

GUSTAVE AIMARD

THE TREASURE OF
PEARLS: A ROMANCE OF
ADVENTURES IN
CALIFORNIA

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of Adventures in California**

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CHAPTER I. THE PIECES AND THE BOARD

We stand on Mexican soil. We are on the seaward skirt of its westernmost State of Sonora, in the wild lands almost washed by the Californian Gulf, which will be the formidable last ditch of the unconquerable red men flying before the Star of the Empire.

Before us, the immensity of land; behind us, that of the Pacific Ocean.

O immeasurable stretches of verdure which form the ever-unknown territory, the poetically entitled Far West, grand and attractive, sweet and terrible, the natural trellis of so rich, beautiful, mighty, and unkempt flora, that India has none of more vigour of production!

To an aeronaut's glance, these green and yellow plains would offer only a vast carpet embroidered with dazzling flowers and foliage, almost as gay and multicoloured, irregularly blocked out like the pieces of glass in ancient church windows with the lead, by rivers torrential in the wet season, rugged hollows of glistening quicksands and neck-deep mud in summer, all of which blend with an unexampled brilliant azure on the clear horizon.

It is only gradually, after the view has become inured to the fascinating landscape, that it can make out the details: hills not to be scorned for altitude, steep banks of rivers, and a thousand other unforeseen impediments for the wretch fleeing from hostile animals or fellow beings, which agreeably spoil the somewhat saddening sameness, and are hidden completely from the general glance by the rank grass, rich canes, and gigantic flower stalks.

Oh, for the time – the reader would find the patience – to enumerate the charming products of this primitive nature, which shoots up and athwart, hangs, swings, juts out, crosses, interlaces, binds, twines, catches, encircles, and strays at random to the end of the naturalist's investigation, describing majestic parabolas, forming grandiose arcades, and finally completes the most splendid, aye, and sublime spectacle that is given to any man on the footstool to admire for superabundant contrasts, and enthralling harmonies.

The man in the balloon whom we imagine to be hovering over this mighty picture, even higher up than the eagle of the Sierra Madre itself, who sails in long circles above the bald-headed vulture about to descend on a prey, which the king of the air disdains – this lofty viewer, we say, would spy, on the afternoon when we guide the reader to these wilds apparently unpeopled, more than one human creature wriggling like worms in the labyrinth.

At one point some twenty men, white and yet swarthy, unlike in dress but similarly armed to the teeth, were separately "worming" their tortuous way, we repeat, through the *chaparral* proper, or plantations of the low branching live oak, as well as the gigantic ferns, mesquite, cactus, nopal, and fruit laden shrubs, the oblong-leaved mahogany, the bread tree, the fan-leaved abanico, the pirijao languidly swinging its enormous golden fruit in clusters, the royal palm, devoid of foliage along the stem, but softly nodding its high, majestically plumed head; the guava, the banana, the intoxicating chirimoya, the cork oak, the Peruvian tree, the war palm letting its resinous gum slowly ooze forth to capture the silly moths, and even young snakes and lizards which squirmed on the hardening gum like a platter of Palissy ware abruptly galvanised into life.

These adventurers insinuated themselves through this tangle unseen and, perhaps, unsuspected by one another, all tending to the same point, probably the same rendezvous. A marked devil-may-

care spirit, which tempered the caution of men brought up in the desert, betokened that they were master of the woods hereabouts, or, at least, only recognised the Indian rovers as their contesting fellow tenants.

Elsewhere, a blundering stranger, of a fairness which startled the pronghorn antelopes as much as a superstitious man would be at seeing a sheeted form at midnight, tramped desperately as one who felt lost, but nervously feared to delay whilst there was daylight, over the immense spreads of dahlias, flaunting flowers each full of as much honey as Hercules would care to drain at a draught, whiter than Chimborazo's snow, or ruddier than the tiger lily's blood splashes; through thick creepers which withered with the pressing circulation of boiling sap like vegetable serpents around the trees, from which gorged reptiles, not unlike these growing cords themselves, dangled, and now and then half curled up, startling with his inexpert foot (in a boot cut and torn by the bramble and splinters of the ironwood and *lignum vitae* shattered in the *tornado*— a "twister," indeed) — animals of all sizes and species, which leaped, flew, floundered, and crept aloof in the chaos not unpierceable to them: forms on two, four, countless feet, with long, broad, ample, or tiny wings, singing, calling, yelling, howling up and down a scale of incredible extent, now softly seducing the astray to follow, now taunting him and screaming for him to forbear. If he were not maddened, he must have had a heart of steel.

Elsewhere still, a man was riding on a horse whose harness and trappings smelt so strongly of the stable, that is, of human slavery, that it alarmed the stupid, mournful-eyed bisons, the alligator as he basked in the caking mire, the hideous iguana slothfully ascending a wind cast trunk, that maneless lion the cougar, the panthers and jaguars too lazy or too glutted with the night's raid to follow the prey, the honey bear warily sniffing the flower which harboured a bee, the sullen grizzly who looked out of a hilly den amazed at so impudent an invader. Upon this horse, whose Spanish descent and state of born thralldom was resented by the angry neigh of his never-lassoed brethren, proudly careering in unnumbered *manadas* upon endless courses, this man was resolutely progressing, ruthlessly severing vines and floral clumps with a splendid old broadsword, cool as only a Mexican can remain in a felt sombrero and a voluminous blanket cloak; charging and crushing, unless they quickened their retreat, the venomous cotejo, the green lizard, the basilisk and tiny, yet awful, coral snakes, and never swerving, though the tongue could almost attain what was unmuffled of his face, the monstrous anaconda and its long, spotted kinsfolk. This mounted Mexican took a line, not so straight as the footmen were pursuing, which would bring him to the spot whither they were converging.

Imagining that the one of the wayfarers who evinced an ignorance of prairie life which made his existence each moment a greater miracle, and that the horseman who, on the contrary, rode on as sturdily as a postboy in a well-worn road, formed two sides of a triangle of which the evident destination of the rider and the other Mexicans was the final end, in about the centre of this fancied space, other human objects of interest were visible to our aerial observer.

Toilsomely marching, one or the other of two men supporting alternately the young girl who, singularly enough, was their companion in this wilderness, the new trio formed a group which fluttered the almost never-so-startled feathered inhabitants of that grove; curassows, tanagers, noisy loros, hummingbirds as small as flies, hunting flies as large as themselves, toucans that seemed overburdened with their ultraliberal beaks, wood pigeons, fiery flamingoes, in striking contrast with the black swans that clattered in the cane brake.

Behind them, in calm, contented chase, easy and active as the pretty gray squirrels, which alone took the alarm and sprang away when he noiselessly appeared, a shining copper-skinned Indian, with robust limbs and graceful gait, an eye to charm and to command, moved like a king who scorned to set his guards to punish the intruder, on his domains, but stalked savagely onward to chastise them himself. The plentiful scalp locks that fringed his leggings showed that he had left many a skeleton of the paleface to bleach in the torrid sun, and that the sex, the youth and the beauty of the gentle companion of the two whites on whose track he so placidly proceeded, would not spare her a single pang, far less obtain her immunity. On his Apollo-like bosom was tattooed, in sepia and

vermilion, a rattlesnake, the emblem not merely of a tribe, but the sect of a tribe, the ring within the circle; he belonged to the select band of the Southern Apaches, the Poison Hatchets, initiated in the compounding of deadly salves and potent potions, to cure the victim of which the united faculties of Europe would be baffled. No doubt those arrows, of which the feathers bristled in a full quiver, and his other weapons, were anointed with that venom which makes such Indians shunned by all the prairie rovers.

Such was the panorama, sublime, enthralling and fearsome, and the puppets which are presented to our imaginary gazer.

Leaving him to dissolve into the air whence we evolved him, we descend to terra firma near the last party to which we directed attention.

The sun was at its zenith, which fact rendered the animation of so many persons the more remarkable, since few are afoot in the heat of the day in those regions.

Suddenly, with a slight hiss as of a living snake, an arrow sped unerringly through a tuft of liquid embers, and laid low, after one brief spasm of death, a huge dog which seemed a mongrel of Newfoundlander and a wild wolf.

Shortly afterwards the branches which masked the poor animal's stiffening body (on which the greedy flies began already to settle, and towards which the tumblebugs were scrambling in their amazing instinct), were parted by a trembling hand, and a white man of Spanish-American extraction, showed his face streaming with perspiration and impressed with terror and despair, to which, at the discovery, was immediately added a profound sorrow.

"Snakebit! That is what detained Fracasador (the Breaker into Bits). Come, arouse thee, good dog!" he said in Spanish, but instantly perceiving the tip of the arrow shaft buried almost wholly in the broad chest, he uttered a sigh of deep consternation, and added —

"Again the dart of death! We are still pursued by that remorseless fiend."

Fracasador was certainly dead.

"After our horses, the dog! After the dog, ourselves! Brave Benito! Poor Dolores, my poor child!"

He started, as the bushes rustled, but it was not an enemy who appeared. It was the young woman whom he had named, and a youth in his two-and-twentieth year at the farthest.

Benito was tall, well and stoutly built; his form even stylish, his features fine and regular; his complexion seemed rather pale for a native, from his silky hair, which came down disorderly on his square shoulders, being of a jet black. Intelligence and unconquerable daring shone in his large black eyes. On his visage sat a seldom seen blending of courage, fidelity and frankness. In short, one of those men who win at first sight, and can be trusted to the last.

Though his costume, reduced by the dilapidation of the thorns, consisted of linen trousers caught in at the waist by a red China crape *faja* or sash, and a coarse "hickory" shirt, he resembled a disguised prince, so much ease and distinction abounded in his bearing. But, for that matter, throughout Spanish-America, it is impossible to distinguish a noble from a common man, for they all express themselves with the same elegance, employ language quite as nicely chosen, and have equally courteous manners.

The girl whom he supported, almost carried in fact, was sleeping without being fully unconscious, as happens to soldiers on a forced march. Dolores was not over sixteen. Her beauty was exceptional, and her modesty made her low melodious voice falter when she spoke. She was graceful and dainty as an Andalusian. The profile so strongly resembled that of the man who was leaning over the slain dog that it did not require the remembrance that he had spoken of her as his child, for one to believe that he had father and daughter under his ken.

"Don't wake her!" said the elder man, with a quick wave of the hand to quell the other's surprise. "Let her not see the poor faithful hound, Benito. And keep yourself, as I do, before her as a shield. The cowardly foe to whom we owe the loss of our horses, our arms, and now our loyal comrade is

lurking in the thicket, may even – Oh, Holy Mother, that should protect us from the heathen! – be this instant taking aim at our poor, dear Dolores, with another missile from his accursed quiver."

"The villain!" cried Benito, darting a furious glance around. "Luckily, she sleeps, Don José."

Indeed the elder Mexican could take the girl without awakening her out of the other's arms, and, after a long kiss on her pure forehead, bear her away from the dog's proximity into a covert where he laid her upon the grass with precaution.

"Thank heaven for this sleep," said he, "it will make her temporarily oblivious of her hunger."

Benito had taken the other's zarapé which he spread over the girl. That blanket was their only appendage; beside the scanty covering which the three wore, weapons, water bottle and food container, they had none. A critical position this for the small party, weaponless and foodless in the waste! A disarmed man is reckoned as dead in such a wild! Struggling is impossible against the incalculable foes that either crush a solitary adventurer by their mass, or deputize, so to say, some such executioner as he whom we saw to have slain the dog, and we hear to have rid the three Mexicans of their horses and equipments. The story of how this deprivation came about is short and lamentable.

CHAPTER II. ENVY NO MAN HIS GRAVE

Don Benito Vázquez de Bustamente was the son of that General Bustamente, twice president of the Mexican Republic. When his father, cast down from power, was forced to flee with his family to take final refuge at Guayaquil, the boy was only five or six years old. Suffering with fever, which made the voyage dangerous for him, the child was left at Guaymas in charge of a faithful adherent, who found no better way of saving the son of the proscrip from persecution than to take him as one of his own little family up the San José Valley, where he had a ranch. The boy remained there and grew up to the age when we encountered him.

His rough but trusty guardian let the youth run wild, teaching him to ride and shoot as the only needful accomplishments. Benito, falling into the company of the remnant of purer-blooded Indians, supposed to be the last of the original possessors of that region, relished their vagabond life exceedingly. Not only did he spend weeks at a time in hunts with them, with an occasional running fight with the Yaqui tribe, and even the Apaches raiding Sonora; but, at the season for pearl diving, accompanied them in their boats, not only in the Gulf, but down the mainland and up the seacoast of the peninsula. La Paz he knew well, and the Isles of Pearls were familiar in every cranny.

Now, when the news of his father's death in exile came to Benito, he was a hunter and horseman doubled by seaman and pearl fisher, such as that quarter of the world even seldom sees.

So little on land, both enemies and followers of the copresident lost all trace of the son.

Moreover, in the land of revolution in permanency, the offspring of a once ruler are personally to blame if they call dangerous attention on themselves.

On shore, however, don Benito had noticed the daughter of a neighbour, one don José Miranda, formerly in the navy. After a couple of years' wedded life, the latter was left a widower with an only daughter, who had become this charming Dolores, now slumbering under her father's zarapé. Her education was confided to a poor sister of the captain, who was about the only enemy young Bustamente had in his courtship. Captain Miranda was very fond of the youth, and it was agreed ere long that there should be a wedding at the *Noria de las Pasioneras* (Well house of the Passionflowers) as soon as Benito reached the age of five-and-twenty.

But doña Maria Josefa had contrary marital projects. Her brother had so many times talked of bestowing the bulk of his considerable fortune on his beloved child, that the lady concluded, rightly or wrongly, that she would be penniless when the niece married. Habituated, since a great while back, to a very easy, not to say pampered existence at her kinsman's expense, she beheld with terror the time coming when her host would settle all his property on the girl, and constitute the strange young man, who was so reserved about his origin, the steward for his young wife. However, doña Maria Josefa was too sly and adroit to openly oppose the paternal determination, and allow him to perceive the hate she bore Benito and would be only too delighted to manifest.

Whenever she threw out hints of a better match for her niece than this mysterious youth, they had fallen in deaf ears, and she fretted in silence that boded no good prospects.

Nevertheless, some two years had known the young hearts formally engaged without the serpent lifting her head to emit a truly alarming hiss. At that time doña Maria Josefa introduced at her brother's a hook-nosed gentleman, arrayed sumptuously, who rejoiced in a long name which paraded pretensions to an illustrious lineage. This don Aníbal Cristobal de Luna y Almagro de Cortez so displeased Benito and Dolores, whilst not ingratiating himself deeply with don José, that his presence would not have been tolerated, only for the young couple hopefully supposing that the tall and bony scion of the first conqueror of Mexico was a flame of Dolores' duenna, and as such would wed the

dragon and take her away from the hacienda to the beautiful and boundless domains in Spain, upon which he expatiated in a shrill voice of enthusiasm.

Don Aníbal had excellent credentials from a banker's at Guaymas, but, somehow, the gentlemen farmers received him with cold courtesy. Besides, it having been remarked that those who offended him met with injury, personal, like the being waylaid, or in their property, stock being run off or outhouses fired, there sprang up a peculiar way of treating the stranger for which the Spanish *morgue*, that counterpart of English phlegm, is very well suited.

All at once, Benito received word that a messenger from his mother had arrived at Guaymas, bearing the very good news that she expected to obtain a revocation of the sentence of banishment against the brood of Bustamente, and then he could publicly avow his name.

He had already imparted his secret to Captain Miranda.

The messenger had grievously suffered with seasickness, and was unable to come up the valley. Miranda counselled Benito to go to him therefore, and besides, as the formalities attending the settlement of his estate upon his daughter, under the marriage contract, required such legal owls as nestled alone in the port, he volunteered to accompany the young man. Over and above all this pleasing arrangement, as Dolores had never seen the city, of which the five thousand inhabitants think no little – for after all it is the finest harbour in the Gulf of California – he proposed she should be of the party.

Another reason, which he did not confide in anyone, acted as a spur. A neighbour had told don José that, from a communication of his majordomo, an expert in border warfare, he believed that the illustrious don Aníbal de Luna was not wholly above complicity with a troop of robbers who lately infested Sonora, and caused as much dread and more damage, forasmuch as they were intelligently directed to the best stores of plunder as the Indians themselves. This neighbour, though he loved doña Josefa no more cordially than anybody else, still deemed it dutiful to prevent Captain Miranda allowing a "gentleman of the highway" to marry into his family.

Don José felt the caution more painfully, as his sister had plainly let him know that the famous don Aníbal was not so much her worshipper as her niece's. He might have thanked the *salteador* to rid his house of the old maid, but to allow one to court his daughter was another matter. At the same time, as of such dubious characters are made the "colonels" who buckler up a Mexican revolutionary pretender, don José was scarcely less coldly civil to the hidalgo, though he hastened on the preparations to withdraw his daughter from the swoop of the bird of rapine.

Doña Maria Josefa drew a long face at the prospect of being left alone at the hacienda, but she was too great a dependant on her brother, and too hypocritical to trammel the undertaking.

The party set forth, then, under good and sufficient escort. But the very foul fiend himself appeared to have taken all doña Maria Josefa's evil wishes in hand to carry them out, to say nothing of the balked don Aníbal's.

Half the escort left without returning, at a mere alarm of the *Indios bravos* ("hostiles") being at La Palma, and massacring and firing farmhouses wholesale. The rest were lost in the bush, were abandoned dead or dying; the mules and horses were "stampeded" by unseen foes; and finally a fatal bowman slew the two horses which had borne don José and his daughter in their futile endeavour to regain the lost track; and, to come to the present time, their dog, of whom the instinct had preserved them more than once from death by thirst, had been despatched by the same relentless demon.

Still, there was the contradictory consolation which the persistent enemy afforded by these evidences of his bloodthirsty hunt. By a singular anomaly of the human organisation, as long as man knows his fellows are at hand, even though they be enemies, he does not feel utterly stripped of hope. In the depth of his heart, the vaguest of hope sustains and encourages him, though he may not reason about it. But as soon as all human vestiges disappear, the imperceptible human waif on the sea, alone with nature, trembles in full revelation of his paltriness. The colossal surroundings daunt him, and he acknowledges it is folly to struggle with the waves that multitudinously mount up to swamp him from all sides.

Meanwhile, no further occasion to be fearful had been shown, the sun went down, and shot up one short gleam ere the swift darkness shrouded the sky. The howling of wild beasts rushing out to enjoy their time of sport could be traced from the lair to the "licks" and springs.

But our disarmed *gente perdida*, the lost ones, durst not light a fire; had they the means to scare the wolf away, it might have afforded a mark for the unknown archer. Don José wept as he saw his daughter, who pretended to sleep, to give him and her lover less uneasiness. But sleep does not come under these circumstances to them who court it.

Indeed, only those who have undergone the horror of a night in the untamed forest can imagine its poignancy. Lugubrious phantoms people the glades, the wild beasts intone a devilish concert, the limbs of trees seem to be animated into semblances of the really awakened serpents, whose scales can be heard gliding with a slime softened hush over the bending boughs. None but the experienced can reckon how many ages are compressed in one second of this gruesome "fix," a nightmare of the wakeful, during which the racked mind finds a distorted relish in picturing the most monstrous lucubrations, particularly when the faint yet tantalised appetite sets the brain palpitating with delirium.

After enduring this strain for some hours of the gloom, hope or mere instinct of self-preservation caused Benito to suggest, as one acquainted with hunters expedients, that the shelter existed by the increasing danger of their position on the ground, was upon the summit of a huge broken cottonwood tree. He assisted don José to mount to the top, which he found tolerably solid, spite of wet and solar rot, passed him up poor Dolores, and stood on guard at the base. He meant to have kept awake, or, rather, had not the least idea that he should go off to sleep, but famine had passed its acute stage, and fatigue collaborated with it to lull him. The last look he gave upwards showed him vaguely, like a St. Simon Stylites, the elder Mexican on the broad summit of the stump, his daughter reclining on the bed of pith at his feet. Don José was then praying, his face turned to the east, where no doubt he trusted to behold a less unhappy sun than had last scorched them.

Suddenly don Benito started: something like a hot snake had run down his cheek and buried itself in his bosom. At almost the same instant, whilst he was awakening fully, a smart sting in the left shoulder, preceded by a hissing, short and angry, made the young man utter an exclamation rather in rage than pain.

The sun had risen; at least, he could see about him and be warmed and vivified a little, through a fresh day commenced of intolerable torments.

As he looked up, the repetition of the sensation of the reptile gliding adown his face, but less warm and more slow this time, caused him to apply his hand to the line traversed. He withdrew it speedily, and in disgust – his fingers were smeared with blood!

"Oh, Don José!" he ejaculated. "Dolores, dear!"

Stupefied, speechless, like a statue, the girl upon the natural pedestal was supporting the lifeless body of the old Mexican. An arrow was broken off in his temple, and his beard, roughly sprouted out and white with this week of hardship, was flooded with the blackening blood of which Benito in his post below had received the drip.

The young man stared fiercely around, and instantly perceiving something on the move in the thicket, sprang up the tree.

At the same time aimed at him to redeem the marksman for his first failure, which had lodged the shaft in the young Mexican's shoulder instead of his head or his heart; a second projectile of the same description whizzed into the gap between his legs, opened by his leap, and smote a knot so violently as to shiver into a dozen splinters.

Unable for want of strength to keep his hold, the youthful Mexican slipped down to the ground. Then, facing about in frenzy of indignation, as being so badgered by the unknown, he called out savagely:

"Coward! Confront the last of your victims, if you have a drop of manly blood!"

Because he had concluded his last shot serious, or from disdain for his antagonist, or sheer recklessness – for it is not likely that a savage so far forgot his training as to let such a white man's taunt sting him into the imprudence – the Indian who had dogged the unfortunate trio stalked out of the underwood, and only ceased his advance when a lance length from the desperate man who had invoked him.

"*¡Presente!*" he said in Spanish, with a hoarse chuckle, as in one glance he saw the insensible young female form beside the dead Mexican, and don Benito's weak condition.

Indeed, the latter, instead of carrying out his implied threat, tottered back and leaned against the cottonwood, just under one arrow, and with the other shattered shaft bristling at his shoulder.

The red man chose to interpret this movement as a flattery for his warlike appearance, for he smiled contentedly, and, drawing his long knife, cried holding up three fingers of his left hand:

"La Garra de Rapina – the Claw of Rapine – will now take his harvest for thrice five days' toil."

Benito sought to summon his failing powers, but a mist seemed to spring up and becloud his gaze, through which he less and less clearly saw the Indian's slow and cruel approach. Nevertheless, he was about to make a snatch at hazard for the steel that rose over his bosom, when a flash of fire from a gun so near that he almost saw the hither extremity blind the redskin, preceded a shot that crashed through the latter's skull. Benito, unable to check his own leap, received the dead yet convulsed body in his arms, and the shock hurled him to the ground. Neither rose! One was dead; the other within an ace of the same impassable portals. It seemed to him, as he lost consciousness, that there was a struggle in the brush.

When Benito reopened his eyes he believed all had been a dream, but, on gazing anxiously about him, he saw the dead Indian by his side. Above him, too, when he rose on his knees by an effort, the two silent witnesses of his miraculous deliverance were still recumbent.

No trace of another living soul; nevertheless, the Indian's weapons had all disappeared.

Suddenly, as he lifted himself to his feet, aching all over as if he had been bastinadoed on every accessible place, he heard Dolores moan. She was animated by the acute racking of hunger.

He gasped, "Food! Food for her!" and reeled to the greenest spot, where he began to tear up the earth with his nails. At length he dislodged a little stem of yucca, the somewhat tasty root which yields a species of maniac.

When he returned to the tree, Dolores, horrified at seeing her father's blood, had fallen off the tree top, rather than climbed down, and was too insensible to hear his appeals. He dragged the Indian's body partly aside, for to do so wholly was too weighty a task, and heaped leaves over the other portion. He placed the root in Dolores' passive hands, and was about to repeat his hoarse babble of hope, which he did not feel at heart, when abruptly the arrow wound in his shoulder gave a sharp, deep, scorching sensation, which filled him from head to sole with fever and awe.

"Oh, heavens!" he groaned. "The arrow was poisoned! I shall die in madness! I shall, perhaps, tear her, my dear Dolores, in my blind, ungovernable rage!"

So feels the man whom hydrophobia has seized upon, as the latest promptings of reason bid him hie aloof from his endangered fellows.

Benito laid his glances about him wildly; his recently dull eyes blazed till his very features, already earthy, lit up, and he howled;

"Welcome, death! But anywhere save here!"

He trampled on the Indian corpse in his flight, and plunged into the thorns as if bent on rending himself to shreds. He must have rushed madly on for half an hour, the venom firing his thinned blood till his veins ran flames, but as the wound on his left side affected that portion of the frame disproportionately, he described a circle, and in the end had almost returned to the spot where Dolores still rested in a swoon.

At last, stumbling, groping, he fell, only to crawl a little way, then, a slight mound opposing his hands and knees, he rolled upon it. His head appeared to have been cleared by the Mazeppa-like course, and he was, at least, conscious of the raised grass reminding him of a funeral mound.

"A grave!" he breathed, dashing the sweat out of his eyes, "Yes, a grave here will the last of the Bustamentes die!"

He stretched out at full length, he folded his arms, one of them palsied already, and was beginning to pray, when his tone changed to joy, or at least, profound hopefulness. He fell over on his side, then rose to his knees, ran his hand over the mound eagerly, and cried:

"God of mercy, deceive me not! The grave I coveted, is it not a *cache*? Thank God!"

CHAPTER III. THE PIRATE'S BEQUEST

The wanderer whose careless progress through the brake sufficiently clearly revealed that he was a stranger of a bold heart and contempt for customs different from his own, was, in fact, one of those Englishmen who seem born to illustrate, in the nature of exceptions, the formal character of his race.

Left an orphan in the fetters of a trustee who forgot he had ever been young, and showed no sympathy with his charge, George Frederick Gladsden had broken his bondage and run away from school at the age of twelve. Reaching a Scotch port, after a long tramp, he shipped as boy on a herring fisher, and so made his novitiate with Neptune. After that initiation, very severe, he chose to become a sailor of that irregular kind which is known as the *pier head jumping*. That is to say, instead of duly entering on a vessel and book at the office in broad daylight, "George" would lounge on the wharf till the very moment of her casting off. Then, of course, the captain is happy to take anybody in the least nautical or even able-bodied, who offers himself in lieu of one of the regularly engaged mariners detained by accident, debt, or drink. By this means Gladsden's trustee and kinsfolk could never prevent him going wheresoever he willed, and it pleased this briny Arab to keep his whereabouts a mystery, though, to amuse himself and annoy his guardian, he would send him a letter from some dreadfully out-of-the-way port, just to show he did exist, and to prevent the estate being locked up or diverted under the law.

Meanwhile, the young roaming Englishman became so thorough a proficient in the honourable calling, and had so much courage and intelligence that, even in the merchant service, where the prizes are few and hotly fought for, he must have obtained a supportable, if not a brilliant position.

Unfortunately for himself he had an execrably fitful head, and was the declared foe of Draconian discipline. If there had been pirates on the seas he might even have joined them, only then to have enjoyed a delightful existence of "Jack his own master."

Quarrelling with his latest skipper, a seal hunter, on the Lower Californian coast, that Spaniard, rather alarmed at the turbulent mate, was relieved when he accepted the offer of an Hermosillo planter to become his manager, and not only broke the engagement between them, but presented Gladsden with some dollars and his gun on their parting. The Englishman promised well up in the country, but the fowl in the swamp allured him into hunting trips with some Indians, and he turned such a vagabond that the indolent Sonoran came to the conclusion that, as the skipper of the seal fur cruiser had warned him, he had contracted with a maniac.

One day, Gladsden and the Indians, turning their backs on the San Miguel swamps, wandered off, the Englishman cared not whither. His dusky comrades were soon displeased by his careless march, and a little later, disgusted by his even resenting their counsels for him to take precautions, since, not only were there other Indians "out," but one of the most notorious salteadores who had ever troubled any part of unquiet Mexico was overawing the whole of the tract between the San Miguel and the San José. To which the mad Englishman replied, with a calmness which startled the red men, though masters of self-repression, that such daring traits aroused in him a lively curiosity, and the strongest desire to face this very famous Matasiete, "the Slayer of Seven," the terror of Sonora.

Seeing this obstinacy, our sly Yaquis solved the perplexity by abandoning their burr one morning whilst he was still sleeping, and leaving him only his gun and what powder and ball he carried. His horse and other property they removed with them lest, in his folly, he should only turn the valuables over to the redskins not of their tribe, or the Mexican depredators.

For all of his maritime knowledge which helps the student of sky and weather on land, Gladsden was in a quandary when thus thrown on his own devices. As, however, he never wrangled with himself, he took up his solitary march without any self-communing, and followed the impulse of the moment.

Fortunately, game never failed him, and though the only flavouring was gunpowder, the fare had not palled upon him up to his coming within our circle of vision.

He was "loping" along, very like a sated wolf, listless, when he unexpectedly, and by the purest chance, spied the gleaming body of an Indian, stealing before him amongst the foliage, always in the thickest parts.

His resolve awakening to give the Yaquis a lecture, with cuts of the ramrod, upon the "Fault of Abandoning a Hunting Companion in the Desert," he quickened his pace, but almost immediately perceived that the savage was another guess sort of a bird, one more likely, armed for war as he was, and determined of aspect as ever was a brave, to deal out punishment than receive it unrequitingly.

In fact, the fierce, hungry, set face of the pursuer of the Mexican protectors of doña Dolores would have sufficed to impress even a more nonchalant person than our Englishman.

"Mischief in the wind," thought he.

And as a white man on seeing a man of another hue on the trail, at once believes that the object of the chase is one of his own colour, he turned to, and, having no other intentions to overrule, began to dog the slayer of don José de Miranda as successfully and closely as he was following the Mexicans. It was not to be expected that the foreigner did not make blunders in this manhunt, so novel to him, but his very incaution or missteps actually helped him, for the savage, unable to believe that a man would dream of breaking a twig noisily in a wild perhaps not devoid of certain enemies, attributed the two or three alarming sounds in his rear to animals, from whom he had nothing to dread.

In brief, Gladsden arrived at the halting place of the Mexicans in time to see poor Benito make his stand, and hear the savage, as he disclosed himself, utter the arrogant "*Presente*" as he bared his knife to complete his triple tragedy.

The Englishman saw there was a flutter of a woman's dress that appealed to his gallantry, the blood splashes from don José on the stump, and the valiant but weak port of don Benito. He feared that to jump towards the Apache would not stay that ugly knife, so he lifted the gun which was Captain Saone's parting gift, and sent a bullet through the warrior's head.

As quickly upon the echoes of the report, as if it had been a signal, and, for that matter, the two men who bounded upon the marksman had been afraid to "tackle" him whilst his firearm was "full" – a standing item in prairie fighting – the Englishman was set upon by a man on either side. Spite of his strength he was hurled off his feet, and secured with a lariat and gagged with moss, all with a celerity which proved that he had been overcome by bandits of no despicable experience. When he was perfectly incapacitated from more than winking, as one of the fellows remarked in a whisper, that facetious rogue warily proceeded to inspect the result of the shot.

It had so laudably obeyed its impulsion, that the Mexican, after one look at the Indian, felicitated himself on not having been so precipitate as to draw that bullet on himself.

The spot was quiet, Benito, clogged red smearing his shoulder, seemed as lifeless as the red man. The young girl and her father, whose blood reddened her ragged dress, were equally among the lifeless, to all cursory examination.

The Mexican picked up the weapons of the Indian, said: "A lone Chiricahua Apache!" as he spurned the body out of wantonness, and returned to his comrades.

"The captain will be gratified, Farruco," said he, pushing the Indian's weapons within his sash; "there they all lie, in a heap, the don, the daughter and their young companion, with the Chiricahua who was hired to dog them to the death, slain by our chalky faced long shot here."

"If we cut his throat, Pepillo, then we shall make a clearance of the whole cluster," returned Farruco, complacently, even laying his hand on the buckhorn haft of a knife.

"A word to that! You are always for taking the crowning pleasure of a running down! Am I to have no thanks even for having saved you from running your hasty head against this heretic's gun? A thousand demons shall not rob me of my prey! You have already grabbed his gun! I will have the cutting of his throat."

The silenced object of this very pretty growing dispute looked up calmly, but sufficiently interested, be sure, out of his gray eyes.

"One moment, let us throw dice for the pleasure!"

"Nonsense! We all know the top heaviness of your dice."

The other duly laughed at this allusion to a vantage which is not always accepted as a compliment.

"Let us draw leaves – long or short!"

"I agree, Pepillo; there's a bayonet palm at your elbow."

The Mexican turned to gather a couple of leaves of different length, when the captive saw the face of his comrade shine with a hellish joy. Noiseless he drew out the Indian's tomahawk from his belt and in another second he would have buried it in the back of the unsuspecting bandit. The monstrous fondness for cruelty which impelled this wanton murder was so repugnant to the Englishman that he, bound too tightly for any other movement, rolled himself, by working his elbow and knee, right against the feet thrown forward of the traitor. The shock was not enough to make the blow fully miscarry, but the axe only cleft the wretch's collarbone, glancing the flesh to one side along it on partial withdrawal with an agony imparted which made the recipient yell. He flung himself round, and drawing his knife at the same inappreciable second of time, broke through the other's guard with the hatchet, and buried the blade in his heart so forcibly that the hilt drove his breath out of his lungs with a loud sound. Farruco pitched over upon the Englishman, and died before he had ceased his groan of despair.

The wounded outlaw sat himself down, without any but self-concern, to attend to his wound, to which he applied a dressing of chewed leaves. Then studying the scene, he suddenly became conscious that the movement of the loglike form of the prisoner between his assassin's legs had saved his life, if, always granted, it were a curable wound.

Without a word, like a man who fears to hesitate in his formation of a good but novel whim, lest he revokes its realisation to remain consistent with his daily and worse nature, Pepillo, without wiping the fatal knife, severed the leather thongs around Gladsden.

"One good turn," said he, sententiously, as becomes a Spaniard, but prudently setting his foot on the gun of which the captive was despoiled.

"Yes, he meant to split your skull, that's all," remarked the latter, sitting up and chafing his limbs to restore the circulation. "He was a pirate; and you have only anticipated his suspension at a yardarm."

Pepillo paid no attention to him. He had picked up the Indian's hatchet, and seemed to be regarding with an antiquarian zeal the design traced in an idle moment or two, now and then, with the hunting knife. Then, contracting his brow more in terror than in pain, and turning pale in the same increasing dread rather than from loss of blood, he ejaculated:

"The villain! The assassin! It is a copper bronze hatchet! I am poisoned! I shall die of lockjaw!" Then, noting the incredulous expression of the bystander, who had, however, been sufficiently sympathetic as to rise to his throbbing feet and lean towards the sufferer, "I tell you, Pagan, that the Indian was one of the *Apaches Emponzoñadores*— the sect of the Poison Hatchets, and I am – the Lord and my patron saint forgive me – a dead man!"

Gladsden looked at the tomahawk, and, after the man's utterance, thought the metal head gave out a sinister gleam. Then, recalling all he ever knew of copper poisoning, he said:

"Let me attend to the cut," in a tone which made the sufferer see that he was taken as the victim of terror rather more than mortal pain.

Still, as the gash was beyond his simple remedy, the Indian cataplasm which should have allayed the fiery feeling which even augmented from the first, Pepillo yielded to his late enemy like a child, with that compliance of the Latin races under mortal injury.

A seafarer knows much about cuts, and so, at the first glance after removing the herb poultice, Gladsden recognised that the cut, clean in infliction, was aggravated shockingly.

"You see!" cried the Mexican, triumphantly, as far as the victory over the other's disbelief was concerned, but with acute agony at his certainty being confirmed; "Am I not a lost man?"

"In that case," replied the Englishman, taking up his gun and charging it methodically out of Farruco's powder horn as the nearest, "I will go and see about the wearer of that woman's dress whom I caught a glimpse of yonder, when you and your mate all but anticipated my shot at that screeching savage."

"Don't leave me!"

"But I must! Gallantry, my dear ex-captor."

"Leave me not!" reiterated Pepillo, who had supported himself with his gun whilst the Englishman had looked at his hurt, "For the sake of my widow and four little ones."

"A bandit with a family," observed Gladsden. "This is curious."

"Yes; who know not of my mode of life," appealed the salteador, falling into a seated position and clasping his hands. "By the rules of our band – for I am one of the Caballeros de la Noche, of Matasiete – all my goods fall in to the gang! But my wife – my Angela! My little ones – my angelitos! Have still more compassion, you greatly noble American of the North, and hear my *viva voce* testament in their behalf."

"Go on," was the reply. "Considering where the commissioner to take oaths – who is only an Englishman, by the way, and no American of the Northern States – where he has his office opened, and the improbability of his traversing a wilderness of poisonous vermin of all descriptions to file your testament, it is a pure formality. However," he added, the while the dying robber divided his time between a disjointed supplication and wrestlings against a pain that convulsed him severely at intervals more and more closely recurrent, "will away your 'bacca box and your knife and sash. I'll do my best to carry them to the legatees."

"Listen to me," said Pepillo solemnly, and beckoning him to approach. His voice was singular in sound; his features contorted, his clayey, pale face streaming with cold, thick perspiration. "I have not always been a ranger of the prairie. I was a sailor, like you are, as I caught in your speech. Do you know the islands on the other coast of the Gulf of California?"

"I have only sailed round to Guaymas."

"I will draw you the chart. Due north from Cantador Island I have a treasure. Laugh not, raise no brow in derision. In coin, and emeralds, gold, silver, and pearls, I have over a million dollars."

"Nonsense!"

"I am the last of the band of Colonel Dartois the Filibuster, and I tell you I am the sole treasurer of the crew."

The Englishman was not acquainted with that adventurer, of much notoriety in his day on the Pacific Coast, but the tone of the dying man was sincere.

"Be quick, then, thou dying one, to give the clue," said he as if convinced, whether so or not.

CHAPTER IV. A DESERT MYSTERY

Upon this enjoinder of so eminently practical a nature, and thoroughly aware of the necessity of haste, the fallen Mexican rapidly drew with his ramrod end, upon a space of earth smoothed by his foot in its deerskin boot, like an antique tablet under the stylus, a map – rude, but, to a navigator, plain and ample.

"At this point," said he, "a sunken reef trends north and south, with a break at a little bow a quarter mile from the black rock that juts out all but flush with its ripple. Deep water in 'the pot,' and there we anchored to ride to a submerged buoy, so that the cankerworm would not attack the metal or the borer the wood – a chest, bound with yellow metal. If it shall have broke away, its weight would only have sunk it deep in the oyster bed, all the shells there smashed to powdery scales by the drags. A diver will find it for you, then."

"Now, swear to me!" he went on, forcing his weakening voice to keep an even tenor. "Swear that one-half the contents of that hiding place shall be Ignacio Santamaria's, my brother-in-law's, who will give enough to his sister, my Angela. And the rest – be it yours, brave and Christian heart."

Whether he was only fostering a delusion, or accepting a commission that would enrich him, Gladsden nodded assent.

"But, swear!"

"I give you my word, as an English gentleman," said he, obstinately.

"I am content."

"And what is there stowed there away?" with a smile of his former discredit, "Copper bolts?"

"Pearls! The choicest from Carmen Island to Acapulco."

"Well, that sounds natural enough. The next thing is, where shall I find your brother Ignacio and the rest of the family, Master Pepillo Santamaria?"

Poignant anguish rendered the other unconscious of external matter for a period; he clutched his head with both hands as if to prevent the bones flying asunder, then recovering his senses, as the paroxysm quitted him, he said:

"You have not far to go for my brother. As for the dear ones, they are at the old town of Guaymas. My brother is here – "

"Here! The devil!" looking round and falling on guard.

"At the Mound Tower." He pointed with a wavering finger to the northeast. "Not two hours' ride, our rendezvous – a robber's rendezvous – but have no fear! Ignacio is second of the band, – remember, his sister's fortune is at stake! Call him out from among the crew – the signal, our private signal, two meows of the catamount – Ignacio is known as the *Gato de montes*, mark! Have mercy! Remember the pearls! My wife – my little angels! Pity!"

Gladsden averted his gaze not to witness an agony which he could not stay relieve or bid cease. When he looked on Pepillo again, he was dead.

As it threatened to come on dark, not only by the disappearance of the sun, but by a storm, which the seaman divined, rather than perceived in progress, he bent a silver coin, so as to make a species of pencil, with the point at the double, and using some cigarette paper, copied off, "in silver point," the map which the dead pirate, *cum* pearl fisher, *plus* highwayman, had designed on the ground bedewed with his blood. Whilst so employed, the Englishman repeated to himself, like a scholar beating a lesson into his brain, the instructions connected with this singular testament.

Recalling his intention before the robber's appeal had distracted him, Gladsden, gun in hand, marched with a determination not to be cried "halt!" to again, towards the huge cottonwood stump, by which he marked the scene of the Mexican standing at bay against the Apache.

The latter's remains were there, a fresh made grave (covered with stones and brambles to prevent the attack of the quadrupedal ghouls to which the luckless red man was consigned, in most probability), concealed don José de Miranda from the searcher's eyes. A fragment of Dolores' attire was all that prevented Gladsden from supposing he had been the prey of an illusion as to a woman having also occupied that natural pedestal. To complete the puzzle a spade of North American make was carelessly lying by the fresh mound.

"Hilli-ho! Ahoy there!" cried the Englishman, fortified against fear of the bandits by the claim he had upon the lieutenant of the band, and caring not a jot for Indians or others, since he had his gun in shooting order.

But save the mocking of birds there was no rejoinder.

Afar he heard thunder, though.

"A mound tower must be prominent," he mused, "and this thicket in a torrent rain and a tornado is worse accommodation than the toughest highwayman must accord the bearer of an inheritance. I'll make for the Mound Tower, and implore señor don El Sostenedor, of the most glorious robber chief What's-his-name, for a corner of his stronghold, a chunk of deer's meat, and a swig of pulque."

He returned to the two dead men, loaded his belt with such of their weapons as completed, not to say replete, a portable arsenal, which an Albanian janissary would have envied, and, with the same heedlessness as to southwestern travelling precautions which had heretofore distinguished him, stepped manfully away from the haunt of murder. Ere he had taken half a dozen strides, he heard many a soft padded foot in the bushes; the volunteer sextons of the prairie were flocking to entomb the dead in their unscrupulous maw.

The thunder boomed more audible, and the eagle screamed defiance over the lonely adventurer's head.

CHAPTER V. THE GODSEND

The inhabitants of the wilderness, red or white, black or yellow, obliged often to "let go of all," as our sailor friend would word it, and "get" (as he would probably say if his foolhardy behaviour allowed him to live long enough in that region to acquire the cant language), and pretty suddenly too, to follow the chase or avoid an ambush, are necessitated to abandon their plunder and traps, using these words in their legitimate sense. As, at the same time, they have no inclination to renounce their property, they bank it, or, as the trappers say, *cache* it.

The model *cache* is thus constructed: the first thing is to spread blankets or buffalo robes around the chosen spot for the excavation, which is scooped out in any desirable shape with knives and flat stones; all the extracted ground, loam, sand, or whatever its nature, being carefully put on the spreads. When the pit is sufficiently capacious it is lined with buffalo hides to keep out damp, and the valuables are deposited within, even packed up in hide, if necessary. The earth is restored and trodden down, or rammed firmly with the rifle butts, water is sometimes sprinkled on the top to facilitate the settling, and upon the replaced sod to prevent it dying after the injury to its roots. All the earth left over is carried to a running water, or scattered to the four winds, so as to make the least evidences of the concealment vanish. The *cache* is generally so well hidden that only the eye of an uncommonly gifted man can discover it. Often, then, he only chances upon one that has been opened and emptied by the owners, who, after that, of course, were easy in their second operation. The contents of a well-constructed *cache* may keep half a dozen years without spoiling.

Benito Bustamente believed he had been led to die upon a *cache*.

To a man dropping of fatigue and famine such a find was of inestimable value. It might reasonably offer him the primary necessities of which he was denuded, and he would be revived, literally, on being furnished with the means to fight his way to civilisation, where otherwise he and Dolores, always hoping the young girl had not preceded him past the bourne, must perish.

For a few instants, propped up on both hands, in a wistful attitude, which I never saw in a pictorial representation of a human being, but which was recalled to me by the pose of the bloodhound in Landseer's picture of the trail of blood, in which floats a broken plume.

A moment of suspense!

He was swayed by indefinable sensations, fascinated, so as to be fearful of breaking the spell.

When, at length, he mastered his emotion, he did not forget the duty of an honest man constrained to invade the property of another, though that other might be his enemy!

Trapper law is explicit; wanton breaking into a *cache* is punishable by death.

So he shaped out a square of the sod with a sharp mussel shell which he spied glistening near him, and slowly removed that piece, anxiously quivering in the act. Other turf he removed in the same manner, more and more sure that it was a *cache*. This preliminary over, he paused to take breath, and to enjoy the luxury of discounting a pleasure which came as veritable life in the midst of death.

Then he resumed a task terrible for one exhausted by privations and loss of blood. Many times he was forced to stop, his energy giving out.

Slow went on the work; no indications of his being correct arose to corroborate his surmise. The shell broke, but then he used the two fragments, held in his hand with such tenacity that they seemed to be supplementary nails. Vain as was the toil, here lay, he still believed, the sole chance of safety; if heaven smiled on his efforts, his darling Dolores might yet be a happy woman. So he clung to this last chance offered by happy hazard with that energy of despair, the immense power of Archimedes, for which nothing is impossible.

The hole, of no contemptible size, yawned blankly before him. Nothing augured success, and, whatever the indomitable energy of the young man's character, he felt discouragement cast a new gloom over his soul. His eyelids, red with fever, licked up the tear that ventured to soothe them, and his lips cracked as he pressed them together.

"At least, here I dig a grave for don José, and my poor love," he said wildly. "It shall be deep enough to baffle the wolf!"

He renewed his tearing at the soil, when suddenly the shells snapped off, both pieces together, and his nails also scraping something of a different material to the earth, turned back at their jagged ends, but not at that supreme moment giving him the pain which at another time the same accident must have caused. Some hairs were mingled with the earth, and a scent different from that of the freshly bared ground intoxicated him with its musk.

Disdaining the shattered mussel shell, he used his hands as scoops, and presently unearthed a buffalo skin.

Instead of tugging at it with greedy relish to feast on the treasure it doubtlessly muffled, Benito drew back his hands and stared with worse tribulation than ever.

A cache— yes! A full one — who knew?

Long ago it might have been pillaged. With but one movement between him and the verification or annihilation of his hopes the Mexican hesitated. He was frightened.

His labour under difficulties had been so great, he had cherished so many dreams and nursed so many chimeras, that he instinctively dreaded the seeing them swiftly to flee, and leave him falling from his crumbling anticipations into the frightful reality that closed in upon him with inexorable jaws.

In the end, determined to do or die, for to that it had truly come, Benito's trembling hands buried themselves in the buffalo robe, clutched it irresistibly and hauled it up into his palpitating bosom. His haggard eyes swam with joyful gush of many tears, so that he could not see the sky to which he had raised them in gratitude.

Benito had fallen on a hunter's and trapper's store. Not only were there traps and springes of several sorts, weapons, powder horns, bullet bags, shot moulds, leaden bars, horse caparisons, hide for lassoos, but eatables in hermetically sealed tins of modern make, not then familiar to Mexicans, and liquor in bottles protected by homemade wicker and leather plaiting.

He was stretching out his hands ravenously to the bottles and a role of jerked beef, when it seemed to him that the voice of the Unseen prompted him with "God! Thank God!" and repeating the words in a voice unintelligible from stifling emotions, he fairly swooned across the pit as if to defend it with his poor, worn, hard-trying body.

His face was serene when he unclosed his eyes anew. Soberly, by a great control, he ate of some tinned meat and the crackers and swallowed as slowly some cognac. The latter filled him with fire, and he could have leaped into a treetop and crowed defiance to the vultures which were sailing overhead as if balked of their prey.

In that momentary calmness, he felt so strong and so rejoiced in his self-command that his spirit seemed to spurn its casket. But instantly, with the blood careering anew, the wound in his shoulder smarted furiously, and all down that arm and up to his neck he felt a strange and novel sensation; it was as if molten lead was in the veins, scorching and making heavy the limb.

"The arrow! I am poisoned!" he muttered. "Oh, is this windfall come merely to embitter my death?"

That taste of liquor made his mouth water, and there was suggested to him by the sight of the brandy bottle that here was the remedy which the wisest frontiersman and medicine man would have prescribed. He put the cognac to his lips, and emptied the bottle.

Almost instantly he felt an aching in every pore away and beyond that of the wound; his brain appeared to swell to bursting its cell, and howling himself hoarse, he thought — though, in reality, his

inarticulate cries were strangled in his throat – he rolled upon the ground, too weak to dance upon his feet, as he imagined he was doing.

This intoxication left him abruptly, and he fell insensible. But for his stertorous breathing, which finally became regular and gentle, he was as a corpse beside the greedy grave.

He woke up, lame in every bone, but clear-eyed, and the ringing in his head abated. Either the remedy had succeeded, or constitution, for he was able to set about his task with surprising vigour.

Thereupon, he chose out of the store a pair of revolvers, their cartridges in quantity, two powder horns and bullets to fit the finest rifle, a bowie knife and a cutlass, and a length of leather thong to make a lasso, and a spade for the grave of don José, filled a game bag with matches in metal boxes, sewing materials, and other odds and ends for the traveller. Tobacco, too, he took, and was looking for paper to make cigarettes, when a small book met his eyes.

It was stamped in gold, "London, Liverpool, and West State of Mexico Agnas Caparrosas Mining Company." It was an account book of the company – one of those enterprises to which, he had heard, his father had lent a favourable attention. A pencil was attached to the book; he wrote on a blank page the list of all the articles he took, signing:

"Require the payment of me. – I, BENITO VÁZQUEZ DE BUSTAMENTE."

As quickly as he could he replaced what he did not wish to be burdened with, made the concealment good, and swept the grass with two buffalo skins, which he had also taken for clothing. This duty of a thankful and honourable man being accomplished, he darted back to where he had left Dolores with a free and easy movement, of which he had not believed himself ever again to be capable only a short time before.

He was amazed that a little food and spirit had restored him, and began to fear the reaction.

His wits remained clear. He remembered very distinctly indeed his confrontation of the savage who had been blasted as by a heavenly thunderbolt. He was not surprised when he found that redskin where he had rolled him. But what was his pain when he saw no trace of Dolores but the same fragment of her dress which Gladsden was, soon after, also to behold!

Sounds in the chaparral which reminded him of the four-footed scavengers in rivalry of the carrion birds that circled above, urged him to ply the spade, and he piously laid don José to his final rest.

Then, his rifle loaded, his frame fortified by the refreshment which he took at intervals on his march, he went forward in the trail which the abductor of the Mexican's daughter had been unable, so burdened, to avoid making manifest, all his emotions, even gratitude to the chief, set aside for the desire of vengeance on the remorseless foes to whom he owed so many and distressful losses, and on whom he had not yet been enabled to inflict any reprisal.

"Let me but overtake him, or them," thought he, "before the tempest obliterates this track with its deluge, and I will flesh this sword, or essay this new rifle on his vile carcass!"

CHAPTER VI. ANY PORT IN A STORM

Gladsden was groping along when he perceived the thorn thicket changing into a prairie, only slightly interspersed with scrub. At the same time, though underfoot, the scene cleared, the indications of atmospheric perturbation increased in number and in ominous importance. Already the material man triumphed over the romantic one, and our Englishman thought considerably better of a solid refuge from the tempest than to come up with the abductor of the Mexican girl. Spite of its sinister aspect, therefore, his eyes were delighted when he saw, outlined against the northeastern sky, sullenly blackening, a curiously shaped tower. In a civilised country he would have ignobly supposed it a factory shaft.

He knew nothing whatever about this pillar of sunbaked bricks, some fifty feet in altitude, and, we repeat, cared nothing for the monument from any point of view but its qualities as a shelter.

Nevertheless, an archaeologist would have given a fortune to have studied this Nameless Tower, for the aboriginal held it too sacred for mention in common parlance. It was slightly pyramidal; the north side, not quite the true meridian, presented a right angle, presumably to breast and divide the wind of winter prevalent at its erection, while the rest was rounded trimly. The excellence of the work was better shown in the cement, not mud, or ground gypsum, having resisted the weather and particularly the sandy winds themselves, though they had worn the *dobies* (*adobes*, sun dried bricks) away deeply in places, without making airholes through. There was nothing like a window or depression save these natural pits, until the view reached the ragged top, where a sort of lantern or cupola, so far as a few vestiges indicated, had once crowned the edifice; there the floor of this disappeared chamber had become the roof, and an orifice, perhaps a loophole enlarged by rot, yawned like a deep set eye beside an arm of metal terminating in a hook. Presumably the column was a priest's watchtower, where a sacred fire was preserved in peace times to imitate the sun. It is known, the ancient Mexicans adored the sun. A beacon, too, in war times, for the fire and smoke signal code of the American Indians is too complete to have been the invention of yesterday. The entrance at the base cut in the rock utilised for nearly all the foundation. Once blocked up, the watcher, remote from lances, slingshots, and bowshots, could count the besiegers on this plain, and telegraph their number to his friends at a distance. The metal arm may have suspended a pulley block and rope by which provisions and even an assistant could be hauled up to him.

The natives avoid the tower and its proximity. The white rovers deem it uncanny, and, having no curiosity to gratify, also leave the spot untroubled.

Gladsden regarded the tall mass with some uneasiness as he approached sufficiently near to measure its dimensions and examine the emblems stained, rather than painted, on the alabaster base stone. A colossal half human, half bovine head, armed with terrible horns, and showing long angular teeth in a ferocious grin, was prominent among these designs.

All was so still that he hesitated to wake the echoes with a more or less tolerable imitation of the wildcat, to which no response came, or if from a distance such was raised, the approaching thunderpeals overcame it.

He boldly plunged into the doorless passage, the way to which had been to a more wary man suspiciously free from brambles.

A smell of smoke, and even of tobacco smoke, he thought, overcame that of damp earth.

The only light was that which the doorway admitted, but several plates of mica, backed rudely with metal, which time and damp had tarnished, made the interior a little less sombre by their dull reflections. A ladder of wood, all the fastenings of rawhide, could be distinguished climbing like a

twin snake up the wall; on high a grayish eye seemed to look unwinkingly down: it was the light oozing in at the gap at the top.

There were red streaks on the wall: paintings in red pipe clay partially effaced, or mementoes of slaughter, just as the spectator chose to believe or fancy.

At the moment, the intruder was chiefly interested in the charcoal under his feet, almost warm, certainly so fresh that he concluded that others than he chose it for a refuge under stress of weather, no doubt Master Pepillo's congeners.

Less courageous, he would have shrunk away without pondering over the nature of his predecessors, possibly regular hosts of this lugubrious domicile of owl and vulture.

Convinced that he was, for the time being, the sole tenant, Gladsden resolved, however, to explore the portion unrevealed. To his hands and feet the ladder presented no obstacle, and he ran up the rough rattlings swiftly, spite of fatigue. It brought him into a species of manhole under the roof, close to the gap, and yet shielded from its draft by a jutting piece of wall.

"This will do," thought he, finding it dry and clean; "I will kill a brace of birds frightened into stupidity by the oncoming storm, roast them on that charcoal, and bring them up here for supper. If the robbers surprise me, I will maintain that I was merely killing time before the arrival of lieutenant Ignacio, and claim that gentleman's friendship by reason of my charge from his brother. If I am interrupted, I shall pull up the ladder, in trust that it will come free, and sleep here, safe from prowling beasts and serpents."

Suddenly gloom fell on all the landscape, as if a mighty hand had eclipsed the waning sun. The air was very much more thick and oppressive, and there were innumerable though faint crepitations like feeble snappings of electricity. To take the game he spoke of, before the rainfall drowned them out of their nests, it was needful to hasten. But he had not descended three rounds of the ladder, before he stopped all of a piece. From every side, there was the sound of an arrival of men, both on foot and ahorse. Instinctively he drew himself up, arranged his form on the floor so as to project only his forehead and eyes over the ledge where ended the means of ascension, and stared below.

A number of persons, congratulating themselves on their reunion loudly with the hyperbolic phrases of the Spanish ceremony of greeting, clattered into the tower. Presently a light was struck, and a roaring fire kindled. As the shaft thus became the chimney, Gladsden was forced to cough, though he smothered the sound as much as possible, hoped, as did the man who lighted the damp wood, that it would lose no time in burning up clearly.

When he could protrude his face over the peephole again, he beheld a dozen persons, swarthy, robust, richly clad as the prairie rovers, or cattle thieves, armed to the teeth. Cruel of eye, malignant and ferocious, he judged it highly imprudent to make their acquaintance, unless Ignacio was the introducer.

Before very many sentences were uttered, every syllable of which came to his ears direct, the overhearer was not allowed to cherish any error as to their profession. They were the Gentlemen of the Night, the road robbers, the scourges of Sonora, belonging to the squad (*cuadrilla*) of Matasiete, "the Slayer of Seven."

The gestures of the Mexicans grew animated as they sat around the fire, or leaned against the wall, which the gleams showed to be painted by the Indians; now and then they clapped their unwashed but jewelled hands to their weapons – at which moments the witness earnestly prayed that they would join in a free fight and kill everyone to the last. They were wrangling over the division of spoil, and perhaps the plunder would have cost additional lives to those of its original proprietors, when the advent of someone in authority caused the dispute to cease. It was their captain.

He was not the heroic figure that Gladsden had imagined fit to rule such desperadoes. He was tall, but lean, don Quixote with Punch's nose and chin, rather the fox than the wolf, and though his features were set stern and his voice was savage, doubts might be conceived as to his own reliance on his bullying mode of government.

"At your differences again," he cried in a sharp voice, which now and then ran up shrill and high, spite of himself, more to the resemblance of the puppet show hero than ever. "*¡Caray!* Why can't you pull together like honourable gentlemen of the prairie?"

Two of the brigands began an explanation which their leader cut short by replying to the less ruffianly of the two:

"Silence! I'll not be bothered by a single word! *¡Viva Dios!* Here you are hugging the fire like herders broiling a steak, without a thought of our common safety. I have had to post sentries myself, and even they grumbled at such important duty, just because there is a barrel of water coming down. I tell you I heard a shot in the thicket, which was not from any of our guns."

Another of the gang spoke up, with whom he judged it meet to argue. It is due to the estimable captain Matasiete to say that the debater in question was picking a fragment of buffalo beef out of a huge hollow grinder, with an unpleasant long knife.

"It is true, Ricardo, that the red men do never approach the Owl Tower; but what is that? Someday our secret haunt will be surprised and the Yaquis will fall on us for profaning the old pile. Where is Ignacio? Where is the lieutenant, I say?"

Neither he nor his brother had arrived, that was the answer, to Mr. Gladsden's chagrin.

"Then will they get their boots choked with rain," remarked the commander of these precious rogues, comfortably installing himself at the fire, in the very manner which he had disapproved of in his men. There was a flash of lightning. The thunder roared round the tower, which bravely met the precursor shower, though it was of a drenching nature to justify the repugnance of the salteadores to standing sentinel in the open, whilst their luckier comrades enjoyed the shelter and the fire.

There was silence within the tower: the bandits, drawing a little aloof from their chief, in respect or lack of sympathy, prepared supper, priced their property with a view of staking it in card play, or, as far as two or three were concerned, lounged at the door, watching the ground smoke after the wetting, and glancing tauntingly at their brothers on guard, who shone with moisture in the chance ray from the glorious fire.

The extreme heat around Gladsden, his fatigue and a dulness engendered by the recent strain on his faculties, forced his eyes to close now and then, and he was about falling into a torpor, when a commotion below aroused him.

A man, clanking his huge spurs to rid them of mud and rotten leaves, drenched almost through his blanket, splashed to the waist, his tough leather breeches scored by wait-a-bit thorns, swearing at the dog's weather, wringing out his hair, for he had lost his hat – this individual, hailed amicably as "our dear Ignacio," but heedless of the welcome in his vexation and a species of alarm, pushed aside his comrades flocking round him, and, saluting the captain, basking in the fire beams, said reproachfully:

"My brother not here? Then ill fares him! There are strangers in the chaparral!"

"Strangers!" all the voices exclaimed, whilst weapons clattered their scabbards.

From only this transient glance at don Ignacio, the Englishman made up his mind that he would not trust him with his life.

CHAPTER VII. A WAKING NIGHTMARE

"Aye, strangers, and no jokers! But to my tale. Captain, in the first place your Indian hireling has done his work well. He slew the don – the youngster, I opine – and, as for the damsel, why I have had her on my arm this half hour, till the storm forced me to *cache* her!"

"Aha! Good!" said the captain, rubbing his hands on his nearly roasted knees. "Albeit, I am sorry that the girl escaped. I'd as lief marry the aunt to obtain the Miranda Hacienda, as wed the lass and be saddled with the old lady."

"Well, she's next to dead. The Apache worried them sore, so that they have had no food."

"And he? Did you *pay* him, as I suggested?"

"I followed him up to administer the dose of lead, but I was anticipated. Some strangers, I tell you, are roaming the desert, and blew a tunnel through his head."

"And Pepillo?" questioned Ricardo.

"Either lying perdu till the storm abates, or gratified with the same pill. It is a deuce of a heavy gun to carry a bullet so large and so true."

"An American rifle?" queried the captain, uneasily, whilst Gladsden, patting his gun silently, so conveyed to it the flattering fear with which its prowess had inspired the depredators.

"It is this way," went on Ignacio, who saw that all eyes were bent on him. "I struck the broad trail of the don and the Apache. I heard a shot of an unknown piece, so I alighted, hopped my mule, and, making a circuit, entered the thicket afoot, going slow because of my spurs."

"Soon I came to a sort of glade, where a big tree stump stands. There the Indian had sent an arrow through don José, and there the unknown had sent a heavy bullet through him. All was quiet. No sign of the young man, their guide. But the señorita, the heiress, lay as one dead at the stump. I felt no pulse. Her eyes were closed. I took her up and made for my mule, but, either I had missed my mark or had strayed. No mule. Then, believing he would come here, since he has a sneaking affection for your horses, captain, I tried to carry the girl on my own way hither. She was light as a feather, but the thorns are a veritable net to catch hummingbirds, and then, again, the storm about to break! Faith, I hid her in a hollow tree, and hastened on. But I was overtaken by the rain, and am as tattered as a *lepero*!"

"And Pepillo?"

"He was never born to be drowned in the deluge upon us," answered lieutenant Ignacio, with no superabundance of fraternal affection, as he sat at the fire, and overhauled the rent raiment. "We will fish for him and the girl, in the day."

"But if she was spent, she will die of starvation," remarked Matasiete, with a spark of humanity or of affection.

"Pshaw! As you say, you can, in the character of don Aníbal de Luna, marry the old lady and so obtain the property; besides, I left my flask of *aguardiente* (firewater, or whiskey) in her cold pit, and that's meat and drink, eh, gentlemen?"

A silence ensued, the others having nodded a double tribute to his gallantry and the potency of raw spirits.

"I do not like the young man being out of your view," said Matasiete, who had a small, carping spirit, "If he should not meet Pepillo and Farruco – "

"Crawled off with an arrow in him to die in the bushes," was the reply. "That Apache is one of the poisoners, you know, and nothing that will not cure a rattlesnake bite, will subdue the venom of his wounds. A good riddance whoever perforated his skull! And here's his health," holding up a horn of spirits on high as though he divined the actual whereabouts of the avenger of don José de Miranda.

"There is Farruco still to come in," said the captain, yawning.

"Pah! He's under a stone like an iguana! If he eludes the rain as cleverly as he does the leaden hail when we attack a caravan, methinks he will turn up in the day as dry as the core of a miser's heart."

Meanwhile, the storm, which had but inadequately manifested its power in the heralding blow and pour, now swept across the plain and buffeted the tower. It began to rock, and the sentries, who set discipline at defiance and had come into the shelter, were half afraid that they had not taken the wiser course. Whatever their terror below, that of Gladsden would have been more justifiable, for the loose stones atop were moved at each gust, and some fell, both within and without. The prospect of the lightning bolt flinging him scathed to the death, amid ruins, upon the knot of robbers, was quite within reasonable surmise.

He wrapped his gun up beside him, so that its steel should not attract the flame that seemed, when it played within his nook, to linger upon him, and expected the worst between the two perils.

All at once, splitting the rolling thunder in its higher key, a frightened voice cried out, "The horses! There is a stampede!"

Notwithstanding the pouring rain, half a dozen of the bandits rushed out. But almost instantly returning, they gladly reported that the agitation among the horses was caused, not so much by their fright at the lightning, as by the mad gambols of Ignacio's mule, which, running into the group tethered on the leeward of the tower, was plying tooth and hoof in order to range himself near the horse to which he had taken one of those devoted fancies not uncommon among the hybrids. Instead of their forming a mass, rounded in shape, their tails outward, to meet the rain, they half encircled the tower, accommodating themselves to the wind, which was shifting to the southeast.

"The old tower holds firm," said Ignacio, his mouth full of beef, as he plied a needle and fine deer's sinew for thread in the reparation of his leggings.

"Only the gale shakes out a tooth of the old hag's head," said his neighbour, on whom sundry fragments of the crumble had fallen.

"Ha!" ejaculated don Matasiete, abruptly, as he clapped his long hand to his head, and then clutched the object which had struck him there, and then rolled into the ashes. He had pulled it forth with amazing alacrity. "Since when has this tower been built with cartridges?"

"What!" was the general cry, as all, like the speaker, looked upward.

"I tell you that this fell on my head. If it rains more of the like we must dash out the fire, or we'll be blown higher than the eagle flies!"

Every man had drawn a weapon. Their ignorance of meteorology might be great or little, but cartridges do not come with Mexican rain often enough to be calmly accepted without an inquisition.

"The strangers!" cried the captain, prudently backing towards the wall at the point furthest from the ladder's end. "Have they come in among us?"

"Stuff! What man in his lightness of heart would leap thus into the wolf's throat?"

"That's all very well put, Ricardo," rejoined the leader. "But they may have preceded you, and not known that this is our lair. Just climb up and see if, by any chance, we are receiving uninvited guests."

Ricardo, who was singled out, was a burly rogue, but he did not accept this order. On the contrary he made a wry face and thrust his cheek out with his tongue, which signified "go and do it yourself." This incipient mutiny was clearly contagious, for all the bandits returned their commander's interrogative look with another, defiant, stupid, or complacent, pursuant to their natures.

Any child could have drawn the inference that the quarter whence cartridges were showered might logically be expected to furnish a gun or two. The figurative language of the western man ranking a packet of lead and ball, or arrows, as the case varies of its being a white or a red man who sends the message, as an equivalent for a challenge to mortal combat – each bandit so interpreted the accident.

"Poltroons!" cried Matasiete. "Is there room, save on the platform itself, for a troop of men? And would one man stand amid the lightning on this rocking tower top! I tell you, if there is a man there it will be in the nook where the ladder is suspended. One man! Well, where are my brave fighting cocks now?"

One man, armed with such a gun as that cartridge of unusual calibre promised, could very easily defend even that despicable nook against a whole coop of gamecocks. So the hesitation to climb the ladder rather augmented than diminished.

"Poltroons, eh?" observed Ignacio, to whom the incident perhaps came in harmony with some project of his own. "If it is nothing uncommon to go and see what owl has alighted in the tower top – an owl whose eggs are cartridges, by the way – why don't you show your superior courage? Show your hardly-too-often-distinguished daring, Captain, by going up and wringing the neck of the fowl of evil omen yourself."

"G – go myself?" repeated Matasiete, whilst the robbers grinned more or less audibly.

"Yes, go yourself," returned the impudent lieutenant, "the more particularly as now that you have no impediment to seize the property of don José de Miranda, you are going to marry richly and settle down as a farming gentleman, and will have no more opportunities of exhibiting your gallantry. Yes, go yourself! And, moreover, be quick about it, or the strangers, whoever they may be, may come down in impatience at your neglect of your duty of host and demand an account of your reluctant hospitality, face to beard, themselves."

Matasiete did not number that defect among his of the sanguine dog who perpetually lets go the substance to snap at the shadow. Whatever the brilliancy of the prospect of obtaining the estate of Miranda, at present that of losing the command of the salteadores was more at hand. Besides, best knowing what valuables were sewn up in the hem of his dress, or contained in his money belt, in case, by robbers' law, judged a coward, and kicked out from their punctilious midst, stripped to the skin, this property would be lost to him, the captain made an effort.

"Then I will show you that I never set a command which I would not have executed myself!" spoken with a tremor, but loudly, to daunt the object aimed at above. "I will mount, and not a cartridge, but the corpse of anyone who has ventured to pry into our secrets, will shortly come hustling down among ye!"

He made one bound to the ladder, put his knife between his teeth, to prevent them chattering as much as to have the blade handy, and ascended briskly with his long legs at the start.

It would be unjust to say that Gladsden, who had heard all this scene, without caring to lean over and witness it lest the gleam of his eyes, reflecting the fire rays, should betray him and draw a pistol shot, was daunted by either the words of the redoubtable robber or his approach. Any one man, or two or three, come to that, caused him no apprehension, for he had all the advantages of position. But, after repulsing them, how could he hope to hold out a long time without food or drink?

An idea of subterfuge had struck him, which was only feasible to a seaman.

We observed that Matasiete had mounted the ladder briskly "at the start." It is true. But, when he had some twenty feet yet of the ascent to make, his action grew less commendable. He even framed an address, in appeal, to be uttered in a whisper only loud enough for the unknown occupant of the turret niche, full of promises or threats if he would only keep quiet, and allow the investigator to return uninjured and state there was an absence of ground for the alarm he had himself unfortunately originated.

In the meantime the Englishman, attributing the slowness of this upcomer's movement to his cowardice, believed he would be only too glad to find no occasion for his long stay at the top of the ladder.

So he thrust his head out of the gap before mentioned, and examined the metal arm socketed in the wall. It was not iron, but bronze, full three feet long to the hook, a little thicker than the thumb. It was planted solidly in a horizontal direction.

Without further reflection, hearing the respiration of captain Matasiete, who had been goaded on by the whisperings ascending of his men beginning to criticise his halt, Gladsden noiselessly pushed his legs out, bent forward, seized the bronze bar with both hands with that grip which enables the sailor to defy the squall to dislodge him from the yard, and hung stiffly at arm's length over the void.

If the Mexican saw him in looking out of the window by one of the less frequent electrical flashes, he intended to kick him under the jaw, reenter, convert the body into a rampart, and fight whilst there was a shot in the barrel, or till he had a chance to claim Ignacio's safeguard. The lieutenant could but be grateful to a man who removed his superior in his favour, and, moreover, brought him a fortune.

He had no more than assumed this trying position, being drenched to the skin at the very first instant of exposure, before Matasiete at last, with many misgivings pulling at his toes, lifted his head above the flooring, and, with indescribable joy, saw there was no one there.

"Well, Captain?" was the half-ironical inquiry from below.

"There is no one, you asses!" was the polite reply, in a gleeful tone.

Gladsden sighed in relief as deep as the captain's.

"Stand from under!" added the latter, putting his knife in its sheath. "I am coming down."

The Englishman was saved!

He prepared to return within his nook. The imminent danger was over. The rain was unpleasant, and the uneasiness of horses beneath him, which he heard whinnying as if they scented him, as was probable, offered the chance of exciting the curiosity of a Mexican, who would infallibly descry him if he looked up outside. So he wished to cut short the feeling of fatigue which already attacked his wrists and shoulders. But, at the first movement, what he believed a mere fancy was confirmed as fact: the bar was set with an unalterable firmness which spoke volumes for the mason of old, but the metal, in which too much copper had been alloyed, or deteriorated by the weather, was slowly bending, arching over the abyss!

No time was there to spare. He began by shifting his grip, moving one hand inwards and bringing the outer up to it, to overcome the curve in the rod. He looked to the socket to make sure that it still held, when his anxious eyes met another pair in the very gap. They were the Mexican robber's!

Matasiete had smelt the powder, at least, he had, in a final and idle sweeping round of the visual ray, perceived the gun of the Englishman, which he had, nevertheless, concealed with unusual and creditable care in the angle of floor and wall.

Now, Matasiete placidly leaning on the sill of the window, so to call it, fixed his ferocious eyes on Gladsden, gleaming with delight at having so complete a chance to avenge on another his companions' taunts of cowardice.

"The owl!" he said ironically.

"You devil!" returned Gladsden, in English, for in such critical moments a man does not display his linguistical acquirements.

Devil, indeed! Matasiete drew his knife and slowly leaned outward in order to slash the poor wretch's fingers to anticipate their relaxing the grasp on the overdrooping bar.

The other made an offer to let go with one hand in the hope to get at a pistol to blow out the fiend's brains at a snap shot, but the impossibility of the feat was immediately so impressed upon him, that he grasped with a double hold once more in deeper desperation.

"Oh! Any death but this waking nightmare!" he ejaculated, as a kind of prayer.

Before his fingers should be pinched by his own weight, between the metal and the brickwork, he thought, by a final spurt of strength, to leap up and seize the grinning demon.

"No, you don't!" cried the captain, guessing his aim, and leaning well out over him, gleaming steel in hand, "Thou shalt die like a dog."

He lifted his arm to strike. Gladsden shuddered in his anguish – his grasp did not relax, rather was it cramped, but he was thrust by his body coming sidewise to the wall, from that direction, and

slid thus perforce to the end of the bar downwards. He closed his eyes not to see the knife and fiendish eyes, not to hear the devilish laugh, when a sharp shot resounded below, a bullet shrieked beside his tingling ear, and louder than the cry which the feeling of falling through space wrung from the brave man, seemed the shriek of captain Matasiete, "creased" through the prominent nose.

Gladsden descended, like a rock loosened from a sierra summit, upon the plain below. Instead of the solid earth, however, he fell upon a warm yielding substance – the backs of a couple of horses. Clutching the mane of one at random – not the one on which he had landed, and of which he all but broke the back and so left paralysed – he was instantly carried away by the frightened steed.

Behind him, as he was borne helter-skelter over the prairie, converted into a shallow lake, he heard the clamour of the Mexicans startled by the shot, and later by a stampede in reality of their horses. It seemed to him, stunned in a measure though he was, that in the thick of the swarm of quadrupeds madly in flight like his own, but in another direction, there was a figure, black and bowing its head between its steed's ears, with a white object across the saddlebow.

But it was a mere glimpse! A new Mazeppa, he went careering on an unchained thunderbolt over the prairie, whilst the old Tower quivered in a fresh onset of the tempest.

CHAPTER VIII. THE "LITTLE JOKER."

There rode a charming little sailing vessel in Guaymas Port. It flew the Chilian flag, was about a hundred and twenty tons register, and was named *La Burlonilla*, or "Little Joker," which might be interpreted innocently, or as a tacit allusion to the pea used in "thimblrig." She was so coquettish, so fine of run, so light and buoyant, and yet carried a good spread of sail, that the experienced Gladsden reckoned she would do her twelve knots an hour without shipping enough water to drown the purser's cat. But there seemed to be some mystery attending the ownership. The shipkeeper allowed no one to inspect her closely, far less to board her, even threatening our Englishman with a blunderbuss. He heard at the Heaven-and-Liberty Tavern that she was consigned to don Stefano Garcia, kinsman of the general Garcia, mixed up with the intrigues of Santa Anna, a rich merchant-banker, and hide dealer. It was easy to make his acquaintance by constituting him his banker, for a remittance of a goodly amount which came on, *via* New York and Mexico, just when he most wanted funds to enable him to ascertain what truth dwelt in Pepillo's story.

Besides, as an old resident of Sonora, he was just the man to help him to find the relict of the *bandolero* of captain Matasiete, though the reason for this search he took care not to impart to señor Garcia.

With an affability which was even noticeably extreme, don Stefano accepted the double trust, and begged his new client to come out to his villa soon and dine with him – a pleasant habitude with bankers all the world over.

Gladsden accepted the invitation. During the dinner – not bad for the place – the guest learnt that the goleta commanded a fancy price, say, twenty thousand dollars, and then would only be sold – not hired – if the owner, a capricious Chilian, rejoicing in the numerous and sonorous appellatives of don Aníbal Cristobal de Luna y Almagro de Cortes, had not changed his intention of living upland on an estate which would shortly become his through a marital alliance.

After the repast, five or six friends of the host came in, and among them the bearer of the long titles, just taxing our pen again.

In token of pretensions to be regarded as an unofficial, but all the more important representative of Chili, this dignitary wore a rich costume trimmed with gold, an immense cocked hat, after the style borne by Nelson's enemies who were admirals at Trafalgar, bullion epaulettes that covered his upper arms, high boots coming up over the knee, not to mention a colossal sabre. Under this accoutrement, nevertheless, Gladsden thought no stranger was displayed; and, in fact, before he spoke, he recognised the individual who had grinned at him, like Quasimodo at Claude Frollo, dangling from the cathedral turret, out of the gaplike window of the Indian tower. The master of the *Little Joker*, the Chilian agent, was the captain of the Upper Sonora ravagers – Matasiete himself. The crease across his nose was an additional token.

Spite of his emotion, the Englishman hoped he had not betrayed the act of quick identification, all the more as don Aníbal, etc., making no sign of recognition, turned to chatting with the others without paying the foreigner any more heed. From a glance which he intercepted between the banker and the pretended Chilian, Gladsden was soon of the impression that there was a complete understanding there. He even jumped to the conclusion that the stranger in the Heaven-and-Liberty Tavern had been instructed to volunteer the hint that had caused our ever imprudent Briton to form acquaintance with the robber's banker.

"They are a deeper set than I imagined," thought he. "The rogue is a pirate on land and sea. When there is no revolution in Mexico, and the authorities attend a little to police matters, our

salteador takes a summersault aboard his dainty craft, and goes slaving, pirating, or, at the least, pearl fishing. If these guests are out of the same cask, by George! I am going to pass a pleasant evening!"

But there arose no question of the sale of the *Burlonilla*, or of anything connected with business. That was put off till the morrow, after the Spanish-American custom.

But there did come up a topic of general interest – gaming. The American-Hispanics are inveterate gamblers; it is their dominant passion. After having chatted and drank, amid the consumption of innumerable cigars, someone proposed a *monte*, a suggestion thrown out only to be caught at a bound with enthusiasm.

Other friends of don Stefano had dropped in, so that the Englishman found more than a corporal's guard arrayed against him. The collection now was composed of upwards of a score.

A table happened to have the orthodox green cloth upon it, where the social "tiger" is prone to roam: new cards, sealed, of course, were brought in, and the sport began.

Without being positively a player, Mr. Gladsden had the blood in his veins of his grandfather, who was a noted card player, a contemporary of Fox and Selwyn. Besides, he understood that he might offend if he stood aloof.

The stakes were, at the outset, moderate, but gradually swelling, they soon attained staggering proportions, some of the points running up to a hundred and even a hundred and fifty ounces. The consequence was that in less than a couple of hours almost all the tilters were cleaned out, and had to become mere lookers-on. At midnight chance – if it were chance – arranged it that only two players were facing each other: don Aníbal of the Cortes Family, as he called himself at present, and Mr. Gladsden. The gallery, as the surrounding bystanders of a game are styled, cooped the pair in so that the European could not easily have withdrawn. All the time the master of the goleta had been a loser, and the Englishman having been luck favoured, was on the contrary supplied with considerable funds, which elicited many a covetous glance.

"Why!" ejaculated the pretended Chilian, with admirably feigned surprise, "We two are left facing one another."

"So we are!" returned Mr. Gladsden, thinking, with all the possible mischances, he was more agreeably placed here *vis-à-vis* with the gentleman of the night, than clinging on a bar outside the top of a tower fifty feet high.

"Shall we two go it alone, Captain?"

"I was just going to ask the favour, Captain."

The other "captain" nodded and grinned under his long hook nose, to the banker and others at hand, as much as to say, "Now I have my gentleman precisely in the corner I have been driving him to."

It was the Englishman's turn to cut.

"How's the play?" he inquired.

"Will you venture all?" the highwayman leader returned in a mocking way.

"Why should I not? You have so far afforded me so much hearty entertainment that I am entirely at your disposal."

Don Aníbal made a grimace not unlike that when the marvellous shot had allowed the last speaker to drop out of the swing of his *navaja*.

"Even in case I risk the whole heap?" resumed Matasiete, laying his long fingers out on the pillar of gold coin before him.

"As your lordship desires, though it is a mistake."

"How so?"

"Because I am in luck's way lately," returned Mr. Gladsden, significantly. "You always lose pitted against me."

"Do you really think that run will last?"

"I am willing to wager on it," was the reply, in the determined tone of an Englishman to whom, indeed, a bet is the *ultima ratio*.

"¡Caray!" exclaimed the arch-bandit, piqued, "Your remark decides me, all goes on the *dos de espadas*, two of spades. Is it a go?"

The Spanish-Americans are fine players, they lose or gain ever so large sums without wincing. As the spectators uttered a cry of admiration for him who was more or less their lion, Gladsden resolved to prove that he could gamble as well as the best of them.

"Señor Don Aníbal, you'll excuse the rest," he said, impudently, like a man who pretty well knew that he had not a friend in the crowd, as he presented his adversary, in all senses of the word, with the cards; "do you mind shuffling them yourself?"

"What for, Señor?" holding his hands away.

"Oh, it is not merely because I believe you *good at shuffling*, but because things are getting serious, and it is important after all that has taken place between us that you should be convinced that I play fair, and that nothing but my better fortune thwarts you."

Don Stefano turned pale; several of the guests whispered to one another, probably seeing that twenty to one on a ground of their own choosing was rather contrary to the character of a blue-blooded caballero. One of them even lifted up his voice, saying:

"He acts like a perfect gentleman."

Gladsden bowed to him, though he fully believed he recognised in him the suggester on a memorable occasion that the author of the death of the late Pepillo Santa Maria should be roasted alive.

Captain de Luna also bowed, but to his opponent, took the cards, shuffled them, and presented them with grace. Gladsden laid the cards on the board, and turning to no one in particular, said:

"Do me the honour to cut them, Señor."

Someone obeyed the request, and the English player began to deal. A deathlike stillness reigned at once as by enchantment in the drawing room so well peopled. Spite of their villainy, the spectators of the coolness of the Englishman alone in the tiger's lair were impressed by it in his favour, and, though the most of them, such as appertained directly to Matasiete's band, at least, would have fallen on him without reluctance on the road back to Guaymas, here they registered a vow to let him have a good show of fun for his money without interference.

Don Aníbal had staked on the two of spades; the other sought to produce the five of clubs (*cinco de Bastos*) to win; in other words, that card ought to come out of the pack to him before his adversary received the one he called to appear. But after quite twenty of the parallelograms of pasteboard had been thrown on the table one after another, neither of the two cards designated had appeared; but everyone felt they were on the nick.

At the moment when Gladsden was about to show the face of a card between his fingers, the captain of banditti, and of the so-called Chilian cutter, checked his action, saying —

"Stay half a minute, please."

"What's your pleasure?"

"Perhaps to give you one. Did not I hear don Stefano say something about your looking out to buy a pleasure vessel?"

"I even thought that I might make a yacht of —"

"Of the goleta in the port, of the *Burlonilla*— of my vessel?"

"There is no other worth a biscuit, certainly! Why the question now?" inquired the European with some surprise.

"I tell you what; if you will consent, I will add the *Little Joker*, all standing, to my pile, against twenty-five thousand dollars. What do you say to that proposition?"

CHAPTER IX. THE WAY LAYERS

"What do I say to that offer?" returned Gladsden; "That it is a queer one, not to say a mad one! Señor, I am morally certain that you would lose your ship."

"You mean, you refuse," triumphantly, whilst the auditors smiled flatteringly on their leader for having "bluffed" the foreigner.

"Oh, no, since you insist on it," replied the latter, coldly, though he felt his heart contract within him; "but since I have set out to show I can play cards, I'll sell you the present turn up for ten thousand!"

"Don't! Don't do anything of the sort!" interrupted the host, turning pale. "I'll give you fifteen thousand for it myself!"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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