime of life, young, active, sinewy, and skilful to a wonder in the use of their weapons. Juan was as brave as his own steel, and Valdez, a base coward, was forced to fight for his life.

"Kill him! Kill him!" cried Marguerita. "For my sake kill him! By no hand but yours must the villain die!"

They both fought desperately and determinedly, one fighting for life, and the other for vengeance.

Hopeless of directing Marguerita from her appalling object, Julia turned, sick at heart, toward the window—the same window which had given entrance to the Partisan, when he arrived but in time to save Marguerita—and at the very moment she did so, it was driven inward with a loud crash, and she was clasped in the arms of Arthur Gordon. The sound of the forceful entrance, the clanking steps of his men, for the three dragoons were at his heels, and the clatter of his accoutrements, had well nigh proved fatal to Alava; for at the sudden uproar in his rear, he turned his head quickly, and was admonished by a sharp wound in his side for his imprudence.

And, like a wounded lion, Juan de Alava charged him home so fiercely that he had not a second's breathing time. Three triple feints, each followed by a home lunge, Valdez had parried



in succession, when he lunged in return. His foot slipped a little on the marble floor; his blade was struck aside by Alava's dagger, at the same instant in which his chest was pierced and his heart cleft asunder by his home-driven blade.

Scarce was that fearful death-struggle completed, when two of the dragoons advanced their carbines and called on Juan to yield him on good quarters.

Juan had already lost much blood, and staggered sickly, and would have fallen but for the sword on which he leaned.

"Where is your officer?" he asked, in Spanish. "I am a gentleman, and will not yield but to an officer."

30

"I am an officer," cried Gordon, springing forward, having learned by one word from Julia who he was. "I am your friend, too, Senor Don Juan—your friend forever."

Gordon, having seen Juan in safe hands, he went forth in search of a surgeon.

Utterly dispirited and broken, the Mexicans rushed in a body to the window, by which their comrades were pouring out; and, the two currents meeting, jostled and reeled together like tides conflicting in a narrow channel.

But the terror and the numbers of those without were the greater; and gradually they forced their way inward, actually using their weapons, one against the other, in the madness of their despair. And still on the rear of that confused and weltering route raged the fierce broadswords of the Texan riders.

"Ha, Mason," exclaimed Gordon, as the rangers swept past him in their charge, recognizing a young officer of his acquaintance. "This work is over now. For God's sake send one of your fellows for a surgeon. A friend of mine lies badly wounded, yonder, in the orange thicket, by the stream."

"Aye, aye!" cried he whom he addressed, reining up his horse. "You, Grayson, gallop to the rear, and bring up surgeon Maxwell."

"Yes, sir," answered the man, and dashed away to the rear.

"But I wish you would send a dozen men down yonder to that thicket, to mount guard over Julia," said Gordon. "She is almost alone."

"I'll go myself," answered Mason, "or the devil a soul will I get to stir, so long as they can shoot or stick a Mexican. Halt! dress—halt! or I'll scower some of you. That is it. Now steady. Gordon, I'll see to that—never fear. But I wish you would gallop down, and stop firing. All resistance is at an end, and it is now mere butchery."

"I will, I will," replied the young dragoon; "there has, indeed, been enough of it."

And putting his spurs to a charger, which he caught as it ran by him masterless, he galloped forward, shouting to the men to cease firing. But eager as he was to check the carnage, he was preceded in the work of charity by the bold Partisan, whom he could see mounted among the crowd of dismounted rangers, close to the often-mentioned window, actually cutting at his own men with his broadsword to enforce obedience, and shouting till he was hoarse, in Spanish and English alternately:

"Cease firing, and give quarter."

Suddenly a shot flashed from a loop above, and he reeled in his stirrups and fell headlong.

A fierce roar followed from the soldiery; and, in an instant they forced their way bodily into the building, and woe to the Mexican whom they met when the word was given—"Pierre!"

"My God! they have murdered him!" cried Gordon; and forgetful of all else, he drove madly to the spot, sprang from his horse, and raised him from the bloody greensward.

"They have done for me at last," cried the gallant soldier, as Gordon raised his head upon his lap, as he knelt behind him.

"I trust not, indeed."

"They have. I am a dead man, Gordon. But come, my time is short; have me borne to the ladies—unless," he added, "you fear to let them see me."

"You are right. Maxwell is there, tending the hurt of young Alava."

They had conversed alone, with no witness but the beautiful brown horse of the Partisan, which, bleeding himself, from many wounds, stood close beside them, not having moved a yard since the fatal shot was fired, gazing upon his fallen master with an eye that seemed full of human intelligence and sympathy.

"Emperor knows that I am dying. Soh! Emperor, good horse. Soh! Emperor!" he added, raising his head a little to gaze on his favourite.

And the beautiful brown horse whinnied as he heard the long-loved voice, and advanced a yard or two, and rubbed his muzzle gently and fondly over the face of his dying master.

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"Good horse, good Emperor," said the Partisan, patting the face of his horse with his failing hand. "I never shall back you again, good Emperor. He is yours, Gordon, when I am gone. You will be kind to him, I know."

The young dragoon wrung the hand of the dying man hard, and the big tears burst in volumes from his eyes, and fell down like rain upon the face of the veteran.

"Go forward," he said, faintly; "go forward, Gordon, and apprise the ladies. Women are tender plants, and this, I think, will shock them."

And slowly they did bear him, with the beautiful brown horse following them step by step with his head bent almost to the dust, and trailing his long, thin mane on the ground, in the depth of animal sorrow.

When Gordon reached the bower the surgeon was fastening up his case, having dressed young Alava's wound, and was on the point of going to offer his services, he said, where they might be more seriously required.

The young soldier caught his last words as he entered, and arresting him by the arm, said, earnestly, in a low voice, even before he replied to the congratulations of the women:

"That is here, Maxwell; nowhere can they be more required than they will be here. God send that they may avail."

Though uttered in a whisper, Julia heard his words, and judging from the expression of his face, clasped her hands, and cried, earnestly:

"Not the Partisan, Arthur—oh, say it is not the Partisan."

"Would that I could."

"Not severely—not fatally, at least?"

"I fear mortally."

"My God! my God!" and she burst into a paroxysm of almost hysterical weeping.

The conversation had all passed in the English tongue, yet, as it were, instinctively, Marguerita caught their meaning, and she uttered one long, piercing shriek, and fell lifeless to all appearance.

The surgeon and Julia hastened to raise her up, but Pierre said quietly:

"Let her be—let her be if there is no danger. It is better she should be senseless until all is over."

"There is no danger," said Maxwell, with an air of wonder.

"God bless you, then, good Maxwell; betake you where you may do more good—my days are numbered. Commend me to McCulloch and Gillespie. My rifle to the first, my pistols to the latter, and this, doctor," he added, as he handed him his knife. "Yourself, Gordon, will keep my horse. Bury me in my blanket with my sword by my side. Fare you well. Now, lady," he added, turning his eyes to Julia Gordon, "in your ear. You will permit me Gordon?"

"Surely—most surely."

Then Julia knelt down by his side, and clasped his cold hand in her own, and listened with her whole soul in her ears, watering his face with her tears.

"That poor thing," he said, turning his eyes toward the motionless form of Marguerita, "you will be kind to her—you will care for her—you will love her?"

"As my own sister," faltered Julia through her sobs, "as my own sister."

"Then I die happy. Gordon," he added, raising his head a little for the last time, "this agony is well nigh over. She has promised to be a sister to poor Marguerita; will you do likewise?"

"She shall be my sister."

"God's blessing on you now friends. I am going, fare-you-well. Weep not for me, for I have lived happily, and I hope not altogether uselessly, and I die happily, for I die with my duty done, in the arms of those I love the most dearly, and in the faith of a Christian."

Then he closed his eyes, quite exhausted with his efforts, and lay for a long time speechless so that they believed him dead.

But he opened them again after a while, and said, very faintly:

"Brown Emperor; good horse. You will be good to him, Gordon?"

Then one of those strange things occurred which at times almost make us think that brutes have souls and reason. For, before the young soldier could reply, the brown horse, which had followed the bearers of his master to the entrance of the arbour, and paused there, as if conscious that he must not enter, no sooner heard his own name uttered in those feeble accents, than he thrust his head through the foliage and uttered a long, low, plaintive neigh, utterly unlike

any sound he had ever before been heard to utter.

"Ah! thou art there, old friend. God bless thee, too, if it be no sin so to pray. Thou wilt be cared for; will he not, Gordon—Julia?"

But neither could reply for sobbing. He understood the reason, and said once again:

"Bless you all—may God bless you. Remember that I die a Chris—a Christian. I am go—going. Gordon, Gordon, let her—let her kiss—kiss me, Julia."

"Kiss him, quick; kiss him, kiss him, Julia."

She knelt beside him, bent her beautiful form over his bosom, and pressed her cold lips to his, and the pure spirit of the noble and high-minded soldier passed away in that last—that first embrace of the woman he had loved so chastely, so devotedly, so nobly.

Happy who so die, in the arms of love, religion, honour.

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More words are almost needless. Julia and Gordon, under the guidance of the gallant rangers, reached the lines at Monterey in safety. Long did they mourn over that true and noble friend, who, though the friend but of a day, had stamped himself on their souls forever.

Poor Marguerita never ceased to weep for the man she loved so madly and so vainly, till, in the convent which she entered within a month of his death, her sorrows and sufferings were ended.

One thing alone remains to be recorded. The brown horse, which had followed his master's body to the grave, and watched his interment with an almost human eye, was forced almost by violence from the spot when the last ceremony was ended.

But in the afternoon, when the column was formed to march, and the bugles sounded the advance, he reared furiously, broke the leading rein by which a dragoon was guiding him, and galloped to the spot where they had laid his master.

They followed him, and found him lying on the grave, rooting up the fresh laid sods with his muzzle. But when he saw them drawing near, he rose to his feet with a weak, staggering action, stood for a moment gazing at them proudly, then uttered the same long, shrill, plaintive neigh, and in the sound expired.

They scooped a little hollow—it was no sacrilege—beside the grave of him whom he had borne so truly, whom he would not survive, and laid him by those honoured ashes, with this motto rudely carved on a low headstone close by the simple monument, which love erected to the memory of the gallant Partisan:

FIEL HASTA LA MUERTE.

MARGUERITA.

They sleep together. Never was better horse or nobler rider.

THE END.

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Printed by James Jackson, and Published by him at his Publishing Office, 2, RED LION COURT, Fleet Street, London, E.C.

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and

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