

Aimard Gustave

**The Queen of the Savannah: A
Story of the Mexican War**



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PROLOGUE

CHAPTER I. THE EXPEDITION

The story begins on May 5, 1805, in one of the wildest and most abrupt portions of New Spain, which now forms the State of Coahuila, belonging to the Mexican Confederation.

If the reader will have the kindness to take a glance at a numerous cavalcade, which is debouching from a canyon and scaling at a gallop the scarp side of a rather lofty hill, on the top of which stands an *aldea*, or village of Indios mansos, he will at the same time form the acquaintance of several of our principal characters, and the country in which the events recorded in this narrative occurred.

This cavalcade was composed of fifteen individuals in all; ten of them were lancers, attired in that yellow uniform which

procured them the nickname of *tamarindos*. These soldiers were execrated by the people, in consequence of their cruelty. They advanced in good order, commanded by a subaltern and an *alférez* – an old trooper who had grown gray in harness, who had long white moustachios and a disagreeable face. As he galloped on, he looked around him with the careless, wearied air of a man for whom the future reserves no hopes either of ambition, love, or fortune.

About twenty paces from this little band, and just so far ahead that their remarks reached the soldiers' ears in a completely incomprehensible fashion, three persons, two men and a woman, were riding side by side.

The first was a gentleman of about thirty years of age, of commanding stature; his harsh, haughty, and menacing features were rendered even more gloomy by a deep scar of a livid hue which commenced on his right temple and divided his face into two nearly equal parts.

This man, who was dressed in the sumptuous costume of the Mexican *campesinos*, which he wore with far from common grace, was named Don Aníbal de Saldibar, and was considered the richest hacendero in the province.

His companion, who kept slightly in the rear, doubtless through respect, was a civilized Indian, with a quick eye, aquiline nose, and a wide mouth lined with two rows of dazzling white teeth. His countenance indicated intelligence and bravery. He was short and robust, and the almost disproportioned

development of his muscles gave an enormous width to his limbs. This individual must assuredly be endowed with extraordinary strength. His attire, not nearly so rich as that of the hacendero, displayed a certain pretension to elegance, which was an extraordinary thing in an Indian.

This man's name was Pedro Sotavento, and he was majordomo to Don Aníbal.

As we have said, the third person was a female. Although it was easy to see, through the juvenile grace of her movements and her taper waist, that she was still very young, she was so discreetly hidden behind gauze and muslin veils, in order to protect her from the burning heat of the sun which was then at its zenith, that it was impossible to distinguish her features. Long black locks escaped from beneath her broad-brimmed vicuña hat, and fell in profusion on her pink and white shoulders, which were scarcely veiled by a China crape *rebozo*.

At the moment when we approach these three persons they were conversing together with considerable animation.

"No," Don Aníbal said, with a frown, as he smote the pommel of his saddle, "it is not possible, I cannot believe in so much audacity on the part of these Indian brutes. You must have been deceived, Sotavento."

The majordomo grinned knowingly, and buried his head between his shoulders with a motion which was habitual to him.

"You will see, *mi amo*," he replied, in a honeyed voice, "my information is positive."

"What!" the hacendero continued with increased fury, "They would really attempt resistance! Why, they must be mad!"

"Not so much as you suppose, mi amo; the aldea is large and contains at least three thousand *callis*."

"What matter? Suppose there were twice as many, is not one Spaniard as good as ten Indians?"

"In the open, perhaps so."

"What is that you say – perhaps?" Don Aníbal exclaimed, turning sharply round, and giving his majordomo a glance of supreme contempt. "Really, Sotavento, your Indian origin involuntarily abuses your judgment by making you regard things differently from what they really are."

"No, mi amo. The Indian origin with which you reproach me, on the contrary, makes me judge the situation healthily; and, believe me, it is far more serious than you imagine."

These words were uttered in a serious tone, which caused the proud Spaniard to reflect.

Pedro Sotavento had been in his service for a long time. He knew that he was brave and incapable of being intimidated by threats or rodomontade. Moreover, he had always been kind to him, and believed himself sure of his devotion, hence he continued in a milder key —

"That is the reason, then, why you insisted so strongly on my taking an escort when we passed the Fort of Agua Verde?"

"Yes, mi amo," he replied, giving the soldiers a glance of singular expression. "I should have liked it to be more numerous."

"Nonsense, had it not been through consideration for the señora, whom I am anxious not to terrify in her present condition, I would not have accepted a single soldier. We alone are more than sufficient to chastise these scoundrels, were there a thousand of them."

"Don Aníbal," the young lady here said in a soft and harmonious voice, "the contempt you profess for these poor people is unjust. Though they are of a different colour from us, and almost devoid of intellect, they are men for all that, and as such have a claim on our pity."

"Very good, señora," the hacendero answered savagely; "take their part against me, that will not fail to produce an excellent effect."

"I take no person's part, Don Aníbal," she continued, with a slight tremor in her voice. "I merely offer an opinion which I consider correct, that is all. But your outbursts of passion terrify me; perhaps it would have been better to leave me at the hacienda, as I expressed a desire."

"My family are never insulted with impunity, señora; I wished you to witness the vengeance which I intend taking for the insult offered to you."

"I made no complaint to you, Don Aníbal. The slight insult I received, even admitting that it was an insult, does not deserve so terrible a punishment as you purpose to inflict on these unhappy creatures. Take care, Don Aníbal. These men whom, in your Castilian pride, you obstinately insist on ranking with the brute

beasts and treating as such, will grow weary one day. They already feel a profound hatred for you. The Indians are vindictive, and may wait perhaps for twenty years the opportunity to repay you the evil you have done them; but then their vengeance will be frightful."

"Enough, señora," the hacendero said roughly; "but while waiting for this vengeance with which you menace me in their name, I mean to treat them as they deserve."

The young lady bowed her head, and made no further remark.

"Oh!" the majordomo said, with a grin of mockery, "You can strike without fear, mi amo. The Indians have been too long accustomed to bend their necks for them ever to feel any desire to draw themselves up and bite the hand which chastises them."

These words were uttered with an accent which would have caused Don Aníbal to reflect seriously, had he not been so infatuated about his real or supposed superiority over the unfortunate race that formed the subject of the conversation we have just reported.

The opinion expressed by the hacendero was not so erroneous as it might appear to a European. The Spanish name was at this period surrounded by such a prestige; the hapless Indians were reduced to such a state of degrading servitude and brutalization; they seemed to have so thoroughly recognized the superiority of their oppressors, that the latter did not even take the trouble to hide the contempt with which these degenerate remains of the powerful races they had vanquished in former times inspired

them. They affected, under all circumstances, to make them feel all the weight of the yoke under which they bowed them.

Still, under present circumstances, the proud Spaniard committed a grave error. For this reason:

The Indians against whom he was marching at this moment were not attached by any tie to those whom three centuries of slavery had rendered submissive to the Spanish authority. They had only been settled for about thirty years, through their own free will, at the spot where they now were. This requires an explanation, which we will proceed to give, begging the reader to pardon this digression, which is indispensable for the comprehension of the facts which we have undertaken to recount.

There are races which seem destined by fate to disappear from the surface of the globe. The red race is of the number, for it has no fiercer enemy than itself.

The Indians, in lieu of making common cause against their oppressors, and trying to emancipate themselves from their tyranny, expend all their courage and energy in fratricidal contests of nation against nation, tribe against tribe, and thus help those who do all in their power to keep them down. These contests are the more obstinate, because they take place between men of the same blood and even of the same family for originally frivolous causes, which, however, soon attain considerable importance, owing to the number of warriors who succumb to the rage and ferocity displayed on both sides.

Hence entire nations, formerly powerful, are gradually

reduced to a few families, and in a relatively short period become entirely extinct, the few surviving warriors seeking their safety in flight, or going to claim the protection of another nation with which they soon become blended.

Hence we may account for the fact that the names of the tribes flourishing at the period of the discovery of America are now scarcely known, and it is impossible to recover any trace of them.

The first conquerors, impelled by religious fanaticism and an unextinguishable thirst for gold were, we allow, pitiless to their unhappy victims, and sacrificed immense numbers in working the mines. Still, to be just, we must state that they never organized those grand Indian hunts which the Anglo-Saxons initiated in North America; they never offered a reward of fifty dollars for every Indian scalp; and instead of driving back the Indian race before them, they, on the contrary, blended the native blood with their own, so that the number of Indians has been considerably augmented in the old Spanish possessions, while they will ere long disappear in North America, where they are hunted down like wild beasts.

According to a census made by the Washington Congress in 1858, the Indians scattered over the territory of the United States amount to 800,000.

In Mexico, where the population is only seven million, there are five million Indians and half-breeds; moreover, it is proved that in the time of Motecuhzoma the population never attained this high figure.

It results then from our remarks that the Spaniards who, during three centuries, incessantly massacred the Indians, succeeded in increasing their numbers; while the North Americans who are so philosophical and such philanthropists have attained a diametrically opposite result, and during the sixty years since they proclaimed their independence, in spite of all the efforts made to civilize the Indians, they have nearly exterminated those tribes which dwell on their territory.

It must be confessed that this is a most unfortunate result! We will stop here, for every thinking man will be enabled to draw the sole logical conclusion from our remarks without our dilating on them.

About forty years before the period at which our story begins, two of the most important tribes of the Comanche nation suddenly quarrelled after an expedition they had made in common against the Apaches, the irreconcilable enemies of the Comanches, with whom they alone dare to dispute the supremacy on the great prairies of the Far West.

This expedition had been completely successful: a winter village of the Apaches was surprised by night, the horses were carried off, and sixty scalps raised.

The warriors returned to the gathering place of their nation, singing, dancing, and celebrating their exploits, as they are accustomed to do when, in an expedition of this nature, they have killed several of their enemies without any loss on their own side. This had been the case on the present occasion. The

Apache warriors, aroused from deep sleep, had fallen like ripe corn beneath the tomahawks of the Comanches as they sought to escape from their burning lodges without thought of arming themselves.

In spite of all the care taken in the division of the plunder that each tribe might be equally favoured, the chiefs did not succeed in satisfying everybody; the warriors who thought themselves defrauded gave way to recriminations; tempers were heated, and, as always happens with men who constantly go about armed, they proceeded almost immediately from words to blows.

There was a battle; blood followed in streams, and then the two tribes separated, swearing a deadly hatred, though it was impossible to discover whence the quarrel originated, or which side was in the wrong. These two tribes were the "White Horse" and the "Red Buffalo."

Then a war began between these old friends which threatened to be indefinitely prolonged; but one day the Red Buffaloes, being surprised by their enemies, were almost entirely exterminated, after a fight that lasted two days, and in which even the squaws took part.

The vanquished, reduced to about fifty warriors and the same number of women and children, sought safety in flight, but being hotly pursued, they were compelled to cross the Indian border, and seek a refuge upon Spanish territory.

Here they drew breath. The Spanish government allowed them to settle in the neighbourhood of the Fort of Agua Verde, and

granted them the right of self-government, while recognizing the authority of the king of Spain, and pledging themselves to be guilty of no exactions of any sort.

The Red Buffaloes, pleased with the protection granted them, religiously carried out the conditions of the treaty; they built a village, became husbandmen, accepted the missionary sent to them, turned Christians, ostensibly at least, and lived on good terms with their white neighbours, among whom they speedily acquired the reputation of being quiet and honest people.

Unhappily, perfect happiness is not possible in this world, and the poor Indians soon learnt this fact at their own expense.

The ground on which their wretched village stood was surrounded by the lands of the Hacienda del Barrio, which had belonged, ever since the conquest, to the Saldibar family.

So long as Don José de Saldibar was alive, with the exception of a few insignificant discussions, the Indians were tolerably at liberty; but when Don Aníbal succeeded his father, matters at once altered.

Don Aníbal signified to the chief cacique of the Red Buffaloes, that he must allow himself to be a vassal, and consequently pay to him not only a tithe of his crops, and the capitation tax, but also supply a certain number of his young men to work in the mines and guard the cattle.

The chief answered with a peremptory refusal, alleging that he was only dependent on the Spanish government, and recognized no other sovereign.

Don Aníbal would not allow himself to be defeated; he organized against the Indians a system of dull annoyance for the purpose of compelling them to give way; he cut down their woods, sent his cattle to grass in their fields, and so on.

The Indians suffered without complaining. They were attached to their wretched huts and did not wish to quit them.

This patient resignation, this passive resistance, exasperated Don Aníbal. The Indians let themselves be ruined without uttering complaints or threats; several of their young men were carried off, and they did not offer the slightest protest. The hacendero resolved to come to an end with these men whom nothing could compel to obey his will.

In spite of himself, he was terrified at the indifference of the Indians, which he fancied too great not to be affected; he went over in his mind all he had made the poor people suffer, and the injustice he had done them, and came to the conclusion that they were preparing to take some terrible vengeance on him.

He determined to be beforehand with them, but he needed a pretext, and this Sotavento, his majordomo, undertook to provide him with.

This Sotavento, of whom we have already said a few words, was himself of Indian race. One of Don Aníbal's friends had warmly recommended him, and for twelve years he had been in the service of the hacendero, whose good and bad passions he had contrived so cleverly to flatter, with that suppleness of character natural to the redskins, that the latter placed the most

perfect confidence in him.

Sotavento, naturally, carried out his master's orders zealously, and eagerly seized every opportunity to injure the Red Buffaloes, for whom he appeared to entertain a profound hatred.

After consulting with his master, Sotavento managed matters so that one day Doña Emilia, Don Aníbal's wife, who had hitherto defended the poor people of the aldea under all circumstances, and had even succeeded in saving them from several vexatious acts, was, while taking a walk, insulted by an Indian, or at least a man wearing their costume, and was so frightened that she was confined to her bed for several days.

The hacendero made the more noise about this insult, because, as his wife was *enceinte*, the fright she had undergone might have had very serious consequences for her.

He proceeded in all haste to the capital of the province, had a long interview with the governor, and then returned home, certain this time of gaining the end at which he had so long aimed.

He had been accompanied from the city by a juez de letras, an insignificant person, to whom we have not yet alluded, and who appeared but little pleased with the duty confided to him, for he trotted timidly along upon a scrubby mule behind the soldiers.

Only stopping at the hacienda long enough to bid his wife mount her horse and come and see what was going to happen, Don Aníbal at once continued his journey, consenting with great difficulty, upon the repeated entreaties of his majordomo, to

accept the escort the commandant of the Fort of Agua Verde offered him, for he was so eager to revenge himself.

The country the travellers passed through was extremely picturesque; from the elevation they had reached, they surveyed an admirable landscape closed in on the horizon by lofty forest-clad mountains. In the west spread out the immense sheet of water, known as the Agua Verde, which the beams of the setting sun tinged with all the prismatic hues. Besides this, they could see the Río Grande, which was lost in infinite windings, the Fort of the Bahia, situated on a point of the river, and the green prairies of the Indian border, which were agitated by mysterious movements.

In the meanwhile the Mexicans continued to ascend, we dare not say the road, for no roads of any sort existed at that period in this savage country, and we doubt whether any exist now, but the track which led to the aldea of the Red Buffaloes.

This track, cut by human hands on the sides of the hill round which it wound, became more and more scarped, and at last resembled a staircase, which would have mightily staggered a European traveller, but these horsemen did not even seem to notice the fact.

All at once, Sotavento, who had pushed on slightly ahead during the conversation between the hacendero and Doña Emilia, uttered a cry of surprise as he stopped his horse so short, that the noble animal trembled on its hind legs.

"What is the matter?" Don Aníbal asked as he spurred his

horse.

"Look there!" the majordomo replied, stretching his hand.

"*¡Mil demonios!*" Don Aníbal shouted passionately, "What is the meaning of this? Who has warned the scoundrels?"

"*¿Quién sabe?*" the majordomo said with a grin.

Several trees, to which the branches and roots were still attached, had been thrown across the track, and formed a barricade about ten feet in height, which completely stopped the way.

The travellers were compelled to halt before this impassable obstacle.

The hacendero was startled for a moment, but soon, shaking his head like a lion at bay, he looked around defiantly, dismounted, and drawing his machete, walked boldly up to the barricade, while Sotavento, motionless and with folded arms, looked cunningly at him.

The lancers, whom this compulsory stoppage had enabled to catch up the first party, cocked their carbines at an order from their commanding officer, and held themselves in readiness to fire at the first signal.

CHAPTER II.

REDSKINS AND WHITESKINS

Don Aníbal de Saldibar was gifted with a most energetic character and iron will; obstacles, instead of checking, only impelled him to go on at all risks, until he had carried out what he once resolved to do. In no case could any interference, however powerful its nature, have induced him to hesitate in accomplishing his plans, much less make him give them up. Possessing great physical strength and unusual skill in the management of weapons, he was courageous after the manner of wild beasts, through an instinct for evil and to smell blood. Still he had as much contempt for his own life as for that of his opponent, and he never tried to avoid peril, but, on the contrary, felt a secret pleasure in looking it in the face.

The soldiers who accompanied him had assuredly furnished proofs of their courage long before. Still it was with a start of terror they saw him advance calmly and carelessly toward this barricade of verdure, which rose silent and menacing before them, and behind which they expected at each moment to see spring up a band of enemies, exasperated by long sufferings, and resolved to defend themselves to the last extremity. In the probable event of a collision, the position of the Mexicans was most disadvantageous.

The soldiers, grouped on a path only three feet in width,

having on their right a perpendicular granite wall, and on their left a deep barranca, into which the slightest false step might precipitate them, with no shelter of any description to fight men hidden behind a thick barricade, were almost certain of being defeated, if a hand to hand fight began with the Indians. Hence the old officer who commanded the escort shook his head several times with a dissatisfied air, after he had hastily examined the probable fighting ground.

The juez de letras and the two alguaciles who served him as a guard of honour, evidently shared the lieutenant's opinion, for they had stopped out of gunshot and dismounted, under a pretext of tightening their mules' girths, but in reality to convert the carcasses of the poor brutes into a rampart.

As for Sotavento, sitting motionless on his horse about ten yards at the most from the felled trees, he was carelessly rolling a cigarette between his fingers, while pinching up his thin lips, and letting a viper's glance pass through his half-closed eyelids.

He seemed, in short, to take but very slight interest in what was going on around him, and was prepared to be a spectator rather than actor of the events which would in all probability occur.

The hacendero had approached the barricade. His face was unmoved; with his left hand resting on one of the branches, and his body bent slightly forward, he was trying to peer through the intertwined branches and leaves at some of the enemies whom he supposed to be ambuscaded there.

Still, although this examination lasted for several minutes, and

Don Aníbal, through bravado, prolonged it far beyond what was necessary, the deepest silence continued to prevail, and not a leaf stirred.

"Come," the hacendero said in a sarcastic voice, as he drew himself up, "you are mistaken, Sotavento, there is no one here. I was a fool to believe for a moment that these brutes would attempt to dispute our passage."

"Well, well," the majordomo said with a grin, "¿quién sabe? mi amo, ¿quién sabe? These brutes, as you very correctly term them, have not left their prairies so long as to have completely forgotten their Indian tricks."

"I care little," the hacendero answered drily, "what their intentions or the tricks they have prepared may be; dismount and help me to roll over the precipice these trees which obstruct the path; at a later date we will proceed to punish the persons who have thus dared to barricade the king's road."

Sotavento hung his head without replying, and prepared to obey; but before he had drawn his foot out of the stirrup the branches parted, and in the space thus left free appeared a man wearing a gold-laced hat with a military cock, and holding in his right hand a long silver-knobbed cane.

As this individual is destined to play a certain part in this narrative, we will draw his portrait in a few lines.

He was a man of lofty stature, with marked features and an intelligent physiognomy. His black eyes, sparkling like carbuncles, and full of cunning, had a strange fixity, which gave

him, when any internal emotion agitated him, an expression of cold ferocity impossible to describe. His complexion, which was of the colour of new red copper, allowed him to be recognized as an Indian at the first glance; although he had passed midlife, it was impossible to decide his age, for he seemed as vigorous and active as if only twenty years old; not a wrinkle furrowed his brow, not a single gray hair was perceptible in the thick black masses which fell in disorder on his shoulders.

Excepting his gold-laced hat, and his silver-mounted cane, which were the emblems of his rank as cacique or alcade of the aldea, his dress was very simple, and only consisted of worn velvet calzoneras, which but half covered his bare legs, and a gaily coloured zarapé, which was thrown over his shoulders.

Still, in spite of this miserable garb, this man had about him such an air of haughty dignity and innate superiority, that, on seeing him, his ridiculous attire was forgotten, and involuntary respect was felt for him.

This person was, in fact, the chief of the Red Buffaloes, their cacique, to whom the governor of the province had given the title of alcade.

His name was Mah-mih-kou-ing-atl, not a very euphonious name; but, like all Indian titles, it had a meaning, and signified literally "Running Water."

The hacendero and the cacique examined each other for a moment silently, like two duellists, who, before falling on their favourite guard, try to discover their opponent's weak point, and

thus render their attack, if possible, decisive.

It was the first time they stood face to face, and hence the fixedness of their glance had something strange and fatal about it. Still, Don Aníbal's machete, raised against the barricade, fell without striking. The cacique, satisfied with this triumph, turned his head away with a gloomy smile. Each of these men had measured his foe, and found him a worthy one. The spectators, dumb and motionless, anxiously awaited what was about to take place. Don Aníbal was the first to break the silence.

"What is the meaning of this?" he asked, in a voice that betrayed dull passion; "By what right do you obstruct the king's highway?"

"Who are you, first, who question me in so haughty a fashion, and who authorizes you to do so?" the cacique answered drily.

"Who I am?" the Spaniard continued passionately, "Do you not know?"

"Whether I know or not is of no consequence; I wish to learn the fact from you. I am not acquainted with you, and do not wish to have any dispute with you."

"Do you think so, my master?" the hacendero retorted with a mocking smile, "If unfortunately you are mistaken, as you will speedily discover."

"Perhaps so," the Indian replied disdainfully; "but, in the meanwhile, as you have no right to enter my village with soldiers, in my quality of magistrate, I order you to withdraw, rendering you and yours responsible for the consequences of your

disobedience in the event of your refusing to obey my orders."

While Don Aníbal listened to these words, with his arms crossed on his chest, and head thrown back, a smile of imperceptible meaning played around his lips.

"I fancy," he said ironically, "that you attach greater importance to your dignity of alcade than it really possesses, my master; but I have not come here to discuss with you. Will you, yes or no, let me pass?"

"Why do you not try to force a passage?" the cacique said.

"I am going to do so."

"Try it."

Without replying, Don Aníbal turned to the leader of the escort.

"Lieutenant," he said to him, "order your men to fire on that scoundrel."

But the old officer shook his head.

"Hum!" he remarked, "What good would that do us? It would only cause us to be killed like asses. Do you imagine that man to be alone?"

"Then you refuse to obey me?" the hacendero said with concentrated passion.

"¡Canarios! I should think I do refuse. I was ordered to defend you from attack; but not to sacrifice the men I command in satisfying a whim. This individual, the deuce take him! Were he ten times the Indian he is, has the law on his side, ¡Rayo de Dios! You waste your time in arguing with him, instead of coming to

an end at once."

Don Aníbal listened to this remonstrance with ill-restrained impatience. When the lieutenant ceased speaking, he said with ironical deference, as he bowed to him —

"Pray what would you have done in my place, Señor Lieutenant?"

"¡Canarios! I should have acted in a different way. It is evident that we are not the stronger, and that if we attempt to pass as you propose, those red devils will only have to give us a push to send us rolling over the precipice, which, I suppose, would not exactly suit your views."

"Well?" the hacendero interrupted with an impatient gesture.

"One moment, hang it all! Let us act legally since it is necessary. The alcade's cane is at times stronger than the soldier's sword, and to break it you require a stronger cane, that is all. Have you not brought with you a sort of writer or juez de letras, flanked by two alguaciles? The scoundrel must have some sort of authority in his pocket. But what do I know? Well, let the two black birds settle matters between themselves. Believe me, it is the only thing we can do in the present posture of affairs; we will see if these pícaros dare to resist a representative of his majesty, whom may Heaven preserve!"

"¡Viva Dios! you are right, Lieutenant; I perceive that I acted like an ass, and we ought to have begun with that. Give those persons orders to come up, if you please."

The cacique had listened to the conversation, leaning

carelessly on his cane in the trench behind the barricade; but, on hearing the conclusion, which he doubtless had not anticipated, he frowned and looked anxiously behind him.

At a sign from the lieutenant, several soldiers went in search of the juez de letras and his two acolytes. But it was no easy task to bring them to the front: officers of justice have this in common with the crow, that they smell gunpowder a long distance off.

The poor devils, entrenched, as well as they could manage, behind their mules, were trembling all over, while waiting for the action to begin; when they saw the soldiers galloping toward them, they fancied their last hour had arrived, and they began commending their souls to Heaven, while repeating all the prayers they could call to mind, and beating their chests powerfully, as they invoked all the saints of the interminable Spanish calendar.

At the first moment the soldiers were greatly amused at their terror, and laughed heartily at their pale faces and startled glances. On hearing the lancers laugh, the juez de letras, who, apart from his poltroonery, was a clever and sensible man, began reflecting, and suspected that the danger was not so great as he had at first supposed it.

He got up, carefully arranged his attire, and asked the soldiers for news, which they gave him, laughing most heartily the while. The juez then drew himself up in a dignified manner, mounted his mule, and addressed his alguaciles, who were still hidden behind a bend in the path —

"Well, scamps," he said to them, while attempting to reassume an imposing air, as became a magistrate of his importance, "what is the meaning of this? Heaven pardon me, but I believe you are afraid. Is that the way in which you sustain the honour of the gown you wear? Come, come, mount without further delay, and follow me smartly."

The alguaciles, abashed by this sharp reprimand, got on their mules, offering the best excuses they could, and ranged themselves behind their superior officer.

Still the worthy juez de letras was not so reassured as he wished to appear, and we are forced to confess that the nearer he drew to the barricade, the more formidable it seemed to him, and the less at ease did he feel as to the results of the mission he had to carry out.

Still, hesitation was no longer possible, he must bravely go through with the affair; and pluck up a heart. No one is so courageous as a poltroon driven into a corner; fear in him takes the place of bravery, and he becomes the more rash in proportion to his former terror.

The juez de letras gave a proof of this, for instead of halting a reasonable distance from the barricade, he advanced till he could almost touch it. Perhaps, though, this did not result entirely from his own will, for the soldiers had maliciously given the poor mule several vigorous blows with their chicotes, so that it pricked up its ears and dashed madly onward. The fact is, that, whether voluntarily or not, the juez found himself side by side with Don

Aníbal.

The lieutenant's advice was, as he had said, the only mode of putting an end to the cacique's resistance. At the period when this story takes place, the liberal ideas which overturned and regenerated the old world had not yet reached the Spanish colonies, or, if they had reached them, had not penetrated to the lower classes, who, besides, would not have understood them.

The King of Spain, owing to the system adopted by the Peninsular government, was revered, feared, and respected like a god; the lowest of his representatives, the mere flag hoisted over a *conducta de plata*, were sufficient to protect the millions that traversed the entire length of Mexico to be embarked on board the ships; in a word, it would not have occurred to anyone in New Spain that it was possible to rebel against the mother country or disobey the lowest or most insignificant of the officers of the sovereign beyond the seas.

Still, in spite of the knowledge of their power, the Spaniards were slightly alarmed by the coldly resolute attitude of the Indian cacique; the more so, because this man belonged to that haughty Comanche race which preferred to return to the desert sooner than bend beneath the Spanish yoke. It is true that Running Water, on settling on this side the border, had recognized the suzerainty of the King of Spain; but it was so recently that this fact occurred, that there was reason to fear lest the Red Buffaloes, driven to extremities by the countless annoyances they had endured, might be resolved to take an exemplary vengeance

on their enemies, even though that vengeance entailed their utter ruin.

Such instances as this had already occurred several times in the colony. Another reason also heightened the apprehensions of Don Aníbal and his companions; in spite of the secrecy in which his plans were arranged and his rapidity of action, the Indians had been warned of what was being prepared against them, which was superabundantly proved by the measures they had taken to defend themselves against an attack which nothing could have led them to suspect.

The hacendero had, then, been betrayed; but who was the traitor?

At a sign from Don Aníbal, the juez de letras prepared with considerable assurance to exhibit his titles and quality. After securing himself firmly in his saddle the magistrate drew a paper from a portfolio one of the alguaciles handed him, the contents of which he read in a loud, firm voice.

This document was to the effect that the Comanche Indians, called the Red Buffaloes, who had sought shelter on the Spanish territory, and to whom the government of his majesty had deigned to grant asylum and protection, had rendered themselves unworthy this protection by their misdeeds, a long list of which was quoted. The Viceroy of New Spain, listening to the repeated complaints which were made from all sides against them, recognizing them as ungrateful and incorrigible felons, withdrew the hand he had hitherto extended to protect them,

and ordered, in consequence, that they should be compelled by all legal means at once to abandon their place of residence, and repass the border, after their village had been utterly destroyed in their presence. Any disobedience would be punished with death, etc., etc.

This document was listened to in religious silence by the cacique, with downcast head and frowning brow, but without the slightest mark of impatience, anger, or sorrow. When the judge had finished he raised his head, and looked at him like a man awakening from sleep.

"Have you ended?" he asked him in a gentle voice.

"Not yet," the magistrate answered, amazed and emboldened by this mildness, which he had been far from anticipating.

"Do so," he said.

The judge continued:

"Consequently I, Don Ignacio Pavo y Cobardo, juez de letras of the town of Mondovo, by virtue of the powers conceded to me by the most serene Governor of the Intendancy, summon you, alcade of the aldea of the Red Buffaloes, in the name of his Majesty, whom may Heaven preserve, to obey this order at once without any resistance."

Running Water drew himself up, gave the spectators a glance of strange meaning; then, without uttering a word, he took off his hat, which he threw over the precipice, broke his cane across his knee, let the pieces fall at his feet, and said to Don Aníbal —

"You wish for war, be it so! I accept. You can now pass, and

no one will oppose you."

He fell back a step, shouted in a thundering voice, "We shall meet again," and then disappeared.

CHAPTER III.

THE RED BUFFALOES

The startled Mexicans looked at each other with dumb terror; for several minutes after the disappearance of the cacique they remained thus gloomy and hesitating, fearing a trap, and not daring to put faith in the words of an Indian.

At length the hacendero, ashamed of showing the terror he felt, haughtily raised his head, and angrily stamped his foot.

"¡Viva Dios!" he shouted, "Are we timid women to let ourselves be frightened by the threats of a maniac? I will go on, even if I should be murdered."

And before anyone dreamed of preventing him, he forced his way with great difficulty through the branches, machete in hand, and ready to sell his life dearly. But Running Water had told the truth; the passage was free far as eye could extend, and the path was entirely deserted. Don Aníbal rejoined his comrades.

"There is nobody," he said, with an accent of regret. "Aid me to throw these trees over the precipice, and let us continue our journey. Let us make haste though, for, if I am not mistaken, we shall find the resistance which is not offered us here at the village."

The path was soon cleared, and the trees hurled into the barranca, down which they rolled with a sinister noise. They continued their march, and at the end of an hour reached the

plateau on which the village stood. But they found the huts a pile of smoking ashes, while a long line of flame was rapidly running along the side of the hill, and devouring the crops. The Red Buffaloes had not waited for the arrival of the king's people; they had themselves destroyed everything.

The Mexicans only found shapeless ruins; as for the Indians, they had disappeared, and it was impossible to discover in what direction they had fled. The old officer gazed for a moment pensively at this scene of desolation, and then walked up to Don Aníbal.

"Señor de Saldibar," he said to him solemnly, "take care!"

"Take care! I?" he answered haughtily, "Nonsense, Lieutenant, you are jesting."

"I am not jesting," the soldier answered sadly, "I have known the Indians for a long time. They never forgive an insult. For them to consent to consummate their ruin, and unresistingly abandon a spot which must for so many reasons be dear to them, they must be meditating a terrible revenge upon you; so, I repeat, take care."

In spite of his ferocious courage and indomitable pride the hacendero was struck by the tone in which these words were pronounced by a man whose courage could not be doubted; he felt a shudder pass over his limbs and his blood run cold in his veins; for a moment remorse entered his heart, and he regretted having driven to desperation these peaceable men, who only asked for their share of air and sunshine.

But stiffening himself almost immediately against this emotion, of which he had not been master, the haughty Spaniard smiled bitterly, and answered the officer with a look of defiance

"What can such wretches effect against me? It is not I who have to fear; but they will have cause to tremble if ever they cross my path again; but as we have nothing more to do here, let us be off, for it is growing late."

The officer made no answer; he bowed, remounted his horse and ordered the bugles to sound. At the base of the hill the band separated; the escort returned to the fort of Agua Verde, and the hacendero, only followed by his wife and his majordomo, started in the direction of the Hacienda del Barrio. The juez de letras and the two alguaciles, who had not quite recovered from their terror, preferred to follow the soldiers in spite of the offer Don Aníbal made them of receiving them into his house.

The journey was sad, for the hacendero was dissatisfied, though he did not wish to show it. His plans had succeeded, it is true, but not in the way he had intended; hence, his vengeance was not complete.

These people, whom he wanted to drive from their hearths, on whom he wished to inflict chastisement for the insult offered his wife, had destroyed their village with their own hands, and they robbed him thus far of the pleasure of doing it.

Doña Emilia was sorrowful and thoughtful; this hatred, accumulated on her husband's head, which would doubtless fall

on her, though she was innocent, terrified her. She did not dare express her feelings aloud, but she gave full scope to her thoughts, and with the exquisite sensibility, and prophetic intuition which loving women possess, she foresaw a future big with misfortune and gloomy catastrophes.

The majordomo appeared as careless and indifferent on the return as when he went to the village. Still, anyone who could have examined him carefully, and seen the wicked flash of his eye when he took a side-glance at his master, would have suspected that this man was playing a part, that he had taken a greater share in recent events than was supposed, that his indifference was feigned, and that he alone of the three travellers had a glad heart, although his countenance was sorrowful.

Anyone who had had this idea would perhaps not have been completely mistaken, for we must not forget that Señor Sotavento was an Indian, although he appeared a Christian, and almost civilized.

Nothing occurred to interrupt the monotony of the journey, no annoying accident troubled the tranquillity of the travellers, who reached the Hacienda del Barrio a little before sunset, at the moment when night was beginning to hide the valleys in the transparent shadows of dusk, while the tops of the mountains were still tinged with a pinkish light.

The hacienda was a substantial building of hewn stone, such as the first conquerors liked to erect to prove to the conquered that they would never abandon the soil of which fortune had rendered

them masters. This house seemed a fortress, so massive was it; and built on the top of a rather lofty hill upon a rock hanging over the abyss, it could only be reached by a narrow, rugged track cut in the rock, on which two horsemen could not ride abreast. This track wound round the side of the hill and led to the great gate of the hacienda, which was defended by a drawbridge, usually down, but which it would have been an easy task to raise. The walls, which were thirty feet high and of proportionate thickness, were surmounted by those *almenas* or battlements which were a sign of nobility, and which the old Christians, that is to say, the true Castilians, never failed to place above their houses; for the hacenderos must not be confounded with our farmers, for that would be a great error.

The hacenderos of New Spain are great landowners, whose possessions are often more extensive than one of our counties. In the time of the Spaniards, they led the life of feudal lords in the midst of their vassals, acting as they pleased, and only accountable to the Viceroy, who, residing in Mexico, or a great distance off, had something else to do than look after the way in which these feudatories managed their estates. The latter cultivated their land, worked their mines, fattened their flocks, and reared their horses, without anyone dreaming of asking any account of them as to the means they employed to augment their fortunes, or the manner in which they treated the Indians who fell to their share upon the grand division of the Mexican population among the conquistadors.

On this subject we will hazard a parenthesis. Since Mexico has proclaimed her independence, slavery is abolished *de jure* in the country, but still exists *de facto*. In this way: The rich landowners whom the philanthropic law utterly ruined, instead of crying out and complaining as certain slaveholders do in North America, hit on a clever and successful plan.

The hacenderos assembled their slaves and informed them that slavery was abolished, and that consequently they were free, and could go wherever they thought proper. The poor devils were, at the first moment, stunned by the news, and did not at all know what would become of them. In fact, while they were slaves, they lived without having the trouble of thinking. They worked, it is true, but they were fairly fed, clothed after a fashion, and taken care of when ill. Now they were free, they would have to seek the food, clothing, and medicine which they had hitherto ready to hand without the trouble of looking for it. The question was a delicate one, for they had nothing at all.

The hacenderos appeared to take pity on their hapless fate; they were moved with compassion, and told them that, as they would require peons to do the Work the slaves had hitherto done, they would engage them at the rate of three reals a day, but they would have to feed and clothe themselves. "Moreover," the hacenderos added, "to facilitate your getting a start in life, which is rather difficult, we will advance you all you require, and stop it out of your wages. In this way you will be free, and you can leave us whenever you think proper, after paying off the advances we

have made you."

The ex-slaves accepted with transports of joy and became peons. Then it came about that they could never pay off the advances, and as they still wanted food and clothing, the debt increased like the memorable snowball, and the peons were forced to give up all thoughts of leaving their masters, as they had no other than personal security to offer. The result is, that at the present day they are greater slaves than ever.

The only persons who gained by the transaction were the hacenderos. The reason is very simple: it has been calculated that the cost of maintaining a slave is six reals a day, and the peons cost them three. Hence there is a clear profit of one half; moreover, the masters supply the food and clothing, and heaven alone knows what price they charge the peons.

This is the way in which the Indians, who were slaves in the Spanish possessions, have become free, thanks to the declaration of Independence. Is this progress? I do not think so. But to resume our story.

Days, weeks elapsed, and not a word was heard of the Indians; they seemed to have disappeared for ever. By autumn the recollection of the expedition faded away, and then it was utterly forgotten, and nothing was said about the Red Buffaloes or their threat of vengeance, which was regarded as braggadocio.

A year passed away, and we reach the second half of 1808. The political horizon was beginning to grow overcast; in spite of the care the Spanish government took to isolate the colonies,

and prevent European newspapers entering them, the arrival of French troops in Spain was vaguely discussed; minds fermented and attempts at revolt were made in several provinces. Don Aníbal, who at this time was at Leona Vicario, whither he had taken his wife a few months before for her confinement, resolved to leave the town and return to his hacienda.

He was the more eager to carry out this resolution because the Indians of the Presidio de Río Grande, only a few leagues from his estate, had risen in revolt, and after burning the fort and massacring the garrison, had spread over the country like a torrent which had burst its dykes, and were plundering and destroying everything they came across. An atrocious fact was stated in connection with the capture of the Río Grande Fort, which heightened the hacendero's apprehensions, by leading him to suppose that his old enemies, the Red Buffaloes, were connected with this sudden insurrection.

Count Don Rodrigo de Melgosa, commander of the Presidio, and brother of the governor of the Intendancy, was detested by the Indians, whom he treated with the utmost rigour, and it was rumoured that he had several times been guilty of unjustifiable acts of cruelty and barbarity. When, after a desperate resistance, the Indians stormed the fort, they killed Colonel de Melgosa by pouring molten gold into his mouth, saying that, "Since he was so fond of gold they were determined to make him eat it," and the unhappy man died under horrible sufferings.

Then the Indians cut off his head, wrapped it up in a zarapé,

and sent this horrible trophy of their victory to the colonel's wife, who happened to be staying with her father-in-law at Mondovo. At the sight of this scalped and fearfully mutilated head, the unhappy woman all but went mad.

It was in vain that the governor – whose only son, quite a lad at time, was at the time in the fort with the colonel, and had disappeared, carried off by the Indians, or, as was more probable, had been sacrificed to their implacable vengeance – tried by all the means in his power to discover the man who had undertaken to deliver this horrible message; all his researches were fruitless, and the unhappy father, a prey to impotent despair, remained in the most perfect ignorance as to the fate of his child.

Strange to say, the murderers had designed on the victim's forehead a buffalo with their scalping knives. Don Aníbal knew that the buffalo was the totem, or emblem of the Indian tribe which he had so brutally expelled from his domain a year previously, hence his anxiety was great, for it was evident to him that the Red Buffaloes were the authors of the death of the unfortunate Colonel de Melgosa, and of the rape of his nephew.

He completed his preparations in all haste, said good-bye to Doña Emilia, whom, in spite of her entreaties, he would not consent to take with him, and started. Nine days later he reached his hacienda, where bad news was awaiting him; all was in disorder. This was substantially what he learned:

Most of his cattle had been carried off, as well as his manadas of horses; several peons had been killed in trying to prevent the

robbery of his animals; his fields had been fired and his vines uprooted, indeed the destruction was immense; and in order that the hacendero might be thoroughly aware who the culprits were, a long pole was found planted in the middle of a field, from which was suspended a half-tanned elk skin, on which a buffalo was drawn. This time there could be no mistake; it was really the totem of the hacendero's enemies, for the buffalo was red.

The hacendero burst into a frightful passion, and swore to take exemplary vengeance for this insult. He immediately wrote letters to several neighbouring hacenderos exposed like himself to the depredations of the marauders, and sent off couriers in all directions. The hacenderos, who were as desirous as he was to be freed from these demons, whose audacity, heightened by impunity, no longer knew any limits, and threatened, if they were left alone, to ruin the entire province, did not hesitate about joining Don Aníbal de Saldibar, and a veritable manhunt was organized against the redskins.

The Count de Melgosa, burning to avenge his brother's death, and, moreover, hoping to recover his son, placed two squadrons of dragoons at the service of the confederates, whose numbers were thus considerably augmented, and Don Aníbal, who took the command in chief by general acclamation, found himself at the head of a real army.

The hostilities commenced immediately. The confederates divided into three bodies and set out in search of the Indians. The preparations for the expedition had been made with such secrecy,

that the redskins, who were far from suspecting what was going on, were surprised only a few leagues from the Hacienda del Barrio, in a valley on the banks of the Río del Norte, where they had established their camp.

Although suddenly attacked by an enemy superior in strength, the redskins did not the less try to defend themselves, and bravely opposed the white men. The combat was terrible, and lasted a whole day; the Indians fought with that energy of desperation which doubles the strength and equalizes chances; they knew they had no quarter to expect, and hence preferred death to falling alive into the hands of their implacable foes. The massacre was terrible, and nearly all the redskins succumbed; some, but they were a small number, succeeded in escaping by leaping into the Río del Norte. The Mexicans took no prisoners; men, women, and children were pitilessly sacrificed.

After the battle, Sotavento, who had truly done his duty by his master's side, brought him a boy of about five or six years of age, who was crying bitterly, and who had been delivered to him during the massacre by a Canadian wood ranger. He declared that he had not the courage to kill the child, the more so because his pale skin might lead to the supposition that he was the son of a European. The hacendero shook his head angrily at the sight of the boy; still, not daring to prove himself more cruel than his majordomo, he consented to the poor little wretch being spared, and even carried his clemency so far as to allow him to be taken to the hacienda.

This battle ended the campaign. The confederates separated, satisfied with having exterminated their enemies and taken such a prompt revenge for their outrages. The redskins, at least for a lengthened period, would be unable to take their revenge, and the lesson had been perfect.

CHAPTER IV.

THE CASCABEL

The French Revolution not only shook the old European thrones, which it made quiver to their foundations, but the terrible blow it dealt the world was so violent, that the counterstroke was felt even in the indolent and voluptuous Spanish colonies.

In response to the echoing footsteps of those generals of the young French Republic who marched from prodigy to prodigy, improvising soldiers and organizing victory, a lengthened electric current ran along all the coasts of the New World, and revealed to the inhabitants that, like their brethren in North America, they too might someday become free.

Like a deafening thunderclap, leaping across the Atlantic Ocean, the echo of the battles of giants of that Sublime epic power called the Empire, caused the hearts of Americans to beat, and inflamed them with a noble ardour which the Spanish Viceroy's were powerless to extinguish.

The occupation of the Peninsula by French armies, by forcing Spain to defend her own territory, which had almost entirely fallen into the enemy's power, obliged her to concentrate all her strength in order to sustain the extraordinary struggle that was preparing, and compelled her to abandon her possessions beyond the seas to their own resources, while she could only form sterile

vows that they might not slip from her grasp.

The colonies, which had long been worn out by the yoke the mother country implacably made them wear, considered the moment favourable; generous hearts were affected, and in an instant Peru, Mexico, Chili, Buenos Aires formed secret societies, whose common branches, passing through all classes of society, ended by enveloping the colonial governments in an inextricable net.

Then, when all preparations had been made, when the chiefs had been elected, soldiers enrolled, and the headquarters of revolt chosen, a long cry for liberty was raised to heaven on twenty sides simultaneously; the insurgents rose, calling their brethren to arms, and the systematic opposition of the conspirators was all at once followed by an obstinate war without truce or mercy, of the conquered against the conquerors, of the oppressed against the oppressors, whose watchword was Liberty or Death!

A holy war, an extraordinary struggle, in which the Americans, inexperienced, and having no acquaintance with arms, had but one insatiable desire, to shake off the yoke, an energy which no reverse could crush; and an unflinching resolution to oppose the old Spanish bands, hardened by long fighting, and whom the habit of warfare rendered almost invincible in the sight of these men, in whom they inspired a species of instinctive and supernatural terror.

We will not describe here the history of this war, which

was so grand, so noble, and so full of heroic devotion, affecting incidents, and traits of bravery, self-denial, and disinterestedness, worthy the most glorious days of antiquity; our task is more modest, and certainly more easy, for we will limit ourselves to penciling a few private details of this grand drama, which have been neglected by the disdainful muse of history, but which we believe will serve to complete the magnificent tableau of the struggle of progress against barbarism in the first years of the 19th century.

The Mexican revolution had this strange thing about it, that the clergy gave the first signal of revolt. In the provinces the Curas preached insurrection to their parishioners, and seizing a sword in one hand, a cross in the other, led them to the field.

Don Aníbal de Saldibar, although a *cristiano viejo*, that is to say, belonging to a family originally Spanish, and of which not a member had become allied with the Indians during several ages, did not consider himself obliged to join his fellow countrymen, but, on the contrary, attached himself to the insurrectionary movement.

Father Sandoval, chaplain at the Hacienda del Barrio, was to a great extent the cause of this determination. In Mexico, where the towns are far distant from each other, each hacienda has a chapel served by a priest, whose duty it is to baptize, marry, confess, and guide the Indians, but, before all, keep them in order by the fear of future punishment. Father Sandoval, about whom we shall have a good deal to say during the course of this story,

was a simple-hearted, kind, intelligent man, gifted, with great energy of character, and his education had not been so neglected as that of the majority of the priests at this period.

In a word, he was an honest man and true priest before God; the Indians adored him, and would have gone through fire and water for him. Still young, belonging to a rich and respected family, possessing that severe and calm beauty which attracts confidence and excites sympathy, this man who, had he liked, could have attained the highest dignities of the church, preferred this obscure position through his devotion to that persecuted class which Las Casas loved so deeply, and for which he himself felt immense pity.

As friend and fellow student of the Curé Hidalgo, who was destined to become so celebrated, he professed liberal principles and hatred of the Spanish yoke. Don Aníbal, like all weak-minded men, unconsciously yielded to the influence of this chosen vessel, and had for him a friendship mingled with respect and veneration. Protector of the Indians, Father Sandoval defended them under all circumstances, and had often succeeded, by the mere force of his eloquence, in saving them from the severe punishments to which Don Aníbal had condemned them in a moment of passion. He easily proved to the hacendero that it was to his interest to embrace the revolutionary cause. The latter, dissatisfied with the Spanish government, against which he had long been carrying on a lawsuit, raised no serious objections; and as certain natures only require a lash to

make them go faster than is necessary, and pass the goal for which they are started, so soon as Don Aníbal had consented to what Father Sandoval asked of him, he wished to force the latter to place himself by his side at the head of the hacienda peons capable of bearing arms, and proceed to join the Curé Hidalgo, who had just raised the standard of revolt, and was preparing, at the head of his parishioners, armed with bows, arrows, and slings, to face the army of the Viceroy.

As this project was excessively imprudent, the chaplain combated it; but the hacendero, one of whose slightest faults was obstinacy, declared that he must give a pledge to the revolution, and the best way was to range himself beneath the insurrectionist banners. Still, by force of reasoning, supported by the entreaties of Doña Emilia, whom the fear of a separation and the prospect of remaining alone and unprotected at the hacienda with her child, which was scarce fifteen months old, filled with terror, Father Sandoval succeeded in modifying Don Aníbal's resolution, if he did not completely alter it. He made him understand that his hacienda, situated on the Indian border, close to several important presidios, ought to serve as headquarters for the insurgents of this portion of Mexico, who would rally round him and hold the Spanish garrisons in check, so as to prevent them joining the troops General Callega and Count de la Cadena were raising to offer battle to the rebels commanded by Hidalgo, Allende, etc., and who were preceded by the Virgen de Los Remedios, attired as a generalísimo. In a country like

Mexico, where religion is all in all, and at the head of an army most of whose generals and officers were priests and monks, this banner was not inappropriate.

Don Aníbal yielded with great difficulty to Father Sandoval's objections; but, feeling flattered by the part he would be called on to play, he at length consented to follow the advice given him by a man who was wiser and more prudent than himself. The Hacienda del Barrio was therefore converted into a fortress; Don Aníbal incited the Indians to revolt, and organized on this frontier a partizan war against the neighbouring garrisons, after having sent to join Hidalgo a body of two hundred well-armed and mounted horsemen under the orders of his majordomo. We see that Don Aníbal thus frankly threw away the mask and boldly burnt his vessels.

The war soon assumed much larger proportions than had been thought possible. The government had remained attached to the King of Spain, and most of the rich landowners followed this example; so that the insurrection, which was at first formidable, became to some extent isolated, and reduced to act on the defensive. Don Aníbal was too greatly compromised to hope for a pardon, which, indeed, he was not at all inclined to solicit. On the contrary, he suddenly dashed from his eagle's nest on the Spaniards who scoured the country, and though not always the victor, he did them sufficient mischief to prevent them going too far from the presidios or leaving the province. The governor, at length wearied by the incessant attacks of his unseizable foe,

resolved to finish with him, and besiege him in his lurking place.

Don Aníbal, warned by his spies of what was preparing against him, resolved on a vigorous resistance; but as he really loved his wife, and did not wish to expose her to the hazards of a storm, and the sight of those atrocities which are the inevitable consequence of it, he arranged with Father Sandoval that he should remove her from the hacienda as soon as possible, and place her and her child in safety. When these arrangements were made, the two gentlemen proceeded in search of the señora, to tell her of the plan they had formed.

Doña Emilia spent a very dull life at the Hacienda del Barrio. Her husband, who was elsewhere engaged, often left her for days, only seeing her for a moment at meals, and addressing a few unmeaning words to her during the quarter of an hour they were together. Fortunately for the poor lady, the hacienda possessed a magnificent garden. She spent nearly the entire day in it under an arbour of orange and lemon trees, reading pious books and watching her child, who was nursed by a quadroon to whom Doña Emilia was sincerely attached, and had married to a peon of the hacienda.

On the day to which we allude, at about two in the afternoon, the warmest hour of the day, Doña Emilia, according to her wont, was indulging in a siesta in a hammock suspended from two enormous orange trees, whose tufted crests almost entirely overshadowed the entire nook. A few paces from her, Rita, the quadroon, was carelessly rocking in a *butaca*, and giving the

breast to the child.

As we have said, the heat was stifling. The burning sunbeams made the sand on the garden walks sparkle like diamonds; there was not a breath of air; the atmosphere, impregnated with the sweet exhalations of the flowers and fragrant woods, was intoxicating, and conduced to slumber. The birds, hidden under the leaves, had ceased their song, and were waiting till the evening breeze refreshed the soil; a solemn silence brooded over nature, and the fall of a leaf would have been heard, so profound was the calm. Rita, involuntarily yielding to the narcotic influences that surrounded her, had fallen asleep with the child still clinging to her breast.

All at once a strange, terrible, frightful thing occurred – a horrible scene, which we feel a hesitation to describe, although we had the fact from a credible witness.¹ The branches of a dahlia bush were gently and noiselessly parted, and in the space thus left free appeared the hideous and distorted face of Running Water. This man had, at the moment, something fatal and satanic in his physiognomy, which would have filled with terror anyone who saw it. After remaining motionless for an instant, which he employed in looking around, through fear of being surprised, he laughed cunningly in the Indian fashion, and began crawling softly till his entire body had emerged from the bush. Then he rose, carefully repaired the disorder his passage had caused in the

¹ The person to whom we allude is at this moment in Paris, and could, if necessary, confirm our statement.

bush, advanced two paces, placed on the ground a rather large bag he held in his right hand, folded his arms and gazed at Doña Emilia, who was sleeping calmly and peacefully in her hammock, with a strange fixedness, and an expression of hatred and joy impossible to describe.

How had this man contrived to penetrate into the hacienda, which was so strongly guarded, and whose walls were almost insurmountable? Why had he entered alone the garden of a man whom he knew to be his most implacable foe? He doubtless meditated vengeance, but of what nature was it? Running Water, whom the hacendero had strove so hard to injure, and to whom he had done such hurt, was not the man to content himself with ordinary revenge. The redskins have refinements of cruelty and barbarity of which they alone possess the secret. What did he intend doing? What was his object? The Indian chief alone could have answered these questions; for the redskins are well acquainted with the proverb, that "revenge is eaten cold."

I know not what gloomy thoughts agitated this man while he gazed at the sleeping lady, but his countenance altered every second, and seemed to grow more and more ferocious. He made a move as if about to seize the bag on the ground in front of him, but suddenly reflected.

"No," he muttered to himself, "not that; he alone would suffer; the hearts of both of them must bleed. Yes, yes, my first idea is the best."

Then, after taking a parting glance at the lovely, sleeping lady,

he stooped with a terrible smile, picked up the bag, which he placed under his left arm, and went away with a step light and stealthy as that of a tiger preparing to leap on its prey. Still, he only went a few paces. Turning suddenly to his right, he found himself in front of the nurse. The latter was still sleeping, intoxicated by the smell of the flowers which appeared to bend over her, as if to shed sleep more easily upon her. Rita was sleeping like a child, without dreams or fears. Rita was young and lovely; anyone but a ferocious Indian, like the man who gazed at her at this moment, and devoured her with his eyes, would have felt affected by such confiding innocence.

With the upper part of her body indolently thrown back, with her eyes half closed and veiled by her long black lashes, and her rosy lips slightly parted so as to display her pearly teeth, the young quadron with her slightly coppery complexion was delicious. We repeat that anyone but Running Water would have felt subdued and vanquished by the sight of her. Her two hands, folded over the little girl, held her against her bosom, and seemed trying to protect her even in sleep. The infant was neither asleep nor awake. She was in that state of lethargic somnolency which seizes on these frail creatures when they have sucked for a long time. Clinging to the breast, on which she had laid her two small, snow-white hands, the child, with her eyes already closed to sleep, was imbibing a drop of milk at lengthened intervals.

The Indian regarded this group with a tiger's glance, and for some two or three minutes, involuntarily fascinated by this

picture, whose innocence and candour no artist would be able to depict, he stood gloomy and thoughtful, perhaps hesitating in the accomplishment of the infernal work he had meditated so long, and to execute which he had treacherously entered the hacienda. But Satan, conquered for a second, regained his ascendancy in the redskin's heart.

"It is well," he muttered in a hollow voice. "The babe will die. The death of the child kills doubly father and mother."

And he smiled once again that terrible and silent laugh which would have caused anyone who saw it to shudder, and which was habitual to him. He fell back a step, and with a look around him he explored the neighbourhood in its most hidden corners. Assured at length that no one could see him he fell back till he reached the hole in one of the orange trees from which the hammock was hung, and which was exactly opposite the nurse; then he carefully concealed himself behind a tree, and laid his bag on the ground. This bag was of tapir hide, and fastened up with the greatest care.

The Indian stood motionless for a second, then drawing his dagger he did not take the trouble to cut the leather thongs that closed the bag; on the contrary, throwing himself back as if afraid of the consequences of the deed he was about to do, he ripped up the bag its entire length, and at once disappeared behind the trunk of a tree. The body of a cascabel, or rattlesnake; appeared in the gaping orifice of the bag. Indian manners brand as infamous any man who, excepting in Combat, strikes and kills a child at the

breast. Hatred is intelligent, and Running Water had found the means to satisfy his upon the poor little creature without breaking the rules of his tribe. He had gone in search of a snake, which was not difficult to find. He enclosed it in a bag of tapir hide so that it could not escape, and kept it for several days without food so as to restore to the animal, which he had surprised while digesting a gorge, all its original ferocity. When the redskin supposed that the snake was in proper condition, he entered the garden as we have seen.

The snake, suddenly liberated from the dark and narrow prison in which it had been so long confined, began unrolling on the ground its monstrous coils. At first half asleep and dazed by the bright light of day it remained for a moment in a state of stupor, balancing itself to the right and left hesitatingly on its enormous tail, throwing its head back and opening its hideous mouth till it displayed its awful fangs. But gradually its eye grew brighter, and breathing a strangled hiss it rushed with undulating bounds towards poor Rita.

The Indian, with his body bent forward, heaving chest, and eyes enormously dilated, looked after it eagerly; at length he held his vengeance in his grasp, and no human power could take it from him. But a strange thing happened, which filled the Indian himself with horror. Upon reaching the nurse the snake, after a moment's hesitation, gave a soft melodious hiss, apparently indicating pleasure; and rising on its tail with a movement full of grace and suppleness, enwrithed the nurse's body in its huge

folds, gently pushed the sleeping babe aside without doing it the slightest injury, and seizing the nipple the little creature had let go, glued its hideous mouth to it.

Running Water uttered a cry of rage, and stamped his foot in desperation. He had forgotten the frenzied passion snakes have for milk, especially that of women. This time again the Indian's calculations were thrown out, and his vengeance slipped from him. What should he do? To try and tear the snake from the prey it had seized would be incurring certain death; and then, fascinated by the horrible spectacle he had before him, the redskin felt incapable of collecting his ideas. He looked on, suffering from a frightful nightmare, and awaiting with the most lively anxiety the conclusion of this frightful scene. Rita still slept on, and the child even had not noticed its changed position, so gentle and measured had the snake's movements been, and was still slumbering. The cascabel, however, drank with such ardour the quadron's milk that the blood poured down her breast, and she was aroused by the pain from her deep sleep. She opened her eyes, and perceived the horrible animal.

Rita endured a second of indescribable agony and despair, for she felt that she was hopelessly lost. Then, wondrous to relate, this half-sleeping woman, seeing herself through a mist of blood in the power of the monster, suddenly formed an heroic resolution. She recognized with remarkable lucidity her fearful situation, and completely forgetting herself had but one thought, that of

saving the child.² A woman is a mother before all. God has placed in her heart a flame Which nothing can extinguish.

With her features distorted by terror, her temples inundated with cold perspiration, and her hair standing on end, she had the immense courage not to tremble or stir, and held back in her parched throat the cry of horror ready to burst from it: in a word, she remained in the same position as if she were still asleep.

The Indian himself, struck with admiration at this sublime emotion, felt his iron heart melt, and he almost regretted being the cause of this fearful catastrophe. The snake still enjoyed its horrible repast, and gorged itself with the milk mingled with blood which it drew from the breast of its hapless victim. At length its coils relaxed, its eye gradually lost its fascinating lustre, and with an almost insensible undulation it left the prey to which it was clinging. Completely gorged with milk, it rolled off to the ground, and crawled away in the direction of the shrubs. The mulatto then seized the child in her clenched hands, sat up straight as a statue, and uttered a fearful cry.

"Mother, mother!" she said with a sob that lacerated her throat, "Take your child."

Doña Emilia, aroused by this cry, bounded like a lioness from her hammock, and seized her babe. Rita then fell back, with her breast bleeding, and her features distorted by pain, and writhed in frightful convulsions. Doña Emilia leant over her.

"What is the matter, in Heaven's name?" she asked her in

² However incredible this fact may appear, we repeat that it is strictly true.

horror.

"The snake, see the snake, mother!" the quadroon exclaimed, as she raised herself with a last, effort and pointed to the reptile which was quietly gliding along the sand; then she uttered a fearful groan, and fell back – dead. Don Aníbal and the priest, attracted by the cries, rushed into the arbour, and at once comprehended the frightful accident which must have occurred. The hacendero ran up to his wife, while Father Sandoval bravely attacked the snake and killed it. The Indian chief had disappeared with the bound of a wild beast, after exchanging with Doña Emilia a glance of awful purport.

The lady, with calm brow and a smile on her lip, nursed her babe, which was now awake, while singing one of those touching American tunes with which these innocent creatures are lulled to sleep. She was mad!

Don Aníbal, crushed by this terrible catastrophe, tottered for a moment like a drunken man, then raising his hands to his face with a cry of despair, he fell unconscious on the ground. His rebellious nature had at last been vanquished by grief.

"It is the finger of God!" the priest murmured, as he raised his tear-laden eyes to heaven.

And kneeling by the body of the poor quadroon he prayed fervently. Doña Emilia was still singing and lulling her child to sleep.

Two days later the hacienda was invested by the Spaniards. Don Aníbal defended himself for a long time with heroic

courage, but the Spaniards at last stormed the fortress, and made a horrible massacre of its defenders. Don Aníbal, bearing his wife across his horse's neck, and the priest carrying in his arms the baby and the boy saved a short time previously upon the defeat of the Indians, succeeded in escaping, through the courage of some twenty peons who resolutely collected round them and made a rampart of their bodies.

Hotly pursued by the *tamarindos*, the fugitives wandered for a long time haphazard in the forests, tracked like wild beasts by their implacable victors; but at last, after extraordinary privations and innumerable dangers, they succeeded in reaching Santa Rosa, where the miners offered them a shelter. The revolt having thus been drowned in blood in this province by the Spaniards, they had a lengthened breathing time; for the patriots were dead or so utterly demoralized that a fresh insurrection need not be apprehended.

END OF THE PROLOGUE

CHAPTER I.

THE ADVENTURERS

The daring revolt of the Curé Hidalgo opened against the Spanish government that era of sanguinary struggles and obstinate contests which, thirteen years later, on February 24, 1821 was fated to end in the proclamation of Independence by Iturbide at Iguala. This proclamation compelled the Viceroy, Apodaca, to abdicate, and the Spaniards finally to abandon these magnificent countries which they had ruled with a hand of iron for more than three centuries. But during these thirteen years what blood had been shed, what crimes committed! All Mexico was covered with ruins. The unburied corpses became the prey of wild beasts; towns taken by storm burned like lighthouses, and the flames were extinguished in the blood of their massacred inhabitants.

The Mexicans, badly armed and disciplined, learning through their very defeats the art of beating their conquerors, struggled with the energy of despair; incessantly defeated by the old Spanish bands, but never discouraged, deriving strength from their weakness and their firm desire to be free, they ever stood upright before their implacable foes, who might kill them, but were powerless to subjugate them.

In no country of the New World did the Spaniards offer so

long and desperate a resistance to revolution as in Mexico, for Spain was aware that once this inexhaustible source of wealth was lost, her influence and prestige in the Old World would be utterly destroyed. Hence it happened that the Spaniards quitted Mexico as they entered it, on ruins and piles of corpses. And their power, inaugurated by Hernando Cortés by the light of arson, and amid the cries of the victims, slipped in the blood of millions of murdered Indians, and was stifled by their bodies. It was a hideous government, the offspring of violence and treachery, and, after three centuries, violence and treachery overthrew it. It was a grand and sublime lesson which Providence gave the despots through the inflexible logic of history, and yet despots have ever refused to understand it.

We shall resume our narrative on September 20, 1820, between five and six in the afternoon, at a period when the struggle having been at length equalized between the two parties, was growing more lively and decisive. The scene is still laid in the same part of the viceroyalty of New Spain in which the prologue was enacted, that is to say, the Province of Coahuila; owing to its remoteness from the centre, and its situation on the Indian border, this province had suffered less than the others, though the traces of war could be seen at each step.

The rich and numerous haciendas which formerly studded the landscape were nearly all devastated, the fields were uncultivated and deserted, and the country offered an aspect of gloomy desolation painful to contemplate. The revolution, violently

compressed by the Spaniards, was smouldering beneath the ashes; a hollow fermentation was visible on the surface, and the Indian guerillas who had not ceased their partizan warfare, were beginning to combine and organize, in order to deal the Castilian colossus a decisive blow. The insurrection of the Spanish liberals, by creating fresh embarrassments for the mother country, restored Mexico, not its courage, for that had never faltered during the long struggle, but the hope of success; on both sides preparations were being made in the dark, and the explosion could not long be delayed.

Five or six well-mounted and armed horsemen were following a narrow track marked on the side of a hill in that wild and mountainous country which separates the Fort of Agua Verde, of which the Spaniards were still masters, from the little town of Nueva Bilbao. Of these six travellers, five appeared to be peons, or servants, while the sixth was a man of some forty years of age, of lofty stature and haughty demeanour, who kept, as far as the road allowed, by the side of his servants, and talked to them in a low voice, while looking at times at the gloomy scenery that surrounded him, and which the encroaching gloom rendered even more ominous.

All these men advanced rifle on hip, and ready to fire at the slightest suspicious movement in the chaparral, which they attentively investigated. This distrust was justified by the state in which this wild country found itself, for the revolutionary opinions had made more progress here than anywhere else.

The travellers had reached the highest point of the track they were following, and were preparing to descend into the plain, but they involuntarily stopped for a moment to admire the magnificent landscape and grand panorama which were suddenly unrolled before their sight. From the lofty spot which the travellers had reached, they embraced a considerable extent of the loveliest country in the world, rendered even more picturesque by the numerous diversities of the ground; an uninterrupted series of small hills rising one above the other, and covered with luxuriant verdure, were blended in the distant azure of the horizon, with the lofty mountains of which they formed the spurs, and supplied a splendid frame for the magnificent picture. An extensive lake, studded with small plots resembling bouquets, occupied nearly the entire centre of the plain to which the travellers were preparing to descend.

A deep calm brooded over the landscape, which the first gleams of dusk were beginning to tinge with varying hues. Nothing enlivened this deserted country, and the travellers were on the point of starting again, when one of the servants turned to his master, and pointed in the direction of a track that ran along the bank of the lake.

"Stay, mi amo," he said, "I know not if I am mistaken, but I fancy I can see down there, near that cactus clump, something resembling human forms. Unluckily, the gloom gathering in the valley prevents me being certain."

The master looked attentively for some minutes in the

indicated direction, and then shook his head several times, as if annoyed.

"You are right, Viscachu," he said; "they are men, and I can distinguish their horses tied up a few yards from them; who can they be?"

"Travellers, like ourselves," remarked the peon, whom his master had called Viscachu.

"Hum!" the horseman said dubiously, "People do not travel in such times as these, unless they have very important motives. Those two persons, for there are two, as I can distinguish them perfectly now, are more probably spies sent to meet us, and find out the reason of our presence in these parts."

"With all the respect I owe you, mi amo," Viscachu, who seemed to be on rather familiar terms with his master, objected, "that does not seem very likely; if these strangers were spies, they would not expose themselves so, but, on the contrary, would be careful to keep out of sight. And then, again, they would not be ahead of us, but behind us."

"You are right, Viscachu; I did not reflect on all that; but we are compelled to display such prudence, that I yielded involuntarily to my first impulse."

"And it is often the right one," the peon observed, with a smile; "but this time I believe the proverb is false, and that these persons are simply travellers, whom business of some nature has brought across our path. However, it is an easy matter to make sure; there are only two of them, while we are six, well armed and resolute

men. Let us push on boldly towards them, because it is probable that they have already perceived us, and our hesitation, which has no apparent cause, may seem to them suspicious."

"Yes, we have stopped here too long as it is, so let us continue our journey. Well, if they are enemies, they will have their work cut out, that's all. Hang such foolish terror! We can face a larger party than the one at present in front of us."

"Excellent, Don Aurelio, that is what I call talking," the peon said gaily; "so let us start without further delay."

Don Aurelio bent down to his servant, after looking round him anxiously —

"Be prudent!" he said, in a low voice.

"That is true," the peon replied, with a slight smile. "I let myself be carried away involuntarily; but do not be alarmed, I will be more careful in future."

Then, at a signal from the leader, the little party began descending the hill, though not till the peons had assured themselves that their muskets were in good state, and ready to do service if it came to a fight. The path followed by the Mexicans, like all those found on the side of a hill or mountain, formed a countless succession of turns, so that, although from the height, where they halted for a moment, it was easy for them to notice the strangers almost beneath them, owing to the constant turnings they were obliged to take they required a lengthened period to reach them, the more because the constantly increasing gloom compelled them to redouble their precautions in order to

prevent their horses stumbling over pebbles, and rolling into the quebradas past which the track ran.

In the desert, man, being obliged to keep constantly on guard against the invisible enemies who incessantly watch him, grows accustomed not only to watch the bushes, grass, and rocks that surround him, but also to examine the air, water, and sky, as if he expected a foe to rise before him at any moment. The result is, that the physical qualities of the individual who is habituated to the normal life of the savannahs, acquire such perfection, that, by a species of a prophetic intuition, the wood rangers, who are so praised, and of whom so little is generally known, foresee the dangers that threaten them even before those dangers have become realized.

The strangers, perceived from the top of the hill by the Mexicans, had guessed the presence of the latter before they appeared, and their eyes had been eagerly fixed on the crest of the hill some moments before the newcomers crowned it. These two men had set up their night bivouac near a clump of cactuses, and they quietly continued to prepare their supper, apparently troubling themselves very little about the approaching travellers. Still, anyone able to examine them closely would have perceived that they had made all preparations for an obstinate defence, in the event of an attack. Hence their rifles lay ready cocked within arm's length, and their horses were still saddled and bridled, so that they could be mounted immediately, should it prove necessary.

As for these two men – whose portraits we shall draw, as they play a very important part in our story – although they were in no way related, they bore an extraordinary likeness to each other, not so much in features, but in general appearance, that is to say, both were tall, thin, and powerfully built; they were light haired and had blue eyes, in a word, they displayed all the characteristic traits of the northern race, – we mean the true Norman, and not the Anglo-Saxon.

In truth, these men were Canadians. At the period of which we are writing, the United States of America had not attained that degree of factitious strength and daring confidence they eventually reached. The King of Spain reigned as lord and master of the colonies as much as of the Peninsula. No Anglo-American had up to this time dared to leap across the frontier and hunt in New Spain. The laws were strict and rigorously carried out; any foreigner surprised inside the frontier was regarded as a spy, and treated as such, that is to say, mercilessly shot. Several examples having been made, the Americans took the hint, and did not attempt to force their way in.

But times had changed; the Mexican insurrection, by rendering the inhabitants interested accomplices in infractions of the Spanish laws, favoured this immigration, the more so because the Mexicans, who had been kept by the Spaniards in utter ignorance of the use of firearms and of military discipline, wanted to obtain men capable of leading and teaching them how to conquer their oppressors. Hence the North Americans, who

had hitherto been held in check by the severity of the Castilian laws, began to inundate the territory of New Spain from all sides.

The two men to whom we refer at this moment were hardy comrades, real wood rangers, who, reaching the Mexican border while hunting buffalo and deer, crossed it in the hope of picking up an honest fortune in a short time by fishing in the troubled waters of revolution. We must do them the justice of saying that, in their hearts, they cared but little for either of the parties quarrelling in Mexico, and were probably ready to sell their assistance to the one which offered the highest price and the most tangible hopes of a speedy fortune. Still they were good fellows, bold and experienced, caring as little for their life as for a leaf that fell from a tree, and resolved to risk it on a throw of the dice, if it offered them the hope of advantageous gain.

The first of these two men was called Oliver Clary.

The redskins among whom he had resided for a long time had christened him the Sumach, in consequence of his extraordinary strength and boldness; while his comrade had forgotten the name he originally bore, and only answered to that of Moonshine. These strange and significant names will save us the trouble of dwelling on the character of their bearers, the more so as the reader will be able to appreciate it in the course of the story.

Carelessly reclining on the grass by the side of the fire lit to cook their supper, they watched with one eye the leg of venison which, with some batatas, was to constitute their meal, and with the other attentively followed the march of the Mexicans. The

latter, so soon as they left the track and entered the plain, affected a certain military air, which did not fail to appear formidable to the Canadians, the more so as the newcomers were well armed, and moreover seemed resolute and difficult to intimidate. The hunters waited till they came nearly within pistol shot, then rose cautiously, and placed themselves with shouldered rifles in the middle of the road.

Don Aurelio ordered his men to halt, while recommending them in a low voice to keep on their guard for fear of treachery, and ready to come to his assistance. Then, giving his horse a slight touch of the spur, he proceeded a few yards nearer the hunters, who still remained motionless in the middle of the road. Stopping his horse with one hand, with the other he raised his hat, while crying in a clear and well modulated voice, "Who goes there?"

"Men of peace," Moonshine answered in excellent Spanish, though it was easy to recognize the foreigner from his accent.

"Which side do you belong to?" Don Aurelio continued.

Moonshine looked cunningly at his comrade.

"It is easy to ask, caballero," he said, "on which side we are. Tell us first which side you are; we are only two against six, and the stronger party ought to give the first explanation."

"Very good," Don Aurelio replied, "we are for God and independence; and you?"

The two Canadians exchanged a second look as ironical as the first.

"By Jove, señor," Moonshine said presently, as he rested the

butt of his rifle on the ground, and crossed his hands confidently over the muzzle, "you ask us a question which we find it rather difficult to answer. My comrade and I are strangers, as you may easily recognize by our accent, and hence have no settled opinion upon the subject which divides your country. On the other hand, you can perceive from our garb that we are wood rangers, that is to say, men with whom liberty is a worship, almost an adoration; so that if we must have an opinion, we should rather be on the side of independence than of royalty."

"And why do you not decide for one or the other?" said the horseman, who had drawn nearer, though the Canadian did not appear alarmed by the fact.

"For the reason I had the honour of giving you a moment ago," Moonshine continued; "we are foreigners, that is to say, entirely disinterested in the question; and in case we decided to join either side, it would be the one which offered us the greatest advantages."

"Excellently argued, and like true Yankees," Don Aurelio remarked with a laugh.

"Pardon me, señor," Moonshine objected seriously, "do not make any mistake; my friend and I are not Yankees, but Canadians, which, I must beg you to believe, is by no means the same thing."

"Forgive me, señor," Don Aurelio said civilly, "I did not at all intend to insult you."

The hunter bowed, and the Mexican continued —

"My name is Don Aurelio Gutiérrez; it is late, and the spot where we now are is by no means suited for a serious conversation; if you will consent to accompany me to a hacienda about three leagues from here, I will guarantee to modify your opinions, and bring you over to my way of thinking."

"I do not say no, Señor Gutiérrez; but I will propose something better. I suppose you are not in such a hurry that you could not delay your arrival at the hacienda to which you allude for a few hours?"

Don Aurelio exchanged a look with Viscachu, who, during this conversation, had drawn nearer, and was now standing by his side.

"No," he at last answered; "so long as I reach the place I am going to by tomorrow morning, that will do."

"Well," the hunter continued, courteously, "as you remarked yourself, the night is dark; accept the hospitality we offer you, and bivouac with us; the supper is ready and we will eat together: a night in the open air need have no terrors for you; we will sleep side by side, and tomorrow when the sun appears on the horizon, my comrade and I will accompany you wherever you please. What do you say to that?"

Don Aurelio exchanged a second look with Viscachu, who gave him a sign of assent by nodding his head several times.

"On my honour," he replied with a laugh, as he held out his hand to the hunter, "your proposition is too hearty for me to decline it. Done with you then, on one condition, however, that

my people add a few provisions they carry with them to our meal."

"You can add what you please; we will pass the night as good comrades; tomorrow it will be day, and we will see what is to be done. Of course it is understood that if your proposals do not suit us, we are at liberty to decline them."

"Oh, of course."

Don Aurelio ordered his men to come up, himself dismounted, and five minutes later, all our party, merrily seated round the fire, were doing justice to the hunters' meal, which was considerably augmented through the provisions brought by Don Aurelio, and rendered almost sumptuous by a goat skin filled with excellent *refino de Cataluña*, a sort of very strong spirit, which put the guests in a thorough good humour.

CHAPTER II.

A NIGHT IN THE WOODS

American forests, when night sets in, assume a character of grandeur and majesty, of which our European forests cannot supply an idea. The aged trees, which grow more than one hundred feet in height, and whose tufted crests form splendid arches of foliage, the lianas which spread in every direction with the strangest parabolas, the moss, called Spaniard's beard, which hangs in long festoons from all the branches, impart to these vast solitudes an aspect at once grand and mysterious, which leads the mind to reverie and fills it with religious and melancholy thoughts.

When the sun has disappeared and made way for darkness, when the night breeze murmurs in the foliage, and the hollow sound of some unknown rivulet coursing over the gravel, is blended with the myriad indistinct noises of the insects hidden in the crevices of the trees and rocks; when the wild beasts, awaking at nightfall, leave their secret dens to proceed to their watering places, uttering at intervals hoarse yells – the forests in the pale moonbeams, which filter timidly through the branches, really become to the man who ventures into them the grand laboratory in which nature likes to assay in gloom and mystery the most powerful and strangest of her productions.

There are accumulated, beneath the detritus piled up by centuries, the shapeless and yet imposing ruins of generations which have disappeared and left no sign; remnants of walls, pyramids, and obelisks rise at times before the startled eyes of the Indian or the hunter, as if to reveal to them that in times perhaps contemporary with the deluge, a powerful nation, now utterly effaced from the world, existed at this spot. Those who obstinately call America the New World, and deny the existence of the ruins with which this fertile soil is broadcast, have traversed this country like blind men, and have neither visited the splendid ruins of the Palenques, nor those which may be found at every step in the desert, by means of which some travellers have succeeded in settling the route followed by the migrations of the peoples that succeeded each other. The province of Coahuila in Mexico possesses several of these remains of great antiquity, which recall by their shape, and the way in which they are constructed, the *dolmens* and *menhirs* of old America.

The travellers had established their camp in a vast clearing, in the centre of which was a gigantic monolith obelisk, so singularly placed on a block of stone that the slightest touch sufficed to give it a marked oscillating movement. This spot had a singular name, whose origin no one could have accounted for; the people of the country called it *Coatetl*, that is to say the home of the snake. This name, by the way, is found very frequently in Mexico, whose aborigines had a great respect for the snake, in consequence of

their first legislator Quetzaltcoatl, that is to say, the "serpent covered with feathers."

The clearing, which Indians and peons avoided with a respect mingled with terror, was said to be haunted. An ancient tradition, greatly in favour with the people, declared that at certain periods of the year, at the new moon, and when any great event was about to be accomplished, the stone, raised at its base by some mysterious power, afforded passage to a monstrous snake, which, after sitting up there on its tail with an angry hiss, suddenly assumed the appearance and form of a female, dressed in a white winding sheet, who walked round the clearing till daylight, uttering shrieks and writhing her arms with all the marks of the most profound despair; then, as the moon became more deep on the horizon, the apparition gradually became less distinct, and entirely disappeared at daybreak. The stone then resumed its place, and all returned to its natural state. At times, but very rarely, the apparition spoke; but woe to the man whose ear the words reached; he would certainly die within the year, and his end was almost always miserable.

Probably the travellers bivouacked at this moment in the clearing were ignorant of this legend, or, if acquainted with it, their education or their strength of character protected them from such vulgar belief. Had it not been so, they would not have ventured to spend the night at a spot of such suspicious reputation. However this may be, the travellers whom chance had so singularly brought together did honour to the improvised

repast, like men who, little accustomed to good dinners, recognized all their merits. When they had finished eating they turned their backs to the fire, so that the flames might not prevent their watching the neighbourhood, and lighting their pipes and cigarettes began smoking the Indian *moriche*, the only tobacco they had at their service at the moment. There was a lengthened silence, during which the guests enjoyed their smoke, and Don Aurelio was the first whose cigarette was consumed. As he rolled another he said to the two wood rangers —

"You are foreigners, I think you said?"

The Canadians nodded an affirmative, probably not considering that any other answer was required.

"And have not been long in Mexico?" Don Aurelio continued.

"No," the Sumach answered, laconically.

"Ah!" the Mexican continued, not allowing himself to be discouraged by the uninviting way in which the hunters answered him. "Ours is a famous country at present for brave men; it is easy to make a fortune without much outlay."

"Well," Moonshine answered with a crafty look, "not quite so easy as you fancy. Here is my comrade, who is certainly a plucky fellow, and who perhaps knows his trade better than most people, and yet he has not found anything to suit him."

"He probably applied to persons who did not understand him."

"Perhaps so, perhaps not," the Sumach said, shaking his head doubtfully; "or perhaps I asked too high a price."

"What! Too high a price?" Don Aurelio exclaimed; "I do not

understand."

"What use is it wasting time in explaining it to you, as it is not likely we shall have a deal together?"

"Who knows? Tell me, at any rate. We are going to a meeting of very rich caballeros, and expect to join them in the morning. Let me know your demands, which I will lay before them; and if they are not too high, they may probably deal with you."

"Nonsense, why tell them to you?" the adventurer continued carelessly. "It will be time enough tomorrow for us to have an explanation with the gentlemen to whom you refer."

"As you please, I have no wish to force myself on your confidence."

"I intend to do so; but listen to me. Give me your word of honour that if we do not come to terms I shall be at liberty to go wherever I please, without any fear for my safety or my life."

"I pledge you my word of honour," Don Aurelio said quickly; "you can trust to me."

"I do so with the more confidence," the adventurer remarked with a laugh; "because if a hair of my head fell, it would cost you much more dearly than you imagine."

"What do you mean?"

"Enough that I know it," the Sumach said with a crafty smile; "we have no need to enter into further details."

"Why play fast and loose with this caballero?" Moonshine observed; "His intentions are good. I see no harm in your being frank with him."

"Nonsense," the adventurer said, with a shrug of his shoulders. "Let me alone, Moonshine; least said is soonest mended. In that way, we shall see if we can have confidence in the word of a Spaniard."

"Of a Mexican you mean," Don Aurelio interrupted him with some vivacity.

"Well, a Mexican; it is of little consequence, though the difference appears to me very slight."

"That is possible, but to me it is enormous."

"As you please," the adventurer answered carelessly. "I have not the slightest wish to argue with you – the more so, that you must know more about the matter than I do."

"In one word," Don Aurelio continued, "do you accept the proposition I made you to accompany me tomorrow to the hacienda, where the leaders of the revolutionary party are going to assemble, and may I rely on your word?"

"Yes, if I may rely on yours."

"I gave it to you. Here is my hand, you can take it without fear; it is that of a man of honour, and a friend."

The two Canadians cordially pressed the hand so frankly offered.

"That is settled," Moonshine said, as he shook the ashes of his pipe out on his thumb nail, and then passed the stem through his belt. "Now that is all arranged between us, if you will take my advice we will have a sleep. The night is getting on, and we must be mounted by sunrise."

No one opposed this proposition, which, on the contrary, was unanimously accepted; for all of them being fatigued with riding for the whole day along impracticable roads, had great need of rest. Each wrapped himself carefully up in his zarapé, and lay down on the grass with his feet to the fire. Moonshine threw a few handfuls of dry wood into the flames, and resting his back against the base of the obelisk, placed his rifle between his legs, and prepared to guard the slumbers of his companions.

Don Aurelio had to oppose this, asserting that it was his duty to keep the first guard; but the Canadian insisted so strongly that the Mexican at length gave way, on the express condition of taking his place so soon as he felt sleep weighing his eyelids down. Moonshine, therefore, was soon the only person awake in the camp.

The night was calm and sultry; the atmosphere impregnated by the fragrant emanations from the ground, and refreshed by a wayward breeze which sported through the branches, and made them gently rustle, formed a light haze through which the white moonbeams capriciously filtered. The will-o'-the-wisps danced over the points of the grass, and a dull, continuous murmur which resembled the breathing of nature, and seemed to have no apparent cause, was mingled with the indistinct sounds of the solitude. The dark blue sky, studded with a profusion of dazzling stars, spread out like a diamond dome over this grand scenery, to which it imparted a fairylike aspect.

The hunter, leaning against the base of the obelisk, with his

arms crossed on the barrel of his rifle which was resting between his legs, yielded to the pleasure which this splendid night caused him. With his eyes half closed, and assailed by a sleepiness which he only combated with difficulty, his ideas were beginning to lose their lucidity, his brain was growing confused, and the moment was at hand when sleep would definitely close his eyelids, which he could only succeed in keeping open by long and painful efforts.

How long he was plunged in this reverie, which has no name in any language, but which causes an infinite pleasure, he could not have said. All was confused before his half-closed eyes, and he could only perceive surrounding objects through a prism which transformed the landscape. Suddenly the hoarse croak of the owl was repeated several times with a force which made the hunter give a mighty start. He opened his eyes, shook off the lethargy that weighed upon him, and looked anxiously around him. All at once he started, rubbed his eyes as if to expel the last remains of sleep, and with a movement swift as thought, raised his rifle.

"Who goes there?" he shouted in a sharp though slightly trembling voice, owing to the inward emotion that agitated him.

The cry aroused the travellers from their sleep; they started up sharply and laid their hands on their weapons; but they let them fall again and remained motionless, with pallid cheeks and eyes fixed and dilated by terror. At fifty paces from them, on the skirt of the clearing, and fantastically illumined by a moonbeam which threw its light full upon her, stood straight and upright the

vague form of a woman, whose proportions appeared gigantic to the terrified travellers. Garments of a dazzling whiteness fell in folds round this undefinable being, who held in her right hand a long sword whose flashing blade emitted sinister reflections. Her beautiful and regular face was of a cadaverous hue, which formed a contrast with the raven hue of her hair, which fell in disorder on her shoulders, and descended lower than her girdle, which was a golden circlet two burning eyes lit up this face and gave it an expression rendered even more sinister by the heart-rending and despairing smile which slightly parted her lips.

This strange apparition, whether man, woman, or demon, fixed on the startled travellers a look in which sorrow and wrath were mingled. These brave men, whom no human peril could have terrified, underwent a moment of supreme hesitation – they were afraid!

The very horses, as if they understood what was going on, and instinctively shared the fear which overpowered their masters, left off eating their food. With ears laid back, legs apart, and head stretched out in the direction of this terrible apparition, they neighed and snorted violently. Moonshine, at length ashamed of the feeling of fear he experienced, moved forward a step and boldly cocked his rifle.

"Who goes there?" he shouted for the second time, in a voice rendered firmer by the assurance of being supported by his comrades, although the latter, growing more and more alarmed, did not appear at all disposed to help him. "Who's there? Speak,

or, by Heaven, whether you are an angel or demon, I will lodge a bullet in your head, and I warn you that I never miss my mark."

Fear makes men talkers; the hunter only made so long a speech through the terror with which the incomprehensible being he was addressing inspired him, and whom his threats did not at all appear to disturb. The apparition stretched out its left arm to the hunter, and said in a loud though melodious voice —

"What use is it to threaten what you cannot perform? Have you such a stock of ammunition that you are not afraid of wasting it?"

By an instinctive movement, which was independent of his will, the Canadian lowered his weapon, and let the butt sink to the earth again.

"What are you doing here?" the fantastic being continued. "You are sleeping like brute beasts, when you ought to be galloping. Your enemies are on the watch to surprise you; if you remain any longer here, on reaching the meeting place tomorrow you will only find the corpses of your friends lying all bloody on the ruins of the hacienda, where they are expecting you. You have not a moment to lose: to horse! To horse! And you," she added, turning to the two Canadians, "do you follow them; and, as you say that you are flying from despotism and seeking liberty, fight for it!"

"Who are you? What faith can we place in your words?" asked Don Aurelio, who had overcome his first terror.

"What matter who I am," the apparition replied, forcibly, "if the advice I give you be good. I come, maybe from heaven,

maybe from hell, who can say?" she added with a sarcastic laugh. "Perhaps, I am the spirit of this clearing. Obey the order I give you; then, when the task you have undertaken is accomplished, you may try to find me out, if you are still curious."

"¡Viva Dios! I will not be fobbed in this way!" the Mexican shouted. "I will know what this means, and who is the being that thus counsels me."

And before his comrades could oppose the execution of the plan he had formed, he rushed forward impetuously, with a pistol in each hand.

"Madman!" the apparition continued, "For wasting your time in trying to pursue a chimera, when an imperious duty summons you. Catch me if you can."

"Aye, if I perish," Don Aurelio shouted. But at the same instant his feet were entangled in a liana, which he had not noticed in his hurry, and he rolled full length on the ground, and both his pistols, whether accidentally or purposely, were discharged in his fall. The Mexican rose again with a savage imprecation, but the phantom had disappeared.

"Malediction!" he shouted, as he looked searchingly around him.

A long laugh responded to him, and then a voice, momentarily growing weaker, said three distinct times —

"To horse, to horse, to horse!"

The travellers were startled; all had been witness of this strange apparition, which had suddenly disappeared as if the

earth had swallowed it up, and there was no chance of guessing whither it had gone; hence all these brave men trembled like leaves agitated by the wind, and exchanged silent glances of terror, without daring to make a movement.

CHAPTER III.

THE SUCCOUR

The emotion caused by the strange apparition we described in the last chapter was gradually dissipated; minds regained their equilibrium, and ere long the travellers, reassured by each other's presence, laughed and jested at the terror they had felt. Two of them, however, more obstinate, or more affected than the rest, wished to detect the meaning of this extraordinary adventure, and, as if by common accord, though they did not communicate to each other the result of their reflections, they fetched their horses, mounted, and rushed into the forest from two opposite points. These two men were Don Aurelio Gutiérrez and the Canadian adventurer, known as the Sumach.

Their absence was long, and their comrades impatiently awaited their return for several hours. At length they reappeared, each coming in a direction opposed to that in which he had set out. For a radius of four leagues round the clearing, they had explored the forest, clump by clump, bush by bush, but in vain; their researches had obtained no result; they had discovered no trace, and found no sign which might lead them to the truth. At one moment the adventurer fancied that he heard the distant gallop of a horse; but the sound was so remote, so indistinct, that it was impossible for him to form any opinion or acquire a

certainly. As for Don Aurelio, the forest had been as silent to him as a tomb.

Both, therefore, rejoined their companions with hanging heads and minds occupied with this apparition, which seemed to them the stranger because their staunch hearts and straightforward minds could not accept it as a divine intervention, and yet it could not be an hallucination. At the moment when they re-entered the clearing the night was nearly spent, the stars were growing pale, and expiring one after another. Wide tinted bands were beginning to appear athwart the horizon, the flowers and plants exhaled a sharper and more penetrating perfume, and the birds nestled beneath the leaves were already preludeing with timid notes the melodious concert with which they each morning salute the break of day. The sun would make its appearance ere long.

The horses were saddled, and the travellers had only been awaiting the return of the two explorers to resume their journey. At the moment when Don Aurelio was about to give the signal to start, the Sumach walked up to him and laid his hand on the bridle of his horse.

"One moment," he said; "before we start I should wish to make a few remarks to you."

The Mexican regarded the adventurer closely, and read on his thoughtful face so serious an expression that he bowed to him deferentially.

"I am listening to you," he said.

The Sumach, as the surname he bore sufficiently proved, was a man endowed with that ferocious and blunt courage to which every contest is a holiday, and which overthrows any obstacles that rise before it, however great they may be. Deeds done by this man were related which displayed a boldness and temerity bordering on the prodigious. Fear was as unknown to him as was weakness. But he was a Canadian; that is to say, he belonged to that hardy Norman race, so superstitious and credulous, which trembles at night at the dashing of an owl's wing against a pane of glass, and for which apparitions and phantoms are almost articles of belief. In a word, this man, who would have been unmoved by the sight of twenty rifles pointed at his bosom, had an inward tremor at the thought of the past night's apparition. And yet, so peculiar is the human mind, the suspicious being who had so startled him had scarce disappeared ere he rushed in pursuit. The truth was that his indomitable courage had revolted at the thought of the involuntary panic, his heart palpitated with shame, and he tried to discover the truth or falsehood there might be in the occurrence.

The sterile hunt he had made in the forest had put the final touch on his mental confusion, conviction was forced upon him, and now he felt certain that a supernatural intervention had given them a warning which they would do very wrong in neglecting. This was the reason which made him oppose the immediate departure of the travellers and address Don Aurelio.

"Listen, caballero," he said to him, in a firm voice, "I am

only an ignorant adventurer to whom books have hitherto been unknown things. There are few things in the world I fear, but I am a Christian and a Catholic; as such I cannot believe that God would disturb the order of nature without some powerful reason. What is your opinion in the matter?"

"I entirely share your opinion, my good fellow," Don Aurelio replied, who, a good Catholic himself, and sincerely attached to his religion, did not dream of disputing its dogmas and creeds.

"In that case," the adventurer continued, "trusting only to my own poor judgment, the being who appeared to us a few hours ago does not belong to this world. Yourself fired two pistol shots almost point-blank without hitting, and though we started immediately in pursuit we found no signs or trace. Is that so?"

"I must allow, señor, that all this is not only perfectly true but strictly exact."

"Very good," the Sumach continued, evidently pleased with this answer. "Now, neither of us can affirm with certainty whether this being comes from heaven or the other place; but that is of but slight importance to me. What I consider as far more serious is the advice offered to us. Whether it be true or false we are unable to discover at this moment, but it is our duty not to neglect it. If a serious danger menaces your friends we are not numerous enough at this moment to offer them effectual help."

"That is just; but what is to be done?" the Mexican remarked, struck by the adventurer's logical reasoning.

"Patience," the latter said, with a smile full of meaning. "Did

not my comrade, Moonshine, tell you last night that if you broke your engagement with me I should not fail of avengers."

"It is true," Don Aurelio exclaimed, eagerly.

"Well," the Canadian said, "what I did not care to tell you then I will confess now. I have some twenty comrades a few leagues from here, Canadians like myself, all resolute men and devoted to me. I was going to rejoin them last night when we met. I will place them at your orders, if you like, for this expedition, on the understanding that when the danger has passed – should there be any – if the conditions we offer do not please you, we shall be at liberty to withdraw in safety."

"Certainly," Viscachu exclaimed, yielding involuntarily to the joy he probably experienced; but, recognizing at once the fault he had committed, he humbly withdrew behind his master, muttering —

"Pardon me, Señor Caballero."

"I pledge you my word as a gentleman," Don Aurelio answered; "then you have at your disposal twenty bold comrades?"

"Yes, or nearly so," the adventurer said; "and I offer them to you."

"Unfortunately we are in a hurry, and you will not have time to warn them."

"Well, I did not think of that," the Canadian said, thoughtfully.

"Where are they at this moment?"

"I told you; about two leagues from here."

"But in what direction?" Don Aurelio pressed him.

"Hang it! As you belong to the country, you will know better than I; they are encamped at a place called the Giant's Peak, on the road running to the Hacienda del Barrio."

"What!" the Mexican exclaimed, in delight, "Why that is the very hacienda we are going to!"

"Can it be possible?" the adventurer asked, in amazement.

"Nothing is truer; my friends are going to assemble there."

"If that be the case, it is useless to lose any further valuable time; let us be off at once."

"Of course; I am most anxious to do so."

"By the way," said the Sumach, "I will go on ahead, so as to warn my comrades, in that way you will not be obliged to make a circuit to reach our camp, and when you arrive opposite the Giant's Peak, you will find us on the road ready to follow you. Does that suit you?"

"¡Canarios! I should think so; you are a precious man, you think of everything, so be off at once."

The Canadian dug his spurs into his horse's flanks and started at full speed. The travellers followed him at once; their pace, though rapid, was however much more moderate than that of the adventurer, who appeared to devour space. Moonshine remained with the Mexicans, and galloped by the side of Don Aurelio.

"Why did you not tell me about your cuadrilla?" the latter asked him.

"Pardon me, señor," the Canadian said, "but your memory

fails you at this moment; I was about to speak of it when my friend, the Sumach, forced me to be silent."

"That is true; I remember."

"Now," he continued, "I will take the liberty of remarking, that in speaking of my comrade's party you used the words *your* cuadrilla."

"Well," Don Aurelio observed, "have I unwittingly offended you by that qualification?"

"Not at all, señor; still I will inform you that I do not at all belong to this cuadrilla, as you call it; I am simply a buffalo hunter and beaver trapper. I do not say that when the opportunity offers to draw a bead on a redskin I refuse to do so; far from it – it is, in fact, an amusement in which I frequently indulge; but soldiering is not at all in my line."

"I thought you an intimate friend of your countryman," the Mexican remarked.

"You were not mistaken," the hunter answered, "we are indeed very old friends, though our avocations are diametrically opposed."

"And on the present occasion, would you refuse the support of your arm in defending the good cause?"

"I do not know what you call the good cause," the Canadian replied, simply, "and, as a foreigner, I care very little to learn what it is. Thanks to heaven your disputes do not concern me the least in the world; but I should consider myself a coward if I abandoned a man with whom I have eaten and drunk, and by

whose side I have slept, when a serious danger seems to threaten him. Hence you can safely reckon on me."

"Thanks, caballero," the Mexican said, warmly; "you are a man whose heart is in the right place."

"I believe it is; but I do not see why you should take the trouble to thank me for so natural a thing as this."

Don Aurelio regarded him for a moment with repressed admiration.

"Let me shake your hand," he said to him.

"With pleasure," the hunter simply replied.

During the preceding conversation the sun had risen on the horizon, and beneath the influence of its hot and enlivening beams, which made the pebbles in the road glisten like diamonds, the scenery had lost that stern appearance which the darkness had imparted to it. A warm vapour rose from the ground and formed a species of; transparent fog, that refreshed the atmosphere which was already rendered sultry by the sun; the leaves damp with dew seemed greener, the birds twittered in rivalry, and at times an elk or antelope, startled by the thundering echo of the horses' hoofs, leaped from beneath a bush, and dashed madly away with head thrown back and dilated eye; or the alligators raised their heavy heads from the mud in which they were imbedded, and after gazing at the travellers for a moment, plunged into the lake.

The Mexicans galloped on thus without the slightest incident for about two hours, conversing together about indifferent topics, and apparently as tranquil as if they were not going to meet

a probable danger. They had left for some time the banks of the lake which they had hitherto been following, and, turning to the right, entered a narrow track, the bed of a dried-up torrent, encased between two hills over which mighty oaks formed a dense dome of verdure which the sunbeams could not penetrate.

"The Giant's Peak is only a league and a half to our left," Don Aurelio said to the Canadian.

"In that case," the latter quietly replied, "we shall soon come up with our friends; they must be waiting for us at the end of that canyon."

In fact, when the travellers passed through the species of defile in which they were, they saw, about fifty yards ahead of them, a party of horsemen drawn up in good order, at whose head Don Aurelio recognized, with a delight he did not attempt to conceal, the worthy adventurer. The two bands were soon commingled.

"Thanks," the Mexican said with a smile to the Canadian; "you are a man of your word."

"Did you doubt it?" the other remarked.

"Certainly not."

And they continued their journey at a gallop. They had at the most but two leagues to go ere they reached the hacienda. Moonshine spurred his horse, which soon carried him twenty yards ahead of the party.

"Where are you going?" Don Aurelio shouted to him.

"To scout," the hunter answered; "let me alone. We must not fall into a wasps' nest."

"Go on, my friend," said the Mexican.

The hunter went off; but a quarter of an hour had scarce elapsed ere his comrades saw him returning at full gallop, and making them signs to halt, which they obeyed.

"Oh, oh!" Moonshine exclaimed, so soon as he had rejoined them, "the warning was good: whether angel or demon, the person who gave it was well informed."

"Explain, explain," his hearers shouted.

"Silence," the hunter replied. "Listen!"

All did so; and then the distant detonation of firearms could be distinctly heard.

"What is happening?" Don Aurelio asked, a prey to the liveliest anxiety.

"A very simple thing," the hunter answered; "two or three hundred Indians, or at least men dressed in their garb, are furiously attacking the hacienda, the inhabitants of which are offering the most vigorous resistance."

"¡Caray! Comrades, we must hasten to their assistance," Don Aurelio exclaimed.

"That is also my opinion; but take my advice; let us not act rashly, but take our precautions, for these Indians appear to me suspicious; they manage their pieces too well, and take too good an aim to be real redskins, and Indians would never venture to attack in open daylight a fortress like the one before us."

"Then your opinion is – "

"That they are disguised Spaniards, viva Dios, and nought

else."

"We cannot hesitate," said the Sumach. "Every minute is worth an age. Let us approach softly, so as not to reveal our presence prematurely, and when we are near enough to the demons, let us charge them vigorously."

"Yes, we have nothing else to do. Forward!" Don Aurelio shouted.

"Forward!" the adventurers repeated.

The nearer they drew, the more distinct the sound became. With the shots were mingled ferocious yells and howls uttered by the assailants, and to which the defenders of the hacienda responded with equally ferocious cries. They soon came in sight of the fortress, and perceived the combatants. The engagement was of a serious nature. The Indians, or men looking like them, fought with incredible energy and contempt of death, trying, in spite of the fire of the besieged, to escalate the walls of the hacienda, the top of which several of them were on the point of reaching. In spite of the courage they evinced, the defenders were unfortunately too few to carry on the contest much longer with any prospect of victory.

All at once a formidable cry was raised, and the Indians, furiously attacked in the rear, were obliged to wheel round. It was the charge of the adventurers. At the same moment further succour arrived for the besieged, for a second band of strangers rushed forward like a manada of forest tigers, and taking the Indians on the flank, made a desperate attack. The latter bravely

supported this double assault, which they resisted with the utmost bravery; but the defenders of the hacienda finding they were at liberty through this providential help, which they were far from anticipating, made a sortie, and proceeded to help their defenders. There it became no longer a fight, but a butchery. The Indians, after disputing the ground for some moments, recognized the madness of a longer contest. They turned their backs, and sought safety in flight.

The second band, which charged the Indians simultaneously with the Canadians, had also disappeared. Still the Sumach, with a surprise mingled with horror, fancied that he recognized at the head of this band the fantastic being who had appeared in the forest; hence, in his simple credulity, he was not far from supposing that these combatants who vanished so suddenly were demons. When the few wounded white men were picked up, the adventurers, and those who had given them such effectual assistance, entered the hacienda. The plain, so noisy a few moments previously, became silent and solitary once again; and the birds of prey, left masters of the obstinately disputed battlefield, began circling heavily above the corpses, with hoarse and sinister croaks of joy.

CHAPTER IV.

INSIDE THE HACIENDA

Although since the beginning of the civil war the Hacienda del Barrio had frequently served as headquarters for the insurgents of New Spain, and, for this reason, had sustained several regular sieges from the government troops, who twice took it by storm, still, in the interior at least, but slight changes had taken place since the time when we first introduced the reader to it.

Still this house, which at that time was almost a country mansion, had become a real fortress, a deep and wide fosse had been dug round that side of the walls which might be accessible, and the threatening muzzles of several heavy guns peeped out of the embrasures, to avoid a surprise and defend the approaches to the hacienda. The trees had been felled for a radius of nearly a mile all round, the scarped path which ran round the hill and led to the gateway had been dug up in several places so as to render the approach still more difficult, and the drawbridge had been placed in working order.

On entering the hacienda the adventurers and travellers were received by a caballero, who paid them the greatest attention. It was the proprietor of the hacienda, Don Aníbal de Saldibar. The eleven years which had elapsed since our prologue had produced but very slight effect on his vigorous organization. A few wrinkles

had formed on the hacendero's wide forehead, here and there a few threads of silver were mingled with his black hair, but that was all. He was still upright, and his eye was bright as ever. He and Don Aurelio had been long acquainted, and appeared to feel a sincere friendship for each other.

"You and the gentlemen who accompany you are welcome," Don Aníbal exclaimed as he warmly pressed his friend's hand; "you could not have arrived more opportunely. Had it not been for you, I know not how matters would have ended."

"Well, I hope," Don Aurelio said, warmly returning the pressure; "are we the first at the meeting?"

"On my word, nearly so, there are very few persons here as yet. You know how difficult the communications are, and what a system of espionage Señor Apodaca, his Excellency the Viceroy of New Spain, has invented. It is a perfect inquisition. Every suspicious individual is immediately arrested, so that our friends are obliged to act with the greatest prudence."

"In fact, we have unhappily reached that point when one half the population plays the spy on the other."

"Well, enough on this head for the present. You and your friends must need rest. Allow me to conduct you myself to the cuartos which have been prepared for you by my orders."

"On my word, I confess to you that I accept your offer with the same frankness in which it is made."

Don Aníbal then led his guests to spacious and rather comfortable furnished apartments, where he left them at

liberty to behave as they thought proper, informing them that refreshments would be brought them directly; then he left them, in order to receive other persons who arrived at the hacienda at the moment. In fact, scarce had Don Aníbal left, ere the door opened to make way for several footmen, loaded with trays covered with refreshments of every description. The Sumach, after bivouacking his adventurers in a corral, rejoined Don Aurelio, with whom remained only one of his servants, namely, Viscachu, in whom he seemed to have the greatest confidence.

Our four friends, that is to say, Don Aurelio, Moonshine, the Sumach, and Viscachu, sat down to the table, and did honour to the refreshments sent by Don Aníbal, in a manner which would have assuredly pleased him, had he seen it. Viscachu, doubtless through humility, was seated a little away; he alone ate moderately, rather as a man who does not wish to be guilty of want of courtesy, than as a man who had just ridden ten leagues, and whose appetite must have been sharpened by recent and vigorous exercise. When the travellers' hunger was appeased, the conversation, which had, at the outset, been languishing, became more animated, and naturally turned on the master of the house in which the guests were assembled. Moonshine, after lighting his pipe, addressed Don Aurelio.

"Will you allow me," he said to him, "to ask you a few questions with reference to our host?"

"I see no reason why you should not," the Mexican replied; "I shall be even pleased to give you all the information you wish

about him that I am in a position to supply."

"These questions will be quite general," the Canadian continued. "My friend and I are strangers, and as it is probable that circumstances will oblige us to make a rather lengthened stay in this country, I confess to you that we should be glad to have certain information about persons with whom chance may bring us into contact, which will enable us to act toward them in such a way as will not hurt either their feelings or their interests."

"The fact is," Oliver Clary said in support, interrupting his words with numerous puffs of smoke, "the country is so extraordinary, all that goes on in it so far surpasses anything I have hitherto seen, that I am quite of my countryman and friend's opinion."

"As you please. To begin, I presume that you would like to know something about our host."

"You have hit it, caballero," both men said, with a polite bow.

"Nothing is easier, the more so because I am a distant relative of Don Aníbal, and am better able than most persons to give you the information you require."

"Excellent," the Sumach said, as he threw himself lazily back in his chair.

"I think nothing equal to a good story after a jolly breakfast," said Moonshine, as he rested his elbows on the table, and prepared to listen.

Don Aurelio delicately rolled a husk cigarette between his fingers, lit it, and then went on as follows: —

"It is scarce midday," he said; "it is probable that we shall not be disturbed till four o'clock, for Don Aníbal is at this moment occupied in receiving the numerous visitors who are arriving from all parts of the province. We have four hours before us, which we cannot employ better; so listen to me."

After this sort of introduction, the Mexican summoned up his recollections for a few minutes, and then went on like a man prepared to tell a long story: —

"Don Aníbal Heredia Gómez de Alvarado y Saldibar is what we call in this country a *Cristiano viejo*, that is to say, his blood has never crossed, during ages, with that of the Indians; he is descended in a straight line from that famous Don Pedro de Alvarado to whom Don Hernando Cortés entrusted the government and command of the city of Mexico, when he was compelled to proceed to Veracruz, to fight Don Pamfilo de Narváez, whom Don Diego Velasquez, Governor of Cuba, sent against him, and who passed with all his men under the flag of the conqueror. You will see from this rapid sketch that Don Aníbal comes from a good stock. When Hernando Cortés had completed the conquest of Mexico, he divided the vast territory among all his lieutenants. Don Pedro de Alvarado, owing to his fidelity to the Conquistador, was naturally the best provided for, and he soon found himself in possession of an enormous fortune. This fortune, being well managed, augmented in the course of time, and thus at the present day Don Aníbal is not only one of the richest landowners in New Spain, but in the whole world. This

colossal fortune was further increased, some sixteen years back, by Don Aníbal's marriage with Doña Emilia de Aguilar, my cousin, sixth removed. Doña Emilia was at that period seventeen years of age, and one of the loveliest girls in the province."

Don Aurelio paused for a few seconds, and then continued —

"Here there is a grand gap, not in my recollection, but in the information I have been able to collect. At the period to which I allude some interesting business forced me to make a voyage to the Havana, so that I only heard on my return that Don Aníbal had drawn on himself the hatred of certain Indians established on his estates; that these Indians, expelled by him, had sworn to avenge themselves, which they tried several times, but unsuccessfully. While this was going on, Hidalgo, the curé of Dolores, raised the standard of revolt, and summoning the population under arms, began that long war of independence which is not yet terminated. Although of Spanish origin, Don Aníbal, whose whole fortune consists of land and mines, and whom the triumph of the revolution would irremediably ruin if he obstinately remained faithful to the Spanish government, either through interest or conviction, or through these motives united, joined the insurrection, and became one of its most devoted adherents. The house in which we are at this moment, perfectly situated, as you can see, and tolerably well fortified to resist a surprise, has several times served as headquarters for the insurgents. Once was Don Aníbal surprised suddenly by the Spaniards; the hacienda was so completely and rapidly invested

that Don Aníbal had not the time, as he had intended, to send Doña Emilia and her child, who was then hardly eighteen months old, to Leona Vicario. Both, therefore, remained with him, and then a frightful affair, which has never been properly cleared up, took place. A snake was conveyed into the garden of the hacienda by an Indian, as was found by the trail discovered on the sand, and the bag of tapir hide he left behind. How this Indian contrived to elude the vigilance of the sentinels no one ever knew. Still it is a fact that this snake, without doing the slightest hurt to the infant, attacked the nurse, whose milk it sucked with a horrible frenzy. The wretched girl died almost immediately after in fearful convulsions, and Doña Emilia, who was a witness of the tragedy, not having the strength to endure it, went mad."

"Oh!" the hearers exclaimed, with a terror mingled with horror, "that is fearful."

"Is it not?" Don Aurelio said sadly.

"And what became of the unhappy mother?" Moonshine asked with interest.

"Did she remain mad?" the adventurer added.

"No," the Mexican continued, "the unfortunate lady recovered her reason, or, at least, after two years of assiduous care, she appeared to do so, for, since the scene I have described to you, she has constantly suffered from terrible crises, which succeed each other with a strength and energy that continually grow greater."

"Poor woman!" Viscachu muttered.

"Oh, yes, poor woman!" Don Aurelio continued. "Don Aníbal, although he would not let it be seen, adored his wife. The misfortune which burst on him like a thunderclap, by revealing to him all the immensity of his passion, deprived him of the strength any longer to conceal it. All the time that Doña Emilia's madness lasted, the devotion and self-denial he displayed were sublime. When she at length recovered her senses, he ordered all his servants not to restrain her in any way, but to let her act as she pleased, without even questioning or troubling her. A strange change had taken place in Doña Emilia's character; this woman or girl – for she was hardly eighteen years of age when the misfortune happened – so kind, gentle, timid, and graceful, became a lioness thirsting for carnage, only dreaming of combats, and having one fixed idea, that of incessantly pursuing the redskins, and pitilessly destroying them wherever she met them. Employing the liberty her husband granted her, she frequently disappeared from the hacienda for whole weeks, taking her daughter with her, from whom she never parts, and whom she has trained in her own feelings of hatred and revenge; and both remained absent all this time, and no one was able to discover what became of them, or what they were doing; then the mother and daughter would return with smiling faces and tranquil demeanour, as if nothing extraordinary had occurred."

"And now?" Moonshine interrupted.

"I believe that the same thing goes on now," the Mexican continued, "and that Doña Emilia has not given up her

wanderings. Don Aníbal, whom her absence terribly alarmed, has tried several times to prevent them, but he found that the precautions he took to keep his wife at home rendered her so unhappy that he preferred letting her act as she thought. However, for some reason unknown to me, the Indians feel such a superstitious terror of her that her mere appearance suffices to put them to flight, however numerous they may be, as has been witnessed on several occasions."

"It is extraordinary," Oliver Clary muttered.

"And the young lady?" Moonshine asked.

"She is now nearly fifteen years of age, and her name is Diana. She is an exquisite creature, light and graceful, fair-haired, and her eyes reflect the blue of heaven; but, beneath this delicate appearance she conceals an indomitable energy, and an incredible firmness of character. Educated by her mother, as I told you, she adores and only obeys her, although she has a deep and sincere friendship for her father, and evinces the greatest respect for him. Still, Don Aníbal, I feel persuaded, however energetic he may be, would not venture to contend with her, for he would be certain beforehand of defeat. The young lady is, therefore, quite her own mistress, and hence never leaves her mother; but the singular thing is that these two females, who understand each other so thoroughly, have admitted a third person to their friendship."

"A third," the Canadian said; "who is it?"

"That is the strangest thing of all; he is a tall, well-built,

powerful young fellow of about two and twenty, whom Don Aníbal brought back some twelve or thirteen years ago from an expedition against the Indians, and there is every reason for believing that he is a redskin himself. This person's name, or rather the name given him, is Melchior Díaz. Gifted with prodigious strength and unequalled activity and Excellency in all manly exercises, this young man is the darling of Don Aníbal, who sees with secret despair the approaching extinction of his name, for he has no son, and is, consequently, the last of his race. Hence he has bestowed on this young man, who, I must allow, is in every respect worthy of it, through the goodness of his heart and the rectitude of his mind, the affection he would feel for a real son; on the other hand, being forced to consent to leave his wife and daughter their liberty, he is glad to know they have such a devoted defender, for Melchior accompanies them in all their expeditions. Several times Don Aníbal has tried to obtain from the young man some information as to their nature, but the latter has been impenetrable, intrenching himself behind the oath he says he has taken never to reveal anything that relates to Doña Emilia. Now, how is it that this lady, who has such an inveterate hatred for the Indians, has taken into her friendship this young man, who, I repeat, is assuredly a redskin, and is so attached to him that she will not let him leave her for a moment?"

"And what does Doña Diana think of this young man?" the hunter asked.

"Diana is a child knowing nothing of life; she believes that

Melchior is her brother, for they were brought up together, and she feels a frank friendship for him."

"But the young man," Moonshine said searchingly, "does he know that he is not Doña Diana's brother?"

"I am not aware, but it is probable that Don Aníbal or Doña Emilia has informed him of his origin."

"Is he at the hacienda at this moment?" the Sumach asked.

"I cannot tell you. I have not been here for several months, and so do not know what is going on. But I hear a footstep in the corridor, and I doubt not but that we are going to be interrupted."

In truth, a light footstep was audible on the outside, coming nearer and nearer to the room in which the travellers were. At length the door opened, and a peon appeared.

"Pardon, señores," he said, after bowing ceremoniously, "Don Aníbal de Saldibar, my master, requests you to follow me to the grand hall, where all the caballeros are assembled."

"We are at Don Aníbal's orders," Don Aurelio said, as he rose.

His companions imitated him, and all four went out after the servant.

CHAPTER V. THE COUNCIL

While the travellers were listening with ever growing interest to the astonishing story told by Don Aurelio, other strangers, coming from all parts of the compass, flocked into the hacienda. They were principally rich landowners of the province, or persons compromised in previous struggles through their ardent love of liberty, and who, justly objects of suspicion to the Spaniards, could only find security in a general uprising. Don Aníbal tried to offer all these visitors, the majority of whom were followed by a numerous and well-armed escort, a large and generous hospitality. Hence, the interior of the hacienda soon resembled a barrack, and though the dependencies of the mansion were large, they were crowded with men and horses, so that the latter were obliged to be placed in the courtyards and the gardens.

At four in the evening the number of strangers assembled at the hacienda amounted to upwards of four thousand, which formed an imposing force. Unfortunately, with the exception of a few experienced men who had fought during the first tentatives made by the Mexicans to regain their liberty, the rest were only poor peons who had never smelt powder, and were completely ignorant of war. Still, whatever their intrinsic value might be

from a military point of view, all these men burned with an ardent desire for liberty. They were devoted to their masters, and if well led, it was plain that a good deal might be expected from them; and that when once trained and disciplined, they would become not only formidable through their numbers, but also through their courage and the revolutionary fanaticism that animated them. In the meanwhile they offered a most miserable and pitiable appearance; pale, haggard, thin, scarce covered by their dirty ragged clothes, and mostly armed with pikes, bows and arrows, they could only excite a pity blended with contempt in the well-fed, disciplined, and thoroughly-armed Spaniards.

However this may be, Don Aníbal de Saldibar saw them enter the hacienda with a joy which he did not attempt to conceal, and he augured favourably for the success of the plans he had formed, through the promptitude with which his friends replied to his summons. At length the moment arrived when it was impossible for another soul to enter the hacienda, and the last comers were obliged to establish themselves in an entrenched camp on the ground where in the morning so obstinate a fight had been waged with the Indians. At night the hacienda was surrounded as it were by a glittering halo, produced by the bivouac fires of the rebels who were encamped on the plain.

When all the persons Don Aníbal expected were assembled he gave orders for the hacienda gates to be shut, doubled the sentries, advised the utmost vigilance, and entered the reception hall, whither he had ordered his servants to conduct visitors

of high rank. This hall, which was of large, almost grand proportions, was filled by some two hundred persons, who were collected in groups and conversing together in a low voice, but with great animation. The entrance of Don Aníbal was greeted with a prolonged "Ah!" which testified to the impatience of the visitors.

The hacendero, after gracefully inviting his guests to take the seats prepared for them, made his way through the groups, and approached a table covered with a green cloth, round which were already seated several strangers, among them being Don Aurelio Gutiérrez, the two Canadians, and Viscachu, who had contrived unnoticed to find his way among the select company. Don Aníbal waited until silence was established, then he bowed several times to the visitors, and asked to say a few words. Permission, was at once granted, for the company were pleased in their hearts at thus seeing him take the initiative, and assume the responsibility of the events which were about to take place.

"Señores," he said, in a firm, distinct voice, "permit me in the first place to thank you cordially, in the name of the country, for the eagerness you have kindly shown in accepting my invitation, in spite of the difficulties of every description that opposed, the journey you were about to undertake, and the perils you must meet with on the road. In spite of our continued defeats since the day when the generous Hidalgo first called us to arms, in spite of the triumphs of our haughty oppressors, the cause we have sworn to defend, instead of being destroyed, has, on the contrary,

prospered, because the cause is a holy one, as we fight for liberty, that undoubted right of all nations. Before approaching the immediate subject of our meeting, let me describe in a few words the events accomplished during the last twelve years, in order that we may be able to judge our position healthily, perceive whether the insurrection we are preparing is opportune, and if its success is so certain as is asserted."

"Pardon me, señor," said Moonshine, as he rose to interrupt him, "I perceive that you are preparing to discuss matters which are perfectly indifferent to myself and my companions, as we are foreigners; we, therefore, ask your permission to withdraw before we have heard any of your secrets."

At these words, uttered with that crafty carelessness characteristic of the French Canadian, the company rose tumultuously, and remarks were made violently from all parts of the hall. Some even shouted treachery. In a word, the confusion was tremendous. Don Aníbal and Don Aurelio exchanged anxious glances, and tried in vain to appease the agitation of their friends, and establish some degree of order in the meeting. At length, by exhortations and entreaties, they succeeded in producing a semi-silence, of which they hastened to take advantage.

"What!" Don Aurelio exclaimed, addressing Moonshine, "Are we not to reckon on you and your comrade?"

"For what reason should you do so?" the adventurer said, bluntly. "We have made no bargain; to my knowledge, you have

made me no proposition I am able to accept. *¡Viva Dios!* business is business. The honourable gentlemen I command have a right to ask me of an account of the blood they have sold me. I suppose that they do not fight for mere amusement."

"You are perfectly in the right," Don Aníbal said, prudently and politely. "Still, your noble and devoted conduct this morning lead us to suppose that you wished to defend our cause."

"A mistake," Moonshine replied, with a shake of his head. "My friend and myself only wished to give you a specimen of what these men can do – that was all. And then, again, could we honourably abandon travellers who trusted to our loyalty, and whom we had promised to defend?"

"Certainly not," said the hacendero; "and in the name of these caballeros, as well as my own, I thank you for your brilliant conduct, and the valiant assistance you rendered them."

The company were beginning to grow tired of this conversation which seemed to have no object. Shouts and threats were beginning to be heard again. Don Aníbal understood that he must come to an end as quickly as possible.

"Tell me, señores," he said, "are you free from engagements?"

"Completely," the adventurer replied.

"Do you feel disposed to fight for us?"

"Yes, if your terms suit us."

"Very good. These are the terms. You, Caballero, are appointed colonel of a regiment of cavalry, which you will undertake to organize, and of which your men will form the

nucleus. Your pay will begin from today; your engagement is for three months; and you will receive a month and a half in advance. Do these terms suit you?"

"I find them very fair," the adventurer replied; "but how much will you give my comrades?"

"Two piastres a man. Is that enough?"

"Certainly, if you are not too exacting."

"What do you mean?"

"If you will shut your eyes to certain things which take place after a battle or a siege."

"Colonel, as your regiment is a free corps, it cannot be subjected to the strict discipline of regular troops."

"Very good, I understand," the Sumach said, with a wink of intense significance.

"Is that settled?"

"Yes; whatever may happen, I belong to you for three months."

"Good. As for you, señor," Don Aníbal continued, addressing Moonshine, "what are your wishes?"

"Although my rifle knows how to talk when there is an opportunity, I repeat that I am no soldier; I only ask to serve you as scout during the campaign at the rate of six ounces a month. You can take it or leave it."

"I accept," the hacendero said, quickly.

"All right. You can count on me as on my friend."

Don Aníbal, pleased with having settled this affair to the general satisfaction, and ensured the insurrection the

assistance of men of tried bravery and experience, received the congratulations of his friends, and prepared to continue his address. During this, Don Aurelio leant over to the adventurers.

"I was convinced that you would join us," he said to them, in a low voice.

"What would you have?" they replied, in the same key; "We have no prejudices, and came to this country to take service with one or other of the two parties. You met us first, that is all."

Don Aurelio could not restrain a smile of contempt, but made no answer. As for the Canadians, they were firmly convinced that their conduct was most honourable, and, as they were in a foreign country, they had the right of acting as they were doing; a reasoning which, by the way, was neither incorrect nor illogical.

"Señores," the hacendero continued, "since the time of Hidalgo, who, carried away by his enthusiasm, believed that it was sufficient to wish to be free to become so, our enemies have taught us to conquer them; the battles of Tres Palos, Palmar, Acatita de Bajan, Cuautlo, Chilpancingo, and many others in which we defeated our ferocious adversaries, have proved that we were able to gain our liberty. Unhappily the death of Morelos, by delivering our enemies from their most formidable adversary, has plunged the nation into discouragement, and occasioned that discord which has glided into our ranks and once again riveted our almost broken fetters. Three mournful dates are marked in our revolutionary annals: that of July 30, 1811, on which Hidalgo was shot; December 22, 1815, on which Morelos

shared the same fate; and lastly, December 18, 1817, which saw the brave and generous Mina also fall beneath the murderous bullets of the Spaniards. Do not all these glorious dead who lie in their bloodstained tombs excite you to emulate them? Has their precious blood been uselessly shed? I do not think so; the glorious spark which is supposed to be extinguished is smouldering beneath the ashes, and one word, one cry from you will be sufficient to rekindle it. Will you hesitate at this supreme hour to rise and die, if need be, like those who so nobly preceded you in the arena?"

"No," Don Aurelio exclaimed enthusiastically, as he rose; "no, we will not hesitate, for at your summons, Don Aníbal, we flocked to you, ready to recommence the struggle, no matter what may happen."

"Yes," observed a hacendero, whose white hair, lofty stature, and imposing glances inspired respect, "we are ready to fight and die if necessary for that liberty which is so dear to us; but courage is nothing without discipline; who will command us, who is the chief we can select? The revolutionary martyrology is already long in our country, although the contest only began ten years ago. In addition to the three heroes you have mentioned, Don Aníbal, and whom the Spaniards cowardly assassinated, what has become of those heroes who are more obscure but equally worthy of mention, such as Matamoros, Galeana, Bravo, Mier y Terán, Victoria, and Guerrero? They are also dead or in flight. We do not lack soldiers but chiefs. What can we

effect against the old Castilian generals, against that Viceroy Apodaca, who obtained from King Ferdinand the title of Count del Venadito for the assassination of Mina, and who, employing with diabolical skill the faults we have not ceased to commit, has almost succeeded in extinguishing that patriotic fire which emitted such dazzling flames but a few months back?"

"What!" Don Aníbal remarked vehemently, "Would you despond? Do you believe that chiefs will be wanting, and that Providence who has up to the present done so much for you, will abandon you?"

"Heaven forbid my entertaining such a thought," the old man replied; "for ten years I have furnished sufficient proof of my devotion to the cause of Independence for my opinions not to be suspected. As you said yourself, Don Aníbal, the struggle we are about to begin must be decisive, and the last hour of liberty or slavery will strike for us! I confess with sorrow that although I have looked carefully around, I see no person capable of taking on himself the perilous honour of commanding us, no one worthy of marching at our head, no one whose military talent can cope with that of the Spanish generals."

"Are you sure you are not mistaken? Are you quite convinced that your memory does not fail you at this moment, and that all the heroes who formerly led us are dead?" Don Aurelio exclaimed, with a marked accent of irony.

The old man started at being thus addressed, and his brow was contracted as if by the weight of a sorrowful remembrance.

"Alas, Don Aurelio," he replied sadly, "one man alone has hitherto escaped the death which all his comrades suffered in succession; but his fate is only the more sorrowful. Confined in one of the dungeons of the old Mexican Inquisition, he drags on in despair the rest of a branded existence, which his torturers appear to have only left him through derision. That man, were he free, might claim the honour of commanding us, and we would gladly follow him. But, alas! What use is it opening such cruel wounds? He will never be free, he will never be allowed to see the sun again; he is compelled to die of misery in his foetid dungeon."

"Are you quite sure of that?" Don Aurelio exclaimed. "Do you really believe that heaven has so utterly abandoned us, and that the man to whom you allude cannot recover his liberty?"

"Unhappily, I am but too certain of it. During the two years which have elapsed since the Spaniards have treacherously seized him, no one knows what has become of him. Shall I add that no one is certain that he is still alive, and has not been strangled in his dungeon by the Viceroy's orders?"

"Do you remember this person's name, señores?" Don Aurelio asked in a loud voice.

"Don Pelagio," the company, shouted unanimously.

"No one has forgotten it; his name is inscribed on our hearts."

"If he were to reappear, what would you do?" Don Aníbal asked.

"It is impossible," the old man said, "he will not reappear;

when the Spanish lion holds a victim beneath its powerful paw, it does not let him go, but rends him asunder."

"But tell me," Don Aníbal continued pressingly, "if Father Sandoval reappeared, what would you do? Answer me!"

"Since you insist on an answer," the old man said with an accent of supreme majesty, "I will give it you clearly and categorically, in the name of all present, for I am persuaded that no one will dream of contradicting me. If Father Pelagio were to appear suddenly in the midst of us, we would immediately take an oath to conquer or die with him."

"Do you swear it?" Don Aurelio asked again.

"Yes, we swear it!" all present exclaimed proudly.

Don Aníbal took a step forward, and approaching Viscachu, who had hitherto remained modestly concealed behind Don Aurelio, he bowed to him with marks of the deepest respect, and taking his hand, said – "Father, your Excellency can throw off your incognito without fear; there are none but true Mexicans here."

CHAPTER VI.

GENERAL FRAY PELAGIO

It is impossible to describe the enthusiasm which broke out among the patriots at this revelation which burst upon them like a thunderclap. In truth, it was really Father Pelagio Sandoval. The result obtained by this surprise, which was so thoroughly to the Mexican taste, was immense. For a moment the worthy priest literally ran a risk of being stifled, so lovingly did his partizans press round him; everyone wished to get near him, clasp his hand; or kiss some part of his garments. For more than a quarter of an hour there was an indescribable tumult and disorder in the hall; everybody spoke at once; each exalted the remarkable qualities of the chief who had been so long lost, and who reappeared, as if by a miracle, at the moment when they least hoped to see him.

The two Canadians were dumb with surprise; the effervescence, however, gradually calmed, and silence was re-established. Before aught else, Father Pelagio was obliged to explain to his followers in what way he had succeeded, after two years of captivity, comparable with the Neapolitan *carcere duro*, in leaving his dungeon by the aid of a faithful friend, in spite of the vigilant watch and constant espionage the Spaniards had established around him. So soon as he had satisfied their curiosity to the best of his ability, Father Sandoval, understanding the

value of time well employed, and not wishing to let the enthusiasm of his adherents cool, asked leave to speak.

A deep silence at once fell, as if by enchantment, upon the crowd a moment previously so turbulent and disorderly; each with body bent forward, and an attentive ear, prepared to listen to the words which a mouth, they had fancied closed for ever, was about to utter. Father Pelagio still retained the calm, benign, and intellectual appearance which illumined his face the first time when we introduced him to the reader; a few wrinkles more, furrowed by the terrible struggle he had carried on for so many years, marked his pale forehead; his eyes had acquired a greater magnetic force, and his face, pale and thinned by suffering, had assumed that appearance of asceticism which Zurbaran has so well depicted on immortal canvas.

In spite of his common dress, so soon as the priest had thrown far from him the broad-brimmed hat which partly covered his features, and, under the influence of the feelings that agitated him at the moment, drew himself up to his full height, his face changed so thoroughly, his demeanour all at once became so majestic, that all the spectators, when gazing on him, felt themselves filled with a respect for which they did not even attempt to account.

"Listen to me, brothers and friends," he said in that melodious and sympathetic voice which gained him all hearts, "Don Aníbal said to you, only a moment ago, the time is ripe for our beloved country, the hour of liberty has struck for Mexico. If we really

wish to break the yoke which has so long weighed on us, the moment for the final struggle has arrived; the salvation of our country depends on you, and all is prepared for the grand act which it is our mission to accomplish. Pay the greatest attention to my words, for the news you are about to hear is serious. You are ignorant, I suppose, of the name of the man who opened the door of the dungeon in which I was buried alive, without hope of ever leaving it; this man is Don Agustín de Iturbide, the same man who shot Matamoros, that stoical martyr of our liberty – Iturbide, that ferocious colonel of militia, who has hitherto proved himself the most obstinate enemy of the Mexican insurgents. Don Agustín de Iturbide, that skilful, active, enterprising, and ambitious chief, who learnt the art of war in the ranks of our enemies, has all at once left the false path on which he has hitherto marched in order to become one of our most zealous defenders. Great changes effected in the mother country by Riego's pronunciamiento, have led to the establishment of the Cortés, and the abolition of the Inquisition throughout the Spanish possessions. As you see, the times are changed, the sun is beginning to shine for us through the clouds, our most obstinate adversaries are becoming our warmest partizans. Lastly, the Count del Venadito has been recalled by the Spanish government and is no longer Viceroy, his place being taken by O'Donojú. Let us take advantage of this interregnum, let us make our last heroic effort, and if we like we shall be free; our fate depends on ourselves, is in our hands. Shall we hesitate to rend our fetters?"

At those words, warmly pronounced with a cheering accent and inspired face, the audience felt electrified; an indescribable enthusiasm seized on them, and, drawing their sabres and swords, which they brandished over their heads, they shouted, in a voice of thunder, "Liberty! Liberty!" The priest waited a few minutes, until the generous effervescence caused by his speech had slightly calmed; then, commanding silence by a gesture full of majesty, he continued —

"Iturbide is only waiting for our signal to declare himself for independence, and overthrow the metropolitan government; the southern provinces are already in a flame. Shall we remain behindhand? You are all witnesses of what took place here this very morning; the Spaniards, advised by their spies of the meeting which was to take place at this hacienda, and having no plausible excuse to break it up, assumed the Indian garb to attack us, in order to deceive us, and be able, in the case of a check, to disavow all participation in this unjustifiable act. Their ostensible motive, it is true, señores, was to break up our meeting; but their real motive, the important object they had in view, was to carry me off, and thus paralyze your attempts at insurrection. Caballeros, brothers, and countrymen, one last word, which contains our thought, and traces our duty for us — "To arms! Liberty or death!"

The effect of these words, pronounced with feverish energy, was immense.

"To arms! Liberty or death!" all his hearers shouted.

At this moment the door opened, and a young man appeared; it was Don Melchior, the lad saved by Don Aníbal some fourteen years back, and brought up by him as his son. Don Aurelio had spoken the truth; Melchior was really a charming cavalier, tall and gracefully built, with regular, noble features, and soft black eyes. His dress, without being rich, was extremely neat, and held a middle place between that of the conspirators and of the desert hunters; a straight sabre, called a machete, unsheathed, and passed through an iron ring, hung from his left side, and the butts of two long pistols peered out of the *faja*, or red China crape girdle, fastened round his hips. Don Melchior, after looking curiously around him, glided through the groups and made his way up to Father Pelagio, in whose ear he whispered a few words; the priest started, and his face was slightly flushed, but, recovering himself immediately, he said, raising his voice so as to command attention —

"Señores, I have just heard something which neither you nor I anticipated. Count de Melgosa has just arrived at the hacienda, and insists on being shown in to you, as he says that he has matters of the utmost importance to communicate to us."

This news produced all the effect which the chief of the insurgents expected. All frowned angrily, and a menacing expression of dull irritation appeared on every face.

"What do you propose doing?" Don Aurelio asked. "If our friends give their consent," Fray Pelagio replied, "I will receive him at once. What good is it any longer hiding ourselves?"

We have sufficient force to hold head against an enemy more dangerous than the count can be. Let us burn our vessels bravely, and make head against the storm. What matter whether our enemies learn two hours sooner or later, that we are recommencing the struggle?"

"Viva Dios, you are right," Don Aníbal exclaimed impetuously; "let us confront the storm."

"Let us show," the old man supported him, who had already taken part in the discussion several times; "let us show these haughty Spaniards that we are not afraid of them."

"That is talking like a man of heart," Father Pelagio said with a smile. "Melchior, my child," he added, as he turned to the young man, "be kind enough to introduce El Señor Conde de Melgosa. So great a person must not be kept waiting any longer in the anteroom of a poor Creole."

The last words were uttered with an accent of pure raillery, which brought a smile to the lips of several of the hearers. Don Melchior, without replying, bowed to the priest and left the room. Father Pelagio then drew Don Aníbal and Don Aurelio on one side, and began an earnest conversation with them in a low voice. The door ere long again opened and Melchior appeared preceding another person, whom he introduced as Count de Melgosa. At the time when we bring him on the stage the count was about fifty-five years of age, although he seemed scarce forty, so greatly had his powerful constitution hitherto preserved him against the assaults of old age.

He was a tall and well proportioned man, with a cold and ceremonious manner. His angular features were stern and haughty, and the expression of his face ironical. His eyes, deep set beneath his brows, flashed a gloomy and concentrated fire. There was about his whole person something stiff and constrained, which prevented sympathy. He was dressed in a rich military uniform, and wore the insignia of a colonel in the Spanish army.

A profound silence greeted his entrance into the hall. Not appearing at all affected by this cold and significant reception he lightly raised his hand to his hat without deigning to uncover, and walked with a firm and deliberate step up to Don Aníbal de Saldibar, who, at a sign from Father Pelagio, came to meet him, moving aside the persons in his way so as to offer a free passage to a visitor who was so little desired. When the two men were opposite each other they bowed ceremoniously, and Don Aníbal, as master of the house, spoke first.

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