

Aimard Gustave

The Gold-Seekers: A Tale of California



Gustave Aimard

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PREFACE

The "Gold-Seekers" must be regarded as forming the connecting link between the "Tiger-Slayer" and the "Indian Chief," the concluding volume of this series. It must not be forgotten that the author is dealing with real characters, and that the hero lived and died in the way hereafter to be described; and the three volumes may be considered a life-history of a very remarkable man. Although they may be perused separately with equal interest, I feel confident that those readers who have gone so far with me will desire to know the conclusion of this strange eventful history.

LASCELLES WRAXALL.

PROLOGUE

I. – THE MEETING

On the 5th of July, 184-, at about six in the evening, a party of well-mounted horsemen started at a gallop from Guadalajara, the capital of the state of Jalisco, and proceeded along the road that traverses the village of Zapopan, celebrated for its miraculous virgin. After crossing the escarped summits of the Cordilleras, this road reaches the charming little town of Tepic, the usual refuge of those Europeans and rich Mexicans whom business carries to San Blas, but to whom the insalubrity of the air breathed in that port, the maritime arsenal of the Mexican union, would be mortal.

We have said that six o'clock was striking as the cavalcade passed the gateway. The officer of the watch, after bowing respectfully to the travellers, watched them for a long time, then re-entered the guardroom, shaking his head, and muttering to himself, —

"Heaven save me! What can Colonel Guerrero be thinking of, to set out on a Friday, and at such an hour as this? Does he fancy that the *salteadores* will allow him to pass? Hum! He will see what they are about at the *barranca del mal paso* (the gorge of the evil step)."

The travellers, however, probably unaffected by the superstitious fears that ruled the worthy officer, rapidly sped on the long poplar alley that extends from the town to Zapopan, caring neither for the advanced hour nor the ill-omened day of the week.

They were six in number – Colonel Sebastian Guerrero, his daughter, and four peons, or Indian criados. The colonel was a tall man, with harsh, marked features, and a bronzed complexion. The few silvery threads mingled with his black hair showed that he had passed middle life, although his robust limbs, upright stature, and the brilliancy of his glance denoted that years had not yet gained the mastery over this vigorous organisation. He wore the uniform of a Mexican field officer with the ease and nonchalance peculiar to old soldiers; but, in addition to the sabre hanging by his side, his holsters held pistols; and a rifle laid across the saddle-bow proved that, in case of need, he would offer a vigorous resistance to any robbers who ventured to attack him.

His daughter, Doña Angela, rode on his right hand. In Europe, where the growth of girls is not nearly so precocious as in America, she would only have been a child; for she counted scarce thirteen summers. As far as could be judged, she was slight, but graceful, and perfectly proportioned; her features were delicate and noble; her mouth laughing; her eyes black, quick, and flashing with wit; while her brown hair fell in two enormous tresses down upon her horse. She was wrapped up coquettishly in her *rebozo*, and laughed madly at every bound of her steed, which she maliciously tormented, in spite of her father's reiterated remonstrances.

The servants were powerfully-built Indians, armed to the teeth, and appeared capable of defending their master in case of need. They rode some ten paces behind the colonel, and led two mules loaded with provisions and baggage – an indispensable precaution in Mexico, if travellers do not wish to die of hunger by the way.

Mexico combines all the climates of the globe. From the icy peaks of the Cordilleras, down to the burning coasts of the ocean, the traveller in that country undergoes every temperature. Hence this vast territory has been divided into three distinct zones: *las tierras calientes*, or hot lands, composed of the plains on the seashore, and which produce sugar, indigo, and cotton in truly tropical abundance; *las tierras templadas*, or temperate lands, regions formed by the Cordilleras, and which enjoy an eternal spring, great heat and extreme cold being equally unknown there; and lastly, *las tierras frias*, or cold lands, which include the central plateaux, and where the temperature is relatively much lower than in the other zones.

Still we should remark that in Mexico the expressions "heat," and "cold," have not an absolute value as in Europe, and that the lofty plateaux, known as the *tierras frias*, enjoy a temperature like that of Lombardy, which would seem to any European a very pleasant climate. Owing to its position, Guadalajara shares in two of the three zones that divide Mexico. Situated on the limit of the *tierra caliente* and the *tierra templada*, the tepid breezes and pure sky reveal the warm regions of the seaboard, which extend thus far. The arid sands are succeeded by fertile and well-cultivated plains, fields of sugar-cane, Indian corn, bananas, goyaviers, and other productions of the tropical flora. By degrees the gloomy black oaks and pines, which only grow on the mountains, become rarer, and eventually disappear entirely, to make room for poplars, fan-palms, calabash trees, sumachs, Peru trees, and thousands of others, which proudly wave their superb crowns over the spontaneous vegetation that surrounds them.

In *las tierras calientes*, where the heat of the day is stifling, persons generally only travel from five to eleven A.M., and from three in the afternoon till ten at night, so as to enjoy the morning and evening freshness. Colonel Guerrero had, therefore, only conformed to the general custom by commencing his journey in the evening; but, as so often occurs, he had started later than he wished, owing to those numberless obstacles which ever supervene at the moment of departure, and cause a lengthened delay for no visible reason. But the colonel cared little about the advanced hour: a night march possessed no terrors for him, as he had been accustomed for years to modify his humour by circumstances, and yield to the exigencies of the situation in which he found himself.

The sun set behind the Peak of Teguilla, and the Cerro del Col disappeared in the centre of the chain of tall, abrupt hills which borders the Rio Tololotlan: gradually the scene was veiled in darkness. The travellers progressed gaily conversing together, while following the winding and accidented course of the Rio Grande del Norte, along whose banks their road ran. The latter was wide, well made, and easy to follow. Hence the colonel, after taking a careful glance around to assure himself there was nothing suspicious in the neighbourhood, trusted entirely to the vigilance of the criados, and resumed the conversation with his daughter, which he had for a moment broken off.

"Angela, my child," he said to her, "you are wrong to tease your horse so. Rebecca is a good beast, very gentle, and very sure-footed; and you should be more merciful to her than you are."

"I assure you, papa," the pretty girl answered with a laugh, "I am not in the least teasing Rebecca; on the contrary, I am only tickling her to render her lively."

"Yes, and to make her dance too, as I can plainly see, little madcap. That would be all very well if we were only taking a ride for a few hours, instead of a journey which will last a month. Remember, niña, that a rider must also treat his horse carefully if he wish to reach his destination safe, and sound. You would not like, I fancy, to be left on the road by your horse."

"Heaven forbid, father! If it be so, I will obey you. Rebecca may be at ease in future; I will not tease her."

And, while speaking thus, she bent over her horse's neck and gently patted it.

"There!" the colonel continued, "now that peace, as I suppose, is made between you, what do you think of our way of travelling? Does it please you?"

"I think it charming, father; the night is magnificent, the moon lights us as if it were day; the breeze is fresh, and yet not cold. I never was so happy."

"All the better, my child. I am the more pleased to hear you speak thus, because I so feared the effects of such a journey for you, that I was on the point of leaving you at the convent."

"Thank you, father, for having changed your mind, and bringing me with you. I was so wearied with that wretched convent; and then it is so long since I have seen my dear mother, whom I long to embrace."

"This time, child, you will have ample leisure to do so for I propose leaving you with your mother."

"Then I shall not return to Guadalajara with you?"

"No, child; you will live at my large *hacienda*, Aguas Frescas, with your mother and my most faithful servants, during the period of my absence; for so soon as I have ended the urgent business that demands my presence at San Blas, I shall go to Mexico and join General Santa Anna. His Excellency has done me the honour to send for me."

"Oh!" she said, clasping her hands in entreaty, "you ought to take me with you to the *ciudad*."

"Little madcap, you know perfectly well that is impossible; but on my return I will bring you and your mother the finest things from the Portales des Mercaderes and the Parian, in order that you may eclipse the most coquettish señoras of Tepic, when it may please you to walk on the Alameda of the Pueblo."

"Oh! That is not the same thing," she said with a charming pout; "and yet," she added, suddenly regaining her good humour, "I thank you, father; for you are kind – you love me; and when you do not satisfy my whims, it is because you find it impossible."

"I am glad that you recognise that fact, and at length do me justice, little rattle-brain; for you spend your life in teasing me."

The girl began laughing, and by a sudden impulse letting her reins fall, she threw her arms round her father's neck and kissed him several times.

"Take care what you are about," the colonel said, at once happy and alarmed. "If Rebecca were to bolt you would be killed. Take up your reins at once, I say!"

"Nonsense!" she said, laughing, and shaking her brown tresses carelessly; "Rebecca is too well trained to behave in such a way."

Still she caught up her reins and settled herself in her saddle.

"Angelita mia," the father continued, perhaps more seriously than the circumstances demanded, "you are no longer a child. You ought to begin to grow more reasonable, and moderate the vivacity of your character."

"Do you scold me for loving you, my father?"

"Heaven forbid, my child! I only make a remark which I consider just; for, if you yield in this way to your first impressions, you will prepare great grief for yourself at a future day."

"Do not think that, my kind father. I am quick, careless, impressionable, that is true; but, by the side of those defects, I have the family pride I derive from you, and which will defend me from many faults."

"I hope so, my daughter."

"Do not assume that stern air for a harmless act of folly, father, or I shall fancy that you are angry with me." Then she added, with a laugh, "I remember that our family descends in a straight line from the Mexican king, Chimalpopocatzin, who, as his name indicates, had for his emblem a buckler from which smoke is issuing. You see, father, our character has not degenerated since that valorous king, and we have ever remained as firm as he was himself."

"Come, come," the colonel said good-humouredly, "I shall give up scolding you in future, for I see that it is labour wasted."

The girl smiled maliciously, and was about to reply, when a flash of light was seen in front of the party.

"What is that?" the colonel asked, raising his voice. "Is there anyone on the road?"

"I think so, colonel," one of the domestics answered at once, "for that flash seems to me produced by the flint of a *mechero*."

"That is my opinion too," the colonel said. "Let us hasten on, in order to see this delayed smoker."

The little band, which had hitherto proceeded at a slow pace, broke into an amble. At the expiration of an hour, at the same time as the sound of a horse's hoofs reached the travellers, they also heard the shrill and discordant sounds of a *jarana* (guitar), and the refrain of the following song, so familiar in Mexico, was borne on the breeze: —

"Sin pena vivamos
En calma feliz:
Gozar es mi estrella,
Cantar y reir."¹

"Bravo!" the colonel shouted, who reached the singer at this moment. "Bravely and joyously said, comrade!"

The latter, with a husk cigarette in his mouth, bowed his head in affirmation, and defiantly twanged an air on his jarana; then, throwing it across his shoulder, where it was held by a species of brace, he turned to his addresser, and ceremoniously doffed his vicuna-skin hat.

"May God protect you, caballero!" he said politely. "It seems that the music pleases you."

"Greatly," the colonel answered, scarce able to retain his laughter at the sight of the singular person before him.

He was a tall fellow of eight-and-twenty at the most, marvellously thin, dressed in a ragged jacket, and haughtily folded in a cloak, whose primitive colour it was impossible to recognise, and which was as full of holes as a sieve. Still, in spite of this apparent wretchedness and starving face, the man had a joyous and decided expression about him, which it was a pleasure to look upon. His little black eyes, which looked as if pierced by an auger, sparkled with humour, and his manner had something *distingué* about it. He was mounted on a horse as thin and lanky as himself, against whose hollow flanks beat the straight sword called a *machete*, which the Mexicans continually wear at their side, passed through an iron ring instead of a sheath.

"You are very late on the road, compañero," the colonel continued, whose escort had by this time caught him up. "Is it prudent for you to travel alone at this hour?"

"What have I to fear?" the stranger replied. "What salteador would be such a fool as to stop me?"

"Who knows?" the colonel remarked with a smile. "Appearances are often deceitful, and it is not a bad plan to pretend poverty, in order to travel in safety along the high roads of our beloved country."

Though uttered purposelessly, these words visibly troubled the stranger; still he at once recovered, and continued in a hearty voice, —

"Unfortunately for me, any feint is useless. I am really as poor as I seem at this moment, although I have seen happier days, and my cloak was not always so ragged as you now see it."

The colonel, perceiving that the subject of conversation was disagreeable to his new acquaintance, said, —

"As you did not stop either at San Pedro or at Zapopan, for I presume that, like myself, you came from Guadalajara —"

"It is true," the stranger interrupted him; "I quitted the city about three in the afternoon."

"I suppose," the colonel continued, "that you intend to halt at the mesón of San Juan; so, if you have no objection, we will proceed thither together, for I intend to halt for the night there."

"The mesón of San Juan is a good hostelry," the other said, respectfully lifting his hand to his hat; "but what shall I do there? I have not an *ochavo* to expend uselessly, and have far to go. I will bivouac on the road; and while my horse, poor brute, is sucking its bit, I will smoke cigarettes, and sing that romance of King Rodrigo, which, as you are aware, commences thus."

And quickly bringing his guitar to the front, he began singing in a loud voice, —

"Cuando las pintadas aves
Mudas están, y la tierra

¹ Let us live without annoyance in a happy calm: playing is my star, singing and laughing.

Atenta escucha los rio
Que al mar su tributo llevan:
Al escaso resplandor – ²

"Eh!" the colonel exclaimed, brusquely interrupting, "what musical rage possesses you? It is frenzy."

"No," the singer replied in melancholy mood; "it is philosophy."

The colonel examined the poor fellow for a moment; then drawing nearer to him, —

"I am Colonel Don Sebastian Guerrero de Chimalpos. I am travelling with my daughter and a few servants. Grant me the honour of your company for this night: tomorrow we will separate, and go our several ways."

The stranger hesitated for a moment, and frowned. This shade of dissatisfaction, however, soon disappeared.

"I am a proud fool," he replied with affecting frankness; "misery renders me so susceptible that I fancy people are ever trying to humiliate me. I accept your gracious invitation as frankly as it is offered. Perhaps I may be able to prove my gratitude to you ere long."

The colonel paid no great attention to these words, because, just at the moment, the party arrived at the mesón of San Juan, whose lighted windows had revealed its proximity to the travellers for some time past.

² When the spangled birds are dumb, and the attentive earth listens to the rivers that bear their tribute to the sea by the weak light – .

II. – EL MESÓN DE SAN JUAN

A great deal has been written about the cool and inhospitable way in which Spanish and Sicilian landlords receive the travellers whom Providence sends them; but it is evident to us that those who write in such wise are not acquainted, even by hearsay, with the *mesoneros* or Mexican hosts. Were it so, they would doubtlessly, at their own risk and peril, have rehabilitated those worthy fellows, to discharge the whole weight of their indignation on the *huéspedes* of New Spain.

It is a justice to render to the Spanish and Sicilian landlords, that if they are utterly unable to satisfy in any way the exigencies of travellers, by giving the latter the provisions they demand, still they greet them with so affable a countenance, and veil their refusal under such an exquisite politeness, that in nine cases out of ten the traveller is compelled to allow that he was himself to blame for not laying in the necessary provisions, and therefore sups on apologies.

In Mexico things are very different. On the few high roads formerly constructed by the Spaniards, and which the neglect of the different governments that succeeded them has left in such a state that they will soon disappear completely, there stand, at long distances from each other, vast buildings which resemble fortresses, for they are nearly all surrounded by embattled and loopholed walls. These buildings are the *mesones*, or inns.

The interior is composed, first, of an enormous court, with a *noria*, or well, intended to water the horses. Corrals for the beasts of burden occupy the four corners of this yard. In a separate building are the travellers' *cuartos*; that is to say, miserable dens furnished only with a frame of oak, covered with a cowhide, which serves as a bed. These *cuartos* are numbered, and all open on long corridors. Each traveller is obliged to bring with him the indispensable bedding, for the host only supplies the alfalfa for the horses' provender, and water from the *noria*.

It was about ten at night when Colonel Guerrero arrived at the door of the mesón of San Juan, which was hermetically closed. Upon the repeated blows dealt by one of the servants, a wicket pierced in the wall, about two paces from the gate, at length opened; an ill-tempered face was visible, and a rough voice shouted, —

"Who dares to make such a disturbance at the gate of so honest and respectable a mesón as this?"

"Travellers have arrived, Don Cristoval Saccaplata," the colonel answered. "Come, open quickly, for we have made a long journey, and are tired."

"Hum! They all say the same thing," the host growled. "What do I care for that? I shall not open, it is too late; so go your way, and Heaven protect you!"

And he prepared to close the wicket.

"One moment. Confound you!" the colonel shouted, "you will not let us bivouac in front of your door? That would not be at all honourable for you."

"Bah! A night is soon passed," the host replied with a grin; "besides, you can go on to the mesón del Salto: they will open to you there."

"Don't you know that is eight miles off?"

"Of course I do."

"Come, open, Señor Saccaplata: you would not have the barbarity to leave us out here?"

"Why not?"

"Because, if you do open, you will be rewarded in a way which you will not repent of."

"Yes, yes, all travellers are the same; they make plenty of promises so long as they are outside; but once in, they are not in a hurry to untie their purse-strings."

"That will not be the case with us."

"How do I know?" the *huésped* said, shrugging his shoulders. "My house is full; I have no room left."

"We will find some, dear Saccaplata."

"Halloh! Who are you, pray, who know me so well? Maybe you are one of those *caballeros de la noche* who have been ransacking the country for some time past."

"You are mistaken grossly, and I will prove it to you," the colonel answered, anxious to cut short this open-air conversation. "Take that first," he said, throwing two ounces through the wicket; "and now, to prevent any misunderstanding, know that I am Don Sebastian Guerrero."

The worthy landlord was only sensible to one argument – that which the colonel had so judiciously employed to overcome his resistance. He stooped, picked up the two ounces, which disappeared in a second, and again addressing the travellers, but this time with a tone which he strove to render more amiable, —

"Come," he said, "I must e'en do what you wish, I am too good-hearted. You have provisions, I hope?"

"We have everything we require."

"All the better, for I could not have supplied you. Do not be impatient; I am coming down."

He disappeared from the wicket, and within five minutes could be heard unbarring the door, growling fearfully the while. The travellers then entered the yard of the mesón. The huésped had lied like the true landlord he was; he only had in the house two or three muleteers with their animals, and three travellers, who, by their dress, seemed to be hacenderos from the vicinity.

"Halloh!" Don Sebastian shouted, "someone to take my horse."

"If you begin in that way we shall not be friends long," the huésped said in the sharp tone he had previously employed. "Here, everyone, big or little, waits on himself, and attends to his own horse."

The colonel was far from being of a patient temper. If he had previously endured the host's insolence, it was solely because it was impossible to chastise him; but that reason no longer existed. Sharply dismounting, he drew his pistols from his holsters, thrust them in his belt, and walking boldly toward Señor Saccaplata, seized him by the collar and shook him roughly.

"Listen, master rogue!" he said to him. "A truce to your insolence, and wait on me, unless you would repent it."

The host was so amazed at this brusque way of replying to him, and this assault on his inviolability, that for a moment he remained dumb through confusion and wrath. His face became crimson, his eyes rolled, and he at length shouted in a strangled voice, —

"Help! Help me! Such an insult! By the body of Christ, I will not overlook it! Leave my house at once!"

"I shall not go," the colonel answered peaceably, but firmly; "and you will attend to me immediately."

"Oh! We shall see that. Here, help, Pedro, Juan, Jacinto! Come, all of you, and on to these rascals!"

Seven or eight servants rushed from the corrals at the sound of their master's voice, and ranged themselves behind him.

"Very good," the colonel said, raising his pistols. "I'll blow out the brains of the first scamp who moves a step toward me with bad intention."

We need not say that the peons remained motionless, as if they had suddenly been changed into blocks of granite. One of the colonel's servants had assisted Doña Angela from her horse, and accompanied her to a cuarto, in which he installed her; then he returned in all haste to his master's side, foreseeing that his co-operation would be speedily needed.

The courtyard of the mesón offered a most singular aspect at this moment by the light of the torches of ocote wood, passed through iron rings along the walls. On one side stood the host and his servants; on the other, Don Sebastian's four footmen, with their hands on their weapons, and the guitar player, with his jarana on his back, and his hands folded on his chest; a little on one side, the

travellers and arrieros previously arrived; and in the centre, alone, with his pistols in his hand, the colonel, with frowning brow and flashing eyes.

"Enough of this, scoundrel!" he shouted. "For a long time you have been plundering and insulting the travellers whom Providence sends to you. By heavens! If you do not on the instant demand my pardon for your insolence, and if you do not serve me with all that politeness I have a right to demand from you, I will inflict on you, upon the spot, a correction which you will remember your life long."

"Take care what you are about, my master," the huésped answered ironically. "You see that I have men to help me. If you do not decamp at once, all the worse for you. I have witnesses, and the *juez de letras* shall decide."

"Good heavens!" the colonel shouted, "that is too much, and removes all my scruples. The scoundrel threatens me with the law. Level your pieces, men, and fire on the first who stirs!"

The domestics obeyed. Don Sebastian then seized the host, despite his cries and desperate resistance, and in a second had him down on the ground.

"I believe I shall do a service to all the travellers whom their evil star may in future bring to this den," he continued, "by punishing this scamp as he deserves."

The witnesses of this scene – peons, arrieros, or travellers – had not made a move to help the host. It was evident that all, for certain reasons, were in their hearts pleased with what was happening to him. Not one of them would have dared to take on himself the responsibility of such an act; but as there was someone ready to do so, they were careful not to offer the slightest obstacle to him. By the peremptory order of the colonel, the poor landlord was fastened by two of his own servants to the long pole of the noria, and debarred from making the slightest movement.

"Now," the colonel continued, "each of you take a *reata*, and thrash him till he confesses himself conquered, and consents to do what I ask of him."

Despite their feigned repugnance, the host's two peons were compelled to obey the colonel; for his orders were supported by four rifles and two pistols, whose gaping muzzles were directed point blank at them. To honour the truth, we must confess that, either through terror or for some other cause, the two peons conscientiously performed their duty.

The host howled like a bull. He was mad with rage, and writhed like a viper in the bonds which he tried in vain to break. The colonel stood stoically by his side, only asking him from time to time, ironically, how he liked his arguments, and if he would soon make up his mind to yield. Human strength has limits which it cannot pass. In spite of all his fury and obstinacy, the host was forced to confess to himself, aside, that he had to do with a man more obstinate than he was, and that, if he did not wish to die under the lash, he must resolve to endure the humiliation imposed on him.

"I surrender," he said, in a voice broken as much by anger as by pain.

"Already!" the colonel remarked coldly. "Pooh! I fancied you braver. Why, you have hardly received thirty lashes. Stop, you fellows, and unfasten your master!"

The peons eagerly obeyed. When free, the host tried to rise, but his strength failed him, and he fell back on the ground, where he lay for several moments powerless to move. At length he made a desperate effort, and picked himself up. His face was pale; his features were contracted; an abundant perspiration stood on his temples, which throbbed as if ready to burst; he had a buzzing in his ears; and tears of shame poured from his eyes. He took a few tottering steps toward the colonel.

"I am at your orders, caballero," he said, bowing his head humbly. "Speak: what must I do?"

"Good!" the latter remarked. "Now you are reasonable; you are much better so. Give some provender to my horses, and assist my servants to wait on me."

"Pardon, caballero!" the huésped said. "Will you allow me to say two words to you?"

The colonel smiled contemptuously.

"To what end? I know them, and I will repeat them myself. You wish to warn me that, obliged to yield to superior force, you have done so, but you will avenge yourself on the first opportunity. Is not that it?"

"Yes," he muttered in a hollow voice.

"Very well; you are quite at liberty to do so, master host; but take your precautions, for I warn you that, if you miss me, I shall not miss you. So now wait on me, and make haste."

And, shrugging his shoulders, the colonel turned his back on him with a smile of disdain.

The host watched him depart with a hateful expression, which imparted something hideous to his face; and when he saw that the colonel was out of the yard, he shook his head twice or thrice, muttering to himself, —

"Yes, I will avenge myself, demon, and sooner than you imagine."

After this aside, he composed his face and attended to his household duties with an activity and apparent indifference that caused his servants to be thoughtful, for they knew his rancorous character. Still he did not complain; he made no allusion to the cruel punishment he had undergone, but, on the contrary, waited on the travellers with an attention and politeness they had not been accustomed to prior to this unlucky day; and they took advantage of the change, while keeping on their guard.

Still nothing apparently happened to justify their suspicions – all went on calmly: the travellers retired to bed one after the other; then the host made his round to assure himself that all was in order, and retired to the room reserved for his private use.

The colonel had already been asleep some hours, and was in a deep sleep, from which he was suddenly aroused by a noise he heard at his door.

"Who's there?" he asked.

"Silence!" someone answered outside. "Open; it is a friend."

"Friend or foe, tell me who you are, that I may know with whom I have to deal."

"I am," the voice made answer, "the man you met on the road."

"Hem! What do you want with me? Why are you not asleep at this hour, instead of coming to rouse me?"

"Open, in Heaven's name! I have important news to tell you."

The colonel hesitated for a moment, but soon reflecting that this man, to whom he had done no harm, could have no motive, for being his enemy, he decided on getting up. Still, through prudence, he cocked one of his pistols, which he had placed by his side on retiring to bed, and went to open the door. The stranger walked in quickly, and closed it after him.

"Speak low," he said hurriedly. "Listen to me: the host is forming some scheme against you."

"I suspect it," the colonel said, who, while speaking, had lit a candle; "but whatever he may do, I am out of his reach, and the scoundrel will be crushed if he attack me."

"Who knows?" the stranger said.

"Come, you know something positive. Have I any plot to fear inside the house?"

"I do not think so."

"Tell me what you have discovered, then."

"I will do so; but in the first place, as I am a total stranger to you, allow me to tell you my name."

"For what good?"

"No one knows what may happen in this world: it is useful to be able to distinguish one's friends from one's enemies."

"Speak; I am listening."

"You nearly guessed the truth. Under my starving appearance I conceal a certain monetary value. My name is Don Cornelio Mendoza. I am a student. I had at Guadalajara an aunt, who, on dying, appointed me her heir. I am carrying with me in my belt one hundred and fifty gold ounces, and in my portfolios bills for an equal amount payable at San Blas. You see that I am not so poor as I

appear to be. But the road between the two cities is long and dangerous, and I assumed this disguise to escape the robbers, if that be possible."

"Very good, Don Cornelio: you can now, if you please, change your attire, for I hope that we shall pursue our journey together."

"With all my heart; but if it make no difference, I will retain my lepero dress provisionally."

"As you please; but now to the fact. What have you to tell me?"

"Not much, but yet enough to put us on our guard. Our landlord, after making his round and assuring himself that everyone had retired, woke up one of his servants, the very one who thrashed him with such good will."

"Yes, I remember that rogue's face."

"Very good. After calling him into his room, he remained shut up with him for ten minutes; then he opened a window, the peon leaped out on the highway, and ran off at full speed."

"Oh, oh!" the colonel said.

"The landlord looked after him till he disappeared, then muttered several words I could not understand, excepting one name, which, thanks to Heaven, reached my ear."

"What was it?"

"El Buitre (the Vulture)."

"Hum! Is that all?"

"Yes."

"It does not teach me much; but how did you learn all this? The landlord did not make you his confidant, I suppose?"

"No, not a bit in the world. I became his confidant in spite of himself, and in the most natural way. My cuarto is just over his room. I heard him open a window, and I listened."

"Yes, but unfortunately you heard nothing."

"Yes, a name."

"But a name which has no meaning for us."

"On the contrary, it is of enormous significance."

"How so?"

"The famous leader of the salteadores, whose band has been desolating the province for a year, is called El Buitre. Do you now understand?"

"Body o' me!" the colonel shouted, as he jumped up hurriedly, "I rather think I do understand."

III. – THE GENTLEMEN OF THE ROAD

We will for the moment quit the mesón of San Juan, and proceed about two leagues further on, where certain persons, with whom the reader must form an acquaintance, are assembled.

Hardly one hundred and fifty yards beyond the mesón the road begins to grow narrower; the mountains approach, as if wishful to shake hands, and that so abruptly and unexpectedly, that they form all at once a narrow and long gorge, which is known throughout the country as the *barranca del mal paso*.

After passing through this gorge, the scenery leaves its abrupt and savage aspect to resume a smiling character; the road widens again; a charming valley, intersected by a stream, presents itself to sight; and on all sides the eye surveys a deliciously accidented horizon.

On either side of the barranca begin impenetrable forests, through which a road can only be cut axe in hand, unless the traveller has a deep knowledge of the narrow and almost invisible paths which lead into the interior with innumerable twinings.

We must ask the reader to follow us to one of the most hidden and least known resorts in this forest.

In the centre of a vast clearing, where burned a cedar eighty feet in height, emitting incessant sparks, some twenty men in sordid garments – a horrible medley of luxury and indigence – with faces in which crime was written in capital letters, but all armed to the teeth, were assembled in groups of three or four each, drinking, eating, smoking, and singing.

Not far from them, their horses, saddled and ready to mount at the first signal, were eating their provender of alfalfa and climbing peas; while, on the edge of the covert, four or five men, motionless as bronze statues, were attentively surveying the surrounding country.

A little on one side, two men, seated on low stools, were talking and puffing in each other's faces enormous volleys of smoke. The first and elder of the two appeared about eight-and-twenty years of age; his long, light hair fell in heavy curls on his shoulders; his features were effeminate; but his aquiline nose, his bright blue eyes, and narrow forehead, imparted to his face a character of baseness and cold cruelty. He wore the splendid costume of the Mexican hacenderos, and was carelessly playing with the trigger of a splendid silver-mounted American rifle.

His companion offered a striking contrast to him: while the first was tall, well built, and endowed with pleasing manners, the second was short, stumpy, heavy, and repulsive in face, gestures, and even in language. The richness of his attire only seemed to render more striking the hideousness imprinted as an indelible stigma on this odious person. Everything announced in him the prowling jackal, that possesses all the ferocity of the lion, but none of that animal's nobility or courage.

The clearing we have described was one of the principal haunts of the Vulture, that terrible bandit who, at the time we write of, was ravaging the state of Guadalajara. The men collected in it formed his band, and the two men we have just introduced were, the first, *El Buitre* himself; the second, *El Garrucholo*, his lieutenant and dearest friend.

At the moment we bring them on the stage, these two interesting personages were engaged, as we shall see, in a confidential conversation. We may observe that, strangely enough, this conversation was not held in Spanish, but in English.

"Hem!" El Garrucholo said, as he inhaled a mouthful of smoke, which he immediately sent forth again from his mouth and nostrils. "What do you find so disagreeable in our profession, John? For my part, I consider it delightful. These worthy Mexicans are gentle as lambs; they allow themselves to be plundered with unequalled patience; and you will agree with me, my dear fellow, that we gain more by cutting the buttons from their *calzoneras* than by easing the richest gentleman down there."

"All that is possible, my friend," El Buitre answered, throwing away his cigarette with a gesture of impatience. "I do not assert the contrary. Assuredly the profit is large, and the risk nothing, I grant; but –"

"Well, why do you stop? Go on."

"In a word, I was not born for such a trade."

El Garrucholo gave vent to a hearty laugh.

"That's where the shoe galls you, then?" he said, with a shrug of his shoulders. "You are mad, comrade: every man is born for the trade he carries on, especially when he chose it himself."

"Would you assert by that –?"

"What I say I mean. When I picked you up in Mexico, under the arcades of the Plaza Mayor, with a dagger buried in your breast up to the hilt, and not a real in your pockets, I should have done better, deuce take me, to let you die like a masterless dog, instead of curing you; at least, I should not have heard such nonsense from you."

"Why did you not do so? At any rate I should have died without dishonouring an honourable name."

"Deuce take the honourable name, and the man who bears it! My dear fellow, you annoy me by your ridiculous pretensions; you forget, with your mania for nobility, that you are only a foundling."

El Buitre frowned and seized his lieutenant's arm.

"Enough on that subject, Red Blood; you know that I have already warned you that I would not suffer any jesting on that head."

"Bah! What's the odds about being a foundling? A man ought not to feel annoyed at that; it is one of those accidents for which the most honest fellow cannot be responsible."

"You are my friend, Red Blood; or, at least, seem to be so."

"In your turn, my noble Mr. John Stanley," the bandit sharply interrupted him, "do not express such doubts about me; they grieve and insult me more than I can express. I am attached to you as the blade of my bowie-knife is to the hilt I am yours, body and soul. I have only that one virtue, if it be one; so pray do not strip me of it."

El Buitre remained silent for a moment, and then continued in a conciliating voice, —

"I am wrong. Pardon me, brother; in truth, I have had sufficient proofs of your friendship to have no right to doubt it. Still it seems to me so strange, that I at times ask myself how it comes that you, Red Blood, who hate humanity in a mass – you to whom nothing is respectable or sacred – feel for me a friendship which rises to the most complete abnegation and the most utter weakness. That appears to me so extraordinary, that I would give much to hold the solution of the problem."

"You are an ass, John!" the bandit replied in a mocking tone. "What is the use of telling you why I love you? You would not understand me. Suffice it for you to know that it is so. Do you believe me, then, a perfect ferocious brute, incapable of generous instincts?"

"I do not say that."

"You think it, which comes to the same thing. But it is of no matter to me: I dispense you from gratitude; you may even hate me, and I should not care. I do not love you for yourself, but for myself. But suppose we talk of something else, if you are agreeable?"

"I wish nothing better, for I see that I should lose as much time in trying to draw a good reason from you as in washing a blackamoor white."

"Ta, ta, ta! You are an ass, I repeat. But let me alone; if a certain thing I am now scheming succeed, we shall soon bury El Buitre to bring John Stanley to life again."

The salteador quivered.

"May Heaven hear you!" he exclaimed involuntarily.

"You had better appeal to the other place if you wish to succeed," the bandit said with a grin; "but you trust to me. Soon, I hope, we shall so completely change our skins that fellows will be very

clever who recognise us. Look ye, John: in, this world all that is needful is to take the ball on the bound and turn with the wind."

"I confess, my good fellow, that I do not understand a syllable of what you are saying to me."

"Eh! What do you want to understand for? You never were the worse off for leaving me to guide you. Two words are as good as a thousand. Before long we shall turn our coats, and change, not the trade we carry on so agreeably, but the name under which we do it, to assume one better sounding and more lofty. Look there!" he added, pointing sarcastically at his comrades. "What an imposing collection of honest fellows we shall restore to circulation under our auspices! Will it not be magnificent, after having so long plundered individuals, to become suddenly the defenders of a nation to the prejudice of the government?"

"Yes," El Buitre said thoughtfully, "I have always dreamed –"

"Of carrying on our trade on a grand scale, eh? You were right: there is nothing like doing things properly, if you wish to be held in estimation. Well, be at ease; I will procure that pleasure. At any rate, if luck desert you, you will have the advantage of being shot instead of being hanged or garotted, and that is a consolation."

"Yes," El Buitre said quickly; "in that way a man dies like a gentleman."

"And is not dishonoured, I allow. Ah! The filibusters of old were lucky fellows; they conquered empires, and handed down their names to posterity, the exploits of the hero easily causing the crimes of the bandit to be forgotten."

"Will you never be serious?"

"I am only too much so, on the contrary; for, as you see, although you did not confide in me, I am preparing you a place by the side of the Cortez, the Almagros, and Pizarros, whose glory has so long prevented you sleeping."

"You may jest, Red Blood," the salteador said with an accent of profound emotion; "but if, as I suppose, you appreciate my character at its true value, you know that I only seek one thing – to regenerate these unhappy races, whom a brutalising subjection has plunged during so many centuries into a degrading barbarism."

"You only wish for the welfare of humanity of course," the bandit said with an ironical laugh. "We should not be worthy sons of Uncle Sam, that land of liberty and theoretical philanthropy, did we not dream of the amelioration of society. That is the reason why, while biding our time, we have become of our private authority redressers of wrong, and gentlemen of the road – a charming trade, I may remark parenthetically, and which we carry on conscientiously."

"Go to the deuce, you inexplicable scamp!" the young man exclaimed in a passion. "Shall I never know how to speak or how to deal with you?"

"No," he replied seriously, "no, John, so long as you try to play at hide and seek with me, who know every thought of your heart. Cease to display these pretensions to honesty, which deceive nobody, not even yourself, and become frankly a bandit chief till you can be something else. When the moment has arrived it will be time to put on a cloak of hypocrisy, which will deceive the fools, and consolidate the position you have acquired."

At this moment the shriek of the owl was heard in the thickest part of the forest.

"What's that?" El Buitre asked, not sorry to break off a conversation which was taking a personal turn rather disagreeable to him.

"A signal given by a sentry," El Garrucholo answered; "a spy who doubtlessly brings us news. We are awaiting, as you know, the passing of certain travellers."

"I know it; but they are said to be well armed, and under good escort."

"All the better; they will defend themselves, and that will be a change."

"The truth is, that those we have stopped for some time past seemed to have agreed to let themselves be plundered without a murmur."

"If the information I have received be exact, that will not be the case with the present party."

The owl cry was heard a second time, but now much nearer.

"It is time," El Garrucholo observed.

The two chiefs then put on black velvet masks, and almost immediately a man appeared, led by two bandits. On entering the clearing this individual threw around a glance rather of astonishment than terror: nothing in his conduct showed that he had fallen into an ambushade, for his face was calm, though rather pale, and his step was assured.

The bandits who escorted him led him before the two chiefs, who examined him attentively through the holes in their masks. El Buitre then addressed the bandits in Spanish.

"Where the deuce did you catch that scoundrel?" he said in a rough voice. "He has not an ochavo about him. Hang him, and let us have no more bother."

"Yes," the lieutenant observed, "he is only fit for that, as he was such an ass as to rush into the net prepared for more noble game."

"Permit me, excellency," one of the bandits said, bowing respectfully; "this man was not caught by us."

"How is he here, then?"

"Because, illustrious captain, he earnestly asked to be led into your excellency's presence, as he had matters of the utmost importance to impart to you."

"Ah!" the chief said, but added, "I know the fellow; he is, if I am not mistaken, the huésped of the mesón of San Juan."

The prisoner bowed in affirmation.

It was really the worthy Saccaplata himself. After sending off his criado, and while Don Cornelio was with the colonel, the host thought that nobody could do one's business so well as one's self; and as he was probably anxious that it should succeed, he had started off after the peon, whom he had no difficulty in catching up, for the poor fellow was not at all anxious to execute the commission his master had intrusted to him. Saccaplata sent him back to the mesón; and, while the peon returned in delight, had himself attempted the adventure.

"Indeed!" the lieutenant remarked. "Does Señor Saccaplata wish to enter into business relations with us? That would be an excellent idea."

"I do not say no, honourable caballero," the landlord replied in a honeyed voice. "Business is very bad at this moment, and it is certain that a little extra profit, honestly come by, would be acceptable; but, for the present, I only desire –"

"To the point," El Buitre suddenly interrupted him; "we have no time to lose in silly remarks."

The landlord understood that he must be brief, if he did not wish to bring down certain unpleasantnesses on himself.

"The fact is this," he said: "I have in my house, at the present moment, several rich travellers."

"We know it. What next?"

"Among them is the Señor Colonel –"

"Don Sebastian Guerrero, proceeding to Tepic with his daughter and four servants," the lieutenant interrupted him. "What next?"

"What next?" the landlord said, sadly discountenanced.

"Yes, what next?"

"That is all."

"What, you scoundrel! And you had the effrontery to venture among us, only to tell us a thing we knew as well as yourself?" El Garrucholo exclaimed.

"I thought I was doing you a service."

"You wished to be a spy on us."

"I!"

"Of course. Do you take us for fools like yourself, you wretch? But you shall remember this visit. The *orejada*" he added, turning to the two bandits, who had remained by the landlord's side.

"One moment," the captain said.

Saccaplata, fancying he should escape with the fright, grimaced a smile.

"I will tell you," the captain continued, "why you came to us. You want to revenge yourself on Colonel Guerrero, who a few hours back inflicted on you a well-merited correction."

"But – " the landlord ventured.

"Silence! Do not attempt to deny it. I was there. I saw what occurred. As you are too great a coward to dare to avenge yourself, you thought of us, supposing that we should not refuse to render you that slight service. What do you say – is that the truth?"

"Hum! I would not venture to contradict your excellency," the landlord said, now beginning to regret having entered this wasp's nest.

The bandits, attracted by the colloquy, had gradually drawn nearer, and formed a circle round the speakers, while laughing cunningly to each other. Still, although accustomed to the pleasing eccentricities of their worthy chief, they were far from anticipating the *dénouement* of this scene.

After having proved to Saccaplata as clearly as the day that he knew the motive that led him to offer his good services to the salteadores, the captain continued in these terms, while smiling cunningly: —

"Dear huésped of my heart, we do not refuse to undertake revenging you, the more so as we had already made up our minds to stop the colonel."

"Ah!" the landlord said, beginning to feel easier.

"Yes: still, after reflecting on it thoroughly, we gave up the plan. The colonel is brave – he will defend himself; moreover, he has with him four well-armed and determined men. My faith, it was too great a risk; but if you insist – "

"Immensely!" the other exclaimed, deceived by the bandit's feigned kindness.

"Very good," the other answered, changing his tone; "then it is a matter of business between us. Now, such things are always paid for, as you know, my scamp."

Saccaplata turned involuntarily toward the other salteadores, who were grinning affably at him.

"Consequently," the captain continued with perfect calmness, "you will pay me twenty ounces for your vengeance, which I take on my own account, and ten for your ransom."

"Heaven save me!" the landlord said, clasping his hands in despair. "I never possessed such a sum, not even in a dream."

"That is a matter of perfect indifference to me. I never recall my decision under any circumstances. Another time you will think twice before venturing so rashly into the claws of El Buitre. The orejada – "

"Oh, my lord!" the luckless Saccaplata exclaimed, as he fell on his knees, "I am a poor devil. Have pity on me, noble captain, I implore you!"

"Come, put an end to this."

In spite of his cries and protestations, the landlord was seized and haled off by his guardians, amid the laughter and sarcasms of the bandits, whom the sight promised by the captain delighted.

"Stop!" the huésped suddenly exclaimed; "I think I have a little money about me."

"No, no!" the salteadores shouted. "Give him the orejada all the same."

El Garrucholo made a sign, and order was restored.

"Let us see," he said.

The wretch gave a sigh, and with extreme difficulty, after ransacking all his pockets with many a protestation that he was utterly ruined, which the bandits listened to with stoical indifference, he at last succeeded in making up a little more than half the sum.

"Hum!" the lieutenant said as he pocketed the money, "that is nothing; but I am a good fellow. You have no more?"

"Oh! I swear it, excellency," he said, turning out all his pockets.

"Well," El Garrucholo continued philosophically, "no man is bound to do impossibilities, and as you have only that – "

"I am sure of it," the other said, fancying himself saved.

"Well, then," the lieutenant continued, "let him be only attached by one ear: we must be honest."

An immense burst of laughter from the whole band greeted this proposition. The landlord was carried off to a tree, and before he understood what they meant to do to him, he uttered a frightful yell of pain. A bandit had fastened him to the tree by the right ear, by simply driving his knife through it.

"There, that's settled," the lieutenant said. "Now, I warn you that, if you continue to howl, I will have you gagged."

"Traitors, dogs, assassins, kill me!"

"No. But listen; that wound is nothing. It is easy for you to deliver yourself by a slight tug. Your ear will be torn, I allow, but you can't have everything. As soon as you are free, return home; one of our friends will accompany you, and you will pay him the rest of the sum."

"Never!" the landlord howled, "Never! I would sooner die!"

"Very good; then you shall die, and after that we will carry off the contents of the hiding place you have so cleverly made in the wall of your cuarto, by placing before it a picture of Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe. Eh! What do you think of that?"

The lieutenant had hardly finished speaking ere the landlord, by a sharp movement, had regained his liberty. Without thinking of his frightfully-mutilated ear, he threw himself at the feet of El Garrucholo.

"I accept, my lord, I accept; but I implore you, do not ruin me."

"I was certain you would understand. Be off, scoundrel; and if it is any consolation, know that you will be avenged on the colonel."

"Yes," the landlord muttered to himself, "but who will avenge me on you? Thanks," he added aloud; "that promise causes me to forget my suffering."

"All the better; but mind you, no treachery, or we shall manage to get hold of you again."

Saccaplata bowed, but made no reply. He understood that it would have been better for him to remain at home, and allow matters to follow their course, without seeking a problematic vengeance which cost him thirty gold ounces and an ear. On reaching the mesón he paid the rest of his ransom, and banging the door in the face of the bandit who accompanied him, and thanked him with an air of mockery, he sank on a bench, and overcome by so many terrible emotions, fainted away.

IV. – THE BARRANCA DEL MAL PASO

The rest of the night passed, apparently at any rate, calmly and tranquilly, and nothing occurred to disturb the rest enjoyed by the guests at the mesón of San Juan. About four in the morning the doors of the travellers' cuartos began to open one after the other, and lights flashed in the patios. The shouts of the muleteers, and the bells of their animals, aroused the colonel and his daughter, warning them that it was time to prepare for their departure.

Don Sebastian, after the suspicions Don Cornelio had suggested to him, did not at all wish, as he had a young lady with him, to start before sunrise, especially as he had to traverse the gorge we have already described, and where it would be easy to form an ambushade.

By the sunlight he had a better chance, for two reasons: in the first place, the servants who accompanied him were old soldiers, accustomed to war, and greatly attached to him; the second was, that the Mexican brigands are usually great cowards, and whenever they meet with any serious resistance from those they attack, they immediately give up the game.

These two reasons, and, before all, the fear of alarming his daughter, and uselessly exposing her to danger during the darkness, obliged the colonel to let all the other travellers at the mesón start before him; and, in fact, they soon quitted the hostelry, and dispersed in various directions.

The Señor Saccaplata, with pallid face, compressed eyebrows, and head bandaged up, was walking up and down the patio, with his arms behind his back, every now and then raising his eyes angrily to the colonel's window, and growling in a low voice, —

"Body and bones! Will not that trumpety colonel make up his mind to start soon, if he is so ready to give the bastinado to poor folk? But let him do what he will, he will not escape the fate that awaits him."

At this moment a young man appeared in the patio, strumming a guitar, and singing in a low voice, —

"No sabo donde mirar,
De todo teme y rezela,
Si al cielo teme su furia,
Porque hizo al cielo ofensa."³

These verses, taken from the romance of King Rodrigo, though probably sung without any malignant meaning, still referred so closely to the landlord's present position, that he turned furiously to the unlucky singer, and attacked him in a brutal voice.

"Deuce take your howling! Why do you come buzzing in this way in my ears, when you ought, on the contrary, to be preparing for your departure?"

"Why, it is our worthy huésped," Don Cornelio replied with that joyful accent peculiar to him. "What! You are not fond of music? You are wrong, my worthy friend, for what I am singing to you is really fine."

"That is possible," the other said in a rough voice; "but I should feel obliged by your giving me no more of it."

"Oh, oh! You are not in a good temper this morning. What's the matter with you, that you are so bandaged up? On my soul, you must be ill. Oh! I see what it is; you slept with your window open, and have caught a toothache."

The landlord turned green with impotent fury.

"Caballero," he shouted, "take care."

³ He knows not where to look; he fears or distrusts everything. If he is afraid of the anger of Heaven, why did he insult it?

"Of what?" Don Cornelio said peacefully. "Toothache is not catching, as I am aware. Poor man! Pain causes him to wander. Take care of yourself, my good man; take care of yourself, I advise you."

And without further ceremony he turned his back on him, and began again the song which so annoyed the landlord at the point where he broke it off.

"Hum!" the latter growled, shaking his fist at the singer; "I hope that you will catch something in the row. Ah!" he added, "the sun is rising: perhaps that will induce him to come down."

In fact, the sun appeared at this moment in a bed of vapour, and after a twilight, whose duration was almost nothing, the day succeeded, as it were, immediately to night.

Don Cornelio, aided by the colonel's servants, fed the horses and saddled the mules – preparations which brought a smile to the landlord's lips which would have caused the colonel to feel uncomfortable had he seen it.

Suddenly a sound of horses was heard outside, and two men trotted into the patio, through the gateway left open after the departure of the arrieros and other travellers. At this unexpected arrival the landlord turned as if a viper had stung him.

"Confusion!" he muttered; "day has hardly broken ere these accursed fellows come across my path."

The two arrivals troubled themselves in no way about their host's ill-temper, but dismounted, and taking the bridles off their horses, led them to the noria to let them drink.

The travellers were dressed in the garb of the frontier men, and appeared to be from forty to forty-five years of age. Like all wayfarers in this blessed country, where every man must depend on himself alone, they were armed; but, in lieu of the lance or fusil usual in the interior, they had excellent Mexican rifles – a peculiarity which, in addition to their *zarapés* of Indian manufacture, and their fiery and half-wild mustangs, allowed them to be recognised as Sonorians, or at least men domiciled in that state.

The landlord, seeing that the newcomers did not appear to trouble themselves in the least about him, decided at length on walking toward them and addressing them.

"What do you want?" he said to them.

"Nothing just at present," the elder replied; "but so soon as our horses have finished drinking, you will give each of them a measure of maize and a truss of alfalfa."

"I am the mesonero, and not a peon. It is not my place to wait upon you," he said brutally.

The traveller who had spoken looked askance at the host.

"I don't care whether it is you or your criados who do it," he answered dryly, "provided that the order I have given is executed promptly, for I am in a hurry."

In the face of this rebuff, and especially the glance that accompanied it, the huésped judged it prudent to draw in his horns and assume a more conciliatory tone. For the last few hours poor Saccaplata had not been fortunate with his travellers. All those Heaven sent him had the air of young bulls escaped from the *toril*.

"Your excellencies are doubtless anxious to set out again?" he said in an insinuating voice.

The strangers made no answer.

"Not to be too curious," the landlord continued, not yet discouraged, "may I ask in what direction your honourable seigneuries intend to proceed?"

One of the travellers then raised his head, and, looking the indiscreet mesonero full in the face, said with a mocking air, —

"If you are asked, you will answer that you do not know. Come, my good fellow, have us attended to, and blow your own *puchero*, without troubling yourself about ours: you might find it too hot for you."

The host shrugged his shoulders and slipped away, the more nimbly because he noticed the colonel entering the patio at the moment, and felt no desire to come in contact with him.

The two strangers exchanged a smile, and, without further remark, watched the peon who was giving their horses the provender they had ordered.

Don Sebastian was ready to start: he had come to give a final glance to the horses before leading his daughter downstairs. Don Cornelio walked up to him so soon as he saw him, and after wishing him good day, drew him a little aside and whispered, —

"Look there, colonel," and he pointed to the two strangers; "those are sturdy fellows, if I am not mistaken."

"They are so," Don Sebastian made answer; "I did not notice them before."

"They have only just arrived. They would be famous recruits added to our party, if they would consent to travel with us. What do you think of it?"

"I think you are right; but will they consent?"

"Why not? If they are going the same road as ourselves they will derive the same benefit from our presence as we shall from theirs."

"That is true. Have you spoken to them?"

"No: as I told you, they arrived this moment. You ought to try to persuade them."

"I see no harm in attempting it, at least," the colonel answered.

Hereupon, leaving Don Cornelio, he advanced toward the strangers, and saluting them politely, said, —

"You have magnificent horses, caballeros. I see that they come from the prairies."

"Yes, they are real mustangs," one of the strangers replied, returning the bow.

"You are finishing your journey at a very early hour," the colonel continued. "With horses like yours a deal of ground could be covered."

"What makes you suppose, caballero, that our journey is ended?"

"Why, your arrival at this hostelry at so early an hour."

"Ah! You might be mistaken."

"Pardon my indiscretion, caballeros. Do you come from Guadalajara, or are you going there?"

"Caballero," the stranger replied dryly, who had hitherto spoken, "we the more readily pardon your indiscretion, because it appears that in this hostelry everybody passes his time in asking questions; still, you will permit me not to answer yours. My companion and myself are old travellers, and we know that on the roads of this country men too often repent gossiping about their business, but never of keeping it to themselves."

The colonel drew himself up with an air of pique.

"As you please, caballero," he replied coldly. "I cannot feel annoyed at your prudence; still, I would observe that you have given a wrong meaning to my remarks. I only wished to offer you my escort in crossing an ill-famed gorge, in which the band of the dangerous robber, El Buitre, is at this moment ensconced."

"I know the man by repute," the stranger said in a somewhat more affable tone. "My friend and myself will, I hope, be sufficient to keep him at arm's length; still, though I do not accept your offer, I thank you for the cordiality which urged you to make it."

The conversation broke off here. The two men bowed with all the marks of the most exquisite politeness, and turned their backs on each other. The colonel, annoyed at the way in which his advances had been met, gave the order for departure, and went to fetch his daughter. An instant later he reappeared with her; the band mounted, and, on a signal from Don Sebastian, set out. On passing before the strangers, who watched their departure, the colonel took off his hat, as did Don Cornelio. Doña Angela gave a graceful bow, accompanied by a charming smile. The strangers, in their turn, uncovered and bowed respectfully to the party.

"There, scoundrel," the colonel said as he threw an ounce to the landlord, who watched their departure with a cunning look, "there's a plaster for your wounds."

Saccaplata sharply picked up the ounce, thrust it into his pocket, and crossed himself as he muttered, —

"You will want a good many ounces to cure your wounds, you will. Bah!" he added, with a sinister laugh, "it is now El Buitre's affair; let them settle it together."

When Don Sebastian had left the hostelry he divided his party into three: two of his servants rode in front, gun on thigh; two others behind; while he and Don Cornelio, having Doña Angela between them, rode in the middle. All being thus arranged, and the order given to keep a careful outlook, the cavalcade started at a sharp trot.

In the meanwhile the two strangers, as we have said, remained at the mesón. They watched the little party for a long time, and then, as their horses had finished eating, they put on their bridles and tightened their girths.

"My faith, Don Louis!" the younger of the two at length said, "I can't help it; I must tell you what I have on my mind, or I shall choke."

"Speak, my friend," his comrade said with a sad smile. "I know as well as you do what is troubling your mind."

"Perhaps so; still that would surprise me."

"Listen, then, Belhumeur. You are asking yourself at this moment why I was so rude to that gentleman whom I do not know, and whom I saw for a moment for the first time in my life?"

"By my faith! You have guessed it: that was, in truth, my thought. I seek in vain the reason for such extraordinary conduct on your part, and I confess that I give it up as a bad job."

"Do not trouble yourself any further, my good fellow. I was involuntarily guided by a secret presentiment, by a species of incomprehensible instinct, which forced me to act as I did."

"That is strange."

"Yes, is it not so? You know the feeling of instinctive repulsion one experiences on touching a reptile?"

"Of course."

"Well, when that man advanced toward me, even before I saw him, I felt his presence, if I may say so; my heart beat violently; and when he addressed me I felt a sudden and incomprehensible pain."

Belhumeur regarded him for a moment with fixed attention.

"And you conclude from that?" he said.

"That this man will be my enemy at some appointed moment; that he will stand in my path, gloomy and implacable, and prove fatal to me."

"Come, my friend, that is not possible. You are leaving this country, never to return to it, since, in spite of all your researches, you have been unable to find the man on whose behalf you came. The man you saw this morning is a field officer in the Mexican army, and it is not very likely he will leave his country: everything opposes it. Where can you meet again?"

"I do not know, Belhumeur; I seek neither to guess nor to foresee the future. It is evident that, after leaving you at the Hacienda del Milagro, I shall proceed to Guaymas, where I shall embark, I know not yet for what country; and it is my settled purpose never to set foot in Mexico again. Still I repeat to you, although it may appear absurd, I am convinced that that man will be my enemy some day, and that one of us will kill the other."

"Come, come, I will not discuss that subject with you; it is better for us, I fancy, to start, for we have a long journey before us today."

"That is true, my friend. Let us start, and think no more of my forebodings. They will turn out as Heaven may direct."

"Amen!" Belhumeur said. "That is how I like to see you; thus you resemble my brave Raphael, my dear Loyal Heart, to whom I wish to make you known before leaving you."

"You will afford me the greatest pleasure."

They mounted their horses, paid the landlord, and in their turn quitted the mesón de San Juan, walking their horses in the direction of the barranca del mal paso, where the colonel had preceded them. They proceeded for some time in silence, side by side. At length the Canadian, who could not remain long without speaking, took the word.

"Do you not think, Don Louis, that, supposing the colonel spoke the truth, two men like ourselves would prove very useful to him?"

"What does that concern us?" Don Louis asked sharply.

"Us nothing; and assuredly, if only that soldier, to whom you have such an antipathy, were concerned, I should not trouble myself about him, but leave him to settle with the bandits as best he could."

"Well?"

"Don't you understand me?"

"No, on my honour."

"Did you not notice the charming girl that accompanies him?"

"Of course I did."

"Would it not be frightful – ?"

"Good heavens!" the Count de Prébois Crancé, whom the reader has doubtlessly recognised,⁴ quickly interrupted him, "that would be fearful. Poor child! Forward, Belhumeur, forward! We must save her."

"Ah!" the Canadian thought to himself, "I was sure I should find the soft place."

The two men bowed over their horses' necks, and started with the velocity of the tempest. They had scarce gone a mile when cries and shots reached their ears.

"Forward – confound it, forward!" the count shouted, urging his horse to increased speed.

"Forward!" Belhumeur repeated.

They rushed into the barranca at headlong speed, and fell like two demons into the midst of the bandits, whom they saluted with two shots; then clubbing their rifles, they employed them like maces, bounding into the medley with indescribable fury.

It was high time for this assistance to reach the colonel. Three of his servants were killed; Don Cornelio was lying wounded on the ground; while Don Sebastian, with his back against a block of granite, was desperately defending himself against five or six bandits who assailed him.

El Buitre had seized Doña Angela, and thrown her across his saddle-bow, in spite of her shrieks and resistance; but suddenly Don Louis dealt the bandit a crushing blow on the head, which hurled him to the ground, and delivered the girl. Belhumeur all this time did not remain inactive; he wounded and trampled under his horse's hoofs all those who dared to oppose his passage.

The salteadores, surprised by this sudden attack, which they were far from anticipating – frightened by the carnage the newcomers caused among their comrades, and not knowing how many foes they might have upon them, were seized with a panic fear, and fled in the utmost disorder, clambering up the rocks. El Garrucholo, at the peril of his life, picked up his captain, whom he would not abandon, and El Buitre once again escaped the garota. The salteadores lost in this skirmish more than two-thirds of their numbers.

When tranquillity was restored, and the bandits had completely disappeared, Don Sebastian warmly thanked the two adventurers for the timely aid they had rendered him. Don Louis received politely, but very coldly, the colonel's advances, confining himself to saying that if he had been so fortunate as to save his life, he found a reward in his own heart, and that was sufficient for him; but, in spite of the colonel's pressing, he refused to tell him who he was, alleging as his sole reason that he was about to leave Mexico for ever, and that he did not wish to lay on him a burden so heavy as gratitude. At this remark Doña Angela drew nearer to Don Louis, and said with a smile of gentle reproach, —

⁴ See the "Tiger Slayer." Same publishers.

"It is quite natural that you who have saved our lives should forget the fact, or at least attach but slight importance to it; but my father and myself will remember it for ever."

And before Don Louis could prevent it, the lovely girl bounded like a fawn, threw her arms round his neck, and holding up her pure forehead, which was still rather pale, —

"Kiss me, my saviour!" she said, with tears in her eyes.

The count, affected, in spite of himself, by an action full of such simple frankness, respectfully kissed the maiden's brow, then turned away, that she might not read the sweet and yet painful impression so simple an action had produced on him.

Doña Angela, smiling and blushing, sought refuge in her father's arms, leaving in Don Louis' hand a small relic she usually wore round her neck.

"Keep it," she said to him, with that sweet Spanish superstition so full of grace; "it will bring you good fortune."

"Yes, I will keep it, señorita," the count replied, hiding it in his bosom, "as a reminiscence of a moment of happiness you unconsciously caused me this day, by proving to me that, in spite of misfortunes, my heart is not so dead as I fancied."

The preparations for departure were made. Don Sebastian, deprived of his servants, could not dream of continuing his journey. He decided on returning to Guadalajara, in order to obtain another escort sufficiently strong to protect his daughter from such a danger as that she had escaped by a miracle. He was, however, greatly embarrassed by Don Cornelio, whom he did not wish to abandon, and yet could not transport.

"I will take charge of this man, caballero," Don Louis then said to him. "Do not trouble yourself about him further. My friend and I are in no great haste. We will carry him to the mesón of San Juan, and not leave him till he is thoroughly cured."

Two hours later the two parties separated in front of Saccaplata's mesón, who saw them return with great terror; but the colonel thought it advisable, for Don Cornelio's sake, to appear ignorant of the part the landlord had played in the attack, to which himself and daughter had so nearly fallen victims.

Don Sebastian and Don Louis separated with a frigid bow, like men who are persuaded they will never meet again. But no one can foresee the future, and unconsciously chance was about to bring them hereafter face to face under strange circumstances, the realisation of which neither assuredly suspected at the moment.

End Of Prologue

CHAPTER I

THE NIGHT HALT

Before the discovery of the rich placers in the neighbourhood of San Francisco, California was completely wild and almost unknown. The port of San Francisco, the finest and largest in the world, destined to become very shortly the commercial *entrepôt* of the Pacific, was at that time only frequented by whalers, who, at the period when the whales retire to the shallow water, came to fish there, cut them up, and melt down their blubber.

A few Flat-head Indians wandered haphazard through the vast forests that covered the seaboard; and in this country, which trade has now seized on, and which is entering, with all sail set, into the movement of progress, wild beasts lorded it as masters.

An old officer of Charles X.'s Swiss Guard had founded a poor colony on the territory of San Francisco, and cut down trees, which he converted into planks by the aid of a few watermills.

Such was the condition in which this magnificent country languished, when suddenly the news of the discovery of rich placers in California burst on the world like a shell. Then the country, as if touched by the magic wand of some powerful enchanter, became all at once transformed. From all parts of the world adventurers flocked in, bearing with them that feverish activity and boundless audacity which ignore all difficulties, and surmount every obstacle.

At a spot where, a few days previously, gloomy and mysterious forests, old as the world, stretched out, a city was created, improvised, and within a few months counted its inhabitants by tens of thousands. The port, so long deserted, was crammed with vessels of every sort and every size, and the gold fever renewed the Saturnalia of the Spanish conquistadors of the Middle Ages.

For some time after, this country offered to the eye of the observer a sight the most hideous, the most grand, the most heart-rending, and most striking that can be imagined. All was mingled, confounded, and upturned. It was a confusion, a hurly-burly impossible to describe, where nothing existed any longer – where every tie was broken, every social idea annihilated; and in this terrible pell-mell, in this frightful race to the placers, rogues and gentlemen, soldiers and priests, diplomatists and physicians, jostled each other, all running, howling, wielding the dagger or the revolver, possessed by only one idea, instinct, or passion – that of gold. For gold these men would have sold everything – conscience, honour, probity, everything, even to themselves!

We will not enter into fuller details of this wondrous period, during which California emerged from her nothingness, to take her place, after ten years of desperate struggling, among the civilised peoples. Other pens, far more eloquent than ours, have undertaken the rude task of telling us the history of these striking incidents. We will confine ourselves to stating that, at the period of our story, gold had only just been discovered, and California was struggling against the first raging attack of *delirium tremens*.

It was about three years after the events we narrated in our prologue.

In the Sierra Nevada, upon the picturesque slopes that descend gradually to the sea, in the heart of an immense virgin forest a hundred leagues from San Francisco, between that city and Los Angeles, the heat had been stifling during the day. At sunset the sea breeze had risen, and slightly refreshed the atmosphere; but it sank again almost immediately, and the temperature had again become heavy and oppressive.

The motionless trees concealed beneath their dense foliage birds of every description, which only revealed their presence at intervals by shrill and discordant cries. Hideous alligators wallowing in the mud of the swamps, or holding on to the trunks of dead trees scattered here and there, were the only living beings that animated the landscape, which was rendered even more gloomy and mournful by the pale, uncertain, and tremulous flickering of the moonbeams that filtered with great difficulty

through the rare openings in the verdurous forest dome, and sported capriciously and fantastically about the trees and branches, though unable to lessen the mysterious obscurity that reigned in the leafy covert.

A noise of horses' hoofs was heard on one of the innumerable tracks made by the wild beasts as they proceed in search of water, and two men debouched into a clearing formed by the fall of several trees that had died of old age, and whose mossy trunks were already in a state of decomposition.

These men were both dressed in the costume of hunters or wood rangers, and were armed with American rifles, long knives, and *machetes*. A *reata*, rolled up and fastened to the saddle-bow, allowed them to be recognised as partisans from the Mexican frontiers.

Both had passed middle life; but there the resemblance between them ended. At the first glance it was easy to guess that one belonged to the Northern European race; while his comrade, on the contrary, by the olive tint of his complexion, and his angular features, offered a perfect type of the Indian aborigines of Chili, so eloquently celebrated by Ercilla, and known in South America by the name of Araucanos – a powerful, intelligent, and energetic race, the only one of all the native tribes of the New World which has managed to retain its nationality, and caused its independence to be respected to the present day.

These two men were Valentine Guillois, better known as the "Trail-hunter," and Curumilla, his silent and devoted companion ever since the day that chance so many years previously had led Valentine into Araucania.⁵

Years, while accumulating on the heads of the two men, had produced but a slight change in their external appearance. They were still quite upright, and seemed equally vigorous. A few more wrinkles had formed on the Frenchman's pensive brow, and some silvery threads were added to his locks; his features, more angular than before, had assumed those firm and distinct lines, alone produced by reflection and long contests valiantly sustained; his eye was still equally frank, but the flash was more incisive; and his face wore that melancholy impression which deceptions of every description, and great grief, stamp indelibly on the countenance of powerful men, whom the fearful storms of life have bowed, though not broken.

The Indian was still morose and concentrated. Age, which had laid even a smaller hold on his organisation than on that of his comrade, had merely increased the worthy Araucanian's habitual taciturnity, and drawn over his gloomy face a thicker veil of that stoical fatalism peculiar to the aboriginal race of America.

The two men advanced slowly side by side, apparently plunged in deep thought. At times Valentine stopped, looked cautiously around him, and then resumed his march, shaking his head dubiously. Each time that the hunter reined in his horse Curumilla imitated him, though not evidencing by the slightest sign that he took any interest in his companion's operations.

The forest grew with each step denser, the paths became narrower, and all appeared to forebode that the horses would soon be unable to advance, impeded as they were by the creepers that were intertwined into a thick trellis-work in front of them.

The two horsemen at length reached the clearing to which we have already alluded, after intense difficulty. On arriving there, Valentine stopped, and heaving a sigh of relief, —

"By Jove!" he said, "Curumilla, my good friend, I was mad to believe you and follow you so far; it is evident that we are lost."

The Indian shook his head in denial.

"Hem! I am aware that you fellows have a marvellous talent for following a trail, and that you rarely lose your way, even in a place you have never visited before. Still the darkness is so intense here, that I can hardly distinguish objects only two paces ahead of me. Come, allow that we have lost ourselves. Hang it! That may happen to anybody. I propose that we stop here and await sunrise before

⁵ These two characters have been introduced in another work by our author, and are old friends to French readers.

we renew our search, the more so because, for nearly two hours, it has been impossible to discover the slightest trace proving to us that we are still on the right road."

Curumilla, without replying, dismounted, and explored the clearing on all sides; then, at the expiration of a few minutes, he returned to his friend's side, and gave him a sign to mount again. Valentine had carefully followed his movements.

"Well," he said, checking him, "are you not convinced yet?"

"One hour more," the Indian replied, liberating himself gently, and getting into his saddle.

"Hang, it all!" Valentine said, "I confess I am growing tired of playing at hide and seek in this inextricable forest, and if you do not give me a positive proof of what you assert, I will not stir from this spot."

Curumilla bent toward him, and, showing him a small object, said, —

"Look!"

"Eh?" Valentine remarked in surprise, after carefully examining the object his comrade handed him. "What the deuce is it? Why," he added almost immediately, "I ought to have recognised it at once: it is a cigar-case, and a handsome one too. There is a cigar still in it, if I am not mistaken."

He remained for an instant in thought.

"It is true," he went on, "that I have not seen these luxurious products of civilisation for a long time; indeed, since I gave them up to lead the life of a free hunter. Where did you find it, Curumilla?"

"There," he answered, stretching out his arm.

"Good! The owner of that case cannot be far from us, so let us push on."

He pocketed the case, and the two horsemen set out once more.

After crossing the clearing, the path on which they entered began gradually to widen, and soon they noticed, by the moonbeams that lighted them at intervals, that the path had been trodden by a large number of cloven-footed animals, which had cropped the leaves and broken down the branches on both sides. These traces were still quite fresh.

"Come," Valentine said gaily, "I was wrong just now, Curumilla. We were really on the right track, and I believe we shall soon catch up the persons we have so long been seeking."

Something like a smile attempted to contract the Indian's features; but the attempt was not a happy one, and stopped at a grimace. All at once Curumilla laid his hand on his comrade's bridle, and bending forward, —

"Listen," he said.

Valentine listened attentively; but, for all that, several moments passed ere he could distinguish aught else than those confused and mysterious sounds which never expire in the desert: at length something resembling a musical note borne on the breeze gently died away on his ear. The hunter started back in surprise.

"Ah, by Jupiter!" he exclaimed, "that musician has chosen a strange time to give a concert. I am curious to see such an original a little nearer. Let us push on."

After marching for about a quarter of a mile further they began to see a fire flashing through the trees, and distinctly heard a masculine and sonorous voice singing to the accompaniment of a jarana. The hunters stopped in surprise, and listened.

"By heaven!" the Frenchman muttered, "it is the romancero of King Rodrigo, sung by an unknown voice at night in the heart of a virgin forest. Never has that powerful poetry affected me so deeply. In truth, everything here harmonises with that song, which is so thoroughly sorrowful and despairing. Whoever he may be, I must see the man who has unconsciously caused me a few moments of such gentle emotion. Were it the demon in person, I would shake his hand ere the last strains had ceased vibrating on the strings of his jarana."

And without further deliberation, Valentine, after giving Curumilla a sign to follow him, resolutely entered the circle of light. At the sound of horses' hoofs, the stranger, with a movement

swift as thought, threw the guitar across his back, and leaped up with a sabre in his right hand and a revolver in the other.

"Hold!" he shouted boldly; "stop, if you please, caballero, or I shall fire."

"Pray do not do so, señor," Valentine answered, who considered it prudent to obey the order given him, "for you would run the risk of killing a friend, and they are too rare in the desert to be received, when met, by a pistol shot."

"Hum! I trust what you say is true," the other answered, still on the defensive; "still I should feel obliged by your explaining to me, in two words, who you are, and what you are seeking after the acquaintance becomes more intimate between us."

"Of course, caballero; I see no inconvenience in satisfying your wishes, especially as prudence is one of the theological virtues recommended in the regions where we now are."

"On my soul, you appear to me to be a jolly fellow! I hope we shall become friends ere long; and to prove to you that I sincerely desire it, and at the same time to arouse your confidence, I will begin by telling you who I am, which will not take long."

"Pray do so."

The stranger then thrust his revolver into his belt, took three paces forward, removed his wide-brimmed hat, whose long feather swept the ground, and saluted his new acquaintance ceremoniously.

"Señor caballero," he said with infinite grace and politeness, "my name is Don Cornelio Mendoza de Arrizabal, gentleman of the Asturias, noble as the king, and poor at this moment as Job of Bohemian memory. The few *novillos* lying around me are my property, and that of my partner, absent at this moment in search of a few strayed members of the herd, but whom I expect at any moment. These animals were purchased by us at Los Angeles, and we are taking them to San Francisco, with the purpose of selling them at the best price to the gold-seekers and other adventurers collected in that curious city."

After uttering this short speech the young man bowed again, put his hat on his head, placed the point of his sabre on his boot, and waited, foot forward, and his hand on his hip.

Valentine had listened attentively, and when he spoke of his partner a flash of joy sparkled in the hunter's eyes.

"Caballero," he answered, uncovering in his turn, "my friend and myself are two wood rangers, hunters, or trail-seekers, whichever you may please to term us. Attracted by the light of your fire, and the harmonious song that reached our ears, we came toward you for the purpose of claiming from you that hospitality which is never refused in the desert, offering to share our provisions with you, and to be hail fellows well met so long as we may remain in your agreeable company."

"You are welcome, caballeros," Don Cornelio replied nobly. "Pray consider the little we possess as your own."

The hunters bowed and dismounted.

CHAPTER II

FIFTEEN YEARS' SEPARATION

The reception offered the travellers by Don Cornelio was stamped with that graceful kindness and careless ease which so eminently distinguish the Spanish character. Although the adventurer's resources were extremely limited, still he gave the little he possessed with such complacency and so much good humour to his guests, that the latter knew not how to thank him for the attentions he lavished upon them.

After supping as well as they could on *tasajo* (jerked meat) and *tortillas* of maize, washed down with *pulque* and *mezcal*, they carefully wrapped themselves in their zarapés, lay down on the ground with their feet to the fire, and soon appeared to be buried in a deep sleep.

Don Cornelio took up his jarana, and leaning against a larch tree, hummed one of those interminable Spanish romances he was so fond of, in order to keep awake while awaiting his partner's return.

The bivouac where our friends now found themselves was certainly not without a degree of the picturesque. The uncertain gleams of the fire were reflected fantastically on the heads of some seven hundred and fifty novillos, lying side by side, ruminating and sleeping, while the horses were devouring their provender, stamping and neighing. The Spaniard twanged his guitar, and the two hunters slept peacefully. This scene, at once so simple and so singular, was worthy the pencil of Callot.

Two hours thus passed away, and nothing occurred to disturb the repose the encampment enjoyed, and the moon sank lower and lower on the horizon. Don Cornelio's fingers stiffened; his eyes closed; and at times, despite his efforts to keep awake, his head fell on his chest. In despair, the Spaniard at last, beaten by fatigue, was about to yield to the sleep that overpowered him, when a distant noise suddenly dispelled his somnolency, and restored him the full use of his mind and other faculties.

By degrees this noise, at first vague and indistinct, became louder; and a horseman, armed with a long goad, entered the clearing, driving before him a dozen novillos and half-savage bulls. After being helped by Don Cornelio in stockading the straying animals he brought back, the partner, who was no other than Count Louis de Prébois, dismounted and sat down to the fire with that nonchalance and careless motion produced in energetic natures, not so much by fatigue as by discouragement and moral lassitude.

"Ah!" he said, looking at the two men stretched out at the fire, and who, in spite of the noise caused by his arrival, still slept, or appeared to do so, "we have visitors, I see."

"Yes," Don Cornelio made answer, "two hunters from the great prairies. I thought I ought not to refuse them hospitality."

"You have done well, Don Cornelio: no one has a right in the desert to refuse the stranger, who asks for them courteously, the heat of his fire and a moiety of his *tasajo*."

"That was my idea."

"Now, my friend, lie down by our guests and rest yourself. This long watch after the day's toil must have fatigued you beyond measure."

"But will you not sleep a few moments, Don Louis? Rest must be more necessary to you than to myself."

"Permit me to watch," the count answered with a sad smile. "Rest was not made for me."

Don Cornelio did not press him any further. Long accustomed to his companion's character, he considered it useless to make any more objections. A few moments later, wrapped in his zarapé, and with his head on his jarana for a pillow, he slept soundly.

Don Louis threw a few handfuls of dry wood on the fire, which threatened to expire, crossed his arms on his chest, and, leaning his back against a tree, indulged in his thoughts, which were doubtlessly sorrowful and very bitter; for the tears soon fell from his eyes, and ran down his pallid cheeks, while stifled sighs exhaled from his bosom, and muttered words escaped from his lips, crushed between his teeth by sorrow.

So soon as the count, after ordering Don Cornelio to take some repose, fell down exhausted at the foot of a tree, the hunter, who appeared to be sleeping so profoundly, suddenly opened his eyes, rose, and walked gently toward him step by step.

Several hours passed away thus, Louis being still plunged in mournful thoughts, Valentine standing behind him, leaning on his rifle, and fixing on him a glance full of strange meaning.

The stars gradually expired in the depths of the sky, an opal-coloured band began slowly to stripe the horizon, the birds awoke beneath the foliage, sunrise was at hand. Don Louis let his head fall on his chest.

"Why struggle longer?" he said in a hoarse, deep voice. "What good to go farther?"

"Those are very despairing words in the mouth of a man so strong as Count Louis de Prébois," a low but firm voice whispered in his ear, with a tone of gentle and sympathising reproach.

The count shuddered as if he had received an electric shock; a convulsive tremor agitated all his limbs; and he bounded to his feet, examining with haggard eye, pale brow, and disordered features, the man who had so suddenly replied to the words pain had torn from him. The hunter had not changed his position; his eye remained obstinately fixed upon him, with an expression of melancholy, pity, and paternal kindness.

"Oh!" the count muttered in terror, as he passed his hand over his dank forehead; "it is not he – it cannot be he! Valentine, my brother! – you whom I never hoped to see again – answer, in Heaven's name, is it you?"

"'Tis I, brother," the hunter said gently, "whom Heaven brings a second time across your path when all seems once again to fail you."

"Oh!" the count said with an expression impossible to render, "for a long time I have been seeking you – for a long time I have called on you."

"Here I am."

"Yes," he continued, shaking his head mournfully, "you are here, Valentine; but now, alas! It is too late. All is dead in me henceforth – faith, hope, courage: nothing is left to me – nothing but the desire to lie in that tomb, where all my belief and all my departed happiness are buried eternally!"

Valentine remained silent for a few moments, regarding his friend with a glance at once gentle and stern. A flood of memories poured over the hunter's heart; two glistening tears escaped from his eyes, and slowly coursed down his bronzed cheeks; then, without any apparent effort, he drew the count toward him, laid his head on his wide and loyal chest, and kissed him paternally on the forehead.

"You have suffered, then, severely, my poor Louis," he said to him tenderly. "Alas, alas! I was not there to sustain and protect you; but," he added, turning to heaven a glance of bitter sadness and sublime resignation, "I too, Louis, I too, in the heart of the desert, where I sought a refuge, have endured agonising grief. Many times I felt myself strangled by despair; often and often my temples were crushed in by the pressure of the furious madness that invaded my brain; my heart was broken by the terrible anguish I endured; and yet, brother," he added in a soft voice, filled with an ineffable melodiousness, "yet I live, I struggle, and I hope," he said, so low that the count could hardly hear him.

"Oh! Blessed be the chance that brings us together again when I despaired of seeing you, Valentine."

"There is no such thing as chance, brother: it is God who prepares the accomplishment of all events. I was seeking you."

"You were seeking me over here?"

"Why not? Did you not yourself come to Mexico to find me?"

"Yes; but how did you learn the fact?"

Valentine smiled.

"There is nothing extraordinary in it. If you wish it, I will prove to you in a few words that I am much better informed than you suppose, and that I know nearly all that has happened to you since our separation at the hacienda of the Paloma."

"That is strange."

"Why so? About three months ago were you not at the Hacienda del Milagro?"

"I was."

"You left it after spending some days there on your return from a journey you had undertaken to the far west, in search of a rich auriferous placer?"

"It is true."

"During that expedition, full of strange and terrible incidents, two men accompanied you?"⁶

"Yes; a Canadian hunter and a Comanche chief."

"Very good. The hunter's name was Belhumeur, the chief's Eagle-head, I think?"

"They were."

"Do you not remember revealing to Belhumeur (a worthy and honourable hunter, by the way) the reason of the gloomy sorrow that devours you, and for what motives, mere vague suspicions though they were, you had come to Mexico in order to look for your dearest friend, from whom you had been separated so many years?"

"Yes, I remember telling him all that."

"The rest is not difficult to comprehend. I have known Belhumeur many years, and Heaven brought us together during a hunt on the Rio Colorado. One night, while seated at the fire, where our supper was roasting, after talking about a thousand indifferent things, Belhumeur, whom you had left only a few days previously, began by degrees to talk about you. At first, absorbed in my own thoughts, I paid but slight attention to his recital; but when he described to me your meeting with Count de Lhorailles in the desert, your name, uttered by Belhumeur unintentionally, made me tremble. It was then my turn to cross-question him. When I had learned everything, by making him tell the story twenty times over, my resolution was immediately formed, and two days later I set out on your track. For three months I have been following you, and have at last come up with you – this time, I hope, never to part again," he added with a stifled sigh. "Still I do not know what has occurred to you during the last three months. Tell me what you have been about. I am listening."

"Yes, I will tell you all. My object, indeed, in seeking you was to demand the fulfilment of a solemn promise."

The hunter's brow grew dark, and he frowned.

"Speak," he said; "I am listening. As for the promise to which you allude, when the moment has arrived I shall know how to fulfil it."

"The sun is rising," Louis answered with a sad smile; "I must pay the proper attention to my herd."

"I will help you. You are right; those poor brutes must not be neglected."

At this moment the gloom was dispersed as if by enchantment; the sun appeared radiant on the horizon; and thousands of birds of every variety, hidden beneath the foliage, gaily celebrated its advent by singing their matin hymn to it.

Don Cornelio and Curumilla shook off the torpor of sleep, and opened their eyes. The Indian chief rose, and walked toward Valentine with that slow and majestic step peculiar to him.

"Brother," the latter said, taking the Araucanian's hand in his own, "I was not alone in my search for you. I had near me a friend whose heart and arm never failed me, and whom I have ever found ready to help me in weal and woe."

⁶ See "The Tiger Slayer." Same publishers.

Don Louis gazed doubtfully at the man whom the hunter pointed out to him, and who stood motionless and stoical before him. Gradually his features were expanded, his memory returned, and he affectionately offered his hand to the Indian, saying with deep emotion, —

"Curumilla, my brother!"

At this proof of memory and friendship, after the lapse of so many years – this frank and true emotion on the part of a man to whom he had already given so many marks of devotion – the crust of ice that surrounded the Indian's heart suddenly melted, his face assumed an earthy hue, and a convulsive tremor agitated all his limbs.

"Oh, my brother Louis!" he exclaimed with an accent impossible to describe.

A sob resembling a roar burst from his chest; and, ashamed of having thus betrayed his weakness, the chief turned quickly away, and hid his face in the folds of his robe.

Like all primitive and energetic natures, this man, on whom adversity had no effect, was moved like a weak child by the immense joy he experienced at seeing once again Don Louis, the man whom Valentine loved more than a brother, and whose absence he had so long lamented.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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