

REID MAYNE

THE TIGER
HUNTER

Томас Майн Рид

The Tiger Hunter

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Mayne Reid

The Tiger Hunter

Prologue

During one of many journeyings through the remote provinces of the Mexican republic, it was my fortune to encounter an old revolutionary officer, in the person of Captain Castaños. From time to time as we travelled together, he was good enough to give me an account of some of the more noted actions of the prolonged and sanguinary war of the Independence; and, among other narratives, one which especially interested me was the famed battle of the *Puente de Calderon*, where the Captain himself had fought during the whole length of a summer's day!

Of all the leaders of the Mexican revolution, there was none in whose history I felt so much interest as in the *priest-soldier*, Morelos – or, as he is familiarly styled in Mexican annals, the “illustrious Morelos” – and yet there was none of whose private life I could obtain so few details. His public career having become historic, was, of course, known to every one who chose to read of him. But what I desired was a more personal and intimate knowledge of this remarkable man, who from being the humble curate of an obscure village in Oajaca, became in a few short months the victorious leader of a well-appointed army, and master of all the southern provinces of New Spain.

“Can you give me any information regarding Morelos?” I asked of Captain Castaños, as we were journeying along the route between Tepic and Guadalajara.

“Ah! Morelos? he was a great soldier,” replied the ex-captain of guerilleros. “In the single year of 1811, he fought no less than twenty-six battles with the Spaniards. Of these he won twenty-two; and though he lost the other four, each time he retreated with honour –”

“Hum! I know all that already,” said I, interrupting my fellow-traveller. “You are narrating history to me, while I want only chronicles. In other words, I want to hear those more private and particular details of Morelos' life which the historians have not given.”

“Ah! I understand you,” said the captain, “and I am sorry that I cannot satisfy your desires: since, during the war I was mostly engaged in the northern provinces, and had no opportunity of knowing much of Morelos personally. But if my good friend, Don Cornelio Lantejas, is still living at Tepic, when we arrive there, I shall put you in communication with him. He can tell you more about Morelos than any other living man: since he was *aide-de-camp* to the General through all his campaigns, and served him faithfully up to the hour of his death.”

Our conversation here ended, for we had arrived at the inn where we intended to pass the night – the *Venta de la Sierra Madre*.

Early on the following morning, before any one had yet arisen, I left my chamber – in a corner of which, rolled in his ample *manga*, Captain Castaños was still soundly asleep. Without making any noise to disturb him, I converted my coverlet into a cloak – that is, I folded my serape around my shoulders, and walked forth from the inn. Other travellers, along with the people of the hostelry inside, with the domestics and muleteers out of doors, were still slumbering profoundly, and an imposing silence reigned over the mountain platform on which the venta stood.

Nothing appeared awake around me save the voices of the *sierras*, that never sleep – with the sound of distant waterfalls, as they rushed through vast ravines, keeping up, as it were, an eternal dialogue between the highest summits of the mountains and the deepest gulfs that yawned around their bases.

I walked forward to the edge of the table-like platform on which the venta was built; and halting there stood listening to these mysterious conversations of nature. And at once it appeared to me that other sounds were mingling with them – sounds that suggested the presence of human beings. At first

they appeared like the intonations of a hunter's horn – but of so harsh and hoarse a character, that I could scarcely believe them to be produced by such an instrument. As a profound silence succeeded, I began to think my senses had been deceiving me; but once more the same rude melody broke upon my ears, in a tone that, taken in connexion with the place where I listened to it, impressed me with an idea of the supernatural. It had something of the character of those horns used by the shepherds of the Swiss valleys; and it seemed to ascend out of the bottom of a deep ravine that yawned far beneath my feet.

I stepped forward to the extreme edge of the rock, and looked downwards. Again the hoarse cornet resounded in my ears; and this time so near, that I no longer doubted as to its proceeding from some human agency. In fact, the moment after, a man's form appeared ascending from below, along the narrow pathway that zigzagged up the face of the cliff.

I had scarce time to make this observation, when the man, suddenly turning the angle of the rock, stood close by my side, where he halted apparently to recover his breath.

His costume at once revealed to me that he was an Indian; though his garments, his tall stature, and haughty mien, lent to him an aspect altogether different from that of most of the Indians I had hitherto encountered in Mexico. The proud air with which he bore himself, the fiery expression of his eye, his athletic limbs, and odd apparel, were none of them in keeping with the abject mien which now characterises the descendants of the ancient masters of Anahuac. In the grey light of the morning, I could see suspended from his shoulders the instrument that had made the mysterious music – a large sea-shell – a long, slender, curved conch, that hung glistening under his arm.

Struck with the singular appearance of this man, I could not help entering into conversation with him; though he appeared as if he would have passed me without speaking a word.

“You are early abroad, friend?” I remarked.

“Yes, master,” he replied; “early for a man as old as I am.”

I could not help regarding this as a jest; for over the shoulders of the Indian fell immense masses of jet black hair, which seemed to give contradiction to the statement of his being an old man.

I looked more narrowly into his countenance. His bronzed skin appeared to cling closely to his angular features, but there were none of those deep furrows that betray the presence of advanced age.

“How old are you?” I asked at length.

“That I cannot tell, cavallero,” replied he. “I tried from the time I was able to distinguish the dry season from that of the rains to keep an account of my age; and I succeeded in doing so up till I was fifty. After that, for particular reasons, I did not care to know it, and so I left off counting.”

“You say you are more than fifty years old?” and as I put this inquiry I glanced at the long purple black tresses that hung over his shoulders.

“Nearly half as much more,” was the reply. “You are looking at the colour of my hair. There are ravens who have seen a hundred seasons of rain without having a feather whitened. Ah! what matters the course of years to me? A raven croaked upon the roof of my father's cabin when I was born, at the same instant that my father had traced upon the floor the figure of one of these birds. Well, then! of course I shall live as long as that raven lives. What use then to keep a reckoning of years that cannot be numbered?”

“You think, then, that your life is in some way attached to that of the raven that perched on the paternal roof when you came into the world?”

“It is the belief of my ancestors, the Zapotèques, and it is also mine,” seriously responded the Indian.

It was not my desire to combat the superstitions of the Zapotèques; and, dropping the subject, I inquired from him his purpose in carrying the conch – whether it was for whiling away his time upon the journey, or whether there was not also connected with it some other belief of his ancestors?

The Indian hesitated a moment before making reply.

“It is only a remembrance of my country,” he said, after a short silence. “When I hear the echoes of the Sierra repeat the sounds of my shell, I can fancy myself among the mountains of Tehuantepec, where I used to hunt the tiger – in pursuing my profession of *tigrero*. Or at other times I may fancy it to be the signals of the pearl-seekers in the Gulf, when I followed the calling of a *buzo* (diver); for I have hunted the sea tigers who guard the banks of pearls under the water, as I have those that ravage the herds of cattle upon the great savannas. But time passes, cavallero; I must say good day to you. I have to reach the hacienda of Portezuelo by noon, and it’s a long journey to make in the time. *Puez, adios, cavallero!*”

So saying, the Indian strode off with that measured step peculiar to his race; and was soon lost to my sight, as he descended into the ravine on the opposite side of the plateau.

As I returned towards the inn I could hear the prolonged notes of his marine trumpet rising up out of the chasm, and reverberating afar off against the precipitous sides of the Sierra Madre.

“What the devil is all this row about?” inquired Captain Ruperto Castaños, as he issued forth from the venta.

I recounted to him the interview I had just had; and the singular communications I had received from the Indian.

“It don’t astonish me,” said he; “the Zapotèques are still more pagan than Christian, and given to superstitious practices to a greater degree than any other Indians in Mexico. Our Catholic *curas* in their villages are there only for the name of the thing, and as a matter of formality. The business of the worthy padres among them must be a perfect sinecure. I fancy I understand what the fellow meant, well enough. Whenever a Zapotèque woman is about to add one to the number of their community, the expectant father of the child assembles all his relations in his cabin; and, having traced out the figures of certain animals on the floor, he rubs them out one after another in their turn. That which is being blotted out, at the precise moment when the child is born, is called its *tona*. They believe that, ever after, the life of the newborn is connected in some mysterious manner with that of the animal which is its *tona*; and that when the latter dies so will the former! The child thus consecrated to the *tona*, while growing up, seeks out some animal of the kind, takes care of it, and pays respect to it, as the negroes of Africa do to their *fetish*.”

“It is to be presumed, then, that the Indian father will make choice only of such animals as may be gifted with longevity?”

The captain made no reply to my suggestion, farther than to say that the Zapotèque Indians were a brave race, easily disciplined, and out of whom excellent soldiers had been made during the war of the Revolution.

After a hasty *desayuno* at the venta, my travelling companion and I resumed our journey; and, crossing the second great chain of the Mexican Andes, at the end of six days of fatiguing travel we reached the ancient town of Tepic.

Here it was necessary for me to remain some time, awaiting the arrival of important letters which I expected to receive from the capital of Mexico.

During the first week of my stay at Tepic, I saw but very little of my fellow-voyager – who was all the time busy with his own affairs, and most part of it absent from the little *fonda* where we had taken up our abode. What these affairs might be, God only knows; but I could not help thinking that the worthy ex-captain of guerilleros carried on his commercial transactions, as in past times he had his military ones – a little after the partisan fashion, and not altogether in accordance with legal rules.

After all, it was no affair of mine. What most concerned me, was that with all his running about he had not yet been able to meet with his friend, Don Cornelio Lantejas – whom no one in Tepic seemed to know anything of – and I was beginning to suspect that the existence of this individual was as problematical as the business of the captain himself, when a lucky chance led to the discovery of the ex-aide-de-camp of Morelos.

“Don Ruperto appears to have gone crazy,” said Doña Faustina, our hostess of the fonda, one morning as I seated myself to breakfast.

“Why, Doña Faustina?” I inquired.

“Because, Cavallero,” replied she, evidently piqued at the captain’s disregard of her hospitable board, “he is hardly ever here at meal times, and when he does show himself, it is so late that the *tortillas enchiladas* are quite cold, and scarce fit to eat.”

“Ah, señora!” replied I, by way of excusing the irregularity of the captain’s habits, “that is not astonishing. An old soldier of the Revolution is not likely to be very punctual about his time of eating.”

“That is no reason at all,” rejoined the hostess. “We have here, for instance, the good *presbitero*, Don Lucas de Alacuesta, who was an insurgent officer through the whole campaign of the illustrious Morelos, and yet he is to-day a very model of regularity in his habits.”

“What! an officer of Morelos, was he?”

“Certainly; all the world knows that.”

“Do you chance to know another old officer of Morelos, who is said to live here in Tepic, Don Cornelio Lantejas?”

“Never heard of him, Señor.”

At this moment Don Ruperto’s voice sounded outside, announcing his return from one of his matutinal expeditions.

“To the devil with your tortillas and black beans!” cried he, rushing into the room, and making answer to the reproaches of his hostess. “No, Doña Faustina – I have breakfasted already; and what is more, I shall dine to-day as a man should dine – with viands at discretion, and wine, as much as I can drink, of the best vintage of Xeres! I have breakfasted to-day, good clerical fashion. Who with, do you think?” asked he, turning to me.

“Don Lucas de Alacuesta, perhaps?”

“Precisely; otherwise Don Cornelio Lantejas, who, on changing his profession, has made a slight alteration in his name; and who, but for a lucky chance, I should never have found till the day of judgment, since the worthy *presbitero* hardly ever stirs out from his house. Who would have believed that an old soldier of the Independence should so change his habits? In fact, however, we have had so many priests turned officers during the Revolution, that it is only natural one officer should become a priest, by way of compensation.”

In continuation, Don Ruperto announced to me, that we were both invited to dine with his old acquaintance; and further, that the latter had promised to place at my disposition such souvenirs of the illustrious Morelos as I desired to be made acquainted with.

I eagerly accepted the invitation; and in three hours after under the conduct of the captain, I entered the domicile of the worthy padre, Don Lucas de Alacuesta. It was a large house, situated near the outskirts of the town, with an extensive garden, enclosed by a high wall, rendered still higher by a stockade of the organ cactus that grew along its top.

We found our host awaiting us – a thin little man, of some fifty years of age, nimble in his movements, and extremely courteous and affable. He appeared to be one who occupied himself, much less with the affairs of his parish, than with the cultivation of his garden, and the preservation of entomological specimens – of which he possessed a bountiful collection.

Nothing either in his speech or features, as in those of Captain Castaños, recalled the *ex-militario*, who had borne a conspicuous part in the long and bloody campaigns of the revolutionary war.

It is not necessary to give any details of the dinner – which was after the fashion of the Mexican *cuisine*, and excellent of its kind. Neither shall I repeat the conversation upon general topics; but enter at once upon those scenes described by the *ex-aide-de-camp* of Morelos, and that of which our drama has been constructed.

Chapter One.

The Grito of Hidalgo

The great revolutionary war of 1790 was not confined to France, nor yet to Europe. Crossing the Atlantic, it equally affected the nations of the New World – especially those who for three centuries had submitted to the yoke of Spain. These, profiting by the example set them by the English colonies in the north, had taken advantage of the confusion of affairs in Europe, and declared their independence of the mother country.

Of the Spanish-American vice-kingdoms, New Spain – or Mexico more properly called – was the last to raise the standard of independence; and perhaps had the wise measures of her viceroy, Iturrigaray, been endorsed by the court of Madrid, the revolution might have been still further delayed, if not altogether prevented.

Don José Iturrigaray, then vice-king of New Spain, on the eve of the insurrection had deemed it wise policy to grant large political concessions to the Creoles, or native white population of the country, and confer upon them certain rights of citizenship hitherto withheld from them.

These concessions might have satisfied the Creoles with the government of the mother country, and perhaps rendered their loyalty permanent. Mexico, like Cuba, might still have been a “precious jewel” in the Spanish crown, had it not been that the decrees of Iturrigaray produced dissatisfaction in another quarter – that is, among the pure Spaniards themselves – the *Gachupinos*, or colonists from Old Spain, established in Mexico; and who had up to this time managed the government of the country, to the complete exclusion of the Creoles from every office of honour or emolument.

These egoists, considering the acts of the viceroy ruinous to their selfish interests, and the privileges they had hitherto enjoyed, seized upon his person, and sent him to Spain to give an account of his conduct.

Tyrannous counsels prevailed; the prudent plans of Iturrigaray were rejected, and Mexico fell back into the same political bondage under which she had groaned since the conquest of Cortez.

The dismissal of Iturrigaray took place in 1808. The *Gachupinos* were not without apprehensions of an outbreak; but as two years passed over in tranquillity, their doubts became dissipated, and they ceased to believe in the possibility of such an event.

Theirs was but fancied security, and lasted only two years. In 1810 it was abruptly terminated by the rising of Hidalgo in one of the northern provinces, the news of which event descended upon the *Gachupinos* like a thunderbolt.

Strange enough that a priest should be the leader of this movement in favour of liberty: since it was through priestly influence that Mexico had all along been governed and oppressed! But in truth Hidalgo, and the other priests who figured in this insurrection, were a very different class of men from the great metropolitan ecclesiastics of the capital and the larger cities, who conducted the affairs of state. Hidalgo was but a simple village *cura*— a child of the people – and so, too, were most of the other patriot priests who espoused the popular cause.

In October 1810, Hidalgo had nearly one hundred thousand men in the ranks of his army. They were badly armed and equipped, but still formidable from their very numbers. This immense host, which consisted principally of native Indians, overspreading the country like a torrent, could not fail to produce consternation in the minds of the *Gachupinos*.

Even among the Creoles themselves it created a certain confusion of ideas. All these were the sons or descendants of Spaniards, and of course connected with the latter by ties of consanguinity. It was but natural, therefore, that some of them should believe it to be their duty to take the part of the government against the insurrection, while others should sacrifice the ties of family relationship to the more noble idea of liberating their country from a foreign yoke.

This difference of opinion among the Creoles existed only in families of the higher and wealthier classes. Among the poorer Mexicans – the people – whether white or half caste, there existed only one sentiment, and that was in favour of independence from Spain. The Indians of pure blood had their own ideas. They had been more enslaved than the Creoles, and of course readily united with them for the expulsion of the Spaniard – their common oppressor. Some of them also indulged in the idle dream that circumstances might restore the ancient splendour of the Aztec race.

Chapter Two. An Irksome Journey

In a morning of the month of October, a solitary traveller was pursuing his route across the vast plains which extend from the limits of the state of Vera Cruz through that of Oajaca. It is scarcely necessary to say that the traveller was on horseback – in a country where no one ever thinks of journeying on foot. He was armed also, as well as mounted; but both horse and weapon were of such an indifferent character as to be ill suited for an encounter with an enemy of any kind. This, too, in a country just then in a state of revolution, where the traveller might expect to meet with an enemy at any moment – either a political adversary, or one of those professional bandits with whom Mexico at this time abounded, and who robbed all alike, irrespective of party.

The only weapon our traveller possessed was an old curved sabre; but it was doubtful whether it could be drawn from its iron scabbard, which appeared as rusty as if it had lain for years at the bottom of a river. It was carried obliquely along the flap of the saddle, and under the thigh of the horseman – the common mode in Mexico – thus transferring the weight of the weapon from the hip of the rider to the ribs of his horse.

The steed of our traveller showed evident signs of having been at one time the property of some *picador de toros*: as was manifested by the numerous scars that traversed his flanks and counter; but whatever good qualities he may have once possessed, he was evidently now one of the sorriest of jades – worth no more than the value of his own skin. Notwithstanding the repeated strokes of the spur, which his rider administered without stint, it was impossible to force him into anything more rapid than a shambling walk, and at this slow pace was he proceeding, evidently to the great chagrin of the impatient traveller.

The costume of the horseman thus ill mounted consisted of a sort of jacket of white cotton stuff, with open *calzoneros* of olive-coloured velveteen. On his feet were short boots of goat-skin – dressed in imitation of cordovar leather – and covering his head was a broad-brimmed hat of common palmetto plait. Though not positively shabby, his garments had the appearance of having been a long time in wear, out of regard to economy. There was something, however, in their cut and texture that bespoke the wearer to belong to a class above that of the mere peasant.

He was a young man – apparently two or three and twenty – of slender figure and rather thin in flesh. His countenance bespoke gentleness of disposition, amounting almost to simplicity; and this would have been the impression produced upon an observer, but for a pair of lively spiritual eyes that sparkled in sockets somewhat sunken. These, combined with a well-formed mouth, and lips of a sarcastic cut, relieved the otherwise too ingenuous expression of his features, and proved that the young man was capable, when occasion required, of exhibiting a considerable power of repartee and acute observation. Just then the predominant expression upon his features was that of chagrin, mixed with a certain degree of uneasiness.

The scenes through which he was passing were of a character to cause apprehension – especially to one journeying alone. On all sides extended a vast plain of sterile soil – the brown earth but thinly covered with a growth of cactus and wild aloes, under the shadow of which appeared a sparse herbage, wild, and of yellowish hue. The aspect was monotonous and dreary beyond expression; while here and there vast clouds of dust rose in whirlwinds, and moved like spectres over the plain. The straggling huts encountered at long intervals on the way were all empty – apparently abandoned by their owners! This strange circumstance combined with the heat of a tropic sun, the absence of all signs of water, the profound silence that reigned over these solitary steppes, had created a sense of discouragement in the mind of the young traveller, amounting almost to fear.

Notwithstanding a liberal use of the spur, his horse could not be induced to depart from a walk. If by a desperate effort he was once or twice forced into a trot it was only to return again to his old gait as soon as the spur was taken from his flanks. The painful exertions of the rider had no other result than to cause the perspiration to flow profusely over his face, rendering it necessary for him every now and then to make use of his pocket-kerchief.

“*Maldito cavallo!*” (Good-for-nothing beast!) he exclaimed at intervals as his patience became exhausted; but the horse, fatigued with a long journey, was as insensible to the insults of his rider’s speech as he had been to the strokes of his spur, and moved not a whit the faster.

Wearied with these idle efforts to increase the speed of the animal, the young traveller turned in his saddle and looked back. His object was to compare the route he had come with that which lay before him – in order to form some calculation as to the distance yet to be travelled before he could reach the other side of the desert plain.

The observation did not appear to gratify him. On the contrary, his countenance became clouded with a still deeper shade of chagrin; and, abandoning himself to a complete despair, he made no further attempt to urge forward his unwilling roadster, but left the sorry brute to his creeping pace.

For several hours the traveller kept on his slow course – his spirit alternately exasperated and depressed.

Mid-day had arrived, and the tropic sun, glaring down vertically from a cloudless sky, was causing a degree of heat almost intolerable. The breeze had ceased to cool the atmosphere; and even the dry leaves of the trees hung motionless from the boughs. At every moment the horse, crawling painfully forward, threatened to become motionless as they.

Suffering from thirst, and wearied with the journey he had already made, the young traveller at length dismounted, and threw his bridle-rein over the neck of his horse. He had no fear that the animal would take advantage of the freedom thus given him. There was not the slightest danger of its running away.

Leaving the steed to himself, therefore, the rider walked towards a clump of *nopals*– in hopes of finding some fruit upon them, by which he might relieve his thirst.

As good luck would have it, he was not deceived in his expectation. The *nopals* were in fruit; and having plucked a number of these “Indian figs,” and stripped them of their spinous skins, he was enabled, by swallowing a quantity of the sweetish pulp, to allay in some measure the excessive thirst that had been hitherto torturing him. Thus satisfied, he once more mounted into his saddle, and continued his interrupted journey.

Chapter Three. An Enigma

After riding several miles farther, he arrived at a small village, situated in the same plain through which he had been journeying. There, as all along the route, he found the houses deserted and abandoned by their owners! Not a soul was to be seen – no one to offer him hospitality; and as nothing could be found in the empty houses – neither food to satisfy his hunger, nor water to quench his thirst – the traveller was compelled to ride on without halting. “*Cosa estrana!*” muttered he to himself, “what on earth can be the meaning of this complete depopulation?”

In addition to the desertion of the houses, another odd circumstance had struck his attention. Almost at every hut which he passed, he saw canoes and *periaguas* suspended from the branches of the trees, and raised many feet above the ground! In a part of the country where there is neither lake nor river – not so much as the tiniest stream – no wonder the sight astonished our traveller, considering that he was a stranger to the district, and had not yet encountered a single individual who might explain the ludicrous phenomenon.

Just as he was pondering over an explanation of these singularities, a sound fell upon his ear, that produced within him a feeling of joy. It was the hoof-stroke of a horse, breaking upon the profound solitude. It came from behind him; and betokened that some horseman was approaching in his rear, though still invisible on account of a turning in the road, which the young traveller had just doubled.

In a few seconds’ time the horseman appeared in sight; and galloping freely forward, soon came side by side with our traveller.

“*Santos Dios!*” saluted the new-comer, at the same time raising his hand to his hat.

“*Santos Dios!*” responded the young man, with a similar gesture.

The meeting of two travellers in the midst of a profound solitude is always an event, which leads to their regarding one another with a certain degree of curiosity; and such occurred in the present instance.

He who had just arrived was also a young man – apparently of twenty-four or twenty-five years; and this conformity of age was the only point in which the two travellers resembled each other. The new-comer was somewhat above medium stature, with a figure combining both elegance and strength. His features were regular and well defined; his eyes black and brilliant; his moustache thick and curving, and his complexion deeply embrowned with the sun. All these circumstances tended to show that he was a man of action; while a certain air of energy and command bespoke fiery passions, and the hot Arabian blood, which flows in the veins of many Spanish-Mexican families.

His horse was a bay-brown, whose slender limbs and sinewy form declared him also to be descended from an oriental race. The ease with which his rider managed him, and his firm graceful seat in the saddle, betokened a horseman of the first quality.

His costume was both costly and elegant. A vest of unbleached cambric suited well the heat of the climate. His limbs were covered with *calzoneros* of silk velvet of a bright purple colour; while boots of buff leather, armed with long glancing spurs, encased his feet. A hat of *vicuña* cloth, with its trimming of gold lace, completed a costume half-military, half-civilian. To strengthen its military character a rapier in a leathern sheath hung from his waist-belt, and a carbine, suspended in front, rested against the pommel of his saddle.

“*Puez, amigo!*” said the newly-arrived horseman, after a pause, and glancing significantly at the back of the traveller. “May I ask if you have far to go upon that horse?”

“No, thank goodness!” replied the other; “only to the hacienda of San Salvador; which, if I’m not mistaken, is scarce six leagues distant.”

“San Salvador? I think I’ve heard the name. Is it not near to an estate called hacienda of Las Palmas?”

“Within two leagues of it, I believe.”

“Ah! then we are following the same route,” said he in the laced cap; “I fear, however,” he continued, checking the ardour of his steed, “that there will soon be some distance between us. Your horse does not appear to be in any particular hurry?”

The last speech was accompanied by a significant smile.

“It is quite true,” rejoined the other, also smiling, as he spoke; “and more than once upon my journey I have had reason to blame the mistaken economy of my good father, who, instead of letting me have a proper roadster, has munificently furnished me with a steed that has escaped from the horns of all the bulls of the Valladolid Circus; the consequence of which is, that the poor beast cannot see even a cow on the distant horizon without taking to his heels in the opposite direction.”

“*Carrambo!* and do you mean to say you have come all the way from Valladolid on that sorry hack?”

“Indeed, yes, Señor – only I have been two months on the way.”

Just then the Rosinante of the circus, roused by the presence of the other horse, appeared to pique himself on a point of honour, and made an effort to keep up with his new companion. Thanks to the courtesy of the moustached cavalier, who continued to restrain the ardour of his fine steed, the two horses kept abreast, and the travellers were left free to continue the conversation.

“You have been courteous enough,” said the stranger, “to inform me that you are from Valladolid. In return, let me tell you that I am from Mexico, and that my name is Rafael Tres-Villas, captain in the Queen’s dragoons.”

“And mine,” rejoined the young traveller, “is Cornelio Lantejas, student in the University of Valladolid.”

“Well, Señor Don Cornelio, can you give me the solution of an enigma which has puzzled me for two days, and which I have been unable to ask any one else, for the reason that I have not met with a soul since I entered this accursed country. How do you explain this complete solitude – the houses, and villages without inhabitant, and skiffs and canoes suspended from the trees in a district where you may go ten leagues without finding a drop of water?”

“I cannot explain it at all, Señor Don Rafael,” replied the student; “it has equally astonished myself; and more than that – has caused me most horrible fear.”

“Fear!” echoed the captain of dragoons; “of what?”

“The truth is, Señor Capitan, I have a bad habit of being more afraid of dangers which I cannot comprehend, than those which I know. I fear that the insurrection has gained this province – though I was told to the contrary – and that the State of Oajaca was perfectly tranquil. Like enough the people have abandoned their dwellings to avoid falling into the hands of some party of insurgents that may be scouring the country?”

“Bah!” exclaimed the dragoon, with a contemptuous toss of his head. “Poor devils like them are not in the habit of fleeing from marauders. Besides, the country-people have nothing to fear from those who follow the banner of the insurrection. In any case, it was not for sailing through these sandy plains that the canoes and *periaguas* have been hung up to the trees? There’s some other cause, than the panic of the insurrection, that has breathed a spirit of vertigo into the people here; though, for the life of me, I can’t guess what it is.”

For a while the two travellers continued their journey in silence – each absorbed in speculating upon the singular mystery that surrounded them, and of which neither could give an explanation.

Chapter Four. The Hungry Travellers

The dragoon was the first to resume the conversation.

“You, Señor Don Cornelio,” said he, “you who have come from Valladolid, perhaps you can give me some later news, than I have received about the march of Hidalgo and his army?”

“Not any, I fear,” replied the student; “you forget, Señor, that, thanks to the slow pace of my old horse, I have been two months on the route? When I left Valladolid, nobody had any more thought of an insurrection than of a new deluge. All I know of it is what I have heard from public rumour – that is, so much as could be divulged without fear of the Holy Inquisition. If, moreover, we are to believe the mandate of the Lord Bishop of Oajaca, the insurrection will not find many supporters in his diocese.”

“And for what reason?” asked the captain of dragoons, with a certain hauteur, which proved, without committing himself to any disclosure of his political opinions, that the insurgent cause would not find an enemy in him. “What reason does the bishop assign?”

“What reason?” replied the student. “Simply because my Lord Bishop Bergosa y Jordan will excommunicate them. He affirms, moreover, that every insurgent will be recognisable by his horns and cloven hoofs, which before long they will all have from the hands of the devil!”

Instead of smiling at the childish credulity of the young student, the dragoon shook his head with an air of discontent, while the hairs of his black moustachios curled with indignation.

“Yes,” said he, as if speaking to himself, “thus is it that our priests fight with the weapons of calumny and falsehood, perverting the minds of the Creoles with fanatical superstition! So, Señor Lantejas,” he continued in a louder tone, addressing himself to the student, “you are afraid to enrol yourself in the ranks of the insurgents, lest you might obtain these diabolical ornaments promised by the bishop?”

“Heaven preserve me from doing such a thing!” replied the student. “Is it not an article of faith? And who should know better than the respectable Lord Bishop of Oajaca? Besides,” continued he, hastening his explanation, as he saw the angry flash of his companion’s eye, “I am altogether of a peaceable disposition, and about to enter into holy orders. Whatever party I might take, it would be with prayer alone I should seek to make it triumph. The Church has a horror of blood.”

While the student was thus delivering himself, the dragoon regarded him with a side glance; which seemed to say: that it mattered little which side he might take, as neither would be much benefited by such a sorry champion.

“Is it for the purpose of passing your thesis that you have come to Oajaca?”

“No,” replied Lantejas, “my errand into this country is altogether different. I am here in obedience to the commands of my father, whose brother is the proprietor of the rich estate of San Salvador. I am to remind my uncle that he is a widower – rich – and without children; and that he has half-a-dozen nephews to provide for. That is my business at San Salvador. What can I do? My honoured father is more attached to the good things of this life than is perhaps right; and I have been obliged to make this journey of two hundred leagues, for the purpose of sounding our relative’s disposition in regard to us.”

“And ascertaining the value of his property as well?”

“Oh! as to that, we know exactly how much it is worth; though none of us has ever been on the estate.”

This answer of the young student did more honour to his heart than to his discretion.

“Well,” continued he, after a pause, “I may safely say, that never did nephew present himself before an uncle in a more famished condition than I shall do. Thanks to the inexplicable desertion of all the houses and villages through which I have passed – and the care which their owners have

taken to carry with them even the leanest chicken – there is not a jackal in the country hungrier than I at this minute.”

The dragoon was in pretty much the same case. For two days he had been travelling without seeing a soul, and though his horse had picked up a little forage along the road, he had been unable to obtain food for himself – other than such wild fruits and berries as he could gather by the way.

The sympathy for a like suffering at once dissipated any ill-blood which the difference in their political sentiments might have stirred up; and harmony was restored between them.

The captain in his turn informed his new *compañon du voyage*, that, since the imprisonment of the Viceroy, Iturrigaray, his own father, a Spanish gentleman, had retired to his estate of Del Valle, where he was now proceeding to join him. He was not acquainted with this estate, having never been upon it since he was a mere child; but he knew that it was not far from the hacienda of Las Palmas, already mentioned. Less communicative than Don Cornelio, he did not inform the student of another motive for his journey, though there was one that interested him far more than revisiting the scenes of his childhood.

As the travellers rode on, the evanescent ardour of Don Cornelio’s roadster insensibly cooled down; while the student himself, fatigued by the incessant application of whip and spur, gradually allowed to languish a conversation, that had enabled them to kill a long hour of their monotonous journey.

The sun was now declining towards the western horizon, and the shadows of the two horsemen were beaming elongated upon the dusty road, while from the tops of the palm-trees the red cardinals and parroquets had commenced to chaunt their evening song.

Thirst – from which both the travellers suffered even more than from hunger – was still increasing upon them; and at intervals the dragoon captain cast a look of impatience toward the horse of his companion. He could not help observing that the poor brute, for the want of water, was every moment slackening his pace.

On his side, Don Cornelio perceived, that, from a generous motive, his travelling companion was resisting the temptation to ride forward. By putting his fine horse into a gallop, the latter could in a short time reach the hacienda – now less than three leagues distant. Under the apprehension of losing his company, therefore, the student redoubled his efforts to keep his old circus hack abreast with the bay-brown of the dragoon.

The journey thus continued for half an hour longer; when it became evident to both travellers that the *escapado* of the bull-ring was every moment growing more unable to proceed.

“Señor student,” said the dragoon, after a long spell of silence, “have you ever read of those shipwrecks, where the poor devils, to avoid starvation, cast lots to see which shall be eaten by the others?”

“Alas! yes, I have,” answered Lantejas, with a slight trembling in his speech; “but I hope with us it will not come to that deplorable extremity.”

“*Carrambo!*” rejoined the dragoon with a grave air, “I feel at this moment hungry enough to eat a relative – even if he were rich and I his heir, as you of your uncle, the *haciendado* of San Salvador!”

“But we are not at sea, Señor captain, and in a boat from which there is no chance of escape?”

The dragoon fancied that he might amuse himself a little at the expense of the young student of divinity – of whose excessive credulity he had already had proofs. Perhaps he meant also to revenge himself on this foolish credulity, upon which the fulmination of the Bishop Bergosa – already celebrated throughout Mexico – had made such an impression. His chief motive, however, was to demonstrate to his travelling companion the necessity for their parting company; in order, that, by riding forward himself, he might be able to send back succour to his fellow-traveller. He was no little surprised, therefore, to perceive that his pleasantry was taken in actually a serious light; and therefore had determined to desist from making any further innuendos.

“I hope, Señor captain,” said Don Cornelio, “I hope neither of us will ever be in such extremities.”

Then casting a glance over the arid waste that stretched before them, a new idea seemed to strike the student; and with a haste that bespoke his agitation he continued —

“As for me, if I were mounted on a horse equal in strength and vigour to yours, I should gallop either to the hacienda of Las Palmas or San Salvador, without drawing bridle; and from there send assistance to the fellow-traveller I had left behind.”

“Ah! is that your advice?”

“I could not think of giving any other.”

“Good, then!” cried the dragoon; “I shall follow it; for to be candid, I felt a delicacy in parting company with you.”

As Don Rafael spoke, he held out his hand to the student.

“Señor Lantejas,” said he, “we part friends. Let us hope we may never meet as enemies! Who can foresee the future? You appear disposed to look with an evil eye on those attempts at emancipation of a country, that has been enslaved for three hundred years. As for myself, it is possible I may offer my arm – and, if need be, my life – to aid her in conquering her liberty. *Hasta luego!* I shall not forget to send you assistance.”

Saying this, the officer clasped warmly the chill attenuated fingers of the student of theology, gave the reign to his horse, that needed no spur, and disappeared the moment after amidst a cloud of dust.

“God be praised!” said Lantejas, breathing freely; “I do believe the famished Lestrygon would have been quite capable of devouring me! As for my being found on a field of battle in front of this Goliath, or any other, there’s not much danger. I defy the devil with all his horns to make a soldier of me, either *for* the insurrection or *against* it.”

The student proceeded on his solitary route – congratulating himself on having escaped, from what his credulous fancy had believed to be a danger.

Some time had passed, and the red clouds of sunset were tinting the horizon, when he saw before him the form of a man, whose gait and complexion proved him to be an Indian. In hopes of obtaining some provisions from this man, or, at all events, an explanation of the singular circumstances already mentioned, the student urged his horse into a more rapid pace, heading him towards the Indian.

He saw that the latter was driving two cows before him, whose distended udders proved them to be milch cattle. This increased the desire of the horseman, hungry and thirsty as he was, to join company with the cowherd.

“*Hola!* José!” cried he, at the top of his voice.

An Indian will always respond to the name *José*, as an Irishman to that of *Pat* or *Paddy*. On hearing it, the cow-driver looked round in alarm. At that moment the *escapado* of the bull-ring caught sight of the two cows, and suddenly broke off into a gallop – unfortunately, however, in a direction the very opposite to that which his rider desired him to take!

Notwithstanding this, the student still continued to shout to the cowherd, in hopes of bringing him to comprehend his dilemma. But the odd spectacle of a horseman calling to him to approach, while he himself kept riding off in the opposite direction, so astounded the Indian that, uttering a cry of affright, he also took to his heels, followed in a long shambling trot by the two cows!

It was not until all three were out of sight, that the student could prevail on his affrighted steed to return into the proper path.

“In the name of the Holy Virgin!” soliloquised he, “what has got into the people of this country? Every one of them appears to have gone mad!”

And once more setting his horse to the road, he proceeded onward – now, however, hungrier and more disconsolate than ever.

Just as night was coming down, he arrived at a place where two or three small huts stood by the side of the road. These, like all the others, he found deserted. At sight of them, however, the old horse came to a dead stop, and refused to proceed. His rider, equally fatigued, resolved upon remaining by the huts, until the assistance promised by the dragoon captain should arrive.

In front of one of the huts stood two tall tamarind trees – between which a hammock was suspended, at the height of seven or eight feet from the ground. It was a capacious one, made of the strong plaited thread of the *maguey*. It seemed to invite the wearied traveller to repose – as if placed there on purpose for him.

As the heat was still suffocating, instead of entering one of the huts, he unsaddled his horse, permitted the animal to go at will, and by the trunk of one of the tamarinds climbed up into the hammock. There, stretching himself, he lay a good while listening attentively, in hopes of hearing some sound that might announce the approach of the promised succour.

It was now dark night. All nature had gone to sleep; and the profound silence was unbroken by any sound that resembled the tramp of a horse. Nothing was heard to indicate the approach of the expected relief.

As the student continued to listen, however, he became sensible of sounds, of a singular and mysterious character. There was a continuous noise, like the rumbling of distant thunder, or the roaring of the ocean during a storm. Although the air was calm around him, he fancied he could hear a strong wind blowing at a distance, mingled with hoarse bellowings of unearthly voices!

Affrighted by these inexplicable noises – which seemed the warning voices of an approaching tempest – he lay for a while awake; but fatigue overcoming him, he sunk at length into a profound sleep.

Chapter Five. Black and Red

On that same evening, and about an hour before sunset, two men made their appearance on the banks of a small river that traversed the country not far from the group of huts where the traveller had halted – at a point about halfway between them and the hacienda Las Palmas.

At the place where the two men appeared upon its banks, the river in question ran through the middle of a narrow valley; flowing so gently along, that its unrippled surface mirrored the blue sky. At this place the water filled its channel up to the level of the banks, that were treeless, and covered with a sward of grass. Farther down trees grew along the edge of the stream – tall oaks and cotton woods, whose branches were interlaced by flowering lianas. Still farther down, the river entered between high banks of wilder appearance, and covered with yet more luxuriant vegetation. From the grassy meadow, in which the two men were standing, the noise of a cataract, like the breaking of the sea upon a rocky beach, was distinctly audible.

The complexion and costume of one of the men pronounced him an Indian. The former was a copper-brown, the well-known colour of the American aboriginal. His dress consisted of a coarse shirt of greyish woollen stuff, rayed with black stripes. Its short sleeves, scarce reaching to the elbows, permitted to be seen a pair of strong, sinewy arms of deepest bronze. It was confined round the waist with a thick leathern belt, while its skirt hung down to mid-thigh. Below this appeared the legs of a pair of trowsers, wide, but reaching only to the knee. These were of tanned sheep-skin, and of a reddish brown hue. From the bottoms of the trowsers, the legs and ankles of the Indian were naked; while the *chaussure* consisted of leathern buskins, also of a brownish red colour. A hat of rush plaiting covered his head, from under which hung two long tresses of black hair – one over each cheek – and reaching down to his elbows.

He was a man of tall stature, and with a physiognomy remarkable for one of his race. Instead of the servile aspect so characteristic of the *Indios mangos* (subdued Indians) of Mexico, he had more the air of the true savage, or *Indio bravo*. This appearance was strengthened by the fact of his having a slight moustache and beard – a rare distinction among the aborigines of Mexico.

Over his shoulder he carried a short, thick carbine, somewhat rusty; while a long *macheté* (half sword, half knife), was stuck behind his belt.

His companion was a negro, whose clothing consisted of little else than rags. Otherwise there was nothing remarkable about him – if we except the air of stupified credulity with which he appeared to be listening to the discourse of the Indian. From time to time his features assumed an expression of ill-concealed fear.

The red man, closely followed by the black, was advancing along the bank at a place destitute of timber and where the ground was smooth and soft. He was going slowly, his body bent slightly forwards, and his eyes turned upon the earth as if in search of some object, or tracking an animal. Suddenly he came to a top —

“Now!” he exclaimed, turning to the negro, and pointing to the ground, “I told you I should find their traces in less than half an hour. Look there!”

The Indian spoke in a tone of triumph; but the feeling was far from being shared by his companion, who bent his eyes upon the earth rather with a look of dismay. The sight was sufficient to have caused uneasiness to any one other than a hunter of wild beasts. In the soft mud was exhibited a number of tracks – twenty of them in all. They were of different sizes, too; and appeared to have been recently made. The marks of sharp claws, distinctly outlined in the clayey soil, told what kind of animal had made the tracks. It was the fierce jaguar – the tiger (*tigré*) of the Spanish-Americans.

“It’s not half an hour since they have been here,” continued the Indian. “*Mira!*” exclaimed he, pointing to a little eddy on the edge of the stream, “they have been drinking there not ten minutes ago: the water is yet muddy!”

“Let us get away,” suggested the negro, whose black face was now pale with fear. “I see no use in our remaining here. See! there are many tracks, and of different sizes, too. Lord bless me! a whole procession of tigers must have passed here.”

“Oh! you are exaggerating,” rejoined the Indian, with a sneering laugh. “Let us count them,” he continued, bending down over the foot-prints, “one – two – three – four: a male, a female, and her two *cachorros* (cubs). That is all. *Carrambo!* what a sight for a *tigrero* (tiger-hunter).”

“Ah! indeed!” assented the negro, in a hesitating way.

“Yes,” rejoined the other; “but we shan’t go after them to-day. We have more important business on our hands.”

“Would it not be better to defer the business you were speaking of till to-morrow, and now return to the hacienda? However curious I am to see the wonderful things you promised, still – ”

“What!” exclaimed the Indian, interrupting his companion’s speech, “defer that business till another day? Impossible. The opportunity would not come round for another month, and then we shall be far from this place. No, no, Clara,” continued he, addressing the black by this *very* odd cognomen, “no, no; we must about it to-day and at this very moment. Sit down, then.”

Suiting the action to the word, the Indian squatted himself on the grass; and the negro, willing or unwilling, was forced to follow his example.

Chapter Six. The Tiger-Hunter

Notwithstanding the change of attitude, the negro still continued the victim of his fears. Instead of paying proper attention to what his companion was saying, his eyes wandered abroad, searching the horizon on every side of him, as if at every moment he expected to see the jaguars returning to attack them.

Noticing his uneasiness, the Indian made an attempt to reassure him.

“You have nothing to fear, comrade,” said he. “The tigers have the whole river to drink out of; and it is not likely they will come back here.”

“They may be hungry,” rejoined Clara, “and I have heard say that they prefer a black man, like me, to either a white or an Indian.”

“Ha, ha!” laughed his companion. “You need not flatter yourself on that score. Bah, man! there’s not a tiger in all the State that would be fool enough to prefer a carcass tough and black as yours, to the flesh of a young colt or heifer, either of which they can have at any time. Ha, ha! If the jaguars only heard what you’ve said, they would shake their sides with laughter.”

The fearlessness exhibited by the Indian himself in regard to the jaguars is easily explained, since it was by the destruction of these fierce animals that he got his living. His calling was a peculiar one, though common enough throughout the tropical regions of America. He was, in fact, a *tigrero*, or tiger-hunter, a class of men whose sole occupation consists in pursuing, à l’outrance, the different beasts of prey that ravage the flocks and herds of the great *haciendas de ganado*, or grazing estates. Among these predatory creatures the jaguar is the most destructive; and the hunting and slaying of these animals is followed by many men – usually Indians or half-breeds – as a regular profession.

As the jaguar (*Felis onca*) in all parts of Spanish-America is erroneously called the tiger (*tigré*), so the hunter of this animal is termed a tiger-hunter (*tigrero*). Many of the more extensive estates keep one or more of these hunters in their pay; and the Indian we have introduced to the reader was the *tigrero* of the hacienda Del Valle. His name and nation were declared by himself in the speech that followed —

“Ah!” he exclaimed with an air of savage exultation, “neither tigers nor men may laugh with impunity at Costal, the Zapoteque. As for these jaguars,” he continued after a pause, “let them go for this night. There will be nothing lost by waiting till to-morrow. I can soon get upon their trail again; and a jaguar whose haunt is once known to me, is a dead animal. To-night we have other business. There will be a new moon; and that is the time when, in the foam of the cascade, and the surface of the solitary lake, the Siren shows herself – the Siren of the dishevelled hair.”

“The Siren of the dishevelled hair?”

“Yes; she who points out to the gold-seeker the rich *placers* of gold – to the diver the pearls that lie sparkling within their shells at the bottom of the great ocean.”

“But who has told you this?” inquired Clara, with a look of incredulity.

“My fathers – the Zapoteques,” replied Costal, in a solemn tone of voice; “and why should *they* not know? They have learnt these things from Tlaloc and Matlacuezc – gods they were, as powerful as the Christ of the pale faces. Why – ”

“Don’t speak so loud!” interrupted Clara, in a voice that betokened alarm. “The priests of the Christians have their ears everywhere. They might call it blasphemy; and *carrambo!* the Inquisition has its dangers for blacks as well as whites!”

On hearing the word Inquisition the Indian involuntarily lowered his voice; but continued speaking in a tone that his companion could still hear him.

“My fathers,” said he, “have told me that the Siren never appears to any one who is alone. It is necessary that two be present – two men of tried courage they must be – for the divinity is often wrathful at being invoked, and at such times her anger is terrible. As two men are required, I need another besides myself. Will you then be my companion?”

“Hum!” said Clara. “I may boast that I am not afraid of a man; though I confess I cannot say the same about a tiger. As to your Siren, that appears to be the very devil –”

“Man, tiger, or devil,” cried Costal, “why fear any of the three? What need one care for them – one who has a stout heart – especially when the reward of his courage is gold, and enough of it to make a grand lord out of a poor Indian?”

“And of a negro as well?”

“Without doubt.”

“Say, rather,” rejoined Clara, with an air of discouragement, “that gold could serve neither one nor the other. Black and Indian, both are slaves, and our masters would soon take it from us.”

“True enough what you say; but let me tell you, Clara, that the bondage of the Indian is approaching its end. Have you not heard that up in the north – in the *tierra adentro* – a priest has proclaimed the emancipation of all races, and equal liberty for all?”

“No,” replied the negro, betraying his total ignorance of the political affairs of the country, “I have heard nothing about it.”

“Know, then, that the day is at hand when the Indian will be on an equality with the white, the Creole with the Spaniard; and when an Indian, such as I, will be the master of both!”

The descendant of the Zapotèques delivered this speech with an air of proud exultation.

“Yes!” continued he, “the day of our ancient splendour will soon return. That is why I am desirous at present of acquiring gold. Hitherto I have not troubled myself about finding it; since, as you say, it would soon be wrested from the hands of a poor slave. Now that I am to be free, the circumstances are changed; and I want gold, by which I may revive the glories of my ancestors.”

Clara could not help casting a look of astonishment at his companion. The air of savage grandeur, visible in the countenance of the tiger-hunter – vassal of the hacienda Las Palmas – surprised him, as did also the pretentious manner in which he spoke about reviving the ancient splendours of his race.

The look and its meaning did not escape the observation of the Indian.

“Friend Clara!” said he, in a confidential tone, “listen to me, while I reveal to you a secret which I have kept for many long years – long enough for me to have seen fifty dry seasons, and fifty seasons of rain; and this fact can be confirmed to you by all of my colour and race.”

“You have seen fifty seasons of rain?” cried the negro, in a tone of astonishment, at the same time regarding his companion attentively, who in truth did not appear to be over thirty years of age. “Fifty seasons of rain?”

“Well, not quite fifty,” replied Costal, with a smile, “but very near it.”

“Ah! I shall see fifty more,” continued he. “Omens have told me that I shall live as long as the ravens.”

The negro remained silent, still held in surprise by the wild declarations which his companion was volunteering to make to him.

“Listen, friend Clara!” continued the tiger-hunter, extending his arm in a circle, and designating the four points of the compass; “in all the space that a horseman could traverse between sunrise and sunset – from north to south, from east to west – there is not a spot of ground that was not once possessed by my ancestors – the ancient lords of Zapoteca. Before the vessels of the white men touched upon our coasts, they were sovereign masters of all this land – from ocean to ocean. The sea alone was their boundary. Thousands of warriors followed their banners, and crowded around their plume-bedecked standards of war. In the ocean the pearl-banks, and on the land the *placers* of gold

belonged to them. The yellow metal glanced upon their dresses and armour, or ornamented the very sandals upon their feet. They possessed it in such abundance, they scarce knew what to do with it.

“Where now are the once powerful Caciques of Tehuantepec? Most of their subjects have been slaughtered by the thunder of the white men, or buried in the dark mines – while the conquerors have divided among them and made slaves of the survivors! An hundred needy adventurers have been transformed into grand magnates – each endowed with a portion of the conquered territory; and at this moment the last descendant of the Caciques is forced to earn his subsistence almost as a slave – to submit to the tyranny of a white master – to expose his life daily for the destruction of fierce beasts, lest they should ravage the flocks and herds of his thankless employer; while, of the vast plains over which he is compelled to pursue his perilous calling, there remains to him not a spot he can call his own – not even the ground occupied by his miserable hut.”

The speaker might have gone on much longer without fear of his hearer interrupting him. The latter was held mute with astonishment, as well as by a kind of involuntary respect with which the words of his companion had inspired him. In all probability the negro had never before heard that a powerful and civilised people existed in that country previous to the arrival of the Spaniards. At all events he had never suspected that the man who was thus enlightening him – the half-Pagan, half-Christian tiger-hunter – was the descendant of the ancient masters of Tehuantepec.

As for Costal himself, after making these statements of the former splendours of his family – in which, notwithstanding his pompous mode of declaring them, there was much truth – he lapsed into a profound silence; and, his face turned with a melancholy expression upon the ground, he took no notice of the effect produced on the mind of his black companion.

Chapter Seven.

The Chase of the Jaguar

The sun was gradually inclining towards the horizon, when a prolonged howl, shrill at first, but ending in a hoarse roar, fell upon the ears of the two adventurers. It appeared to come from a brake some distance down the river; but, near or distant, it at once changed the expression upon the countenance of the negro. Fear took the place of astonishment; and, on hearing the sound, he sprang suddenly to his feet.

“*Jesus Maria!*” exclaimed he, “it is the jaguar again!”

“Well, what if it be?” said Costal, who had neither risen, nor made the slightest gesture.

“The jaguar!” repeated the negro in his terror.

“The jaguar? You are mistaken,” said Costal.

“God grant that I may be,” rejoined the black, beginning to hope that the sounds had deceived him.

“You are mistaken as to the number,” coolly proceeded Costal. “There is not one jaguar, but four – if you include the *cachorros!*”

Perceiving the sense in which Costal meant he was mistaken, the negro, with terror gleaming in his eyes, appeared as if about to start off towards the hacienda.

“Take care what you do!” said the Indian, apparently inclined to amuse himself with the fears of his companion. “It is quite true, I believe, that these animals are very fond of black men’s flesh.”

“*Carrambo!* just now you told me the contrary?”

“Well, perhaps I am mistaken upon that point; but one thing I know well – for I have proved it a hundred times – that is, that a brace of tigers, when the male and female are together, seldom roar in that fashion – especially if they suspect the presence of a human being. It is more likely, therefore, that at this moment they are separated; and by going towards the hacienda, you might risk getting between the two.”

“Heaven preserve me from getting into such a scrap,” muttered the negro.

“Well, then; the best thing you can do is to stay where you are – beside a man who don’t care a *claco* for the jaguars.”

The negro hesitated, not quite certain that it would be the best thing for him. At that moment, however, a second howl, coming in a direction entirely opposite to the first, decided his uncertainty, and convinced him that the *tigrero* had spoken the truth.

“You see,” said Costal, “the brutes are in search of something to eat. That’s why they are calling to one another. Well, now! if you’re still in the mind, off with you to the hacienda!”

This was of course meant as a taunt; for the negro, who now perceived that there was a jaguar howling in the way that led to the hacienda, had given up all notion of proceeding in that direction. On the contrary, while his black face turned of an ashen-grey colour, he drew closer to his imperturbable companion – who had not even attempted to take hold of the carbine which lay on the grass by his side!

“Bah!” muttered Costal, speaking to himself, “this comrade of mine is scarce brave enough for my purpose. I must defer it, till I meet with one possessed of more courage.” Then resuming the current of his thoughts, which had been interrupted by the howling of the jaguars, he said aloud – “Where is the red man, where the black, who would not lift his arm to aid this brave priest? – he who has risen against the oppressor – the oppressor of all Zapotèques, Creoles, and Aztecs. Have these Spaniards not been more ferocious than even the tigers themselves?”

“I should not fear *them*, at any rate,” interposed Clara.

“Good! I am glad you talk that way, comrade. To-morrow let us give warning to our master, Don Mariano de Silva. He must find another tigrero; and we shall go and join the insurgents in the west.”

The Indian had scarce finished his speech, when another howl came from the jaguars, as if to put the patience of the tiger-hunter to the test. It was even more spitefully prolonged, coming in the direction in which the first had been heard – that is, from a point upon the river a little above where the two men were seated.

On hearing it, thus uttered as a signal of defiance, the eyes of the tigrero began to sparkle with an irresistible desire for the chase.

“By the souls of the Caciques of Tehuantepec!” exclaimed he, “this is too much for human patience. I shall teach those two braggarts not to talk so loud of their affairs. Now, Clara!” continued he, springing to his feet, “you shall have the opportunity of becoming acquainted with a jaguar at closer quarters than you have hitherto been.”

“*Carrambo!*” exclaimed the black, “why should I go near them? I have no weapon, and would be of no use to you?”

“Hear me, Clara!” said the Indian, without replying to the speech of his comrade. “The one that howled last is the male. He was calling to the female, his mate. He is a good distance from here, up stream. We must go up to him; and as there’s not a stream on all the estate, where I haven’t either a canoe or *periagua*, for the purposes of my calling – ”

“You have one here, then?” interrupted Clara.

“Certainly I have. We can go up the river; and in the canoe you will not be in the slightest danger. I have my own notions as to how we may best approach this noisy brute.”

“But the jaguars can swim like seals, I have heard?”

“I don’t deny it. Never mind that; come on!”

Without deigning further speech, the tigrero started forward; and going cautiously, approached that part of the bank where his canoe was moored.

Clara seeing that it would be perhaps less dangerous to accompany him than remain where he was alone, reluctantly followed.

In a few minutes they arrived at the place where the canoe was fastened to the bank; a rude craft, just large enough to carry two men. A paddle lay at the bottom; along with a piece of matting of plaited palm-leaf, which on occasions was called into requisition as a sail. But Costal threw out the matting, as there was no likelihood of its being required upon the present occasion.

Having loosed the cord by which the canoe was attached to the branch of a willow, the Indian leaped aboard, and seated himself near the stem. The negro took his place abaft. A vigorous push was given against the bank, the little craft shot out into the middle of the stream, and, impelled by the paddle, commenced ascending the current.

The sun was still shining on the river, but with his last rays; and the willows and *alamos* that grew along the bank threw their trembling shadows far over the water. The breeze of the desert sighed among their leaves, bearing upon its wings sweet perfumes stolen from a thousand flowers. It seemed the intoxicating incense of liberty.

Costal, an Indian and a hunter, inhaled it with an instinctive delight. Clara was altogether insensible to the sweetness of the scene; and his anxious countenance offered as great a contrast to the calm unmoved features of his companion, as the black shadows of the trees thrown upon the water with the brilliant hues of the sky.

The canoe for a time kept close along the bank, and followed the windings of the stream. Here and there the bushes hung over; and in passing such places Clara kept a sharp look out, in dread of seeing a pair of fiery orbs glancing upon him through the leaves.

“*Por Dios!*” cried he, every time the canoe approached too closely to the bank, “keep her farther off, friend Costal. Who knows but that the jaguars may be up there, ready to spring down upon us?”

“Possible enough,” rejoined Costal, vigorously plying his paddle; and without giving any farther thought to the appeals of his companion. “Possible enough; but I have my idea – ”

“What is it?” asked Clara, interrupting him.

“A very simple one, and one which I have no doubt you will approve of.”

“Let us hear it first.”

“Well, then; there are two jaguars, without speaking of the brace of *cachorros*. These I shall leave to you, since you have no weapon. Your plan will be this: take up one of the whelps in each hand, and break in their skulls, by striking them one against the other. Nothing can be more simple.”

“On the contrary, friend Costal, it appears to me very complicated. Besides, how can I lay hold upon them if they should run away?”

“Very likely, they will save you that trouble by laying hold on you. Never fear your getting close enough. If I’m not mistaken, we shall have all four of them within arm’s length in less than a quarter of an hour.”

“All four!” exclaimed the negro, with a start that caused the canoe to oscillate as if it would upset.

“Beyond doubt,” rejoined Costal, making an effort to counterbalance the shock which the frail bark had received. “It is the only plan by which we can bring the chase to a speedy termination; and when one is pressed for time, one must do his best. I was going to tell you, when you interrupted me, that there are two jaguars – one on the right bank, the other on the left – the male and female, beyond doubt. Now by their cries I can tell that these animals are desirous of rejoining one another; and if we place ourselves between the two, it is evident they will both come upon us at once. What say you? I defy you to prove the contrary?”

Clara made no reply to the challenge. His profound belief in the infallibility of his companion’s perceptions kept him silent.

“Look out now, Clara!” continued the hunter, “we are going to double that bend in the river where the bushes hide the plain from our view. Your face will be turned the right way. Tell me, then, what you see.”

From his position in the canoe, Costal, who plied the paddle, was seated with his back to the open ground towards which they were advancing; and he could only see in front by turning his head, which from time to time he had been doing. But he needed not to look around very often. The countenance of the negro, who was face to face with him, resembled a faithful mirror, in which he could read whatever might be passing behind him.

Chapter Eight. A Grand Spectacle

Hitherto the features of Clara had expressed nothing more than a kind of vague fear; but at the moment when the canoe rounded the last turn in the river, a sudden terror became depicted upon them. The hunter thus warned quickly faced round. An immense plain came before his eye, that seemed to stretch to the verge of the horizon. Through this ran the river, its waters almost on a level with the banks – which were covered with a grassy sward, and without a single tree. At some distance from the curve the stream almost doubled back on itself – forming a verdant delta, around the apex of which ran the road that led to the hacienda Las Palmas.

The rays of the setting sun were flooding the plain with a transparent golden haze, which hung over the empurpled bosom of the water on which the canoe was floating. Just above, in the middle of the current, and scarce two shots distant from where the two men were, a sight appeared to the ravished eyes of the tiger-hunter that caused him at once to change his position in the boat.

“*Mira!*” exclaimed he in a half-whisper. “Look, Clara! Did you ever behold a more beautiful sight?”

With his claws stuck into the floating carcass of a colt upon which he was feeding, an enormous jaguar was suffering himself to float gently down the stream. It was the male one, the same from which the last howlings had proceeded.

With his head outstretched and curving over his fore paws, his hind legs drawn up under his belly, his back highly arched, and his flanks quivering with a supple undulation that betokened activity and power, was seen the royal beast of the American jungle. The dying rays of the sun falling upon his glossy skin displayed his splendid coat of bright yellow ocellated with spots of deepest black.

It was one of those beautiful savage spectacles often exhibited to the eyes of the Indian hunter – a magnificent episode in that eternal poem which the wilderness is constantly repeating.

Scarce taking time to gaze upon it, Costal passed the paddle to his companion; and, gun in hand, crouched down in the bottom of the canoe.

Clara accepted the oar, and half mechanically commenced rowing. He had made no reply to the enthusiastic interrogatory of the hunter. Fear held him speechless.

At that moment a growl, resembling the deepest tones of an ophicleide, resounded from the throat of the jaguar, rolling over the surface of the water to the ears of the men seated in the canoe. He had seen his enemies, and this was his signal of defiance.

The Indian replied by a cry somewhat similar, as the bloodhound utters his wild bay on seeing his victim before him.

“It’s the male!” said Costal, apparently pleased that it was so.

“Fire, then!” cried Clara, at last finding his tongue.

“Fire, *Carrambo!* no. My gun does not carry so far. Besides, I shoot best when my game is nearer the muzzle. I wonder,” continued he, looking up to the bank, “that the female has not found him! No doubt, if we wait a little, we’ll see her coming bounding up with the *cachorros* at her heels.”

“*Dios nos ampare!*” (God preserve us!) muttered the negro in a melancholy tone; for he feared that Costal would still insist upon his carrying out the plan he had proposed. “God preserve us! I hope not: one at a time is sufficient.”

The words were scarce out of the negro’s mouth, when a sharp screech, heard at some distance, proclaimed the coming of the other jaguar; and the moment after she was seen bounding over the savanna, with a rapidity and gracefulness superb beyond admiration.

At the distance of about two hundred yards from the bank, as also from the canoe, she came to a sudden stop; and with muzzle raised aloft, scenting the air, and flanks quivering like an arrow

after striking its mark, she remained for some moments fixed to the spot. Meanwhile the two whelps, that had been left in the covert of the bushes, were seen hastening to join her. The canoe, no longer propelled by the paddle, began to spin round with the ripple, keeping about the same distance between it and the tiger crouched on the floating carcass.

“For Heaven’s sake, Clara,” said Costal impatiently, “keep the boat’s head to the current, or I shall never get close enough to fire. There now – that is right – keep a steady hand – mine never shakes. It is important I should kill this jaguar at the first shot. If not, one of us is lost, to a certainty. Perhaps both; for if I miss we shall have both the brutes to contend with, to say nothing of the brace of whelps.”

All this while the jaguar was quietly descending the stream upon his floating pedestal, and the distance between him and the canoe was gradually diminishing. Already could be seen his fiery eyeballs rolling in their sockets, and the quick oscillations of his tail, expressive of his gathering rage.

The hunter had taken aim, and was about to pull trigger, when the canoe commenced rocking about, as if tossed upon a stormy sea!

“What the devil are you about, Clara?” inquired the Indian in an angry tone. “If you move in that way I could not hit one in a whole crowd of tigers.”

Whether it was through design, or that fear was troubling his senses, and causing him to shift about, Clara, instead of keeping quiet, only seemed to shake all the more.

“A thousand devils take you!” cried Costal, with increased rage. “Just then I had him between the eyes.”

Laying down his gun, the hunter snatched the paddle from the hands of the black, and set about turning the canoe into its proper position.

This proved a work of some little time; and before Costal could succeed in accomplishing his purpose, the tiger had taken to flight. Giving utterance to a loud scream, the animal buried his sharp teeth in the carcass, tore from it a large mouthful, and then making a desperate bound passed from the floating body to the bank. In another moment he had rejoined his mate with her young ones, and all were soon beyond the range of the hunter’s carbine. The two terrible creatures appeared to hesitate as to whether they should return to the attack, or retreat. Then giving a simultaneous scream, both stretched off at full gallop across the plain, followed by their *cachorros*.

The disappointed hunter looked after them, giving utterance to a fierce exclamation expressive of his disappointment. Then seating himself in the stern of the canoe, he turned its head down stream, and put forth all his strength to regain the point from which they had set out.

Chapter Nine. The Cascade

The canoe carrying the two men continued slowly to descend the course of the river – the negro felicitating himself on his escape from the claws of the jaguars; while the thoughts of the Indian were dwelling with regret upon his want of success.

Clara, however, did not enjoy an unalloyed satisfaction. The jaguars had fled, it was true, but in what direction? It was evident they had gone down stream, and might be encountered below.

This thought troubling Clara, he inquired of his companion if there was any probability of their again falling in with this dangerous enemy.

“Probable enough,” responded Costal, “and more than probable. If we descend below the cascade, we shall be almost certain of seeing the jaguars there. The carcass of a fine young colt is not to be met with every day; and these brutes can reason like a man. They know well though that the current will carry the floating body over the fall, and that, below, it will be rendered up to them again. I do not say it will then be whole; for I have seen the trunks of great trees broken into fragments from being carried over that very cascade.”

“Then you really think the jaguars may be waiting below?”

“No doubt but they will be there. If I don’t mistake, you shall hear their roar before ten minutes have passed, and it will come from the bottom of the cascade, just where our business is now taking us.”

“But they may feel inclined to take revenue on us for having driven them from the carcass?”

“And if they should, what care I? Not a straw. *Vamos!* friend Clara, we’ve given too much thought to these animals. Fortunately we have not lost much; and now to our affair. The young moon will be up in a trice, and I must invoke Tlaloc, the god of the waters, to bestow some gold on the Caciques of Tehuantepec.”

The two men had by this time arrived at the place from which the canoe had been taken; and here both disembarked, Costal carefully refastening the craft to the trunk of the willow. Then leaving his companion, he walked off down the bank alone.

“Do not go far away!” said Clara, entreatingly, still troubled with the fear of the jaguars.

“Bah!” exclaimed Costal, “I leave my gun with you!”

“Oh, indeed!” murmured the negro; “what signifies that? one bullet for four tigers!”

Without vouchsafing any reply to this last speech, the Indian advanced a little farther along the bank, and then came to a pause. A large tree grew upon the edge of the stream, its branches extending outwards. Into this he climbed; and then stretching out his arms over the water, he commenced chanting a lugubrious measure – a species of Indian invocation, of which Clara could hear the words, but without in the least comprehending their signification.

There was something in the wild melody of the Indian’s voice to cause his companion a certain mysterious dread; and this was increased by additional notes of an equally mournful character that came pealing up the ravine, mingling with the hoarse roaring of the cascade. It was the scream of the jaguar; though it actually appeared as if some demon was answering to the invocations of the Indian. The lugubrious chaunt of the pagan, and the coincident scream of the tiger, formed a kind of infernal accompaniment, well calculated to strike awe into the mind of one of Clara’s superstitious race; and as he stood upon the bank he fancied he saw fiery eyes glaring upon him through the leaves, and the Siren with the dishevelled hair rising above the surface of the water.

A double chill passed through his black skin, from the soles of his feet to the roots of his kinky hair.

At this moment Costal returned to him.

“Are you ready?” inquired the Indian.

“For what?”

“To accompany me to the cascade – there to invoke the Siren, and ask if she may be seen.”

“What! down there, where the tigers are roaring?”

“Oh, a fig for them! Remember, Clara, it is gold *we* seek; and, believe me, if fortunate in our application, the Siren will tell us where it is to be found. Gold in masses!”

“Enough!” cried Clara, overcome by the rich prospect. “I am with you,” continued he – “lead on! From this hour I am the slave of the Siren who can show us the *placers* of gold!”

The Indian took up his hat and carbine, both of which he had laid aside while chanting his invocation; and, throwing the gun over his shoulder, started down stream. Clara followed close at his heels – his spirit alternately possessed with cupidity and fear.

As they advanced, the banks rose higher above the surface of the stream, and the channel became the bottom of a deep, narrow ravine, where the water rushed foaming among rocks. The great trees growing on each side stretched towards one another, until their branches interlocked, forming a dark sombre tunnel underneath. At the lower end of this, the stream, once more bursting forth into light, leaped vertically at one bound through a space of two hundred feet sheer, falling into the bottom of a deep gorge, with a noise louder than the roar of the mighty ocean.

Just where the foaming flood broke over the crest of the rocks, grew two enormous cypresses of the kind known to the Mexicans as *ahuehuetes*, or “lords of the water.” They stood on opposite sides of the stream, with their long arms extended towards each other. Thickly loaded with lianas, and profusely festooned with the silvery Spanish moss, which, drooping downwards, every now and then dipped into the foaming arch of the cascade, these two great trees looked like the ancient genii of the waters.

At this point the two men made a halt. Although they were now very near to the place where the jaguars were supposed to be, Clara had become more regardless of the danger. His fear, both of wild beasts and evil spirits, had yielded to his thirst for gold, which had been gradually growing stronger.

“Now, Clara!” said Costal, turning a severe look upon his comrade; “listen attentively to the instructions I am about to give you. If the Siren should appear to you, and you should exhibit, either by look or gesture, the slightest symptoms of fear, you are a lost man!”

“All right!” replied the negro. “The hope of being shown a mine of gold gives me courage to risk even my neck in a halter, if need be. Never fear, Costal. Speak on – I am ready to listen.”

As the negro pronounced these words, his countenance to all appearance expressed as much firmness as that of Costal himself. The Indian, thus assured, seated himself upon the very edge of the precipice, overlooking the gorge into which the waters were precipitated, while Clara, without invitation, sat down by his side.

Chapter Ten. Strayed from the Track

The ravine, below the spot where the Indian and negro had seated themselves, was covered with a luxuriant vegetation – plants and trees of tropical growth so thickly standing over the ground that the rays of the sun could not have penetrated through the umbrageous foliage. Notwithstanding this abundance of vegetation, if the two gold-seekers had not been so absorbed in their designs, they might have seen below them the figure of a man, who was standing at the bottom of the cascade, directly under their feet.

This man, who had just arrived on the spot, and who appeared to be regarding the waterfall with looks of curiosity and admiration, was no other than Rafael Tres-Villas, Captain of the Queen's Dragoons.

It is necessary to explain how Don Rafael had come to be found in this wild spot, altogether away from the path which he should have followed to the hacienda Las Palmas. Accident, not design, had conducted him to the bottom of the cascade.

On parting from the student of theology, who, recalling the classic scenes of his Odyssey, had mistaken him for a man-eater – a Lestrygon – the dragoon captain, without searching any longer for an explanation of the odd circumstances observed along the way, at once stretched his horse into a gallop. The animal required no propulsion of the spur. His instinct enabled him to scent the proximity of a stable; and he responded to the wishes of his rider by galloping swiftly forward.

Unfortunately the Captain, though a Creole or native Mexican, was entirely unacquainted with this part of the country. He had been born in it, as already hinted; but at a very early age had been taken to reside in the capital; and since then had never revisited the place of his nativity. He was consequently ignorant of the road leading to the paternal hacienda Del Valle – as also to that of Las Palmas – for both were one.

He had not ridden many miles when he arrived at a point where the road forked into two separate paths. Both however continued on, running at no great distance from each other.

Not knowing which he should take, and having met no human being that could direct him, the Captain left the choice to his horse.

The animal, that was no doubt suffering more from thirst than hunger, spread his nostrils to the air, and scenting the fresh exhalations of water, struck off in the direction whence it came. This was to the right.

The choice was fortunate for the student of theology, but rather unlucky for the dragoon captain, as will presently appear.

In fact, the path leading to the left was that which conducted to the hacienda of Las Palmas – which the Captain, for a certain reason, was desirous of reaching, and on that very evening.

After following the right-hand branch for some minutes, the horseman arrived at a spot where the path suddenly gave out. In front appeared only a thick tangle of trees and bushes, behind which could be heard the roaring of a torrent.

Don Rafael was now completely at fault. To return on his track would not only be disagreeable, but there would still exist the same uncertainty as to his route. Even the right-hand branch of the road might not be the right one!

After a minute or two spent in considering what was best to be done, the Captain dismounted, and tying his steed to a tree, commenced making his way through the thicket in the direction whence came the sound of the water, evidently a stream. He was in hopes that on reaching the bank, and following along the water's edge, he might find the continuation of the road at some point where the stream was fordable. After making his way with much labour and loss of time through the labyrinthine

tangle of the thicket, he arrived at the bottom of the cascade, just at the moment when Costal and Clara were about entering upon the ceremony of invoking the Siren.

Notwithstanding the desire which the dragoon captain had to escape as soon as possible from the dilemma into which chance had conducted him, the spectacle of this cascade – one of the most magnificent in America – drew from him a cry of wonder and admiration. For some minutes he stood regarding it with admiring eyes, inspired with those sublime feelings which such a grand sight is calculated to call forth.

At length other thoughts came before his mind; and he was about turning away to continue his explorations for a path, when an unexpected object presenting itself to his eyes, caused him to keep his place.

Chapter Eleven.

A Ludicrous Spectacle

Amid the vapoury mist that soared above the foaming torrent, the tops of the two *ahuehuetes* could be seen only indistinctly, but the trunks and lower limbs were more palpably visible. On one of these, that projected obliquely over the water, the dragoon fancied he could perceive the figure of a man. On closer scrutiny he became certain it was the figure of a man, and the bronze-coloured skin told him the man was an Indian.

Looking further, he observed another apparition equally singular. Through the fork of the second *ahuehuete*, appeared a face with a complexion black as ebony. It could be no other than the face of a negro.

Here, then, were three distinct types of the human race met in this wild spot. Why he was himself there, Don Rafael knew well enough; but what had brought the Indian and negro into such a place, and at such an hour, was what was now puzzling him.

Without saying a word, he stood watching the movements of the two men, in hopes that the event would furnish him with an explanation. Soon the entire bodies of both negro and Indian appeared in sight, as the two men crawled outward on the overleaning limbs of the trees; but still more plainly, as, hanging by the branches, they let themselves down till their feet dipped in the foam; and swinging there, appeared to go through a series of the most grotesque contortions! The sight made the head of the officer to swim, as if suddenly struck with vertigo.

Thus engaged, neither of the two perceived Don Rafael, though he was standing upon a spot of open ground immediately below them.

For his life, the officer could not guess the nature of these singular proceedings. He concluded that some object – unseen to him – was engaging their attention; and he could not help fancying that it was some nymph of the waters, whom the negro appeared to be wooing, to judge by his impassioned gestures and animated physiognomy.

The large mouth of the darkey was open from ear to ear, displaying his double row of white teeth set in the most winning smile; while ever and anon he stretched his neck out over the water, as if the object of his regards was hid under the shining sheet of foam!

The Indian was acting in a similar fashion, but with a more serious expression of countenance, and greater dignity of manner.

The officer carefully scrutinised the whole surface of the cascade; but he could see nothing but the glistening sheen of the water, and the mass of white foam where it broke over the rock.

At that moment the Indian made a sign to the black to cease from his grimaces; and, letting go his hold with one hand, he swung his body wholly upon the other over the fearful abyss.

The recklessness of the action caused a renewed surprise to the spectator standing below, amounting almost to a feeling of awe. Before he had time to reflect upon it, a human voice reached his ears, rising high above the roaring of the torrent. It was the voice of the Indian, who, with outstretched arm, was chanting a solemn invocation to the spirit of the waters. The words could not be distinguished, but Don Rafael saw, by the muscular play of the man's lips, that he was singing with all the strength of his lungs.

Curiosity might have prompted the dragoon captain to watch these strange proceedings to the end, but the desire of learning something about his route influenced him to act otherwise. He fancied that by waiting longer the opportunity might be lost. The two persons might disappear in a manner as mysterious as was their behaviour.

To attract their attention, therefore, he shouted, and at the top of his voice; but to no purpose. The deafening roar of the cataract hindered him from being heard; and partly, perhaps, the engrossing occupation in which the two men were engaged.

Failing to attract their notice, he resolved upon ascending the side of the ravine, and going round to the place where they were. For that purpose he retraced his steps through the thicket; and after a difficult climb he reached the top of the cliff, at the point where the *ahuehuetes* formed the arcade over the water. The two personages had disappeared!

Curious as to the object of their ludicrous proceedings, the dragoon climbed up one of the trees, and from a commanding point carefully scrutinised the water underneath. He there perceived nothing more than he had seen already – nothing to justify the strange conduct he had witnessed.

While in the tree, he looked down into the ravine below; first upon the frothing river, and then over the tops of the bushes that grew upon its bank. In an instant he perceived that some of these were in motion, as if some one was making way through the thicket which he had himself traversed.

Presently two men emerged from the cover, and stepped out upon the open bank, at the spot where but the moment before Don Rafael had stood. A glance satisfied him that they were the same he had seen upon the *ahuehuetes*– the negro and Indian.

The sun had already set, but there was still light enough, even in the bottom of the ravine, for Don Rafael to distinguish, not only the movements of the men, but the expression upon their features. Both wore a solemn cast, but those of the negro exhibited evidence of his being influenced by a secret fear.

Near the bank, and where the stream was shallow, a large round boulder of rock stood up out of the water. Towards this the two were directing their steps.

At a signal from the Indian, the negro collected a number of dry sticks; and having piled them upon the flat top of the rock, set them on fire.

In a short time the blaze shot up, and cast its red glare over the stream, tinging with purple flakes the foam of the cataract.

The negro, after kindling the fire, seated himself on the bank, and appeared to contemplate the blaze and its reflections with a feeling of awe. The Indian, on the other hand, threw off his hat, and untwined the plaits of his hair – black as the wing of the raven – whose age he expected to attain. Leaving the long tresses to fall wildly over his shoulders, he walked out into the water, and halted by the side of the rock. The dragoon now saw for the first time a huge sea-shell – a conch – in the hands of the Indian, which had hitherto hung by his side suspended in a string. Placing the conch to his month, he blew several loud, prolonged notes upon it, as if with the intention of arousing the spirit of the waters. Then suffering the shell to fall back upon its string, he commenced leaping around the rock in a sort of grotesque dance, splashing and plunging through the water until the spray rose up and wetted him over the crown of the head.

The whole spectacle was at once ludicrous and imposing. The stoical composure of the negro, who sat perfectly silent upon the bank watching with a solemn air the grotesque capers of his companion – the red light reflected upon the savage figures of the two men – reflected also upon the foaming cataract, which appeared to roll over the cliff like an avalanche of fire – all combined to form a scene in which the ludicrous and the sublime were singularly commingled.

Don Rafael might have desired to witness the *finale*; but time was pressing, and he had a strong motive urging him to proceed upon his journey.

“*Santos Dios!*” cried he, in an impatient tone, “I should like very well to wait and see what pagan divinity these droll savages are invoking; but it will not do to tarry longer here. I must onwards; and to find my way it will be necessary to interrupt their proceedings.”

Saying this, the officer raised his voice and shouted “*Hola!*” with all the strength of his lungs.

The hail was not heeded: it was not heard.

“*Maldito!*” exclaimed he, “I must try some other means of drawing their attention.”

A method at once suggested itself; and stooping, the officer took up a handful of small pebbles, and launched them down upon the two adorers of the demon.

So far as drawing their attention went, the means proved efficacious; for the instant that the pebbles fell upon the water, the Indian, with a stroke of his hand, swept the fire from the rock, and the ravine became instantaneously as dark as Erebus. The forms of the two water-worshippers disappeared in the gloom; and Don Rafael found himself alone in the presence of the foaming cataract.

Chapter Twelve. The Diadem

Chagrined at the result, the traveller had no course left but to return to the place where he had left his horse. He was now in a worse predicament than ever; since it had become dark, and it would be difficult not only to find a path, but to follow it when found. The moon, however, had already risen, or rather had been all the while above the horizon, but hidden by a thick band of cumulus clouds that hung over the west. As the clouds did not cover the whole canopy, and it was likely that the moon would soon be visible, the traveller saw that he had no other resource than to wait: in hopes that by her light he might extricate himself from the difficulty into which his mischances had guided him.

On arriving where he had left his horse, Don Rafael sat down upon a fallen tree; and, lighting a cigar, awaited the appearance of the moon. He knew he should not have long to wait, for the yellow sheen, which betokened the situation of the luminary of night, was at no great distance from the edge of the cloud.

He had not been seated more than a few seconds, when a singular sound fell upon his ear. It was not the rushing noise of the cascade – for to that he had been accustomed for some time – but a sound that resembled the scream of some wild animal, ending in a hoarse and fiercely intoned roaring. He had heard it once or twice before; and although he could tell that it was not the howl of the coyote, he knew not what sort of creature was causing it.

Despite his ignorance of the cause, there was something in the sound that denoted danger; and, instinctively influenced by this idea, the young officer rose from his seat upon the log; and, untying his horse, leaped into the saddle. It was not with the intention of moving away from the spot – for the moon was not visible as yet – but with the knowledge that on horseback he would be the better prepared for any event that might arise. Still further to provide against possible danger, he unbuckled the strap of his carbine, and tried whether the piece was primed and in order. Don Rafael, although young, had seen some military service on the northern frontier of Mexico – where Indian warfare had taught him the wisdom of keeping habitually upon his guard.

Again he heard the wild lugubrious scream rising above the roar of the waters; and perceived that his horse, hearing it also, trembled between his thighs!

Coupling the sound with the strange spectacle to which he had just been a witness, the young officer could not help feeling a slight sensation of fear. He was a Creole, brought up consequently in the midst of ecclesiastical superstition, scarce less monstrous and absurd than that of pure paganism itself. He had heard in his youth how animals in presence of beings of the other world are seized with a shivering – such as that exhibited at the moment by his own horse – and he could almost fancy that the scene he had just witnessed was some evocation of the Prince of Darkness, to which the lugubrious sounds now reaching him were the response.

But Don Rafael was one of those bold spirits whom fear may visit but not subdue; and he remained immobile in his saddle, without showing any further symptoms of apprehension than by the twitching of his lips against his cigar, the light of which at intervals gleamed like a meteor through the darkness.

While thus patiently waiting the moonlight, the horseman fancied that he heard other sounds, and of a different import. Human voices they appeared to be; and it at once occurred to him, that it might be the two men whom he had disturbed and driven from their incantations. The voices were each moment more distinctly uttered; and it was evident that the speakers were approaching him. He perceived that it was probable they would come out somewhere near where he was stationed; and in order to have the advantage of a preliminary survey, in case they might turn out to be enemies, he

drew his horse back under the darker shadow of the trees – placing himself in such a position that he commanded a view of the path.

The voices he heard were in reality those of the Indian and negro or Costal and Clara: for it need scarce be told that it was they who were the heroes of the mysterious spectacle of which Don Rafael had been the sole spectator.

The two worthies, on being interrupted in their pagan ceremony by the shower of pebbles, had given up the performance; and were now threading their way through the thicket to reach the road beyond it.

The Indian was venting his wrath against the unknown personage who had intruded upon their sacred devotions, and who had very probably hindered the Siren of the dishevelled hair from showing herself. The negro appeared to be equally indignant; but his anger was probably only pretended.

“Is it only at the first appearance of a new moon that the Siren shows herself?” inquired Clara, as if the opportunity for seeing her had escaped them.

“Of course,” replied Costal, “only then; but if there is a profane person in the neighbourhood – and by profane I mean a *white*– the spirit will not appear.”

“Perhaps she is afraid of the Inquisition?” naïvely suggested the negro.

“Bah! Clara, you’re a ninny! Why the devil should you suppose that the powerful divinity of the waters has any fear of long-robed monks? It is they, more likely, who would have cause to tremble in her presence, and prostrate themselves before her.”

“*Carrambo!* if she’s afraid to show herself before one white man, more reason why she should fear a whole host of monks – who, it must be confessed, are ugly enough to frighten anything.”

“May the devil drown the man who interrupted us!” cried Costal, rendered the more indignant by the justice of the negro’s reasoning. “A few minutes more, and I am certain the Siren would have showed herself.”

“Why did you extinguish the fire so soon? I think, friend Costal, you did wrong in that,” remonstrated Clara.

“I did it to hide from the eyes of the profane white man the mystery about to be accomplished. Besides, I knew after what happened there was no chance of her appearing.”

“So you really think it was some one who disturbed us?”

“I am sure of it.”

“And is that how you account for the shower of stones?”

“Of course.”

“By my faith, then,” said the negro in a serious tone, “I differ with you in opinion about that.”

“You do? And what is your opinion about it?” inquired Costal, stopping and turning his eyes upon his companion.

“I would stake my life upon it,” replied the negro, still speaking seriously, “that while you were dancing around the rock, I saw the Siren.”

“Saw the Siren?”

“Yes. Just where we had been – up by the *ahuehuetes*– I saw by the blaze of our fire a face, surrounded by a diadem of shining gold. What could that have been but the Siren?”

“You must have been mistaken, friend Clara.”

“I was not mistaken. I saw what I tell you, and I shouldn’t a bit wonder that what we took for pebbles were neither more nor less than a shower of *pepitas* (nuggets) of gold, which the spirit had thrown down to us.”

“*Carajo!* why did you allow us to leave the place without telling me of this?”

“Because it has just occurred to me now that it was *pepitas*, and not pebbles; besides, our touchwood is all gone, and we could not have kindled another fire.”

“We might have groped in the dark.”

“Nonsense, friend Costal! How could we tell grains of gold from gravel or anything else in the midst of such darkness as there is down here. Besides, if I came away, it was only with the thought of returning again. We can come back in the morning at daybreak.”

“Aha!” cried Costal, suddenly starting with an alarmed air, and striking his forehead with his hand. “We shan’t return here to-morrow morning. *Carrai!* I had forgotten; we shall do well to get out of this ravine as quickly as possible.”

“Why so?” hastily inquired the black, astounded beyond measure at the altered demeanour of his companion.

“*Carrai!* I had forgotten,” said Costal, repeating his words. “To-night is new moon; and it is just at this season that the rivers rise, break over their banks, and inundate the whole country. Yes! the flood will come upon us like an avalanche, and almost without warning. Ha! I do believe that is the warning now! Do you not hear a distant hissing sound?” And as he said this the Indian bent his head and stood listening.

“The cascade, is it not?”

“No – it is very different – it is a distant sound, and I can distinguish it from the roar of the river. I am almost certain it is the inundation.”

“Heaven have mercy upon us!” exclaimed the black. “What are we to do?”

“Oh! make your mind easy,” rejoined Costal in a consolatory tone. “We are not in much danger. Once out of the ravine, we can climb a tree. If the flood should find us here, it would be all over with us.”

“*Por Dios!* let us make haste then,” said Clara, “and get out of this accursed place, fit only for demons and tigers!”

A few steps more brought the two adventurers out into the open ground; and close to the spot where the dragoon captain was sitting silently on his horse. The red coal glowing at the end of his cigar shone at intervals in the darkness, lighting up his face, and the gold band of lace that encircled his hat. Clara was the first to perceive this unexpected apparition.

“Look, Costal!” said he, hastily grasping his companion by the arm, and whispering in his ear; “look there! As I live, the diadem of the Siren!”

The Indian turned his eyes in the direction indicated, and there, sure enough, beheld something of a circular shape, shining in the glow of a reddish-coloured spot of fire.

He might have been as much puzzled to account for this strange appearance as was his companion; but at that moment the moon shot up from behind the bank of clouds that had hitherto hindered her from being seen, and the figures of both horse and rider were brought fully into the light.

Chapter Thirteen. Who goes there?

At a glance Costal saw what the strange object was – a broad band of gold lace encircling a *sombrero*, and placed, Mexican fashion, around the under edge of the brim. The cigar illuminating the lace had deceived the negro, guiding him to the idea of a diadem!

“*Carajo!*” muttered Costal between his teeth, “I told you so. Did I not say that some profane white had hindered the Siren from appearing?”

“You were right,” replied Clara, ashamed at the mistake he had made, and from that time losing all belief in the *genius* of the cascade.

“An officer!” murmured Costal, recognising the military equipments of the dragoon, who, with a carbine in one hand, and his bridle in the other, sat smoking his cigar, as immovable as a statue.

“Who goes there?” cried Costal, saluting him in a loud, bold voice.

“Say, rather, who stands there?” responded Don Rafael, with equal firmness, at the same moment that he recognised in the speaker the Indian whose incantation he had witnessed.

“Delighted to hear you speak at last, my fine fellows,” continued the dragoon in his military off-hand way, at the same time causing his horse to step forward face to face with the adventurers.

“Perhaps we are not so much pleased to hear you,” replied Costal roughly, as he spoke, shifting his gun from one shoulder to the other.

“Ah! I am sorry for that,” rejoined the dragoon, smiling frankly through his thick moustache, “for I’m not inclined to solitary habits, and I’m tired of being here alone.”

As Don Rafael said this, he placed his carbine back into its sling, and rebuckled the straps around it, as if it was no longer required. This he did notwithstanding the half-hostile attitude of the adventurers.

The act did not escape the quick perception of the Indian; and, along with the good-humour manifest in the stranger’s speech, made an instantaneous impression upon him.

“Perhaps,” added Don Rafael, plunging his hand into the pocket of his *jaqueta*, “you have no good feeling towards me for disturbing you in your proceedings, which I confess I did not understand. Neither did they concern me; but you will excuse a strayed traveller, who wished to inquire his way; and as I had no means of making myself heard to you, I was forced to adopt the method I did to draw your attention. I hope that on reflection you will do justice to my dexterity in taking care that none of the stones should hit you.”

As he finished speaking the dragoon took a dollar from his purse, and offered it to the Indian.

“Thank you,” said Costal, delicately refusing the piece, but which Clara, less scrupulous, transferred to his pocket. “Thank you, *cavallero!* May I ask where you are going?”

“To the hacienda Las Palmas.”

“Las Palmas?”

“Yes – am I far from it?”

“Well,” replied Costal, “that depends on the road you take.”

“I wish to take the shortest. I am rather pressed for time.”

“Well, then – the road which is the shortest is not that which you will find the most easy to follow. If you wish to go by the one on which there is the least danger of your getting astray, you will follow up the course of this river. But if you wish a shorter route – one which avoids the windings of the stream – you will go that way.”

As Costal finished speaking, he pointed in a direction very different from that which he had indicated as the course of the river.

The Indian had no design of giving a false direction. Even had the little resentment, which he had conceived for the stranger, not entirely passed, he knew that he dared not mislead a traveller on the way to the hacienda, of which he was himself a servitor. But he no longer held any grudge against the young officer, and his directions were honestly meant.

While they were speaking, another of those terrible screams that had perplexed the traveller broke in upon the dialogue. It was the cry of the jaguar, and came from the direction in which lay the route indicated by Costal as the shortest.

“What on earth is that?” inquired the officer.

“Only a jaguar searching for prey,” coolly responded Costal.

“Oh!” said the dragoon, “is that all? I was fancying it might be something more fearful.”

“Your shortest route, then, lies that way,” said Costal, resuming his directions, and pointing with his gun towards the spot where the howl of the tiger had been heard.

“Thank you!” said the horseman, gathering up his reins, and heading his horse to the path. “If that is the shortest, I shall take it.”

“Stay!” said Costal, approaching a little nearer, and speaking with more cordiality than he had yet shown.

“*Oigate, señor cavallero!* A brave man like you does not need to be warned of every danger; but one ought to be informed of the dangers one must meet.”

Don Rafael checked his horse.

“Speak, friend,” said he; “I shall not listen to you ungratefully.”

“To reach from here the hacienda of Las Palmas,” continued Costal, “without going astray, or making détours, be careful always to keep the moon to your left, so that your shadow may be thrown on the right – a little slanting – just as you are at this moment. Moreover, when you have started, never draw bridle till you have reached the house of Don Mariano de Silva. If you meet a ditch, or brake, or ravine, cross them in a direct line, and don’t attempt to go round them.”

The Indian gave these directions in so grave a tone of voice, and with such solemnity of manner, that Don Rafael was struck with surprise.

“What frightful danger is it that threatens me?” he inquired at length.

“A danger,” replied Costal, “compared with which that of all the tigers that ever howled over these plains is but child’s play – the danger of the *inundation!* Perhaps before an hour has passed, it will come sweeping over these savannas like a foaming sea. The *arriero* and his mules, as well as the shepherd and his flocks, will be carried away by its flood, if they don’t succeed in reaching the shelter of that very hacienda where you are going. Ay! the very tigers will not escape, with all their swiftness.”

“I shall pay strict attention to the directions you have given me,” said the officer – once more about to ride off – when just then he remembered his fellow-traveller whom he had left on the road.

In a few hurried words he made known to the Indian the situation of the young student of theology.

“Make your mind easy about him,” replied the latter. “We shall bring him to the hacienda tomorrow, if we find him still alive. Think only of yourself, and those who might bewail your death. If you meet the jaguars don’t trouble yourself about them. Should your horse refuse to pass them, speak to him. If the brutes come too near you, let them hear you as well. The human voice was given us to procure respect, which it will do from the most ferocious of animals. The whites don’t know this – because fighting the tiger is not their trade, as it is that of the red man; and I can tell you an adventure of this kind that I once had with a jaguar – Bah; he’s gone!”

The last exclamatory phrases were drawn from the speaker, on perceiving that the horseman, instead of staying to listen to his tale of adventure, had put spurs to his horse, and suddenly ridden away.

In another instant he was beyond earshot, galloping over the moonlit plain in the direction of the hacienda Las Palmas.

“Well!” cried Costal, as he stood gazing after him, “he’s a frank brave fellow, and I should be very sorry if any mischance were to happen to him. I was not pleased about his interrupting us. It was a pity, to be sure; but after all, had I been in his place I should have done just as he did. Never mind,” he added, after a pause, “all is not over – we shall find another opportunity.”

“Hum!” said Clara, “I think the sooner we get out of the neighbourhood of these tigers the better for our skins. For my part, I’ve had enough adventure for one day.”

“Bah! still frightened about the tigers! For shame, Clara! Look at this young man, who never saw a jaguar in his life; and heeds them no more than so many field mice. Come along!”

“What have we to do now?”

“The spirit of the waters,” replied Costal, “does not show herself in the cascade alone. She appears also to those who invoke her with the conch, amidst the yellow waves of the inundation. Tomorrow we may try again.”

“What about the young fellow whom the officer has recommended to our care?”

“We shall go to look after him in the morning. Meanwhile, we must have some rest ourselves. Let us climb out of the ravine, and carry the canoe up to the summit of the *Cerro de la Mesa*. There we shall sleep tranquilly, without fear either of floods or jaguars.”

“That’s just the thing,” said Clara, his black face brightening up at the prospect of a good night’s rest. “To say the truth, friend Costal, I’m tired enough myself. Our gymnastics up yonder, on the *ahuehuetes*, have made every bone in my body as sore as a blister.”

And as the two *confrères* ended their dialogue, they stepped briskly forward, and were soon at the top of the precipitous path that led up from the ravine.

Chapter Fourteen. Precious Moments

The Captain of the Queen's Dragoons continued his gallop towards the hacienda of Las Palmas.

For the first mile or two of his route, he passed over the broad plain that lay silent under the soft light of the moon. The frondage of the palms swayed gently under a sky sparkling with stars, and the penetrating odour of the guavas loaded the atmosphere with a delicious perfume. So tranquil was the scene, that Don Rafael began to think the Indian had been playing upon his credulity. Mechanically he relaxed his pace, and delivered himself up to one of those sweet reveries which the tropic night often awakens within the spirit of the traveller. At such an hour one experiences a degree of rapture in listening to the voices of earth and heaven, like a hymn which each alternately chants to the other.

All at once the traveller remembered what for the last two days of his journey had been perplexing him – the houses abandoned – the canoes suspended from the trees. Now, for the first time, did he comprehend the meaning of these circumstances, no longer strange. The canoes and *periaguas* had been thus placed as a last means of safety, for those who might be so unfortunate as to be overtaken by the inundation.

Suddenly rousing himself from his reverie, Don Rafael again spurred his horse into a gallop.

He had ridden scarce a mile further, when all at once the voices of the night became hushed. The cicadas in the trees, and the crickets under the grass, as if by mutual consent, discontinued their cheerful chirrup; and the breeze, hitherto soft and balmy, was succeeded by puffs of wind, exhaling a marshy odour, stifling as the breath of some noisome pestilence.

This ominous silence was not of long duration. Presently the traveller perceived a hoarse distant roaring, not unlike that of the cataract he had left behind him; but from a point diametrically opposite – in fact, from the direction towards which he was heading.

At first he fancied that in his momentary fit of abstraction he had taken a wrong direction, and might be returning upon the stream. But no: the moon was on his left; his shadow and that of his horse were projected to the opposite side. He must still be on the right road.

His heart began to bound more quickly within his breast. If the Indian had spoken the truth, a danger lay before him against which neither his carbine nor rapier – neither courage nor a strong arm – could avail him. His only hope rested in the speed and strength of his horse.

Fortunately, the long journey had not deprived the brave steed of all his vigour. With ears laid back, and muzzle stretched horizontally forward, he continued his rapid gallop; his spread nostrils inhaling the puffs of damp air which came like *avant-couriers* in advance of the troubled waters.

It was now a struggle between the horseman and the flood, as to which should first reach the hacienda of Las Palmas.

The officer slackened his bridle-rein. The tinkling rowels of his spurs resounded against the ribs of his horse. The trial of speed had commenced. The plain appeared to glide past him like the current of a river. The bushes and tall palms seemed flying backward.

The inundation was rolling from west to east. The horseman was hastening in the opposite direction. Both must soon come together; but at what place?

The distance between them was rapidly diminishing. The noise of the flood, at first low, like the muttering of distant thunder, was gradually growing louder. The palms still appeared to glide past like spectres, but as yet the belfry of the hacienda had not come in sight. Neither as yet was visible the threatening mass of the inundation.

At this perilous moment Don Rafael perceived that his horse was sensibly slackening his pace. The sides of the animal felt swollen, and heaved with a convulsive panting.

The air, so rapidly cut in his swift course, with difficulty entered his nostrils. A few seconds longer, and that in his lungs must give out.

The officer drew up for an instant. The breathing of his horse appeared obstructed, and the hoarse sound, caused by its inspiration, was a mournful accompaniment to the sough of the waters that were constantly advancing.

The traveller listened to these sounds with a sentiment of despair.

Just then he heard the clanging of a bell, as if hurriedly tolled. It was that of the hacienda, giving out its warning notes over the wide savanna.

A reflection crossed his mind. It had been partly suggested by the words of the Indian: "*Think only of those who may bewail your death.*" Was there in that hacienda, where he was hourly expected, one who would bewail it? Perhaps yes, and bitterly!

The thought would have urged him onward; but Don Rafael still remained halted. He saw that his horse required a moment of rest, in order to recover his wind, otherwise he could not have proceeded.

The dragoon had the presence of mind to perceive this imperious necessity; and, in spite of the danger that threatened he dismounted, loosened the girdle of his saddle, thus permitting the horse to breathe more freely.

Chapter Fifteen. A Friend in Need

He was counting with anxiety the minutes that passed, when at that moment there echoed upon his ear the hoof-strokes of another horse, going at full gallop.

It was a horseman following the same route, and running the same risk as himself. He was mounted upon a strong, swift animal, that appeared to pass over the ground like a bird upon the wing.

In an instant the horseman came up, and drawing vigorously on the bridle, halted alongside.

“What are you about?” cried the new-comer, speaking in hurried phrase. “Do you not hear the alarm-bell? Don’t you know that the flood is coming down?”

“Yes; but my horse has given out. I am waiting till he recovers his wind.”

The stranger cast a glance towards the bay-brown of Don Rafael, and then threw himself out of his saddle. “Take hold of this,” he said, flinging his bridle to the officer. “Let me examine your horse.”

Raising the saddle-flap, he placed his hand underneath, to feel the pulsations of the lungs.

“All right yet,” he exclaimed, after a pause, apparently satisfied that the animal would recover.

Then stooping down, he took up a large stone, and began to rub it vigorously over the ribs and along the belly of the panting steed.

Don Rafael could not help gazing with curious interest on a man who, thus careless of his own life, was occupying himself so generously about the safety of another – that other, too, a perfect stranger!

The man was costumed as an *arriero* (muleteer). A species of tight-fitting blouse, of coarse greyish-coloured wool, striped black, covered the upper part of his body, over which, in front, hung a short leathern apron. Wide calzonerios of linen flapped about his legs. His feet were encased in buskins of brown goat-skin, while over his face fell the shadow of a broad-brimmed hat of coarse felt cloth.

He was a man of less than medium size; but with a sweet expression of features, from which his sunburnt complexion did not detract. Even at that terrible moment his countenance appeared calm and serene!

Don Rafael did not attempt to interrupt his proceedings, but stood regarding him with a feeling of deep gratitude.

For some moments the muleteer continued to use the stone. Then stopping the process, he placed his hand once more to feel the pulsation. This time he appeared less satisfied than before.

“He will founder,” said he, “if something be not done to prevent it. He must have more breath through his nostrils. There is but one way to save him. Assist me to try it. We must haste, for the bell is tolling with double violence to give warning that the waters are near.”

As he was speaking, he drew a cord from the pocket of his leathern apron; and, forming a running noose at one end of it, he drew it tightly around the muzzle of the horse, just above the nostrils.

“Now,” said he, handing the cord to Don Rafael. “First cover the horse’s eyes with your handkerchief; and then hold the cord with all your might.”

While Don Rafael hastened to obey the directions, the muleteer took a knife from his belt, and with a quick cut divided the transparent partition between the nostrils of the animal. The blood gushed forth in copious jets; and the horse, notwithstanding the efforts of Don Rafael to hold him to the ground, reared up on his hind legs, and struck forward with his hoofs. A hollow gurgling noise came forth from his nostrils as the air rushed in through the opening that had been made.

“Now!” exclaimed the muleteer, “you need no longer fear for his wind. Your horse can run as far as his legs will carry him. You will be saved if you are to be saved.”

“Your name,” cried Don Rafael, stretching out his hand to the muleteer; “your name, that I may always keep it in remembrance.”

“Valerio Trujano, a poor *arriero*; not very fortunate in his affairs, but who consoles himself with the belief that he has done his duty, and leaves the rest to God. Our lives are now in His hands. Let us pray that He may preserve them from the awful danger that is before us.”

Repeating these words with an air of solemnity, the muleteer took off his hat, displaying to view a mass of black curling hair. Then kneeling upon the sand, he raised his eyes to heaven, and in a voice of prayer pronounced the words: —

“*De profundis clamavi ad te, Domine! Domine, exaudi vocem meam!*”

While the muleteer was engaged in his devotion, the dragoon tightened his girths for the last struggle; and both at the same time springing into their saddles, resumed the gallop that had been so unfortunately interrupted. The damp, chill wind which preceded the coming of the waters bore loudly to their ears the warning notes of the bell – mingled with the sinister sounds that betokened the approach of the inundation.

Chapter Sixteen.

Las Palmas and its People

The southern portion of the state of Vera Cruz, bordering on Tehuantepec, exhibits a singular hydrographic system. A number of great rivers, as the *Rio Blanc*, the *Plaza Vicente*, the *Goazacoalcos*, and the *Papatoapan*, with many of smaller note, form a complete network over the country. Most of these rivers have their sources in the *Sierra Madre*, and traversing the plains of the *tierra caliente*, debouch into the Gulf of Mexico.

Every one has heard how profusely the rain falls in tropical countries during that period of the year known as the “rainy season.” It is the American winter of these southern latitudes, commencing in the month of June, and ending in October. At this time the waters of the rivers above mentioned, augmented by torrents of rain falling daily, break over the boundaries of their channels, and, free as the wild horses upon their banks, rush impetuously over the surrounding plains.

Almost with the rapidity of a galloping steed, the yellow flood rolls onward, as if impelled by the breath of a demon, carrying terror and desolation in its track. Woe to the living thing unable to flee before its watery phalanx!

The inundations proceeding simultaneously from the different streams soon become joined to one another; and the waters, now spread over a vast tract of country, flow in a more tranquil current. Thus united together, they form an immense sea, covering the whole extent of the savannas; upon the tranquil surface of which may be seen the *débris* of their destructive violence, with the carcasses of all sorts of animals.

In the country thus inundated a singular spectacle may at this time be witnessed: villages completely surrounded by water, as if built upon islands; trees with their trunks submerged, their leafy tops alone visible; canoes and large *periquas*, decked with flags and filled with people in their holiday suits, trying to outdo each other in speed or elegance of adornment; while groups of young girls, gaily dressed and crowned with flowers, may be seen seated in the boats, singing to the inspiring accompaniment of the harp or mandolin.

The situation in which the hacienda of Las Palmas stood had been chosen with a view to provide against these annual floods. It was upon the north side of a plait apparently boundless towards the south, east, and west. The house stood upon an eminence of no great elevation – a sort of outlying spur of a higher ridge that backed it upon the north. It was isolated, however, and at some distance from the ridge, whose direction was eastward and westward. The hill upon which the hacienda stood was one of those singular eminences known in Spanish-America by the name of *mesa* (table). Its flat top formed an oblong parallelogram, at one end of which stood the dwelling-house, the other being occupied by the storehouses and stables. These were upon an extensive scale, all enclosed within a wall of strong mason-work. In the same enclosure were rows of chambers for the lodgment of the *peons*, *vaqueros*, and other retainers of the establishment.

The dwelling-house, standing upon the southern extremity of the *mesa*, fronted towards the great plain. In its centre a massive double door opened into the courtyard, or *patio*; and this entrance was reached by a broad causeway, sloping upward with a gentle declivity from the plain, and fenced along each edge by a parapet of strong mason-work. Thus situated, the hacienda of Las Palmas – so named from the numerous tops of palm-trees which mottled the plain in front – not only defied the flood, but might have served as a fortress of no despicable strength. The proprietor of this dwelling, as well as the extensive estate surrounding it, was Don Mariano de Silva.

The bell of the hacienda had tolled the evening *oration*, and the tinkling of the *angelus* was sounding the summons to prayer. At that moment might be witnessed an interesting spectacle upon the plain adjoining the dwelling of Don Mariano de Silva. The Indian labourers, who never work

a moment beyond the prescribed time, at the first sound of the bell had all suddenly stopped as if struck by paralysis. The pickaxe raised aloft, the spade half buried in the earth, the goad lifted to prick forward the ox, fell simultaneously from their hands; while the oxen themselves, accustomed to imitate their drivers, came at once to a stand, leaving the plough in the half-finished furrow. The *vaqueros* galloped straight to their stables and unsaddled their horses; the peons came crowding in from the fields; and while the plain was thus deserted the corral and outhouses became crowded.

In the midst of this crowd women were seen hurrying to and fro, carrying hot plates of *comal*, *tortillas*, and *chile colorado*, destined for the evening repast.

The sun was yet shining brightly, and his last rays darted their golden light through the iron bars and green trelliswork of the windows of the hacienda. One, however, that looked eastward was sheltered from his beams; and a traveller coming in that direction might have observed that the lattice blind was raised up, and the rich amber-coloured curtains were visible behind it, although partially drawn. The window was at no great height from the ground, in fact on the ground-floor itself; but the house standing upon the pedestal of the *mesa* was elevated several feet above the level of the plain, and a horseman, however high his horse, could not have looked into the chamber thus situated.

There was no traveller, however, in sight; no one except some belated labourers, who, through the luminous haze of the setting sun, could be seen making their way towards the hacienda.

Any one who could have looked into this chamber would have there beheld a scene of more than ordinary interest. Though a mansion in the western world, the style and furnishing of the apartment exhibited a certain character of *orientalism*: for Mexico has long held traffic with the countries of the far East.

At that moment the chamber contained something of more interest than even its rich furniture. Three young girls graced it by their presence. Two of them were evidently sisters – judging by the air of familiarity that existed between them, rather than by any very marked personal resemblance. They were the daughters of Don Mariano, the proprietor of the mansion. The third was simply a servant – their waiting-maid.

Chapter Seventeen.

A Creole Toilette

It is customary in Europe to accuse the Creole ladies of tropical America of the crime of indolence. This custom is common with those who talk of woman and her political rights, and who believe that woman was created to share man's labours instead of soothing them. He, however, who has looked upon these fair Creole women and observed their tranquil repose of spirit – perhaps a certain sensualism, which only adds to their beauty – he, I say, who has seen this, will be disposed to look with a more lenient eye upon their so-called indolence, and will scarce believe it a crime.

The two daughters of Don Mariano de Silva offered at this moment, though in degrees somewhat different, examples of this peculiar characteristic of their countrywomen. One of them, with her limbs crossed in the oriental fashion, was seated upon a Chinese mat. Her long black hair, that had been plaited in several tresses, and recently combed out, still preserved the wavy outlines of the plaits, as it fell profusely over her shoulders.

Perhaps there are no women in the world who take more pride in their hair than do the Creoles of Spanish-America. It is never desecrated by the touch of the scissors; and several hours of every day are bestowed upon the dressing of it. For all this, the young girl in question, as she sat with her head pensively inclined, seemed to give but little thought to those luxuriant tresses that, undulating over her white shoulders, lay in clusters upon the mat. She appeared rather to deliver them up mechanically to the hands of her attendant, who was occupied in arranging them.

The face encircled by these exuberant masses of glossy hair, possessed all the characteristics of the finest Creole beauty. Her features, at once proud and calm, denoted an ardent and enthusiastic spirit habitually hidden under an expression of indolent serenity. The elegance of the Spanish race was also manifest in her small white hands, and in those little feet possessed by Mexican and South American women of whatever class. Blue satin slippers covered those of the young girl, otherwise nude: for stockings are not a rigorous necessity of Creole costume.

The young lady thus described was Doña Gertrudis, the elder of the two daughters of Don Mariano.

The younger, Marianita, was scarce less beautiful, but her beauty was of a different style. Quick-witted, and prone to laughter, her sparkling glances formed a contrast to the calm yet brilliant gaze of her sister; while varying expressions passed as rapidly over her countenance as the fleeting shadows of an April sky. With Doña Gertrudis it was altogether different; she resembled the volcanoes of her country, with their perpetual fire hidden under a robe of snow.

Neither of the young girls had yet reached the age of womanhood. Gertrudis was only seventeen, while the other was a year and a half younger. Both, however, had acquired that full development of feminine beauty which a tropical climate often calls forth at a much earlier age.

While the hair of Gertrudis was being arranged by her waiting woman, Marianita was tying around her ankle the ribbons that were to confine the tiny slipper upon her pretty little foot.

The grand political events at this time occurring had disturbed the quietude of this family, as well as that of most others. There were some probabilities, too, of there being a difference of opinion among its members, for at the moment when our narrative commences, a marriage was on the *tapis* between a young Spaniard of the neighbourhood and Doña Marianita.

Previous to the Mexican revolution, the most ardent wish of a young Creole lady was to obtain for a husband some new arrival from the mother country – Spain. Gertrudis, nevertheless, had more than once declined this honour, which Marianita, as we have seen, had accepted. Why did the Doña Gertrudis form an exception to the general rule? The sequel will show.

We have presented these two young girls in the act of making their toilet; we may add, that these preparations were in view of the arrival of two gentlemen who were that evening expected. One was the young Spaniard, the betrothed lover of Marianita; the other Don Rafael Tres-Villas, Captain in the Queen's Dragoons. The former lived within less than two leagues of the hacienda Las Palmas, and might be expected at any moment – the other, having two hundred to travel, could scarce be looked for with equal punctuality; for although he had sent positive word that he would arrive on that evening, it was reasonable to suppose that upon such a long journey some incident might arise to derange his calculations. Was this uncertainty the reason why Gertrudis had scarce commenced making her toilet, while Marianita had finished hers? Was Don Rafael the only man in whose eyes Gertrudis cared to appear beautiful? We shall presently know.

One of the daily cares of a young Creole lady is to take down the abundant plaits of her hair, and combing out the separate tresses, leave them hanging over her shoulders, so that the air may circulate freely among them. As soon as the attendant of Gertrudis, charged with this duty in the present instance, had accomplished her task, she passed out of the chamber, and the two sisters were left alone.

There are certain subjects of conversation which young girls, of whatever country, love only to talk of between themselves, and in their own private apartment.

Scarce had the servant closed the door behind her, than Marianita – who had just finished placing some pomegranate flowers behind her tortoiseshell comb – glided eagerly towards the window. On reaching it she stood for some moments with her eyes bent inquiringly on the plain. Gertrudis had changed her oriental posture for a seat upon a leathern *fauteuil*. After casting back, by an indolent movement of her arms, the dark masses of her hair, she delivered herself up to a silent reverie.

"I have examined the plain with all my eyes," said Marianita after a while spent at the window; "it appears entirely deserted. I cannot see a human creature upon it, much less Don Fernando, or Don Rafael. Santissima! I fear I have had all this trouble for nothing; in half an hour it will be sunset."

"You need not be uneasy. Don Fernando will come," said Gertrudis, in a calm voice.

"Ah!" exclaimed Marianita, "one might tell by the tone in which you speak that you are not expecting your *novio* (betrothed), as I am. My very impatience makes me despair of seeing him. Ah! Gertrudis, you have never experienced the emotion of love."

"Were I in your place I should feel more chagrin than impatience."

"Chagrin, oh! no; if Don Fernando don't choose to come this evening, he will lose the pleasure of seeing me in this beautiful white dress which he admires so much, and with these purple pomegranates in my hair, which I put in just to please him. For my part I prefer the white blossoms of the orange; but they say that a woman when married must make some sacrifices, and I may as well accustom myself to them."

In saying these words the young girl snapped her fingers together till they cracked like castanets; while her countenance, instead of expressing any very painful emotion, exhibited an air of perfect contentment.

Gertrudis made no answer, except by a sigh, half-suppressed. She sat motionless, with the exception of her foot, which kept balancing upward and downward the little slipper of blue satin, while the fresh breeze of the evening blowing in from the window, caused a gentle tremulous movement among the tresses of her hair.

"It's very tiresome – this country life," continued Marianita; "it's true one can pass the day by combing out one's hair, and taking a siesta; but in the evening, to have nothing else to do but walk in the garden and listen to the sighing breeze, instead of singing and dancing in a *tertulia*! Oh, it is wearisome – very, very wearisome, I declare. We are here, like the captive princesses in an Eastern romance, which I commenced reading last year, but which I have not yet finished. Santa Virgen! I see a cloud of dust upon the horizon at last – a horseman! *Que dicha!* (what happiness!)"

“A horseman! – what is the colour of his steed?” inquired Gertrudis, suddenly aroused.

“Ha – ha! As I live his horse is a mule – what a pity it was not some knight-errant! but I have heard that these fine gentry no longer exist.”

Gertrudis again sighed.

“Ah! I can distinguish him now,” continued Marianita. “It is a priest who rides the mule. Well, a priest is better than nobody – especially if he can play as well on the mandolin as the last one that travelled this way, and stayed two days with us. He! He is coming on a gallop – that’s not a bad sign. But no! he has a very grave, demure look. Ah! he sees me; he is waving a salute. Well, I must go down and kiss his hand, I suppose.”

Saying these words, the young Creole – whose education taught her that it was her duty to kiss the hand of every priest who came to the hacienda – pursed up her pretty rose-coloured lips in a saucy mocking fashion.

“Come, Gertrudis!” continued she; “come along with me. He is just by the entrance gate!”

“Do you see no one upon the plain?” inquired Gertrudis, not appearing to trouble herself about the arrival of the priest. “No other horseman – Don Fernando, for instance?”

“Ah, yes!” answered Marianita, once more looking from the window. “Don Fernando transformed into a mule-driver, who is forcing his *recua* into a gallop, as if he wished the loaded animals to run a race with one another! Why, the muleteer is making for the hacienda, as well as the priest, and galloping like him, too! What on earth can be the matter with the people? One would think that they had taken leave of their senses!”

The clanging of bolts and creaking hinges announced the opening of the great gate; and this, followed by a confused clatter of hoof-strokes, told that the mule-driver with his train of animals was also about to receive the hospitality of the hacienda. This circumstance, contrary to all usage, somewhat surprised the young girls, who were wondering why the house was being thus turned into an hostelry. They were further surprised at hearing an unusual stir in the courtyard – the servants of the establishment talking in a clamorous medley of voices, and footsteps falling heavily on the pavements and stone stairs leading up to the *azotéa* of the building.

“Jesus!” exclaimed Marianita, making the sign of the cross; “is the hacienda going to be besieged, I wonder? Mercy on us! I hope the insurgent brigands may not be coming to attack us!”

“Shame, sister!” said Gertrudis, in a tone of calm reproach. “Why do you call them brigands? – these men who are fighting for their liberties, and who are led by venerable priests?”

“Why do I call them brigands?” brusquely responded Marianita. “Because they hate the Spaniards, whose pure blood runs in our veins; and because,” continued she – the impetuous Creole blood mounting to her cheek – “because *I* love a Spaniard!”

“Ah!” replied Gertrudis, in the same reproachful tone; “you perhaps only fancy you love him? In my opinion, sister, true love presents certain symptoms which I don’t perceive in you.”

“And what matters if I do not love him, so long as he loves me? Am I not soon to belong to him? And why, then, should I think different to what he does? No, no!” added the young girl, with that air of passionate devotion which the women of her country and race lavish without limits on those whom they love.

At this moment, the sudden and unexpected strokes of the alarm-bell breaking upon their ears interrupted the dialogue between the two sisters, putting an end to a conversation which promised to engender ill-feeling between them – just as the same topic had already caused dissension in more than one family circle, breaking the nearest and dearest ties of friendship and kindred.

Chapter Eighteen. The Inundation

Just as Marianita was about to open the door and inquire the cause of the tumult, the *femme-de-chambre* rushed into the room; and, without waiting to be questioned, cried out —

“*Ave Maria, señoritas! the inundation is coming!* A vaquero has just galloped in to say that the waters are already within a league or two of the hacienda!”

“The inundation!” echoed both the sisters in a breath; Marianita repeating the sign of the cross, while Gertrudis bounded up from the *fauteuil*, and, gathering her long hair around her wrists, rushed towards the window.

“*Jesus! señorita,*” cried the waiting-maid, addressing herself to Gertrudis, “one would think you were going to leap down to the plain, as if to save some one in danger.”

“Don Rafael, God have pity on him!” exclaimed Gertrudis in a state of distraction.

“Don Fernando!” cried Marianita, shuddering as she spoke.

“The plain will soon be one great lake,” continued the servant; “woe to them who may be caught upon it! But as for Don Fernando, you may make yourself easy, señorita. The vaquero who came in was sent by Don Fernando with a message to master, to say that he would be here in the morning in his boat.”

After delivering this intelligence the attendant retired, leaving the young girls once more alone.

“In a boat!” exclaimed Marianita, as soon as the servant had gone out. “Oh, Gertrudis!” she continued, suddenly passing from sadness to a transport of joy, “won’t that be delightful? We shall sail upon the water in our state barge crowned with flowers, and —”

As Marianita turned round, her transport of frivolous egotism was suddenly checked, as she saw her sister, with her long dark tresses hanging dishevelled around her, kneeling in front of an image of the Madonna. Giving way to a feeling of reproach, she also knelt down and mingled her prayers with those of Gertrudis, while the alarm-bell continued to peal forth to the four quarters of the compass its notes of solemn and lugubrious import.

“Oh, my poor Gertrudis!” said she, taking her sister’s hand in her own, while her tears fell fast upon the glistening tresses; “pardon me if, in the fulness of my own joy, I did not perceive that your heart was breaking. Don Rafael — you love him then?”

“If he die I shall die too — that is all I know,” murmured Gertrudis, with a choking sigh.

“Nay, do not fear, Gertrudis; God will protect him. He will send one of his messengers to save him,” said the young girl, in the simplicity of her faith; and then returning, she mingled her prayers with those of her sister, now and then alternating them with words of consolation.

“Go to the window!” said Gertrudis, after some time had passed. “See if there is yet any one upon the plain. I cannot, for my eyes are filled with tears. I shall remain here.”

And, saying these words, Gertrudis again knelt before the image of the Virgin.

Marianita instantly obeyed the request, and, gliding across the floor, took her stand by the open window. The golden haze that had hitherto hung over the plain was darkening into a purple violet colour, but no horseman appeared in the distance.

“The horse he will be riding,” said Gertrudis, at the moment interrupting her devotions, “will be his bay-brown. He knows how much I admire that beautiful steed — his noble war-horse that carried him through all his campaigns against the Indians. I have often taken the flowers from my hair to place them upon the frontlet of the brave bay-brown. Oh! *Virgen Santissima!* O Jesus! sweet Lord! Don Rafael! my beautiful! my loved! who will bring you to me?” cried the young girl — her wild, passionate ejaculations mingling with the words of her prayer.

The plain was every moment becoming less visible to the eye, as the twilight deepened into the shadows of night, when all at once it was re-illuminated by the pale rays of the moon. Still no horseman could be seen either near or afar off – nothing but the tall, dark palm-trees that stood motionless in the midst of the silent savanna.

“He has been warned in time,” suggested Marianita, in hopes of tranquillising her sister. “Most likely he will not have set out to-day.”

“Oh, no – no!” cried Gertrudis, wringing her hands in anguish; “you are wrong. I know Don Rafael too well. I judge his heart by my own. I am sure he would try to be here this very evening. Another day would be too long for him. He would brave every danger, if only to see me a few hours sooner – I know he would. I know he will be coming at this moment!”

Just then a noise as of distant thunder was heard mingling with the metallic notes of the bell; and simultaneous with this ominous dialogue, between the hoarse muffled rumbling of the waters and the lugubrious clanging, a sheen of reddish light was seen to gleam suddenly over the moon-whitened plain, and, as it glared far into the distance, illuminating the dark forms of the palm-trees. It was proceeding from the beacon fires which Don Mariano had caused to be kindled both on the platform of the hacienda and on the higher ridge behind it – in hopes that their light might serve as a guide to those who might be still wandering upon the plain.

Both the eye and the ear were thus warned of the threatening danger; and, as the people moved around the blazing fires, their shadows, magnified to gigantic proportions, were projected far out upon the savanna.

The moments passed slowly, amidst fearful and ominous sounds. The muffled roar of the inundation was every instant heard more distinctly, as the exasperated flood came rolling onward. Already it resembled the noise of the loudest thunder, when the mass of dense waters was seen glistening under the light of the fires, only a few hundred paces distant from the western wall of the hacienda!

“Oh, sister!” cried Gertrudis, in a voice of despair, “look again! Is no one in sight? O mercy!”

Marianita still stood by the window, eagerly directing her glance over the plain, and endeavouring to penetrate the obscure gleam outside the circle lighted by the glare of the fires.

“No – no one,” replied she; and then her tone suddenly changing into one of terror, she shrieked out – “O mercy! I see two horsemen – yes; they are horsemen. *Madre de Dios!* they are flying like the wind! Alas! alas! they will be too late!”

As she spoke, loud shouts were heard from above – from the *azotéa* of the house – to which Don Mariano and a crowd of servants had ascended. Other men, mounted on horseback, galloped along the terrace upon which the house stood, waving long lazoos around their heads, and ready to fling them out as soon as the two travellers should approach within reach. The men below were also uttering loud cries, unable to restrain their voices at the sight of the two horsemen thus desperately struggling to anticipate the approach of the mass of roaring waters. Already the flood was rushing forward upon the walls of the hacienda, approaching like waves of fire under the glare of the flaming beacons.

The sisters within the chamber heard the cries, without seeing those that gave utterance to them, or knowing aught of the movements that were being made for rescuing the two horsemen from their perilous position.

“Oh, Gertrudis!” cried Marianita, now leaning out from the window, and clinging convulsively to one of the iron bars, “come hither and see them! You can tell whether it be Don Rafael. I do not know him. If it be he, your voice might encourage him.”

“I cannot – I cannot!” replied Gertrudis, in a voice quivering with emotion. “Oh, sister! I dare not look upon such a spectacle. ’Tis he – too well my heart tells me it is he – oh, I can only pray for him!”

“They are both mounted on dark-coloured horses. One of them is a little man. He is in the costume of an arriero. That cannot be Don Rafael!”

“The other? the other?” cried Gertrudis in a low but anxious tone.

“The other,” answered Marianita, “is a head taller than the first. He sits his horse like a centaur. Now I can see his face distinctly. He has a fine noble countenance, with black moustaches. There is a band of gold lace on his hat. The danger does not appear to alarm him. Ah! he is a noble, handsome fellow.”

“It is he!” cried Gertrudis, in a voice that could be heard high above the *mêlée* of sounds. “Yes – it is Don Rafael!” she repeated, springing to her feet, as if with the intention of beholding him once more before he should be engulfed in the flood of waters. “Where, sister? where?” she continued, gliding towards the window; but before she had made three steps across the chamber, her strength failed her, and she sank half-fainting upon the floor.

“Mercy!” exclaimed Marianita, half stupified with terror. “Oh! *Jesus Maria!* another bound of their horses, and they will be safe! *Valga me Dios!* too late – too late! there are the waters. Oh! their wild roar! hear how they beat against the walls. Mother of God! shield these brave men! They hold one another by the hand! They bury their spurs in their horses’ flanks! They ride forward without fear! They advance upon the frothing flood, as if they were charging upon an enemy! Virgin of Paradise! one of them, the smaller, is actually chanting a hymn!”

In effect, at that moment the voice of a man was heard above the rush of the water, crying out in measured accents —

“*In manus tuas, Domine! commendo animam meam!*”

“Merciful Father!” cried Marianita, “I see them no more, the waters are over them both!”

For a moment a death-like silence reigned in the apartment, broken only by the groaning of the waters, and the shouts of those clustering upon the *azotéa* without.

Gertrudis, prostrate amidst the tresses of her dishevelled hair, was no longer able to give utterance to a word even in prayer.

The voice of Marianita once more aroused her.

“Now I see them again,” continued she, “but no, only one! There is only one of them in the saddle. It is the taller one – he with the moustache. The other is gone. No! I see him, but he is dismounted, and borne off upon the flood. There! the other has seized hold of him! he raises him up, and draws him across his horse. What a powerful arm the brave man must have – he lifts the other like a child! The horse too appears strong as his master. How gallantly he breasts the flood with both men upon his back! What a strange sound comes from his nostrils! Now they are heading for the walls. *Santissima Virgen!* will you allow this brave cavalier to perish? he who overcomes that which has rooted up the trees of the forest?”

“Oh!” cried Gertrudis, recovering her strength, and speaking in a burst of passionate pride; “it is Don Rafael, I am sure! No other could perform such a deed!”

Her heart suddenly sank again, as she observed that her sister once more spoke in a tone of anguish.

“Alas, alas!” cried Marianita, “an enormous tree is drifting towards them! Oh! it will strike the horse! they will be overwhelmed by it.”

“Angel, whose name he bears!” shrieked Gertrudis, “angel, protect him! Virgin Mary, appease the rage of the waters, and shield him from destruction! Holy Virgin, save him, *and I vow to sacrifice my hair for his life!*”

This was the most precious offering the young Creole could think of making to the Virgin, and as if the vow had been accepted, the voice of Marianita was at that moment heard in a more cheerful tone.

“Blessed be God!” exclaimed she, “they will yet be saved! A dozen lazoes are around the tree. They have been thrown by people from the house. Good! the trunk no longer rolls onward. It is checked and held by the ropes. The brave horseman might easily mount upon it. But no! he will not abandon his noble horse, nor the man he is holding in his arms. See, he is riding around the tree, his

brave steed plunging through the water with all his strength. Once more he is breasting the flood – on – on – ah! hear those shouts of triumph! He is up to the walls! he is saved!”

A loud triumphant cheer rising from below, and blending with a similar cry that pealed along the roof of the hacienda, confirmed the words of Marianita; and the two sisters rushing together became locked in a mutual embrace.

“Ah, Gertrudis!” said Marianita, after a moment, “you have vowed your hair to the Virgin? your beautiful hair, worth a kingdom!”

“Yes,” responded Gertrudis, “and, were it worth a world, I should have given it all the same for the life of my noble Don Rafael. Ah! yes; and he shall cut it from my head with his own hands!”

Chapter Nineteen.

The Last of the Zapotèques

At no great distance from the cascade already introduced to the reader, there rises a little hill, with a flat or table-shaped top, as if it had once been a cone, whose apex had been cut off by some freak of nature. As already observed, such eminences are not uncommon throughout the plains of America, where they are generally termed *mesas*, or *cerros de la mesa* (table hills). The archaeologists of the province, in speaking of the hill in question – which simply bore the name of *Cerro-de-la-mesa*– declared it to be an ancient shrine of the Zapotèques. Tradition says that a temple once stood upon it; but, if so, it must have been constructed of very perishable materials; since no ruin testifies to the truth of this tradition. Costal, however, believed it, for the *tigrero*, though apparently a Christianised Indian, was still a faithful believer in many of the pagan rites of his fathers; and, influenced by a superstitious feeling, he was in the habit of sleeping upon the summit of the *Cerro-de-la-mesa*, whenever the necessities of his calling compelled him to remain over night in that neighbourhood. A little hut which he had constructed out of bamboos, with the broad leaves of bananas thrown over it for thatch, served him sufficiently well for this occasional and temporary shelter.

Costal had told Clara no more than the truth. He was descended from the ancient Caciques of Tehuantepec; and, while wandering through the midst of the solitary savannas, the falling grandeur of his ancient race was often the subject of his thoughts. Perfectly indifferent to the political quarrels of the whites, he would have regarded the new insurrection of Hidalgo without the slightest interest or enthusiasm; but another motive had kindled within his breast the hope that in the end he might himself profit by the revolutionary movement, and that by the aid of the gold which he vainly dreamt of one day discovering, he might revive in his own person the title of Cacique, and the sovereignty which his ancestors had exercised. The pagan doctrines in which he had been brought up, the solitudes in which he dwelt while engaged in his calling of tiger-hunter, the contemplation of the boundless sea, whose depths he had often explored – for previous to his becoming a *tigrero* he had long practised the perilous profession of a pearl-diver – all these circumstances had contributed to give to his character a tone of singular exaltation which bordered upon frenzy.

Visionary dreamer though he was, he had acquired as much ascendancy over the negro Clara as ever Don Quixote had over his squire Sancho Panza. Nay more, for, unlike the *Manchego* gentleman, he might easily have persuaded his black associate that windmills were giants, since the latter had already taken a captain in the Queen's dragoons for the Siren with the dishevelled hair!

About an hour after this incident we find the two adventurers upon the summit of the *Cerro-de-la-mesa*. Thither they had just transported the canoe of Costal, which, being a light craft, they had carried up on their shoulders without much difficulty. They had placed it keel upwards close to the wall of the bamboo hovel.

“Ouf!” grunted the negro as he sat down upon it. “I think we have fairly earned a minute's rest. What's your opinion, Costal?”

“Didn't you travel through the province of Valladolid?” asked the Indian without replying to Clara's idle question.

“Of course I did,” answered the black. “Valladolid, Acapulco, and several other of the southwestern provinces. Ah, I know them well – from the smallest path to the most frequented of the great roads – every foot of them. How could I help knowing them? for, in my capacity of *mozo de mulas*, did I not travel them over and over again with my master, Don Vallerio Trujano, a worthy man, whose service I only quitted to turn proprietor in this province of Oajaca?”

Clara pronounced the word *proprietor* emphatically, and with an important air. His proprietorship consisted in being the owner of a small *jacal*, or bamboo hut, and the few feet of ground on which it was built – of which, however, he was only a renter under Don Mariano de Silva. To the hacendado he hired himself out a part of each year, during the gathering of the cochineal crop. The rest of his time he usually passed in a sort of idle independence.

“Why do you ask me these questions?” he added.

“I don’t see,” said Costal, speaking as much to himself as to his companion, “how we can enrol ourselves in the army of Hidalgo. As a descendant of the Caciques of Tehuantepec, I am not above hiring myself out as a tiger-hunter; but I can never consent to wear a soldier’s uniform.”

“And why not?” asked Clara. “For my part, I think it would be very fine to have a splendid green coat with red facings, and bright yellow trowsers, like one of these pretty parroquets. I think, however, we need not quarrel on that score. It’s not likely that the Señor Hidalgo, though he is generalissimo of the American insurgent army, will have many uniforms to spare; and unless we enrol ourselves as officers, which is not likely, I fear – ”

“Stay!” said Costal, interrupting him. “Why couldn’t we act as guides and scouts, since you know the country so well? In that capacity we could go and come as we pleased, and would have every opportunity to search for the Siren with the dishevelled hair.”

“But is the Siren to be seen everywhere?” naïvely inquired Clara.

“Certainly; she can appear at any place to her faithful worshippers, wherever there is a pool of water in which she can mirror herself, a stream or a cascade in which she may bathe herself, or in the great sea where she searches for pearls to adorn her hair.”

“And did you never see her when you were yourself a pearl-fisher on the coast of the Gulf?”

“Certainly I have,” replied Costal; “yes, more than once, too, I have seen her at night; and by moonlight I have heard her singing as she combed out her shining hair and twisted long strings of pearls about her neck, while *we* could not find a single one. Several times, too, I have invoked her without feeling the slightest sensation of fear, and intreated her to show me the rich pearl-banks. But it was all to no purpose: no matter how courageous one is, the Siren will not do anything unless there are two men present.”

“What can be the reason of that?” inquired Clara. “Perhaps her husband is jealous, and don’t allow her to talk to one man alone.”

“The truth is, friend Clara,” continued Costal, without congratulating the negro on the cleverness of his conjecture, “I have not much hopes of seeing her until after I am fifty years old. If I interpret correctly the traditions I have received from my fathers, neither Tlaloc nor Matlacuezc ever reveal their secrets to any man who is less than half a century old. Heaven has willed it that from the time of the conquest up to my day none of my ancestors has lived beyond his forty-ninth year. I have passed that age; and in me alone can be verified the tradition of my family, which has been passed down in regular succession from father to son. But there is only one day in which it may be done: the day of full moon after the summer solstice of the year, in which I am fifty. That is this very year.”

“Ah, then,” said the negro, “that will explain why all our efforts to invoke the Siren has proved fruitless. The time has not yet come.”

“Just so,” said Costal. “It will be some months yet before we can be certain of seeing her. But whatever happens we must start to-morrow for Valladolid. In the morning we can go to the hacienda in our canoe, and take leave of our master Don Mariano as two respectable servants ought to do.”

“Agreed,” said Clara; “but are we not forgetting an important matter?”

“What?”

“The student whom the officer left near the tamarind trees? Poor devil! he’s in danger of being caught by the inundation!”

“I had not forgotten him,” rejoined Costal. “We can go that way in the morning, and take him to the hacienda in the canoe along with us – that is, if we still find him alive. I hope he will have sense enough, before the flood reaches him, to climb into one of the trees.”

As Costal said this, he rose from his seat, and glanced westward over the plain. Already the hoarse murmur of the inundation was making itself heard in the direction of the hacienda.

“Listen!” said he, “to the growling of the waters. *Carrambo!* Who knows if the officer himself has had time to escape? He would have done better had he passed the night with us here. He appeared so anxious about going on to the hacienda. Probably he has his own private reasons for that; besides, I never thought of asking him to stay with us.”

“Well,” said Clara, “we may congratulate ourselves upon being safe here; but I feel rather hungry just now; do you chance to have a bit of *tasajo* in any corner of your cabin? I could put up with that and a drink of water.”

“I think I can manage to find a morsel or two,” said Costal, going inside the hut, whither he was followed by the negro.

A fire of dried sticks soon crackled upon the hearth, among the embers of which, as soon as they had burnt to a certain degree of redness, Costal placed several pieces of jerked meat – which he had taken from a string suspended across the room. This species of viand requires but a slight process of cooking; and, as soon as it was deemed sufficiently done, the two adventurers entered upon their frugal repast, which a keen appetite rendered palatable, if not absolutely luxurious.

Supper over, they stretched themselves along the floor, and for a time lay listening to the hoarse mutterings of the flood that every moment grew louder and louder. To this, however, they paid but little attention, having full confidence in the security of their elevated position; and even the noise of the water as the great waves came dashing against the hill did not hinder Costal from falling into a profound slumber. The negro also fell asleep, but awoke from time to time – fancying that he heard the screams of the jaguars mingling with the confused surging of the waters! In truth it was no fancy. What the negro heard was in reality the voices of the savage creatures they had that evening encountered. On becoming aware of the approach of the inundation, all four of them had made for the *Cerro-de-la-mesa*; but perceiving that its summit was already occupied by the two men, they had halted by its base, and stood for some moments growling their chagrin. The near approach of the waters inspiring them with terror, started them off afresh; and bounding rapidly onward, they were soon far distant from the hill, fleeing at utmost speed from the danger of the inundation, well understood even by them.

Chapter Twenty. A Canopy of Jaguars

Considering the circumstances in which he has been left, it is time to return to the poor student of theology – Don Cornelio Lantejas. We left him sleeping in a hammock, between two great tamarind trees; and certainly it must have been his good star that had conducted him into that comfortable situation.

All at once he awoke with a start – his slumber having been interrupted by a chilly sensation that had suddenly crept upon him. On opening his eyes, he perceived that he was suspended over a vast sea that rolled its yellow waves beneath the hammock, and within six inches of his body! At this unexpected sight, a cry of terror escaped him, which was instantly responded to by a growling, sniffing noise, that appeared to proceed from the tops of the tamarinds over his head!

As yet he saw nothing there; but casting his eyes around, he perceived that the whole country was under water sweeping onward in a frothy, turbulent current!

A moment's reflection sufficed to explain to him this singular phenomenon. He now remembered having heard of the great annual inundation to which the plains of Oajaca are subject, and which occur almost at a fixed day and hour; and this also explained the circumstances which had been mystifying him – the abandoned dwellings, and the boats suspended from the trees. He had arrived in the midst of one of these great floods, which he might have shunned but for the slow and gentle gait at which his *cavallo de picador* had carried him along the route.

What was he to do? He scarce knew how to swim. But even had he been as accomplished in the art of natation as a pearl-diver himself, it would not have availed him in the midst of that immense sheet of water, on all sides apparently stretching to the limits of the horizon!

His situation, sufficiently unpleasant on account of the danger of the rising inundation, soon became absolutely frightful from another and a very different reason.

Some shining objects, which appeared to him among the leaves of the tamarinds, and that looked like burning coals, just then caught his glance; and a closer scrutiny convinced him that these could be no other than the eyes of some fierce animals that had taken refuge upon the trees – jaguars, no doubt: since he could think of no other creatures that could have climbed up the smooth trunks of the tamarinds!

His terror was now complete. Beneath rushed the surging waters. He knew not how soon they might mount higher and engulf him – for the flood might still be far from its maximum height! On the other hand, he dare not climb upwards. The fierce animals in the tree would be certain to dispute his ascent, even should they feel disposed to leave him unassailed where he was!

In this horrid state of uncertainty – dreading the double danger – he was compelled to pass the remainder of the night.

We need not detail the unpleasant reflections to which his situation gave rise: for a volume would scarce contain the thousand alternations from hope to fear that passed through his spirit before the light of the morning broke upon his longing eyes.

Though he had longed for morning to come, the daylight did not add much to the joyfulness of his situation. The animals, whose glancing orbs had kept him all night in a state of apprehension, were now plainly seen among the branches of the trees. They *were* jaguars – four of them – two large ones, and two others of smaller size, or *cachorras*. This was not all that Don Cornelio saw to alarm him. In addition to the fierce quadrupeds, the tops of the tamarinds were occupied by other living creatures of equally frightful aspect. These were reptiles: large serpents of hideous appearance twined spirally round the branches, with their heads projected outwards, and their forked tongues glistening beyond their teeth!

The terrified student cast an inquiring glance over the waters, to see if there was no means of escape from his perilous position. He saw only the bubbling surface, here and there mottled with huge uprooted trees, upon which appeared wolves and other wild animals half dead with affright. High overhead, eagles, vultures, and other birds of prey wheeled in circles through the air, uttering their piercing cries – fit accompaniment to this scene of desolation and death.

Don Cornelio again turned his eyes towards the fierce jaguars crouching among the branches of the trees. These brutes appeared to struggle against the ferocious instincts of their nature, which prompted them to seize hold of a prey almost within reach of their claws. Fear for their own lives alone prevented them from taking that of the student; and at intervals they closed their eyes, as if to escape the temptation caused by his presence!

At the same time the serpents, not far above his face, kept continually coiling their long viscous bodies round the branches, and rapidly uncoiling them again – equally uneasy at the presence of the man and the tigers.

Mechanically closing the folds of the hammock over him, and thus holding them with both hands, the student lay perfectly still. He feared either to speak or make a motion, lest his voice or movement might tempt either the reptiles or quadrupeds to make an attack upon him.

In this way more than an hour had passed, when over the surface of the waters, which now flowed in a more tranquil current, Don Cornelio fancied he heard a singular sound. It resembled the notes of a bugle, but at times the intonation was hoarser and more grave, not unlike a certain utterance of his two formidable neighbours, which from time to time the student heard swelling from the tops of the tamarinds.

It was neither more nor less than the conch of Costal; who, making his way towards the spot in his canoe, was employing the time to advantage in endeavouring to invoke the goddess of the waters.

Presently the student was able to make out in the distance the little canoe gliding over the water, with the two adventurers seated in the stem and stern. At intervals, the Indian, accustomed to this sort of navigation, was seen to drop his oars and hold the shell to his mouth. Lantejas then saw that it was from this instrument the sounds that had so puzzled him were proceeding.

Absorbed in their odd occupation, neither Costal nor Clara had as yet perceived the student of theology – hidden as he was by the thick network of the hammock, and almost afraid to make the slightest movement. Just then, however, a muffled voice, as of some one speaking from under a mask, reached their ears.

“Did you hear anything, Costal?” inquired the negro.

“Yes, I heard a sort of cry,” replied Costal; “like enough it’s the poor devil of a student who is calling us. *Carrambo!* where can he be? I see only a hammock hung between two trees. Eh! as I live, he is inside it. *Carrai!*”

As Costal finished speaking, a loud peal of laughter burst from his lips, which to him in the hammock appeared like heavenly music. It told him that the two men had discovered his situation; and the student at once fervently returned thanks to God for this interposition of His mercy.

Clara was sharing the mirth of the Indian, when music of a very different sort stifled the laugh upon his lips. It was the cry of the jaguars, that, suddenly excited by the voice of the student, had all four of them sent forth a simultaneous scream.

“*Carrambo!*” exclaimed Clara, with a fresh terror depicted upon his face; “the tigers again.”

“Rather strange!” said the Indian. “Certainly their howls appeared to come from the same place as the voice of the man. *Hola! Señor student,*” he continued, raising his voice, so as to be heard by him in the hammock, “are you making your siesta alone, or have you company under the shade of those tamarinds?”

Don Cornelio attempted to reply, but his speech was unintelligible both to the Indian and the negro. In fact, terror had so paralysed his tongue, as to render him incapable of pronouncing his words distinctly!

For a moment his arm was seen elevated above the folds of the hammock, as if to point out his terrible neighbours upon the tree. But the thick foliage still concealing the jaguars from the eye of Costal, rendered the gesture of the student as unintelligible as his cry.

“For the love of God, hold your oar!” cried Clara; “perhaps the tigers have taken refuge on the top of the tamarinds!”

“All the more reason why we should get up to them,” replied the Indian. “Would you leave this young man to smother in his hammock till the waters had subsided?”

In saying this, Costal plied his oars more vigorously than ever; and, in spite of the remonstrances of his companion, headed the canoe in a direct line towards the hammock.

“If these be the same tigers we encountered yesterday,” said Clara, in an anxious tone of voice, “and I am almost sure they are, by the mewling of their whelps, think for a moment, Costal, how desperately spiteful they will be against us.”

“And do you think I am not equally spiteful against them?” replied Costal, urging his canoe onwards with more rapidity than ever.

A few strokes of the paddle brought the light craft within gunshot distance of the tamarinds; and now for the first time did Costal obtain a good view of the theological student couched within the hammock – where he appeared to be indolently reposing, like some Oriental satrap, under a dais of tigers and serpents!

Chapter Twenty One.

The Student Rescued

The odd spectacle once more overcame the gravity of the Indian; and, resting upon his oars, he delivered himself up to a renewed spell of laughter.

Through the network of the hammock the student could now note the movements of those who were coming to his rescue. He saw the Indian turn towards his companion, pointing at the same time to the singular tableau among the tops of the trees, which the negro appeared to contemplate with a countenance that betrayed an anxiety equal to his own.

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