

Aimard Gustave

The Trail-Hunter: A Tale of the Far West



Gustave Aimard

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PART I. RED CEDAR

CHAPTER I

THE VIRGIN FOREST

In Mexico the population is only divided into two classes, the upper and the lower. There is no intermediate rank to connect the two extremes, and this is the cause of the two hundred and thirty-nine revolutions which have overthrown this country since the declaration of its independence. Why this is so is simple enough. The intellectual power is in the hands of a small number, and all the revolutions are effected by this turbulent and ambitious minority; whence it results that the country is governed by the most complete military despotism, instead of being a free republic.

Still the inhabitants of the States of Sonora, Chihuahua, and Texas have retained, even to the present day, that stern, savage, and energetic physiognomy which may be sought in vain among the other States of the Confederation.

Beneath a sky colder than that of Mexico, the winter, which frequently covers the rivers of the region with a thick layer of ice, hardens the muscles of the inhabitants, cleanses their blood, purifies their hearts, and renders them picked men, who are distinguished for their courage, their intelligence, and their profound love of liberty.

The Apaches, who originally inhabited the greater portion of New Mexico, have gradually fallen back before the axe of the pioneers; and after retiring into the immense deserts that cover the triangle formed by the Rio Gila, the Del Norte, and the Colorado, they ravage almost with impunity the Mexican frontiers, plundering, firing, and devastating all they meet with on their passage.

The inhabitants of the countries we alluded to above, held in respect by these ever-shifting savages, are in a state of continual warfare with them, always ready to fight, fortifying their haciendas, and only travelling with weapons in their hands.

El Paso del Norte may be regarded as the outpost of the civilised portion of Mexico. Beyond that, to the north and north-west, extend the vast unfilled plains of Chihuahua, the *bolsón* of Mapimi, and the arid deserts of the Rio Gila. These immense deserts, known by the name of Apacheria, are still as little investigated as they were at the close of the eighteenth century. El Paso del Norte owes its name to its situation near a ford of the Rio Del Norte. It is the oldest of all the New Mexican settlements, and its establishment dates back to the close of the sixteenth century. The present settlement is scattered for a distance of about ten miles along the banks of the Del Norte, and contains four thousand inhabitants at the most. The *plaza*, or village of the Paso, is situated at the head of the valley: at the other extremity is the Presidio of San Elezario. All the interval is occupied by a continuous line of white, flat-roofed houses, buried in gardens, and surrounded by vineyards. About a mile above the ford the stream is dammed up, and led by a canal into the valley, which it waters. Apacheria begins only a few miles from this settlement.

It is easily seen that the foot of civilised man has only trodden timidly and at rare intervals this thoroughly primitive country, in which nature, free to develop herself under the omnipotent eye of the creator, assumes an aspect of incredible beauty and fancifulness.

On a lovely morning in the month of May, which the Indians call "the moon of the flowers," a man of high stature, with harsh and marked features, mounted on a tall, half-tamed steed, started

at a canter from the plaza, and after a few minutes of hesitation, employed in realising his position, resolutely buried his spurs in the horse's flanks, crossed the ford, and after leaving behind him the numerous cottonwood trees which at this spot cover the river banks, proceeded toward the dense forest that flashed on the horizon.

This horseman was dressed in the costume generally adopted on the frontiers, and which was so picturesque that we will give a short description of it. The stranger wore a pelisse of green cloth, embroidered with silver, allowing a glimpse of an elegantly-worked shirt, the collar of which was fastened by a loosely-knotted black silk handkerchief, the ends passed through a diamond ring. He wore green cloth breeches, trimmed with silver, and two rows of buttons of the same metal, and fastened round the hips by a red silken scarf with gold fringe. The breeches, open on the side half way up the thigh, displayed his fine linen drawers beneath: his legs were defended by a strip of brown embossed and stamped leather, called *botas vaqueras*, attached below the knee by a silver garter. On his heels enormous spurs clanked. A *manga*, glistening with gold, and drawn up on the shoulder, protected the upper part of his body, while his head was sheltered from the burning sunbeams by a broad-leafed hat of brown stamped felt, the crown of which was contracted by a large silver *toquilla* passed twice or thrice round it.

His steed was caparisoned with graceful luxuriousness, which heightened all its beautiful points: a rich saddle of embossed leather, adorned with massive silver, on the back of which the *zarapé* was fastened; wide Moorish silver stirrups, and handsome water bottles at the saddle-bow; while an elegant *anquera*, made of openwork leather, and decorated with small steel chains, entirely covered the horse's croup, and sparkled with its slightest movement.

The stranger appeared, judging from the luxury he displayed, to belong to the high class of society. A *machete* hung down his right side, two pistols were passed through his girdle, the handle of a long knife protruded from his right boot, and he held a superbly damascened rifle across the saddle in front of him.

Bending over the neck of his galloping steed, he advanced rapidly without looking round him, although the landscape that lay extended before him was one of the most attractive and majestic in those regions.

The river formed the most capricious windings in the centre of a terrain diversified in a thousand strange ways. Here and there on the sandy banks enormous trees might be seen lying, which, dried up by the sun, evidenced, in their washed-out appearance, that they had been dead for centuries. Near the shallow and marshy spots, caymans and alligators wandered about awkwardly. At other places, where the river ran almost straight, its banks were uniform, and covered with tall trees, round which creepers had twined, and then struck root in the ground again, thus forming the most inextricable confusion. Here and there small clearings or marshy spots might be detected in the midst of the dense wood, often piled up with trees that had died of old age. Further on, other trees, which seemed still young, judging from their colour and the solidity of their bark, fell into dust with the slightest breath of wind.

At times, the earth, entirely undermined beneath, drawn down by its own weight, dragged with it the wood which it bore, and produced a crashing, confused sound, which was returned on all sides by the echo, and possessed a certain degree of grandeur in this desert, whose depths no man has ever yet ventured to scrutinise.

Still the stranger galloped on, with his eye ardently fixed before him, and not appearing to see anything. Several hours passed thus: the horseman buried himself deeper in the forest. He had left the banks of the river, and only progressed with extreme difficulty, through the entanglement of branches, grass, and shrubs, which at every step arrested his movements, and forced him to make innumerable turnings. He merely reined in his horse now and then, took a glance at the sky, and then started again, muttering to himself but one word:

"*Adelante!* (Forward!)"

At length he stopped in a vast clearing, took a suspicious glance around him, and probably reassured by the leaden silence which weighed on the desert, he dismounted, hobbled his horse, and took off its bridle that it might browse on the young tree shoots. This duty accomplished, he carelessly lay down on the ground, rolled a maize cigarette in his fingers, produced a gold *mechero* from his waist belt, and struck a light.

The clearing was of considerable extent. On one side the eye could survey with ease, through the trees, the widely extending prairie, on which deer were browsing with security. On the other side, the forest, wilder than ever, seemed, on the contrary, an impassable wall of verdure. All was abrupt and primitive at this spot, which the foot of man had so rarely trodden. Certain trees, either entirely or partially dried up, offered the vigorous remains of a rich and fertile soil; others, equally ancient, were sustained by the twisted creepers, which in the course of time almost equalled their original support in size: the diversity of the leaves produced the strangest possible mixture. Others, containing in their hollow trunk a manure which, formed of the remains of their leaves and half-dead branches, had warmed the seeds they had let fall, and offered, in the young shoots they contained, some compensation for the loss of their father tree.

In the prairies, nature, ever provident, seems to have been desirous to shelter from the insults of time certain old trees, patriarchs of the forest which are crushed beneath the weight of ages, by forming them a cloak of greyish moss, which hangs in festoons from the highest branches to the ground, assuming the wildest and most fantastic shapes.

The stranger, lying on his back, with his head resting on his two crossed hands, was smoking with that beatitude, full of ease and sloth, which is peculiar to the Hispano-Americans. He only interrupted this gentle occupation to roll a fresh cigarette and cast a glance around, while muttering:

"Hum! He keeps me waiting a long time."

He emitted a puff of bluish smoke, and resumed his first position. Several hours passed thus. Suddenly, a rather loud rustling was heard in the thicket, some distance behind the stranger.

"Ah, ah!" he said, "I fancy my man is coming at last."

In the meanwhile, the sound became louder, and rapidly approached.

"Come on, hang it!" the horseman shouted, as he rose. "By our Lady of Pilar! You have surely been keeping me waiting long enough."

Nothing appeared: the clearing was still deserted, although the sound had attained a certain degree of intensity. The stranger, surprised at the obstinate silence of the man he was addressing, and specially by his continuing not to show himself, at length rose to see for himself the reason. At this moment, his horse pricked up its ears, snorted violently, and made a sudden effort to free itself from the lasso that held it; but our new acquaintance rushed toward it and patted it. The horse trembled all over, and made prodigious bounds in order to escape. The stranger, more and more surprised, looked round for an explanation of these extraordinary movements, and was soon satisfied.

Scarce twenty yards from him a magnificent jaguar, with a splendidly-spotted hide, was crouched on the main branch of an enormous cypress, and fixed on him two ferocious eyes, as it passed its blood-red, rugged tongue over its lips with a feline pleasure.

"Ah, ah!" the stranger said to himself in a low voice, but displaying no further excitement, "I did not expect you; but no matter, you are welcome, comrade. *Caray!* We shall have a fight for it."

Without taking his eye off the jaguar, he convinced himself that his machete quitted its scabbard readily, picked up his rifle, and, after these precautions were taken, he advanced resolutely toward the ferocious brute, which saw him coming without changing its position. On arriving within ten yards of the jaguar, the stranger threw away the cigarette he had till now held between his lips, shouldered his rifle, and put his finger on the trigger. The jaguar drew itself together and prepared to leap forward. At the same moment a hoarse yell was heard from the opposite side of the clearing.

"Wait a minute," the stranger said to himself with a smile; "it seems there are two of them, and I fancied I had to do with a bachelor jaguar. This is beginning to grow interesting."

And he threw a glance on one side. He had not deceived himself: a second jaguar, rather larger than the first, had fixed its flashing eyes upon him.

CHAPTER II

THE CONTEST

The dwellers on the Mexican frontiers are accustomed to fight continually with wild animals, both men and brutes, that continually attack them. Hence the stranger was but slightly affected by the unexpected visit of the two jaguars. Although his position between his two ferocious enemies was somewhat precarious, and he did not at all conceal from himself the danger he ran alone against two, he did not the less resolve to confront them bravely. Not taking his eye off the jaguar he had first seen, he went back a few steps obliquely, so as to have his foes nearly opposite him, instead of standing between them. This manoeuvre, which demanded some little time, succeeded beyond his hopes. The jaguars watched him, licking their lips, and passing their paws behind their ears with those graceful movements peculiar to the feline race. The two wild beasts, certain of their prey, seemed to be playing with it and not over eager to pounce on it.

While keeping his eye on the watch, the Mexican did not yield to any treacherous feeling of security: he knew that the struggle he was about to undertake was a supreme one, and he took his precautions. Jaguars never attack a man unless forced by necessity; and the latter tried, before all, to seize the horse. The noble animal, securely fastened by its master, exhausted itself in efforts to break the bonds that held it, and escape. It trembled with terror on scenting its ferocious enemies.

The stranger, when his precautions were completely taken, shouldered his rifle for the second time. At this moment the jaguars raised their heads, while laying back their ears and snuffing anxiously. An almost imperceptible sound was audible in the bushes.

"Who goes there?" the Mexican asked in a loud voice.

"A friend, Don Miguel Zarate," was the reply.

"Ah! It is Don Valentine," the Mexican continued. "You have arrived just in time to see some fine sport."

"Ah, ah!" the man who had already spoken went on. "Can I help you?"

"It is useless; but make haste if you want to see."

The branches were sharply drawn aside, and two men appeared in the clearing. At the sight of the jaguars they stopped, not through alarm, for they quietly placed the butts of their rifles on the ground, but in order to give the hunter every facility to emerge victoriously from his rash combat.

The jaguars seemed to comprehend that the moment for action had arrived. As if by one accord, they drew themselves up and bounded on their enemy. The first, struck in its leap by a bullet which passed through its right eye, rolled on the ground, where it remained motionless. The second was received on the point of the hunter's machete, who after discharging his rifle, had fallen on his knee, with his left arm folded in his blanket in front, and the machete in the other hand. The man and the tiger writhed together in a deadly embrace, and after a few seconds only one of the adversaries rose: it was the man. The tiger was dead: the hunter's machete, guided by a firm hand, had passed right through its heart.

During this rapid fight the newcomers had not made a sign, but remained stoical spectators of all that was taking place. The Mexican rose, thrust his machete in the grass to clean the blade, and turning coldly to the strangers, said:

"What do you say to that?"

"Splendidly played," the first answered; "it is one of the best double strokes I ever saw in my life."

The two men threw their rifles on their shoulders, and walked up to the Mexican, who reloaded his piece with as much coolness and tranquillity as if he had not just escaped from a terrible danger by a miracle of skill.

The sun was sinking on the horizon, the shadow of the trees assumed a prodigious length, and the luminary appeared like a ball of fire amid the limpid azure of the heavens. The night would soon arrive, and the desert was awaking. On all sides could be heard, in the gloomy and mysterious depths of the virgin forest, the hoarse howling of the coyotes and the other wild beasts, mingled with the song of the birds perched on all the branches. The desert, silent and gloomy during the oppressive heat of the day, emerged from its unhealthy torpor on the approach of dark, and was preparing to resume its nocturnal sports.

The three men in the clearing collected dried branches, made a pile of them and set fire to it. They doubtlessly intended to camp for a portion of the night at this spot. So soon as the flames rose joyously, skyward in long spirals, the two strangers produced from their game bags maize tortillas, jerked meat, and a gourd of pulque. These various comestibles were complacently spread out on the grass, and the three men began a hunter's meal. When the gourd had gone the round several times, and the tortillas had disappeared, the newcomers lit their Indian pipes, and the Mexican rolled a papelito.

Although this meal had been short, it lasted, however, long enough for night to have completely set in ere it was ended. Perfect darkness brooded over the clearing, the ruddy reflections of the fire played on the energetic faces of the three men, and gave them a fantastic appearance.

"And now," the Mexican said, after lighting his cigarette, "I will, with your permission, explain to you why I was so anxious to see you."

"One moment," one of the hunters answered. "You know that in the deserts the leaves have often eyes, and the trees ears. If I am not mistaken in your hints, you invited us here that our interview might be secret."

"In truth, I have the greatest interest in nothing of what is said here being overheard, or even suspected."

"Very good. Curumilla, to work."

The second hunter rose, seized his rifle and disappeared noiselessly in the gloom. His absence was rather long; but as long as it lasted, the two men left at the fire did not exchange a syllable. In about half an hour the hunter returned, however, and seated himself by his comrades' side.

"Well?" the one who had sent him off asked him.

"My brother can speak," he replied laconically; "the desert is quiet."

On this assurance the three men banished all anxiety. Still prudence did not abandon them: they took up their pipes, and turned their backs to the fire, so that they might watch the neighbourhood while conversing.

"We are ready to listen to you," the first hunter said.

"Listen to me with the greatest attention," the Mexican began; "what you are about to hear is of the utmost importance."

The two men bowed silently, and the Mexican prepared to speak again.

Before going further we must introduce to the reader the two men we have just brought on the stage, and go back a few paces in order to make it perfectly understood why Don Miguel Zarate, in lieu of receiving them at his own house, had given them the meeting in the heart of the virgin forest.

The two hunters seemed at the first glance to be Indians; but on examining them more attentively, you could recognise that one of them belonged to those white trappers whose boldness has become proverbial in Mexico. Their appearance and equipment offered a singular medley of savage and civilised life. Their hair was of a remarkable length; for in those countries, where a man is frequently only fought for the glory of lifting his scalp, it is considered the thing to wear it long and easy to seize.

The hunters had their hair neatly plaited, and intertwined with beaver skins and bright coloured ribbons. The rest of their garb harmonised with this specimen of their taste. A hunting shirt of bright red calico fell down to their knees; gaiters decorated with woolen ribbons and bells surrounded their legs; and their feet were shod with moccasins embroidered with beads which the squaws know so well

how to make. A striped blanket, fastened round the hips by a belt of tanned deer hide, completed their clothing, but was not so closely drawn that at their every movement the butt of the pistols and the hilt of the machetes might be seen glistening. As for their rifles, useless at this moment, and carelessly thrown on the ground by their side, if they had been stripped of the plume-worked elk skin that covered them, it would have been possible to see, with what care their owners had decorated them with copper nails painted of various colours; for all about these two men bore the imprint of Indian habits.

The first of the two hunters was a man of thirty-eight at the most, tall and well-built; his muscular limbs denoted great bodily strength, allied to unequalled lightness. Although he affected all the manners of the redskins, it was an easy matter to perceive that he not only belonged to the unmixed white race, but also to the Norman or Gaulish type. He was fair; his large, blue and pensive eyes, adorned with long lashes, had an expression of undefinable sadness: his nose was slightly aquiline; his mouth large, and filled with teeth of dazzling whiteness; a thick chestnut beard covered the lower part of his face, which revealed gentleness, kindness, and courage without boasting, though the whole were combined with a will of iron.

His companion evidently belonged to the Indian race, all the characteristic signs of which he displayed; but, strange to say, he was not coppery like the American aborigines of Texas and North America; and his skin was brown and slightly of an olive hue. He had a lofty brow, a bent nose, small but piercing eyes, a large mouth and square chin; in short, he presented the complete type of the American race, which inhabits a limited territory in the South of Chili. This hunter had round his brow a purple-coloured fillet, in which was thrust over the right ear a plume of the Andes Eagle, a sign which serves to distinguish the chiefs of the Aucas.

These two men, whom the reader has doubtless already recognised, as they played an important part in our previously published works¹, were Valentine Guillois, an ex-noncommissioned officer in the Spahis, and Curumilla, his friend – Ulmen of the Great Hare tribe.

We will introduce a parenthesis to explain their present position, and which is indispensable for a right understanding of what follows. The moment is capitally selected, by the way, for opening this parenthesis; for the three hunters are gaily talking round their fire, the night is gloomy, the forest quiet, and it does not appear likely that anything will arise to disturb them.

"The Chief of the Aucas," "The Tiger Slayer," "The Gold Finders," "The Indian Chief."

¹ "The Chief of the Aucas," "The Tiger Slayer," "The Gold Finders," "The Indian Chief."

CHAPTER III

DON MIGUEL ZARATE

Were Mexico better governed, it would be, without contradiction, one of the richest countries on the face of the globe. Indeed the largest private fortunes must still be sought in that country. Since the United States Americans have revealed to the world, by seizing one-half of Mexico, whither their ambition tends, the inhabitants of that fine country have slightly emerged from the torpor they enjoyed, and have made great efforts to colonise their provinces, and summon to their soil, which is so rich and fertile, intelligent and industrious labourers, who might change the face of affairs, and cause abundance and wealth to abound at spots, where, prior to their arrival, there was naught save ruin, desolation, carelessness, and misery.

Unfortunately, the noble efforts made up to the present day have, through an inexplicable fatality, remained without result, either owing to the natural apathy of the inhabitants, or the fault of the Mexican Government itself. Still the large landowners, comprehending all the advantages of the proposed measure, and how much it is to their interest to combat the deadly influence of the American invasions, have generously devoted themselves to the realization of this great question of social economy, which, unluckily is growing more and more unrealisable.

In fact, in Northern America two hostile races – the Anglo-Saxon and the Spanish – stand face to face. The Anglo-Saxons are devoured by an ardour for conquest, and a rage for invasion, which nothing can arrest, or even retard. It is impossible to see without amazement the expansive tendencies of this active and singular people, a heterogeneous composite of all the races which misery or evil instincts expelled from Europe originally, and which feels restricted in the immense territory which its numerical weakness yet prevents it entirely occupying.

Imprisoned within its vast frontiers, making a right of strength, it is continually displacing its neighbours' landmarks, and encroaching on territory of which it can make no use. Daily, bands of emigrants abandon their dwellings, and with their rifles on their shoulders, their axes in their hand, they proceed south, as if impelled by a will stronger than themselves; and neither mountains, deserts, nor virgin forests are sufficient obstacles to make them halt even for an instant. The Yankees imagine themselves generally the instruments of Providence, and appointed by the decrees of the Omnipotent to people and civilise the New World. They count with feverish impatience the hours which must elapse ere the day (close at hand in their ideas) arrive in which their race and government system will occupy the entire space contained between Cape North and the Isthmus of Panama, to the exclusion of the Spanish republics on one side, and the English colonies on the other.

These projects, of which the Americans make no mystery, but, on the contrary, openly boast, are perfectly well known to the Mexicans, who cordially detest their neighbours, and employ all the means in their power to create difficulties for them, and impede their successive encroachments.

Among the New Mexican landowners who resolved to make sacrifices in order to stop, or at least check, the imminent invasion from North America, the richest, and possibly, first of all, through his intelligence and the influence he justly enjoyed in the country, was Don Miguel Acamarichtzin Zarate.

Whatever may be asserted, the Indian population of Mexico is nearly double in number to the white men, and possesses an enormous influence. Don Miguel descended in a straight line from Acamarichtzin, first king of Mexico, whose name had been preserved in the family as a precious relic. Possessed of an incalculable fortune, Don Miguel lived on his enormous estates like a king in his empire, beloved and respected by the Indians, whom he effectively protected whenever the occasion presented itself, and who felt for him a veneration carried almost to idolatry; for they saw in him the descendant from one of their most celebrated kings, and the born defender of their race.

In New Mexico the Indian population has very largely increased during the past fifty years. Some authors, indeed, assert that it is now more numerous than prior to the conquest, which is very probable, through the apathy of the Spaniards, and the carelessness they have ever displayed in their struggles against it. But the Indians have remained stationary amid the incessant progress of civilization, and still retain intact the principal traits of their old manners. Scattered here and there in miserable ranchos or villages, they live in separate tribes, governed by their caciques, and they have mingled but very few Spanish words with their idioms, which they speak as in the time of the Aztecs. The sole apparent change in them is their conversion to Catholicism – a conversion more than problematical, as they preserve with the utmost care all the recollections of their ancient religion, follow its rites in secret, and keep up all its superstitious practices.

The Indians – above all, in New Mexico – although called *Indios fideles*, are always ready on the first opportunity to ally themselves with their desert congeners; and in the incursions of the Apaches and Comanches it is rare for the faithful Indians not to serve them as scouts, guides, and spies.

The family of Don Miguel Zarate had retired to New Mexico, which country it did not leave again – a few years after the conquests of the adventurer Cortez. Don Miguel had closely followed the policy of his family by maintaining the bonds of friendship and good neighbourhood which, from time immemorial, attached it to the Indians, believers or not. This policy had borne its fruit. Annually, in September, when the terrible red warriors, preceded by murder and arson, rushed like a torrent on the wretched inhabitants, whom they massacred in the farms they plundered, without pity of age or sex, Don Miguel Zarate's estates were respected; and not merely was no damage inflicted on them, but even if at times a field were unwittingly trampled by the horses' hoofs, or a few trees destroyed by plunderers, the evil was immediately repaired ere the owner had opportunity for complaint.

This conduct of the Indians had not failed to arouse against Don Miguel extreme jealousy on the part of the inhabitants, who saw themselves periodically ruined by the *Indios Bravos*. Earnest complaints had been laid against him before the Mexican Government; but whatever might be the power of his enemies, and the means they employed to ruin him, the rich hacendero had never been seriously disturbed: in the first place, because New Mexico is too remote from the capital for the inhabitants to have anything to fear from the governing classes; and secondly, Don Miguel was too rich not to render it easy for him to impose silence on those who were most disposed to injure him.

Don Miguel, whose portrait we drew in a previous chapter, was left a widower after eight years' marriage, with two children, a boy and a girl, the son being twenty-four, the daughter seventeen, at the period when our story opens. Doña Clara – such was the daughter's name – was one of the most delicious maidens that can be imagined. She had one of those Murillo's virgin heads, whose black eyes, fringed with long silky lashes, pure mouth, and dreamy brow seem to promise divine joys. Her complexion, slightly bronzed by the warm sunbeams, wore that gilded reflection which so well becomes the women of these intertropical countries. She was short of stature, but exquisitely modelled. Gentle and simple, ignorant as a Creole, this delicious child was adored by her father, who saw in her the wife he had so loved living once more. The Indians looked after her when she at times passed pensively, plucking a flower before their wretched huts, and scarce bending the slants on which she placed her delicate foot. In their hearts they compared this frail maiden, with her soft and vaporous outline, to the "virgin of the first loves," that sublime creation of the Indian religion which holds so great a place in the Aztec mythology.

Don Pablo Zarate, the hacendero's son, was a powerfully built man, with harshly marked features, and a haughty glance, although at times it was imprinted with gentleness and kindness. Endowed with more than ordinary strength, skilled in all bodily exercises, Don Pablo was renowned through the whole country for his talent in taming the most spirited horses, and the correctness of his aim when on the chase. A determined hunter and daring wood ranger, this young man, when he had a good horse between his legs, and his rifle in his hand, knew none, man or animal, capable of barring his passage. The Indians, in their simple faith, yielded to the son the same respect and veneration

they entertained for the father, and fancied they saw in him the personification of *Huitzilopochtli*, that terrible war god of the Aztecs, to whom 62,000 human victims were sacrificed in one day, upon the inauguration of his *teocali*.

The Zarates, then, at the period when our story opens, were real kings of New Mexico. The felicity they enjoyed was suddenly troubled by one of those vulgar incidents which, though unimportant in themselves, do not fail to cause a general perturbation, and a discomfort possessing no apparent cause, from the fact that it is impossible to foresee or prevent them. The circumstance was as follows: —

Don Miguel possessed, in the vicinity of the Paso, vast estates extending for a great distance, and consisting principally of haciendas, prairies, and forests. One day Don Miguel was returning from a visit to his haciendas. It was late, and he pressed on his horse in order to reach ere night the ford, when, at about three or four leagues at the most from the spot to which he was proceeding, and just as he was entering a dense forest of cottonwood trees, through which he must pass ere reaching the ford, his attention was attracted by cries mingled with growls emerging from the wood he was about to enter. The hacendero stopped in order to account for the unusual sounds he heard, and bent his head forward to detect what was happening. But it was impossible for him to distinguish anything through the chaos of creepers and shrubs which intercepted vision. In the meanwhile, the noise grew louder, and the shouts were redoubled, and mingled with oaths and passionate exclamations.

The Mexican's horse laid back its ears, neighed, and refused to advance. Still Don Miguel must make up his mind. Thinking that a man was probably attacked by wild beasts, he only consulted his heart; and, in spite of the visible repugnance of his steed, he compelled it to go forward and enter the wood. He had scarce gone a few yards ere he stopped in amazement at the strange spectacle that presented itself to him.

CHAPTER IV THE PECCARIES

In the middle of the clearing lay a ripped up horse, which six or eight peccaries were rending, while a dozen others were attacking with their tusks the stem of an enormous tree, in the topmost branches of which a man had sought shelter.

Let us explain to our readers, who probably know little about them, what sort of animals the peccaries are. The peccaries hold the intermediate grade between the domestic pig and the wild boar. Although this animal does not exceed two feet in height, and is not more than three feet long from the end of the snout to the beginning of the tail, it is indubitably one of the most dangerous animals in North America. The animal's jaw is provided with tusks rather like those of the boar, but straight and sharp, their length varying between four and six inches. In the shape of the body it resembles a pig, but the bristles scattered over its warty hide are in colored strips; the part nearest the skin is white, and the point of a chocolate tinge. So soon as the animal is enraged, these bristles stand out like the quills of a porcupine.

The movements of the peccaries are as quick and sharp as those of a squirrel. They ordinarily live in herds of fifteen, thirty, and even fifty. The strength of the head, neck, and shoulders is so great when they charge, that nothing can resist the impetuosity of their attacks. A remarkable peculiarity of this genus is the clumsy wart they have on their backs, whence a musty fluid evaporates when the animal is in a fury.

The peccary lives in preference on acorns, roots, wheat, sugar cane, and reptiles of every description. It is a proved fact that the most venomous serpents are devoured by them without their feeling in the slightest degree incommoded.

The mode in which the peccary forms its lair is very singular. This lair is generally in the midst of tufted and impenetrable canes, found in marshy spots round the monarchs of the forest, which still stand like crushed giants, with their grappling lines of creepers and virgin vines. The trunks of these trees, which at times measure forty feet in circumference, are nearly all hollow, and thus afford a convenient shelter for the peccaries, which retire to them every night in herds of twenty to twenty-five, entering the cavity one after the other backwards; so that the last has the end of its snout placed just at the entrance of the hole, thus watching, as it were, over the rest of its companions.

The peccaries are unboundedly ferocious: they know not danger, or at least despise it completely. They always attack in herds, and fight with unequalled rage until the last succumbs, no matter the nature of their foe.

Hence men and animals all fly a meeting with these terrible beasts: the jaguar, so strong and redoubtable, will become their prey if it be so imprudent as to attack them. This is the way they set about conquering this wild beast: —

When a jaguar has wounded a peccary, the latter collect, chase it, and pursue until they can contrive to surround the common enemy. When every issue is closed, the jaguar, believing it can thus escape, seeks refuge up a tree. But the peccaries do not resign the vengeance; they establish themselves at the foot of the tree, being incessantly recruited by fresh allies, and patiently waiting till the jaguar, driven to extremities by hunger and thirst, decides on descending from its improvised fortress. This is almost always sure to happen at the end of two or three days at the most. The jaguar bounds into the midst of its enemies, which boldly await it, and attack it bravely; a terrible fight commences; and the tiger, after covering the ground with victims, at length succumbs beneath the efforts of its assailants, and is ripped up by their tusks.

After what we have said, it is easy to understand how precarious was the position of the man perched on the top of the tree, and surrounded by peccaries. His enemies seemed determined not to leave their ground; they craftily crept round the tree, attacked its base with their tusks, and then

recognising the inutility of their onsets, they quietly lay down by the carcass of the horse, which they had already sacrificed to their fury. Don Miguel felt moved to pity for the poor fellow, whose position grew momentarily more critical; but in vain did he rack his brains how to help the unhappy man whose destruction was assured.

To attack the peccaries would have been extreme imprudence, and have produced no other result than that of turning on himself the fury of the animals, while not saving the man he wished to help. Still time pressed. What was to be done? How, without sacrificing himself, save the man who ran so great a risk?

The Mexican hesitated for a long period. It seemed to Don Miguel impossible to leave, without help, this man whose death was certain. This idea, which presented itself to his mind several times, he had energetically repulsed, so monstrous did it appear to him. At length he resolved at all risks to attempt impossibilities in favour of this stranger, of whose death he would have eventually accused himself had he left him to perish in the desert.

The stranger's position was the more critical because, in his haste to defend himself from the attacks of his enemies, he had left his rifle fall at the foot of the tree, and was consequently unable to reduce the number of the peccaries. In spite of their fineness of scent, the latter had not noticed Don Miguel's approach, who, by a providential accident, had entered the wood on the side opposite the wind. The Mexican dismounted with a sigh, patted his horse, and then took off its accoutrements. The noble animal, habituated to its master's caresses, shook his head joyously, and fixed its large intelligent eyes on him. Don Miguel could not repress another sigh: a tear fell down on his bronzed cheeks. On the point of accomplishing the sacrifice, he hesitated.

It was a faithful companion, almost a friend, he was about to separate from; but the life of a man was at stake. The Mexican drove back the feelings that agitated him, and his resolution was formed. He passed a lasso round his horse's neck, and, in spite of its obstinate resistance, compelled it to advance to the entrance of the clearing in which the peccaries were assembled. A frail curtain of creepers and leaves alone hid it from their sight. On arriving here Don Miguel stopped: he had one more moment's hesitation, but only one; for then seizing a piece of tinder, which he lighted, he thrust it into the poor animal's ear while caressing it.

The effect was sudden and terrible. The horse uttered a snort of pain; and rendered mad by the burning, bounded forward into the clearing, striving in vain to get rid of the tinder which caused it intolerable suffering. Don Miguel had smartly leaped aside, and now followed with an anxious glance the result of the terrible tentative he had just made to save the stranger. On seeing the horse appear suddenly in their midst, the peccaries rose, formed a compact group and rushed with their heads down in pursuit of the horse, thinking no longer of the man. The animal, spurred on still more by the sight of its ferocious enemies, shot ahead with the speed of an arrow, breaking down with its chest all the obstacles in its way, and followed closely by the peccaries.

The man saved; but at what a price! Don Miguel repressed a last sigh of regret, and leaped into the clearing. The stranger had already descended from the tree; but the emotion he had undergone was so extreme, that he remained seated on the ground, almost in a state of unconsciousness.

"Quick, quick!" Don Miguel said to him sharply. "We have not a moment to lose: the peccaries may alter their minds and return."

"That is true," the stranger muttered in a hollow voice, as he cast a terrified glance around. "Let us be off – off at once."

He made an effort over himself, seized his rifle, and rose. Through a presentiment for which he could not account to himself, Don Miguel experienced at the sight of this man, whom he had hitherto scarce looked at, a feeling of invincible doubt and disgust. Owing to the life he was obliged to lead on these frontiers, frequented by people of every description, the hacendero had been often brought into relation with trappers and hunters whose faces were no recommendation to them; but never ere now had chance brought him in contact with an individual of such sinister appearance as this one.

Still he did not allow his feelings to be seen through, and invited this man to follow him. The latter did not let the invitation be repeated; for he was anxious to escape from the spot where he had been so near death. Thanks to the Mexican's acquaintance with the country, the wood was speedily traversed, and the two men, after a walk of scarce an hour's duration, reached the banks of the Del Norte, just opposite the village. Their speed had been so great, their anxiety so serious, that they had not exchanged a syllable, so terrified were they of seeing the peccaries appear at any moment. Fortunately this was not the case, and they reached the ford without being again disturbed.

Don Miguel was burdened with his horse's trappings, which he now threw on the ground, and looked around him in the hope of finding someone who would help him in crossing the river. His expectations were not deceived; for just as they reached the ford an *arriero* was preparing to cross to the other side of the river with his *recca* of mules, and, with the generosity innate in all Mexicans, he offered to carry them both to the Paso. The two men eagerly accepted, each mounted a mule, and half an hour later they found themselves in safety at the village. After giving the *arriero* a few reals to requite him for his services, Don Miguel took up his horse's trappings again, and prepared to start. The stranger stopped.

"We are about to part here, caballero," he said in a rough voice, with a very marked English accent; "but before leaving, let me express to you my deep gratitude for the noble and generous manner in which you saved my life at the peril of your own."

"Sir," the Mexican simply answered, "I only did my duty in saving you. In the desert all men are brothers, and owe each other protection. Hence do not thank me, I beg, for a very simple action: any other in my place would have acted as I have done."

"Perhaps so," the stranger continued; "but be kind enough, pray, to tell me your name, so that I may know to whom I owe my life."

"That is needless," Don Miguel said with a smile. "Still, as I fancy you are a stranger in these parts, let me give you a piece of advice."

"What is it, sir?"

"Never in future to attack the peccaries. They are terrible enemies, only to be conquered by a strong body of men; and an individual in attacking them commits an unpardonable folly, to which he must fall a victim."

"Be assured, sir, that I shall profit by the lesson I have received this day, and shall never put myself in such a wasps' nest again. I was too near paying dearly for my imprudence. But I beg you, sir, do not let us separate ere I know the name of my preserver."

"As you insist, sir, you shall learn it. I am Don Miguel de Zarate."

The stranger took a peculiar glance at the speaker, while repressing a movement of surprise.

"Ah!" he said in a singular tone, "Thanks, Don Miguel Zarate. Without knowing you personally, I was already acquainted with your name."

"That is possible," the hacendero answered; "for I am well known in this country, where my family has been established for many a long year."

"I, sir, am the man whom the Indians call Witchasta Joute, the Maneater, and the hunters, my companions, Red Cedar."

And after lifting his hand to his cap in salute, this man threw his rifle on his shoulder, turned on his heel, and went off at full speed. Don Miguel looked after him for a while, and then walked pensively toward the house he inhabited at el Paso. The hacendero did not suspect that he had sacrificed his favourite horse to save the life of his most implacable enemy.

CHAPTER V

THE WOUND

At sunrise, Don Miguel, mounted on an excellent horse, left the Paso, and proceeded toward the hacienda where he resided with his family. It was situated a few miles from the Presidio of San Elezario, in a delicious position, and was known as the *Hacienda de la Noria* (the Farm of the Well). The estate inhabited by Don Miguel stood in the centre of the vast delta formed by the Del Norte and the Rio San Pedro, or Devil's River. It was one of those strong and massive buildings which the Spaniards alone knew how to erect when they were absolute masters of Mexico.

The hacienda formed a vast parallelogram, supported at regular distances by enormous cross walls of carved stone. Like all the frontier habitations, which are rather fortresses than houses, it was only pierced on the side of the plain with a few narrow windows resembling loopholes, and protected by solid iron bars. This abode was begirt by a thick wall of circumvallation, defended on the top by that fretwork called *almenas*, which indicated the nobility of the owner. Within this wall, but separated from the chief apartments, were the stables, outhouses, barns and cabins for the peons.

At the extremity of the courtyard, in an angle of the hacienda, was the tall square belfry of the chapel, rising above its terraced roof. This chapel was served by a monk called Fray Ambrosio. A magnificent plain closed in this splendid farm. At the end of a valley more than fifty miles in length were cactus trees of a conical shape, loaded with fruit and flowers, and whose stems were as much as six feet in diameter.

Don Miguel employed a considerable number of peons in the cultivation of the sugar cane, which he carried on upon a very large scale. As everybody knows, the cane is planted by laying it horizontally in furrows half a foot deep. From each knot springs a shoot which reaches a height of about three yards, and which is cut at the end of a year to extract the juice.

Nothing can be more picturesque than the sight of a field of sugar canes. It was one of those superb American mornings during which nature seems to be holding a festival. The *centzontle* (American nightingale) frequently poured forth its harmonious notes; the red throated cardinals, the blue birds, the parakeets, chattered gaily beneath the foliage; far away on the plain galloped flocks of light antelopes and timid ashatas, while on the extreme verge of the horizon rushed startled *manadas* of wild horses, which raised clouds of impalpable dust beneath the vibration of their rapid hoofs. A few alligators, carelessly stretched out on the river mud, were drying their scales in the sun, and in mid air the grand eagles of the Sierra Madre hovered majestically above the valley.

Don Miguel advanced rapidly at the favourite pace of the Mexican *jinetes*, and which consists in making the horse raise its front legs, while the hind ones almost graze the ground – a peculiar sort of amble which is very gentle and rapid. The hacendero only employed four hours in traversing the distance separating him from the hacienda, where he arrived about nine in the morning. He was received on the threshold of the house by his daughter, who, warned of his arrival, had hastened to meet him.

Don Miguel had been absent from home a fortnight; hence, he received his daughter's caresses with the greatest pleasure. When he had embraced her several times, while continuing to hold her tightly clasped in his arms, he regarded her attentively during several seconds.

"What is the matter, *mi querida* Clara?" he asked with sympathy. "You seem very sad. Can you feel vexed at the sight of me?" he added, with a smile.

"Oh, you cannot believe that, father!" she answered quickly; "for you know how happy your presence must render me."

"Thanks, my child! But whence, in that case, comes the sorrow I see spread over your features?"

The maiden let her eyes sink, but made no reply.

Don Miguel threw a searching glance around.

"Where is Don Pablo?" he said. "Why has he not come to greet me? Can he be away from the hacienda?"

"No, father, he is here."

"Well, then, what is the reason he is not by your side?"

"Because – " the girl said, with hesitation.

"Well?"

"He is ill."

"My son ill!" Don Miguel exclaimed.

"I am wrong," Doña Clara corrected herself.

"Explain yourself, in Heaven's name!"

"My father, the fact is that Pablo is wounded."

"Wounded!" the hacendero sharply said; and thrusting his daughter aside, he rushed toward the house, bounded up the few steps leading to the porch, crossed several rooms without stopping, and reached his son's chamber. The young man was lying, weak and faint, on his bed; but on perceiving his parent he smiled, and held his hand to him. Don Miguel was fondly attached to his son, his sole heir, and walked up to him.

"What is this wound of which I have heard?" he asked him in great agitation.

"Less than nothing, father," the young man replied, exchanging a meaning glance with his sister, who entered at the moment. "Clara is a foolish girl, who, in her tenderness, wrongly alarmed you."

"But, after all, you are wounded?" the father continued.

"But I repeat that it is a mere nothing."

"Come, explain yourself. How and when did you receive this wound?"

The young man blushed, and maintained silence.

"I insist on knowing," Don Miguel continued pressing.

"Good heavens, father!" Don Pablo replied with an air of ill-humour, "I do not understand why you are alarmed for so futile a cause. I am not a child, whom a scratch should make frightened; and many times have I been wounded previously, and you have not disturbed yourself so much."

"That is possible; but the mode in which you answer me, the care you seem trying to take to keep me ignorant of the cause of this wound – in a word, everything tells me that this time you are trying to hide something grave from me."

"You are mistaken, father, and shall convince yourself."

"I wish nothing more: speak. Clara, my child, go and give orders to have breakfast prepared, for I am dying of hunger."

The girl went out.

"Now it is our turn," Don Miguel continued. "In the first place, where are you wounded?"

"Oh! I have merely a slight scratch on my shoulder: if I went to bed it was more through indolence than any other motive."

"Hum! and what scratched your shoulder?"

"A bullet."

"What! A bullet! Then you must have fought a duel, unhappy boy!" Don Miguel exclaimed with a shudder.

The young man smiled, pressed his father's hand, and bending toward him, said, —

"This is what has happened."

"I am listening to you," Don Miguel replied, making an effort to calm himself.

"Two days after your departure, father," Don Pablo continued, "I was superintending, as you wished me to do, the cutting of the cane crop, when a hunter whom you will probably remember having seen prowling about the estate, a man of the name of Andrés Garote, accosted me at the moment I was about to return home after giving my orders to the majordomo. After saluting me obsequiously as his wont, the scamp smiled cunningly, and lowering his voice so as not to be overheard

by those around us, said, 'Don Pablo, I fancy you would give half an ounce to the man who brought you important news?' 'That depends,' I answered; for, having known the man a long time, I was aware much confidence could not be placed in him. 'Bah! Your grace is so rich,' he continued insidiously, 'that a miserable sum like that is less than nothing in his pocket, while in mine it would do me a deal of good.'

"Apart from his defects, this scamp had at times done us a few small services; and then, as he said, a half-ounce is but a trifle, so I gave it to him. He stowed it away in his pockets, and then bent down to my ear. 'Thanks, Don Pablo,' he said to me. 'I shall not cheat you of your money. Your horse is rested, and can stand a long journey. Proceed to Buffalo Valley, and there you will learn something to interest you.' It was in vain that I urged him to explain himself more clearly; I could draw no more from him. He merely added before parting from me, 'Don Pablo, you have good weapons; so take them with you, for no man knoweth what may happen.' Somehow the scamp's veiled confidence aroused my curiosity: hence I resolved to go to Buffalo Valley, and gain the clue of this riddle."

"Andrés Garote is a villain, who laid a snare for you, into which you fell," Don Miguel interrupted.

"No, father, you are mistaken. Andrés was honest towards me, and I have only thanks to give him. Still he should have explained himself, perhaps, more distinctly."

The hacendero shook his head with a doubting air.

"Go on," he said.

"I entered my house, procured the weapons, and then, mounted on Negro, my black charger, I proceeded toward Buffalo Valley. As you are aware, father, the place we call so, and which belongs to us, is an immense forest of cedars and maples, nearly forty miles in circumference, and traversed almost through its entire length by a wide confluent of the Rio San Pedro."

"Of course I know it, and I intend next year to fell some of the wood there."

"You need not take the trouble," the young man said with a smile, "for someone has done it for you."

"What do you mean?" the hacendero asked wrathfully. "Who dared?"

"Oh! One of those wretched heretic squatters, as they call themselves. The villain found the spot to suit him, and has quietly settled there with his three whelps – three big fellows with hang-dog faces, who laughed at me when I told them the forest was mine, and answered, while aiming at me, that they were North Americans, who cared as little for me as they did for a coyote; that the ground belonged to the first comer; and that I shall afford them lively pleasure by being off at full speed. What more shall I tell you, father? I take after you. I have hot blood, and I cordially hate that race of Yankee pirates, who, for some years back, have settled on our lovely country like a swarm of mosquitoes. I saw our forest plundered, our finest trees cut down. I could not remain unmoved in the presence of these scoundrels' insolence, and the quarrel became so sharp that they fired at me."

"*Virgen Santísima!*" Don Miguel exclaimed in fury, "They shall pay dearly for the affront they have offered you I swear it! I will take exemplary vengeance."

"Why be so angry, father?" the young man replied, visibly annoyed at the effect his story had produced. "The harm these people do us is really very trifling. I was in the wrong to let my passion carry me away."

"On the contrary, you were right. I will not have these Northern thieves come and commit their plunder here. I will put a stop to it."

"I assure you that, if you will leave me to act, I feel certain of arranging this affair to your entire satisfaction."

"I forbid you taking the slightest steps, for this matter concerns me now. Whatever may occur, I do not wish you to interfere. Will you promise me this?"

"As you insist, I do so, father."

"Very good. Get cured as speedily as possible, and keep your mind at rest. The Yankees shall pay me dearly for the blood they have shed."

With these words Don Miguel retired, and his son fell back on his bed stifling a sigh, and uttering a hoarse exclamation of passion.

CHAPTER VI

THE SQUATTER'S SHANTY

Don Pablo had not told his father the facts in all their truth or detail. He had fallen into a perfect ambushade. He was suddenly attacked by the three brothers, who would have mercilessly killed him, resolved to lay the blame of his death on the wild beasts, had not, at the moment when one of them lifted his knife on the young man, who was thrown down and rendered motionless by the others, a providential succour reached him in the person of a charming maid scarce sixteen years of age.

The courageous girl rushed from a copse with the rapidity of a fawn, and threw herself resolutely into the midst of the assassins.

"What are you about, brother?" she exclaimed in a melodious voice, whose harmonious notes echoed amorously in Don Pablo's ears. "Why do you wish to kill this stranger?"

The three squatters, surprised by this apparition, which they were far from expecting, fell back a few paces. Don Pablo profited by this truce to jump up and regain possession of his arms, which had fallen by his side.

"Was it not enough," the girl continued, "to rob this man, that you must now try to take his life? Fie, brothers! Do you not know that blood leaves on the hands of him who spills it stains which nothing can efface? Let this man retire in peace."

The young men hesitated. Although unconsciously yielding to their sister's influence, they were ashamed of thus executing her wishes. Still they did not dare express their thoughts, and merely bent on their enemy, who awaited them with a firm foot and pistols in hand, glances laden with hatred and anger.

"Ellen is right," the youngest of her brothers suddenly said. "No, I will not allow any harm to be done the stranger."

The others looked at him savagely.

"You would defend him, if necessary, I suppose, Shaw?" Nathan said to him ironically.

"Why should I not, were it required?" the young man said boldly.

"Eh!" Sutter remarked with a grin, "He is thinking of the Wood Eglantine."

This word had been scarce uttered ere Shaw, with purpled face, contracted features, and eyes injected with blood, rushed with uplifted knife on his brother, who awaited him firmly. The girl dashed between them.

"Peace, peace!" she shrieked in a piercing voice, "Do brothers dare threaten one another?"

The two young fellows remained motionless, but watching and ready to strike in a moment. Don Pablo fixed an ardent glance on the girl, who was really admirable at this moment. With her features animated by anger, her head erect, and her arms stretched out between the two men, she bore a startling likeness to those Druidesses who in olden times summoned the warriors to combat beneath the forests of Germany.

In her whole person she offered the complete type of the gentle Northern woman. Her hair light and golden like ripe corn; her eyes of extreme purity, which reflected the azure of the sky; her earnest mouth, with rosy lips and pearly teeth; her flexible and small waist; the whiteness of her complexion, whose delicate and transparent skin still bore the flush of adolescence – all was combined in this charming maiden to render her the most seductive creature imaginable.

Don Pablo, a stranger to this kind of beauty, felt himself involuntarily attracted toward the girl, and entirely subjugated by her. Forgetting the reason that had brought him to this spot, the danger he had incurred, and that which still menaced him, he was fascinated and trembling before this delicious apparition, fearing at each instant to see it vanish like a vision, and not daring to turn his glance from her while he felt he had no strength left to admire her.

This young creature, so frail and delicate, formed a strange contrast with the tall statures and marked features of her brothers, whose coarse and savage manners only served to heighten the elegance and charm exhaled by her whole person. Still this scene could not be prolonged, and must be ended at once. The maiden walked toward Don Pablo.

"Sir," she said to him with a soft smile, "You have nothing more to fear from my brothers; you can mount your horse again, and set out, and no one will oppose your departure."

The young man understood that he had no pretext to prolong his stay at this spot; he therefore let his head sink, placed his pistols in his holsters, leaped on his horse, and set out with regret, and as slowly as possible.

He had scarce gone a league when he heard the hasty clatter of a horse behind him. He turned back. The approaching horseman was Shaw, who soon caught up with Don Pablo. The pair then proceeded some distance side by side without exchanging a syllable, and both seemed plunged in profound thought. On reaching the skirt of the forest, Shaw checked his horse, and softly laid his right hand on the Mexican's bridle. Don Pablo also stopped on this hint, and waited, while fixing an inquiring glance on his strange comrade.

"Stranger," the young man said, "my sister sends me. She implores you, if it be possible, to keep secret what occurred between us today. She deeply regrets the attack to which you fell a victim, and the wound you have received; and she will try to persuade Red Cedar, our father, to retire from your estates."

"Thank your sister for me," Don Pablo answered. "Tell her that her slightest wish will ever be a command to me, and that I shall be happy to execute it."

"I will repeat your words to her."

"Thanks. Render me a parting service."

"Speak."

"What is your sister's name?"

"Ellen. She is the guardian angel of our hearth. My name is Shaw."

"I am obliged to you for telling me your name, though I cannot guess the reason that induces you to do so."

"I will tell you. I love my sister Ellen before all: she urged me to offer you my friendship. I obey her. Remember, stranger, that Shaw is yours to the death."

"I shall not forget it, though I hope never to be under the necessity of reminding you of your words."

"All the worse," the American said, with a shake of his head; "but if at any time the opportunity offers, I will prove to you that I am a man of my word, so surely as I am a Kentuckian."

And hurriedly turning his horse's head, the young man rapidly disappeared in the windings of the forest.

Buffalo Valley, illumined by the parting rays of the setting sun, seemed a lake of verdure to which the golden mist of night imparted magical tones. A light breeze rustled through the lofty crests of the cedars, catalpas, tulip and Peru trees, and agitated the grass on the banks of the Rio San Pedro. Don Pablo let the reins float idly on his horse's neck, and advanced dreamily through the forest, where the birds were leaping from spray to spray, each saluting in its language the arrival of night.

An hour later, the young man reached the hacienda; but the wound he had received in his shoulder was more serious than was at first supposed. He was obliged, to his great regret, to keep his bed, which prevented him seeking to meet again the maiden whose image was deeply engraved on his heart.

So soon as the Mexican had gone off, the squatters continued felling trees and sawing planks, and did not abandon this work till the night had grown quite black. Ellen had returned to the interior of the jacal, where she attended to the housekeeping duties with her mother. This jacal was a wretched

hut, hastily made with branches of intertwined trees, which trembled with every breeze, and let the sun and rain penetrate to the interior.

This cabin was divided into three compartments: the one to the right served as the bedroom of the two females, while the men slept in the one to the left. The central compartment, furnished with worm-eaten benches and a clumsily-planed table, was at once keeping room and kitchen.

It was late: the squatters, assembled round the fire, over which a huge pot was boiling, were silently awaiting the return of Red Cedar, who had been absent since the morning. At length, a horse's hoofs sounded sharply on the detritus collected for years on the floor of the forest, the noise grew gradually nearer, the horse stopped in front of the jacal, and a man made his appearance. It was Red Cedar. The men slowly turned their heads toward him, but did not otherwise disturb themselves, or address a syllable to him.

Ellen alone rose and embraced her father affectionately. The giant seized the girl in his nervous arms, raised her from the ground, and kissed her several times, saying in his rough voice, which his tenderness sensibly softened, —

"Good evening, my dear."

Then he put her down on the ground again, and not troubling himself further about her, fell heavily on a bench near the fire, and thrust his feet toward the fire.

"Come, wife," he said, after the expiration of a moment, "the supper, in the fiend's name! I have a coyote's hunger."

The wife did not let this be repeated. A few moments later an immense dish of *frijoles*, with pimienta, smoked on the table, with large pots of pulque. The meal was short and silent, the four men eating with extreme rapacity. So soon as the beans had disappeared Red Cedar and his sons lit their pipes, and began smoking, while drinking large draughts of whiskey, though still not speaking. At length Red Cedar took his pipe from his lips, and hit the table sharply, while saying in a rough voice, —

"Come, women, decamp! You have nothing more to do here. You are in our way, so go to the deuce!"

Ellen and her mother immediately went out, and entered their separate apartment. For a few minutes they could be heard moving about, and then all became silent again.

Red Cedar made a sign, and Sutter rose and gently put his ear to the parting board. He listened for a few moments while holding his breath, and then returned to his seat, saying laconically, —

"They are asleep."

"Quick, my whelps!" the old squatter said in a low voice. "We have not a minute to lose: the others are expecting us."

A strange scene then occurred in this mean room, which was merely illumined by the expiring light of the hearth. The four men arose, opened a large chest, and produced from it various objects of strange shapes — leggings, mittens, buffalo robes, collars of grizzly bear claws; in a word, the complete costumes of Apache Indians.

The squatters disguised themselves as redskins; and when they had put on their garments, which rendered it impossible to recognise them, they completed the metamorphosis by painting their faces of different colours.

Assuredly the traveller whom accident had brought at this moment to the jacal would have fancied it inhabited by Apaches or Comanches.

The garments which the squatters had taken off were locked up in the chest, of which Red Cedar took the key; and the four men, armed with their American rifles, left the cabin, mounted their horses, which were awaiting them ready saddled, and started at full gallop through the winding forest paths.

At the moment they disappeared in the gloom Ellen stood in the doorway of the cabin, took a despairing glance in the direction where they had gone, and fell to the ground murmuring sadly, —

"Good Heaven! What diabolical work are they going to perform this night?"

CHAPTER VII

THE RANGERS

On the banks of the Rio San Pedro, and on the side of a hill, stood a *rancheria* composed of some ten cabins, inhabited by a population of sixty persons at the most, including men, women and children. These people were Coras Indians, hunters and agriculturists, belonging to the Tortoise tribe. These poor Indians lived there on terms of peace with their neighbours, under the protection of the Mexican laws. Quiet and inoffensive beings, during the nearly twenty years they had been established at this place they had never once offered a subject of complaint to their neighbours, who, on the contrary, were glad to see them prosper, owing to their gentle and hospitable manners. Though Mexican subjects, they governed themselves after their fashion, obeying their caciques, and regulating in the assembly of their elders all the difficulties that arose in their village.

On the night when we saw the squatters leave the cabin in disguise, some twenty individuals, armed to the teeth and clothed in strange costumes, with their faces blackened so as to render them unrecognizable, were bivouacked at about two leagues from the *rancheria*, in a plain on the river's bank. Seated or lying round huge fires, they were singing, laughing, quarrelling or gambling with multitudinous yells and oaths. Two men seated apart at the foot of an enormous cactus, were conversing in a low tone, while smoking their husk cigarettes. These two men, of whom we have already spoken to the reader, were Fray Ambrosio, chaplain to the Hacienda de la Noria, and Andrés Garote, the hunter.

Andrés was a tall, thin fellow, with a sickly and cunning face, who draped himself defiantly in his sordid rags, but whose weapons were in a perfectly good condition.

Who were the men causing this disturbance? They were "rangers," but this requires explanation.

Immediately after each of the different revolutions which have periodically overturned Mexico since that country so pompously declared its independence, the first care of the new president who reaches power is to dismiss the volunteers who had accidentally swollen the ranks of his army, and supplied him the means of overthrowing his predecessor. These volunteers, we must do them the justice of allowing, are the very scum of society, and the most degraded class human nature produces. These sanguinary men, without religion or law, who have no relations or friends, are an utter leprosy to the country.

Roughly driven back into society, the new life they are forced to adopt in no way suits their habits of murder and pillage. No longer able to wage war on their countrymen, they form free corps, and engage themselves for a certain salary, to hunt the *Indios Bravos* – that is to say, the Apaches and Comanches – who desolate the Mexican frontiers. In addition to this, the paternal government of North America in Texas, and of Mexico in the States of the Confederation, allots them a certain sum for each Indian scalp they bring in.

We do not fancy we are saying anything new in asserting that they are the scourge of the colonists and inhabitants, they plunder shamelessly in every way when they are not doing worse.

The men assembled at this moment on the banks of the Rio San Pedro were preparing for a war party – the name they give to the massacres they organise against the redskins.

Toward midnight Red Cedar and his three sons reached the rangers' camp. They must have been impatiently expected, for the bandits received them with marks of the greatest joy and the warmest enthusiasm. The dice, the cards, and botas of mezcal and whiskey were immediately deserted. The rangers mounted their horses, and grouped round the squatters, near whom stood Fray Ambrosio and his friend Andrés Garote.

Red Cedar took a glance round the mob, and could not repress a smile of pride at the sight of the rich collection of bandits of every description whom he had around him, and who recognised him as chief. He extended his arm to command peace. When all were silent the giant took the word.

"Señores caballeros," he said, in a powerful and marked voice, which made all these scamps quiver with delight at being treated like honest people, "the audacity of the redskins is growing intolerable. If we let them alone they would soon inundate the country, when they would end by expelling us. This state of things must have an end. The government complains about the few scalps we supply; it says we do not carry out the clauses of the agreement we have formed with it; it talks about disbanding us, as our services are useless, and therefore burdensome to the republic. It is our bounden duty to give a striking denial to these malevolent assertions, and prove to those who have placed confidence in us that we are ever ready to devote ourselves to the cause of humanity and civilisation. I have assembled you here for a war party, which I have been meditating for some time, and shall carry out this night. We are about to attack the rancheria of the Coras, who for some years past have had the impudence to establish themselves near this spot. They are pagans and thieves, who have one hundred times merited the severe chastisement we are about to inflict on them. But I implore you, señores caballeros, display no mistaken pity. Crush this race of vipers – let not one escape! The scalp of a child is worth as much as that of a man; so do not let yourselves be moved by cries or tears, but scalp, scalp to the end."

This harangue was greeted as it deserved to be; that is, by yells of joy.

"Señores," Red Cedar continued, "the worthy monk who accompanies me will call down the blessing of Heaven on our enterprise; so kneel down to receive the absolution he is about to give you."

The bandits instantaneously dismounted, took off their hats, and knelt on the sand. Fray Ambrosio then repeated a long prayer, to which they listened with exemplary patience, repeating *amen* after each occasion, and he ended by giving them absolution. The rangers rose, delighted at being thus freed from the burden of their sins, and got into their saddles again.

Red Cedar then whispered a few words in Fray Ambrosio's ears, who bowed his head in assent, and immediately set out in the direction of the Hacienda de la Noria, followed by Andrés Garote. The squatter then turned to the rangers, who were awaiting his orders.

"You know where we are going, gentlemen," he said. "Let us start, and, before all, be silent, if we wish to catch our game in its lair; for you know that the Indians are as cunning as opossums."

The band started at a gallop, Red Cedar and his sons being at their head. It was one of those calm nights which predispose the soul to reverie, such as America alone has the privilege of possessing. The dark blue sky was spangled with an infinite number of stars, in the centre of which shone the majestic Southern Cross, sparkling like a king's mantle; the atmosphere was extraordinarily transparent, and allowed objects to be noticed at a great distance; the moon profusely spread around her silvery rays, which gave the scenery a fantastic appearance; a mysterious breeze sported through the tops of the great trees; and at times vague rumours traversed the space, and were lost in the distance.

The gloomy horsemen still went on, silent and frowning, like the phantoms of the ancient legends, which glide through the shadows to accomplish a deed without a name. At the end of scarce an hour the rancheria was reached. All were resting in the village – not a light flashed in the hut. The Indians, wearied with the hard toil of the day, were reposing, full of confidence in the sworn faith, and apprehending no treason.

Red Cedar halted twenty yards from the rancheria, and drew up his horsemen so as to surround the village on all sides. When each had taken his post, and the torches were lighted, Red Cedar uttered the terrible war cry of the Apaches, and the rangers galloped at full speed on the village, uttering ferocious howls, and brandishing the torches, which they threw on the cabins.

A scene of carnage then took place which the human pen is powerless to describe. The unhappy Indians, surprised in their sleep, rushed terrified and half naked out of their poor abodes, and were pitilessly massacred and scalped by the rangers, who waved with a demoniac laugh their smoking, blood-dripping scalps. Men, women, and children, all were killed with refinements of barbarity. The village, fired by the rangers' torches, soon became an immense funebral pile, in which victims and murderers were huddled pell-mell.

Still a few Indians had succeeded in collecting. Formed in a compact troop of twenty men, they opposed a desperate resistance to their assassins, exasperated by the odour of blood and the intoxication of carnage. At the head of this band was a half-nude, tall Indian of intelligent features, who, armed with a ploughshare, which he wielded with extreme force and skill, felled all the assailants who came within reach of his terrible weapon. This man was the cacique of the Coras. At his feet lay his mother, wife, and two children – dead. The unhappy man struggled with the energy of despair. He knew his life would be sacrificed, but he wished to sell it as dearly as possible.

In vain had the rangers fired on the cacique – he seemed invulnerable: not one of the bullets aimed at him had struck him. He still fought, and the weight of his weapon did not seem to fatigue his arm. The rangers excited each other to finish him; but not one dared to approach him.

But this combat of giants could not endure longer. Of the twenty companions he had round him on commencing the struggle, the cacique now only saw two or three upright: the rest were dead. There must be an end. The circle that inclosed the hapless Indian drew closer and closer. Henceforth it was only a question of time with him. The rangers, recognising the impossibility of conquering this lion-hearted man, had changed their tactics: they no longer attacked him, but contented themselves with forming an impassable circle round him, waiting prudently for the moment when the strength of the prey, which could not escape them, was exhausted, in order to rush upon him.

The Coras understood the intention of his enemies. A contemptuous smile contracted his haughty lips, and he rushed resolutely toward these men who recoiled before him. Suddenly, with a movement quicker than thought, he threw with extraordinary strength the ploughshare among the rangers, and bounding like a tiger, leaped on a horse, and clutched its rider with superhuman vigour.

Ere the rangers had recovered from the surprise this unforeseen attack occasioned in them, by a desperate effort, and still holding the horseman, the chieftain drew from his girdle a short sharp knife, which he buried up to the hilt in the flanks of the horse. The animal uttered a shriek of pain, rushed headlong into the crowd, and bore both away with maddening speed.

The rangers, rendered furious at being played with by a single man, and seeing their most terrible enemy escape them, started in pursuit; but with his liberty the Coras had regained all his energy: he felt himself saved. In spite of the desperate efforts the rangers made to catch him up, he disappeared in the darkness.

The cacique continued to fly till he felt his horse tottering under him. He had not loosed his hold of the horseman, who was half strangled by the rude embrace, and both rolled on the ground. This man wore the costume of the Apache Indians. The Coras regarded him for an instant attentively, and then a smile of contempt played round his lips.

"You are not a redskin," he said, in a hollow voice; "you are only a paleface dog. Why put on the skin of the lion when you are a cowardly coyote?"

The ranger, still stunned by the fall he had suffered, and the hug he had endured, made no reply.

"I could kill you," the Indian continued; "but my vengeance would not be complete. You and yours must pay me for all the innocent blood you have shed like cowards this night. I will mark you, so that I may know you again."

Then, with fearful coolness, the Coras threw the ranger on his back, put his knee on his chest, and burying his finger in the socket of his eye, gave it a sharp rotatory movement, and plucked out his eyeball. On this frightful mutilation, the wretch uttered a cry of pain impossible to describe. The Indian got up.

"Go!" he said to him. "Now I am certain of finding you again whenever I want you."

At this moment the sound of hoofs could be heard a short distance off: the rangers had evidently heard their comrade's cry, and were hurrying to his aid. The Coras, rushed into the bushes and disappeared. A few moments later the rangers came up.

"Nathan, my son!" Red Cedar shouted as he leaped from his horse and threw himself on the body of the wounded man. "Nathan, my firstborn, is dead!"

"No," one of the rangers answered; "but he is very bad."

It was really the squatter's eldest son whom the cacique had mutilated. Red Cedar seized him in his arms, placed him before him on the saddle, and the band started again at a gallop. The rangers had accomplished their task: they had sixty human scalps hanging from their girdles. The rancheria of the Coras was no longer aught save a pile of ashes.

Of all the inhabitants of this hapless village only the cacique survived; but he would suffice to avenge his brothers.

CHAPTER VIII

THE VALLEY OF THE BUFFALO

Don Miguel Zarate, on leaving his son, remounted his horse and rode straight to Paso, to the house of Don Luciano Pérez, the *juez de letras* (police magistrate).

The hacendero was one of the richest landed proprietors in the country; and as he was thoroughly acquainted with the spirit of the depositaries of justice in those parts, he had consequently been careful to line his purse well. Here were two reasons, then, to interest the judge in his favour, and this really happened.

The worthy Don Luciano shuddered on hearing the details of what had occurred between Don Pablo and the squatters. He swore that he would, without delay, take an exemplary vengeance for this starting felony on the part of the heretic dogs, and that it was high time to bring them reason. Confirming himself more and more in his resolution, he buckled on his sword, gave orders to twenty well-armed alguaciles to mount, and placing himself at the head of this numerous escort, he proceeded toward Buffalo Valley.

Don Miguel had witnessed with secret annoyance all these formidable preparations. He placed but slight confidence in the courage of the policemen, and he would have preferred the judge leaving him master to act as he pleased. He had even adroitly attempted to obtain from Don Luciano a regular warrant, which he would have executed however he might think proper; but the judge, burning with an unusual warlike ardor, and spurred on by the large sum he had received, would listen to nothing, but insisted on himself taking the head of the expedition.

Don Luciano Pérez was a plump little man of about sixty years of age, round as a tub, with a jolly face, adorned with a rubicund nose and two cunning little eyes. This man cordially detested the North Americans; and, in the courageous deed he was committing at this moment, hatred was as much the instigation as avarice.

The little band set out at a canter, and proceeded rapidly toward the forest. The judge hurled fire and flames at the audacious usurpers, as he called them; he spoke of nothing less than killing them without mercy, if they attempted even the slightest resistance to the orders he was about to give them. Don Miguel, who was much calmer, and foreboded no good from this great wrath, sought in vain to pacify him by telling him that he would in all probability have to do with men difficult to intimidate, against whom coolness would be the best weapon.

They gradually approached. The hacendero, in order to shorten the journey, had led the band by a cross road, which saved at least one-third the distance; and the first trees of the forest already appeared about two miles off. The mischief produced by the squatters was much more considerable than Don Pablo had represented to his father; and, at the first glance, it seemed impossible that, in so short a time, four men, even though working vigorously, could have accomplished it. The finest trees lay on the ground; enormous piles of planks were arranged at regular distances, and on the San Pedro an already completed raft only awaited a few more stems of trees to be thrust into the water.

Don Miguel could not refrain from sighing at the sight of the devastation committed in one of his best forests; but the nearer they approached the spot where they expected to meet the squatters, the more lukewarm grew the warlike zeal of the judge and his acolytes, and the hacendero soon found himself compelled to urge them on, instead of restraining them as he had hitherto done. Suddenly the sound of an axe re-echoed a few paces ahead of the band. The judge impelled by the feeling of his duty, and shame of appearing frightened, advanced boldly in the direction of the sound, followed by his escort.

"Stop!" a rough voice shouted at the moment the policemen turned the corner of a lane.

With that instinct of self-preservation which never abandons them, the alguaciles stopped as if their horses' feet had been suddenly welded to the ground. Ten paces from them stood a man in

the centre of the ride, leaning on an American rifle. The judge turned to Don Miguel with such an expression of hesitation and honest terror that the hacendero could not refrain from laughing.

"Come, courage, Don Luciano," he said to him. "This man is alone; he cannot venture to bar our passage."

"*Con mil diablos!*" the judge exclaimed, ashamed of this impression which he could not master, and frowning portentously, "forward, you fellows, and fire on that scoundrel if he make but a sign to resist you."

The alguaciles set out again with prudential hesitation.

"Stop! I tell you again," the squatter repeated. "Did you not hear the order I gave you!"

The judge, reassured by the presence of the hacendero, then advanced, and said with a tone which he strove to render terrible, but which was only ridiculous through the terror he revealed, —

"I, Don Luciano Pérez, *juez de letras* of the town of Paso, have come, by virtue of the powers delegated to me by the Government, to summon you and your adherents to quit within twenty-four hours this forest you have illegally entered, and which —"

"Ta, ta!" the stranger shouted, rudely interrupting the judge, and stamping his foot savagely. "I care as much for all your words and laws as I do for an old moccasin. The ground belongs to the first comers. We are comfortable here, and mean to remain."

"Your language is very bold, young man," Don Miguel then said. "You do not consider that you are alone, and that, failing other rights, we have strength on our side."

The squatter burst into a laugh.

"You believe that," he said. "Learn, stranger, that I care as little for the ten humbugs I now have before me as I do for a woodcock, and that they will do well to leave me at peace, unless they want to learn the weight of my arm at their expense. However, here is my father; settle it with him."

And he began carelessly whistling "Yankee Doodle." At the same instant three men, at the head of whom was Red Cedar, appeared on the path. At the sight of these unexpected reinforcements for their arrogant enemy the alguaciles made a movement in retreat. The affair was becoming singularly complicated, and threatened to assume proportions very grave for them.

"Halloh! What's up?" the old man asked roughly. "Anything wrong, Sutter?"

"These people," the young man answered, shrugging his shoulders contemptuously, "are talking about driving us from the forest by virtue of some order."

"Halloh!" Red Cedar said, his eyes flashing as he cast a savage glance at the Mexicans. "The only law I recognise in the desert," he continued with a gesture of terrible energy as he struck his rifle barrel, "is this. Withdraw, strangers, if you do not wish blood to be shed between us. I am a peaceful man, wishing to do no one hurt; but I warn you that I will not allow myself to be kicked out without striking a blow."

"You will not be turned out," the judge remarked timidly; "on the contrary, you have seized on what belongs to other people."

"I won't listen to your arguments, which I do not understand," the squatter roughly exclaimed. "God gave the ground to man that he might labour on it. Every proprietor that does not fulfil this condition tacitly renounces his rights, and the earth then becomes the property of the man who tills it with the sweat of his brow; so go to the devil! Be off at full speed, if you do not wish harm to happen to you!"

"We will not suffer ourselves to be intimidated by your threats," the judge said, impelled by his anger, and forgetting for a moment his alarm; "we will do our duty, whatever may happen."

"Try it," Red Cedar said with a grin.

And he made a sign to his sons. The latter arranged themselves in a single line, and occupied the entire width of the path.

"In the name of the law," the judge said with energy, as he pointed out the old man, "alguaciles, seize that person."

But, as so frequently happens under similar circumstances, this order was more easy to give than to execute. Red Cedar and his sons did not appear at all disposed to let themselves be collared. We must, however, do the alguaciles the justice of stating that they did not hesitate for a moment. They plainly refused to carry out the order they had received.

"For the last time, will you be off?" the squatter shouted. "Let them have it."

His three sons raised their rifles. At this movement, which removed all doubts that might still remain on their minds, and which proved to them that the squatters would not hesitate to proceed to extremities, the alguaciles were seized with an invincible terror. They turned bridle and galloped off at full speed, followed by the yells of the Americans.

One man alone remained motionless before the squatters – Don Miguel Zarate. Red Cedar had not recognised him, either owing to the distance that separated them, or because the hacendero had purposely pulled over his eyes his broad-brimmed hat. Don Miguel dismounted, placed the pistols from his holsters through his belt, fastened his horse to a tree, and coolly throwing his rifle across his shoulders, boldly advanced toward the squatters. The latter, surprised by the courage of this man, who alone attempted what his comrades had given up all hopes of achieving, let him come up to them without offering the slightest opposition. When Don Miguel was a couple of paces from the old squatter; he stopped, put the butt of his rifle on the ground, and removing his hat, said, —

"Do you recognise me, Red Cedar?"

"Don Miguel Zarate!" the bandit shouted in surprise.

"As the judge deserts me," the hacendero continued, "and fled like a coward before your threats, I am obliged to take justice for myself, and, by heavens! I will do so! Red Cedar, I, as owner of this forest, in which you have settled without permission, order you to depart at once."

The young men exchanged a few muttered threats.

"Silence!" Red Cedar commanded. "Let the caballero speak."

"I have finished, and await your answer."

The squatter appeared to reflect deeply for a few minutes.

"The answer you demand is difficult to give," he at length said: "my position toward you is not a free one."

"Why so?"

"Because I owe you my life."

"I dispense you from all gratitude."

"That is possible. You are at liberty to do so; but I cannot forget the service you rendered me."

"It is of little consequence."

"Much more than you fancy, caballero. I may be, through my character, habits, and the mode of life I lead, beyond the law of civilised beings; but I am not the less a man, and if of the worst sort, perhaps, I no more forget a kindness than I do an insult."

"Prove it, then, by going away as quickly as you can, and then we shall be quits."

The squatter shook his head.

"Listen to me, Don Miguel," he said. "You have in this country the reputation of being the providence of the unfortunate. I know from myself the extent of your kindness and courage. It is said that you possess an immense fortune, of which you do not yourself know the extent."

"Well, what then?" the hacendero impatiently interrupted him.

"The damage I can commit here, even if I cut down all the trees in the forest, would be but a trifle to you; then whence comes the fury you display to drive me out?"

"Your question is just, and I will answer it. I demand your departure from my estates, because, only a few days back, my son was grievously wounded by your lads, who led him into a cowardly snare; and if he escaped death, it was only through a miracle. That is the reason why we cannot live side by side, for blood severs us."

Red Cedar frowned.

"Is this true?" he said, addressing his sons.

The young men only hung their heads in reply.

"I am waiting," Don Miguel went on.

"Come, the question cannot be settled thus, so we will proceed to my jacal."

"For what purpose? I ask you for a yes or no."

"I cannot answer you yet. We must have a conversation together, after which you shall decide to my future conduct. Follow me, then, without fear."

"I fear nothing, as I believe I have proved to you. Go on, as you demand it: I will follow you."

Red Cedar made his sons a sign to remain here they were, and proceeded with long strides toward his jacal, which was but a short distance off. Don Miguel walked carelessly after him. They entered the cabin. It was deserted. The two females were doubtless also occupied in the forest. Red Cedar closed the door after him, sat down on a bench, made his guest a sign to do the same, and began speaking in a low and measured voice, as if afraid what he had to say might be heard outside.

CHAPTER IX

THE ASSASSINATION

"Listen to me, Don Miguel," Red Cedar said, "and pray do not mistake my meaning. I have not the slightest intention of intimidating you, nor do I think of attempting to gain your confidence by revelations which you may fairly assume I have accidentally acquired."

The hacendero regarded with amazement the speaker, whose tone and manner had so suddenly changed.

"I do not understand you," he said to him. "Explain yourself more clearly, for the words you have just uttered are an enigma, the key to which I seek in vain."

"You shall be satisfied, caballero; and if you do not catch the meaning of my words this time it must be because you will not. Like all intelligent men, you are wearied of the incessant struggles in which the vital strength of your country is exhausted unprofitably. You have seen that a land so rich, so fertile, so gloriously endowed as Mexico, could not – I should say ought not – to remain longer the plaything of paltry ambitions, and the arena on which all these transitory tyrannies sport in turn. For nearly thirty years you have dreamed of emancipation, not of your entire country, for that would be too rude a task, and unrealisable; but you said to yourself, 'Let us render New Mexico independent; form it into a new State, governed by wise laws rigorously executed. By liberal institutions let us give an impetus to all the riches with which it is choked, give intellect all the liberty it requires, and perhaps within a few years the entire Mexican Confederation, amazed by the magnificent results I shall obtain, will follow my example. Then I shall die happy at what I have effected – my object will be carried out. I shall have saved my country from the abyss over which it hangs, through the double pressure of the invasion of the American Union and the exhaustion of the Spanish race.' Are not those ideas yours, caballero? Do you consider that I have explained myself clearly this time?"

"Perhaps so, though I do not yet see distinctly the point you wish to reach. The thoughts you attribute to me are such as naturally occur to all men who sincerely love their country, and I will not pretend that I have not entertained them."

"You would be wrong in doing so, for they are great and noble, and breathe the purest patriotism."

"A truce to compliments, and let us come to the point, for time presses."

"Patience: I have not yet ended. These ideas must occur to you sooner than to another, as you are the descendant of the first Aztec kings, and born defender of the Indians in this hapless country. You see that I am well acquainted with you, Don Miguel Zarate."

"Too well, perhaps," the Mexican gentleman muttered.

The squatter smiled and went on: —

"It is not chance that led me to this country. I knew what I was doing, and why I came. Don Miguel, the hour is a solemn one. All your preparations are made: will you hesitate to give New Mexico the signal which must render it independent of the metropolis which has so long been fattening at its expense? Answer me."

Don Miguel started. He fixed on the squatter a burning glance, in which admiration at the man's language could be read. Red Cedar shrugged his shoulders.

"What! You still doubt?" he said.

He rose, went to a box from which he took some papers, and threw them on the table before the hacendero, saying, —

"Read."

Don Miguel hurriedly seized the papers, and ran his eye over them.

"Well?" he asked, looking fixedly at the strange speaker.

"You see," the squatter answered, "that I am your accomplice. General Ibañez, your agent in Mexico, is in correspondence with me, as is Mr. Wood, your agent at New York."

"It is true," the Mexican said coldly, "you have the secret of the conspiracy. The only point left is to what extent that goes."

"I possess it entirely. I have orders to enlist the volunteers who will form the nucleus of the insurrectionary army."

"Good!"

"Now, you see, by these letters of General Ibañez and Mr. Wood, that I am commissioned by them to come to an understanding with you, and receive your final orders."

"I see it."

"What do you purpose doing?"

"Nothing."

"What, nothing!" the squatter exclaimed, bounding with surprise. "You are jesting, I suppose."

"Listen to me in your turn, and pay attention to my words, for they express my irrevocable resolution. I know not nor care to know, by what means, more or less honourable, you have succeeded in gaining the confidence of my partners, and becoming master of our secrets. Still it is my firm conviction that a cause which employs such men as yourself is compromised, if not lost; hence I renounce every combination in which you are called to play a part. Your antecedents, and the life you lead, have placed you without the pale of the law."

"I am a bandit – out with it! What matter so long as you succeed? Does not the end justify the means?"

"That may be your morality, but it will never be mine. I repudiate all community of ideas with men of your stamp. I will not have you either as accomplice or partner."

The squatter darted a look at him laden with hatred and disappointment.

"In serving us," Don Miguel continued, "you can only have an interested object, which I will not take the trouble of guessing at. An Anglo-American will never frankly aid a Mexican to conquer his liberty; he would lose too much by doing it."

"Then?"

"I renounce forever the projects I had formed. I had, I grant, dreamed of restoring to my country the independence of which it was unjustly stripped: but it shall remain a dream."

"That is your last word?"

"The last."

"You refuse?"

"I do."

"Good; then I now know what is left me to do."

"Well, what is it? Let me hear," the hacendero said, as he crossed his arms on his breast, and looked him boldly in the face.

"I will tell you."

"I am waiting for you to do so."

"I hold your secret."

"Entirely?"

"Hence you are in my power."

"Perhaps."

"Who will prevent me going to the Governor of the State and denouncing you?"

"He will not believe you."

"You think so?"

"I am sure of it."

"Perhaps, I will say in my turn."

"Why so?"

"Oh! you shall easily see."

"I am curious to learn it."

"However rich you may be, Don Miguel Zarate, and perhaps because of those very riches, and in spite of the kindness you sow broadcast, the number of your enemies is very considerable."

"I know it."

"Very good. Those enemies will joyfully seize the first opportunity that presents itself to destroy you."

"It is probable."

"You see, then. When I go to the governor and tell him you are conspiring, and, in support of my denunciation, hand him not only these letters, but, several others written and signed by you, lying in that chest, do you believe that the governor will treat me as an impostor, and refuse to arrest you?"

"Then you have letters in my hand-writing?"

"I have three, which will be enough to have you shot."

"Ah!"

"Yes. Hang it all! you understand: that, in an affair so important as this, it is wise to take one's precautions, for no one knows what may happen; and men of my stamp," he added, with an ironical smile, "have more reasons than others for being prudent."

"Come, that is well played," the hacendero said, carelessly.

"Is it not?"

"Yes, and I compliment you on it: you are a better player than I gave you credit for."

"Oh! You do not know me yet."

"The little I do know suffices me."

"Then?"

"We will remain as we are, if you will permit me."

"You still refuse?"

"More than ever."

The squatter frowned.

"Take care, Don Miguel," he muttered, hoarsely. "I will do what I told you."

"Yes, if I allow you time."

"Eh?"

"*Caspita!* If you are a clever scamp, I am not altogether a fool. Do you believe, in your turn, that I will let myself be intimidated by your threats, and that I should not find means to keep you from acting, not for my own sake, as I care little personally for what you can do, but for my friends, who are men of honour, and whose lives I do not wish to be compromised by your treachery?"

"I am curious to know the means you will employ to obtain this result."

"You shall see," Don Miguel replied with perfect coolness.

"Well?"

"I shall kill you."

"Oh, oh!" the squatter said, as he looked complacently at his muscular limbs, "That is not easy."

"More so than you suppose, my master."

"Hum! and when do you reckon on killing me?"

"At once!"

The two men were seated in front of the hearth, each at the end of a bench: the table was between them, but a little back, so that while talking they only leaned an elbow on it. While uttering the last word, Don Miguel bounded like a tiger on the squatter, who did not at all expect the attack, seized him by the throat, and hurled him to the ground. The two enemies rolled on the uneven flooring of the jacal.

The Mexican's attack had been so sudden and well directed that the half-strangled squatter, in spite of his Herculean strength, could not free himself from his enemy's iron clutch, which pressed his

throat like a vice. Red Cedar could neither utter a cry nor offer the slightest resistance: the Mexican's knee crushed his chest, while his fingers pressed into his throat.

So soon as he had reduced the wretch to utter impotence, Don Miguel drew from his vaquera boot a long sharp knife, and buried the entire blade in his body. The bandit writhed convulsively for a few seconds; a livid pallor suffused his face; his eyes closed, and he then remained motionless. Don Miguel left the weapon in the wound, and slowly rose.

"Ah, ah!" he muttered as he gazed at him with a sardonic air, "I fancy that rogue will not denounce me now."

Without loss of time he seized the letters lying on the table, took from the box the few documents he found in it, hid them all in his bosom, opened the door of the cabin, which he carefully closed after him, and went off with long strides.

The squatter's sons had not quitted their post; but, so soon as they perceived the Mexican, they went up to him.

"Well," Shaw asked him, "have you come to an understanding with the old man?"

"Perfectly so," the Mexican answered.

"Then the affair is settled?"

"Yes, to our mutual satisfaction."

"All the better," the young men exclaimed joyously.

The hacendero unfastened his horse and mounted.

"Good-bye, gentlemen!" he said to them.

"Good-bye!" they replied, returning his bow.

The Mexican put his horse to a trot, but at the first turn in the road he dug his spurs into its flanks, and started at full speed.

"Now," Sutter observed, "I believe that we can proceed to the cabin without inconvenience."

And they gently walked toward the jacal, pleasantly conversing together.

Don Miguel, however, had not succeeded so fully as he imagined. Red Cedar was not dead, for the old bandit kept a firm hold on life. Attacked unawares, the squatter had not attempted a resistance, which he saw at the first glance was useless, and would only have exasperated his adversary. With marvellous sagacity, on feeling the knife blade enter his body, he stiffened himself against the pain, and resolved on "playing 'possum;" that is to say, feigning death. The success of his stratagem was complete. Don Miguel, persuaded that he had killed him, did not dream of repeating his thrust.

So long as his enemy remained in the jacal the squatter was careful not to make the slightest movement that might have betrayed him; but, so soon as he was alone, he opened his eyes, rose with an effort, drew the dagger from the wound, which emitted a jet of black blood, and looking at the door, through which his assassin had departed, with a glance so full of hatred that it is impossible to describe, he muttered, —

"Now we are quits, Don Miguel Zarate, since you have tried to take back the life of him you saved. Pray God never to bring us face to face again!"

He uttered a deep sigh, and rolled heavily on the ground in a fainting fit. At this moment his sons entered the cabin.

CHAPTER X

THE SACHEM OF THE CORAS

A few days after the events we have described in the previous chapter there was one of those lovely mornings which are not accorded to our cold climates to know. The sun poured down in profusion its warm beams, which caused the pebbles and sand to glisten in the walks of the garden of the Hacienda de la Noria. In a clump of flowering orange and lemon trees, whose sweet exhalations perfumed the air, and beneath a copse of cactus, nopals, and aloes, a maiden was asleep, carelessly reclining in a hammock made of the thread of the *Phormium tenax*, which hung between two orange trees.

With her head thrown back, her long black hair unfastened, and falling in disorder on her neck and bosom; with her coral lips parted, and displaying the dazzling pearl of her teeth, Doña Clara (for it was she who slept thus with an infantile slumber) was really charming. Her features breathed happiness, for not a cloud had yet arisen to perturb the azure horizon of her calm and tranquil life.

It was nearly midday: there was not a breath in the air. The sunbeams, pouring down vertically, rendered the heat so stifling and unsupportable, that everyone in the hacienda had yielded to sleep, and was enjoying what is generally called in hot countries the *siesta*. Still, at a short distance from the spot where Doña Clara reposed, calm and smiling, a sound of footsteps, at first almost imperceptible, but gradually heightening, was heard, and a man made his appearance. It was Shaw, the youngest of the squatter's sons. How was he at this spot?

The young man was panting, and the perspiration poured down his cheeks. On reaching the entrance of the clump he bent an anxious glance on the hammock.

"She is there," he murmured with a passionate accent. "She sleeps."

Then he fell on his knees upon the sand, and began admiring the maiden, dumb and trembling. He remained thus a long time, with his glance fixed on the slumberer with a strange expression. At length he uttered a sigh and tearing himself with an effort from this delicious contemplation, he rose sadly, muttering in a whisper, —

"I must go — if she were to wake — oh, she will never know how much I love her!"

He plucked an orange flower, and softly laid it on the maiden; then he walked a few steps from her, but almost immediately returning, he seized, with a nervous hand, Doña Clara's *rebozo*, which hung down from the hammock, and pressed it to his lips several times, saying, in a voice broken by the emotion he felt, —

"It has touched her hair."

And rushing from the thicket, he crossed the garden and disappeared. He had heard footsteps approaching. In fact, a few seconds after his departure, Don Miguel, in his turn, entered the copse.

"Come, come," he said gaily, as he shook the hammock, "sleeper, will you not have finished your siesta soon?"

Doña Clara opened her eyes, with a smile.

"I am no longer asleep, father," she said.

"Very good. That is the answer I like."

And he stepped forward to kiss her; but, with sudden movement, the maiden drew herself back as if she had seen some frightful vision, and her face was covered with a livid pallor.

"What is the matter with you?" the hacendero exclaimed with terror.

The girl showed him the orange flower.

"Well," her father continued, "what is there so terrific in that flower? It must have fallen from the tree during your sleep."

Doña Clara shook her head sadly.

"No," she said: "for some days past I have always noticed, on waking a similar flower thrown on me."

"You are absurd; chance alone is to blame for it all. Come, think no more about it; you are pale as death, child. Why frighten yourself thus about a trifle? Besides the remedy may be easily found. If so afraid of flowers now, why not take your siesta in your bedroom, instead of burying yourself in this thicket?"

"That is true, father," the girl said, all joyous, and no longer thinking of the fear she had undergone. "I will follow your advice."

"Come, that is settled, so say no more about it. Now give me a kiss."

The maiden threw herself into her father's arms, whom she stifled with kisses. Both sat down on a grassy mound, and commenced one of those delicious chit-chats whose charm only those who are parents can properly appreciate. Presently a peon came up.

"What has brought you?" Don Miguel asked.

"Excellency," the peon answered, "a redskin warrior has just arrived at the hacienda, who desires speech with you."

"Do you know him?" Don Miguel asked.

"Yes, Excellency; it is Eagle-wing, the sachem of the Coras of the Rio San Pedro."

"Mookapec! (Flying Eagle)" the hacendero repeated with surprise. "What can have brought him to me? Lead him here."

The peon retired and in a few minutes returned, preceding Eagle-wing.

The chief had donned the great war-dress of the sachems of his nation. His hair, plaited with the skin of a rattlesnake, was drawn up on the top of his head; in the centre an eagle plume was affixed. A blouse of striped calico, adorned with a profusion of bells, descended to his thighs, which were defended from the stings of mosquitoes by drawers of the same stuff. He wore moccasins made of peccary skin, adorned with glass beads and porcupine quills. To his heels were fastened several wolves' tails, the distinguishing mark of renowned warriors. Round his loins was a belt of elk hide, through which passed his knife, his pipe and his medicine bag. His neck was adorned by a collar of grizzly bear claws and buffalo teeth. Finally, a magnificent robe of a white female buffalo hide, painted red inside, was fastened to his shoulders, and fell down behind him like a cloak. In his right hand he held a fan formed of a single eagle's wing, and in his left hand an American rifle. There was something imposing and singularly martial in the appearance and demeanor of this savage child of the forest.

On entering the thicket, he bowed gracefully to Doña Clara, and then stood motionless and dumb before Don Miguel. The Mexican regarded him attentively, and saw an expression of gloomy melancholy spread over the Indian chief's features.

"My brother is welcome," the hacendero said to him. "To what do I owe the pleasure of seeing him?"

The chief cast a side glance at the maiden. Don Miguel understood what he desired, and made Doña Clara a sign to withdraw. They remained alone.

"My brother can speak," the hacendero then said; "the ears of a friend are open."

"Yes, my father is good," the chief replied in his guttural voice. "He loves the Indians: unhappily all the palefaces do not resemble him."

"What does my brother mean? Has he cause to complain of anyone?"

The Indian smiled sadly.

"Where is there justice for the redskins?" he said. "The Indians are animals: the Great Spirit has not given them a soul, as He has done for the palefaces, and it is not a crime to kill them."

"Come, chief, pray do not speak longer in riddles, but explain why you have quitted your tribe. It is far from Rio San Pedro to this place."

"Mookapec is alone: his tribe no longer exists."

"How?"

"The palefaces came in the night, like jaguars without courage. They burned the village, and massacred all the inhabitants, even to the women and little children."

"Oh, that is frightful!" the hacendero murmured, in horror.

"Ah!" the chief continued with an accent full of terrible irony, "The scalps of the redskins are sold dearly."

"And do you know the men who committed this atrocious crime?"

"Mookapec knows them, and will avenge himself."

"Tell me their chief, if you know his name."

"I know it. The palefaces call him Red Cedar, the Indians the Maneater."

"Oh! As for him, chief, you are avenged, for he is dead."

"My father is mistaken."

"How so? Why, I killed him myself."

The Indian shook his head.

"Red Cedar has a hard life," he said: "the blade of the knife my father used was too short. Red Cedar is wounded, but in a few days he will be about again, ready to kill and scalp the Indians."

This news startled the hacendero: the enemy he fancied he had got rid of still lived, and he would have to begin a fresh struggle.

"My father must take care," the chief continued. "Red Cedar has sworn to be avenged."

"Oh! I will not leave him the time. This man is a demon, of whom the earth must be purged at all hazards, before his strength has returned, and he begins his assassinations again."

"I will aid my father in his vengeance."

"Thanks, chief. I do not refuse your offer: perhaps I shall soon need the help of all my friends. And now, what do you purpose doing?"

"Since the palefaces reject him, Eagle-wing will retire to the desert. He has friends among the Comanches. They are redskins, and will welcome him gladly."

"I will not strive to combat your determination, chief, for it is just; and if, at a later date, you take terrible reprisals on the white men, they will have no cause of complaint, for they have brought it on themselves. When does my brother start?"

"At sunset."

"Rest here today: tomorrow will be soon enough to set out."

"Mookapec must depart this day."

"Act as you think proper. Have you a horse?"

"No; but at the first manada I come to I will lasso one."

"I do not wish you to set out thus, but will give you a horse."

"Thanks; my father is good. The Indian chief will remember –"

"Come, you shall choose for yourself."

"I have still a few words to say to my father."

"Speak, chief; I am listening to you."

"Koutonepi, the pale hunter, begged me to give my father an important warning."

"What is it?"

"A great danger threatens my father. Koutonepi wishes to see him as soon as possible, in order himself to tell him its nature."

"Good! My brother will tell the hunter that I shall be tomorrow at the 'clearing of the shattered oak,' and await him there till night."

"I will faithfully repeat my father's words to the hunter."

The two men then quitted the garden, and hurriedly proceeded toward the hacienda. Don Miguel let the chief choose his own horse, and while the sachem was harnessing his steed in the Indian fashion, he withdrew to his bedroom, and sent for his son to join him. The young man had

perfectly recovered from his wound. His father told him that he was obliged to absent himself for some days: he intrusted to him the management of the hacienda, while recommending him on no consideration to leave the farm, and to watch attentively over his sister. The young man promised him all he wished, happy at enjoying perfect liberty for a few days.

After embracing his son and daughter for the last time Don Miguel proceeded to the *patio*, where in the meanwhile, the chief had been amusing himself by making the magnificent horse he had chosen curvet. Don Miguel admired for several moments the Indian's skill and grace, for he managed a horse as well as the first Mexican *jinete*; then mounted, and the two men proceeded together toward the Paso del Norte, which they must cross in order to enter the desert, and reach the clearing of the shattered oak.

The journey passed in silence, for the two men were deeply reflecting. At the moment they entered Paso the sun was setting on the horizon in a bed of red mist, which foreboded a storm for the night. At the entrance of the village they separated; and on the morrow, as we have seen in our first chapter, Don Miguel set out at daybreak, and galloped to the clearing.

We will now end this lengthy parenthesis, which was, however, indispensable for the due comprehension of the facts that are about to follow, and take up our story again at the point where we left it.

CHAPTER XI

CONVERSATION

Valentine Guillois, whom we have already introduced to the reader in previous works², had inhabited, or, to speak more correctly, traversed the vast solitudes of Mexico and Texas during the past five or six years. We saw him just now accompanied by the Araucano chief. These two men were the boldest hunters on the frontier. At times, when they had collected an ample harvest of furs, they went to sell them in the villages, renewed their stock of powder and ball, purchased a few indispensable articles, and then returned to the desert.

Now and then they engaged themselves for a week, or even a fortnight, with the proprietors of the haciendas, to free them from the wild beasts that desolated their herds; but so soon as the ferocious animals were destroyed, and the reward obtained, no matter the brilliancy of the offers made them by the landowners, the two men threw their rifles on their shoulders and went off.

No one knew who they were, or whence they came. Valentine and his friend maintained the most complete silence as to the events of their life which had preceded their appearance in these parts. Only one thing had betrayed the nationality of Valentine, whom his comrade called Koutonepi, a word belonging to the language of the Aucas, and signifying "The Valiant." On his chest the hunter wore the cross of the Legion of Honor. The deeds of every description performed by these hunters were incalculable, and their stories were the delight of the frontier dwellers during the winter night. The number of tigers they had killed was no longer counted.

Chance had one day made them acquainted with Don Miguel Zarate under strange circumstances, and since then an uninterrupted friendship had been maintained between them. Don Miguel, during a tempestuous night, namely, had only owed his life to the accuracy of Valentine's aim, who sent a bullet through the head of the Mexican's horse at the moment when, mad with terror, and no longer obeying the bridle, it was on the point of leaping into an abyss with its master. Don Miguel had sworn eternal gratitude to his saviour.

Valentine and Curumilla had made themselves the tutors of the hacendero's children, who, for their part, felt a deep friendship for the hunters. Don Pablo had frequently made long hunting parties in the desert with them; and it was to them he owed the certainty of his aim, his skill in handling weapons, and his knack in taming horses.

No secrets existed between Don Miguel and the hunters: they read in his mind as in an ever open book. They were the disinterested confidants of his plans; for these rude wood rangers esteemed him, and only required for themselves one thing – the liberty of the desert. Still, despite the sympathy and friendship which so closely connected these different persons, and the confidence which formed the basis of that friendship, Don Miguel and his children had never been able to obtain from the hunters information as to the events that had passed prior to their arrival in this country.

Frequently Don Miguel, impelled, not by curiosity, but merely by the interest he felt in them, had tried, by words cleverly thrown into the conversation, to give them an opening for confidence; but Valentine had always repelled those hints, though cleverly enough for Don Miguel not to feel offended by this want of confidence. With Curumilla they had been even more simple. Wrapped in his Indian stoicism, intrenched in his habitual sullenness, he was wont to answer all questions by a shake of the head, but nothing further.

At length, weary of the attempt, the hacendero and his family had given up trying to read those secrets which their friends seemed obstinately determined to keep from them. Still the friendship subsisting between them had not grown cold in consequence, and it was always with equal pleasure

² "Tiger-Slayer," etc. Same publishers.

that Don Miguel met the hunters again after a lengthened ramble in the prairies, which kept them away from his house for whole months at a time.

The hunter and the Mexican were seated by the fire, while Curumilla, armed with his scalping knife, was busy flaying the two jaguars so skillfully killed by Don Miguel, and which were magnificent brutes.

"Eh, *compadre!*" Don Miguel said with a laugh; "I was beginning to lose patience, and fancy you had forgotten the meeting you had yourself given me."

"I never forgot anything, as you know," Valentine answered seriously; "and if I did not arrive sooner, it was because the road is long from my jacal to this clearing."

"Heaven forbid that I should reproach you, my friend! Still I confess to you that the prospect of passing the night alone in this forest only slightly pleased me, and I should have been off had you not arrived before sunset."

"You would have done wrong, Don Miguel: what I have to tell you is of the utmost importance to you. Who knows what the result might have been had I not been able to warn you?"

"You alarm me, my friend."

"I will explain. In the first place let me tell you that you committed, a few days back, a grave imprudence, whose consequences threaten to be most serious for you."

"What is it?"

"I said one, but ought to have said two."

"I am waiting till you think proper to express yourself more clearly," Don Miguel said with a slight tinge of impatience, "before I answer."

"You have quarrelled with a North American bandit."

"Red Cedar."

"Yes; and when you had him in your power you let him escape, instead of killing him out and out."

"That is true, and I was wrong. What would you? The villain has as tough a life as an alligator. But be at ease. If ever he fall into my hands again, I swear that I will not miss him."

"In the meanwhile you did do so – that is the evil."

"Why so?"

"You will understand me. This man is one of those villains, the scum of the United States, too many of whom have lived on the frontier during the last few years. I do not know how he contrived to deceive your New York agent; but he gained his confidence so cleverly that the latter told him all the secrets he knew about your enterprise."

"He told me so himself."

"Very good. It was then, I suppose, that you stabbed him?"

"Yes, and at the same time I plucked out his claws; that is to say, I seized the letters he held, and which might compromise me."

"A mistake. This man is too thorough-paced a scoundrel not to foresee all the chances of his treason. He had a last letter, the most important of all; and that you did not take from him."

"I took three."

"Yes, but there were four. As the last, however, in itself was worth as much as the other three, he always wore it about him in a leathern bag hung round his neck by a steel chain; you did not dream of looking for that."

"But what importance can this letter, I do not even remember writing, possess, that you should attach such weight to it?"

"It is merely the agreement drawn up between yourself, General Ibañez, and Mr. Wood, and bearing your three signatures."

"*Con mil demonios!*" the hacendero exclaimed in terror. "In that case I am lost; for if this man really possesses such a document, he will not fail to employ it in order to be revenged on me."

"Nothing is lost so long as a man's heart beats in his breast, Don Miguel. The position is critical, I allow, but I have saved myself in situations far more desperate than the one you are now in."

"What is to be done?"

"Red Cedar has been about again for two days. His first care, so soon as he could sit a horse, was to go to Santa Fe, the capital of New Mexico, and denounce you to the Governor. That has nothing to surprise you from such a man."

"Then I can only fly as speedily as I can?"

"Wait. Every man has in his heart at least one of the seven deadly sins as a bait for the demon."

"What are you driving at?"

"You will see. Fortunately for us, Red Cedar has them all seven, I believe, in the finest stage of development. Avarice, before all, has reached its acme with him."

"Well?"

"This happened. Our man denounced you to the governor as a conspirator, etc., but was careful not to give up the proofs he possessed in support of the denunciation at the outset. When General Isturitz, the governor, asked him for these proofs, he answered that he was ready to supply them in exchange for the sum of one hundred thousand piastres in gold."

"Ah!" the hacendero said, with a breath of relief, "and what did Isturitz say?"

"The general is one of your most inveterate enemies, I grant, and he would give a good deal for the pleasure of having you shot."

"That is true."

"Yes, but still the sum appeared to him, as it really is, exorbitant, the more so as he would have to pay it all himself, as the government does not recognise transactions of that nature."

"Well, what did Red Cedar do then?"

"He did not allow himself beaten; on the contrary, he told the general he would give him a week to reflect, and quietly left the Cabildo."

"Hum! And on what day was this visit paid?"

"Yesterday morning; so that you have six days still left for action."

"Six days – that is very little."

"Eh?" the Frenchman said, with a shrug of his shoulders impossible to describe. "In my country –"

"Yes, but you are Frenchmen."

"That is true: hence I allow you twice the time we should require. Come, let us put joking aside. You are a man of more than common energy; you really wish the welfare of your country, so do not let yourself be crushed by the first reverse. Who knows but that it may all be for the best?"

"Ah, my friend, I am alone! General Ibañez, who alone could help me in this critical affair, is fifty leagues off. What can I do? Nothing."

"All. I foresaw your objection. Eagle-wing, the Chief of the Coras, has gone from me to warn the general. You know with what speed Indians travel; so he will bring us the general in a few hours, I feel convinced."

Don Miguel regarded the hunter with mingled admiration and respect.

"You have done that, my friend?" he said to him as he warmly pressed his hand.

"By Jove!" Valentine said, gaily, "I have done something else too. When the time arrives I will tell you what it is. But let us not lose an hour. What do you intend to do for the present?"

"Act."

"Good: that is the way I like to hear you talk."

"Yes, but I must first come to an understanding with the general."

"That is true; but it is the least thing," Valentine answered, as he looked skyward, and attentively consulted the position of the stars. "It is now eight o'clock. Eagle-wing and the man he brings must

be at midnight at the entrance of the *Cañon del Buitre*. We have four hours before us, and that is more than we require, as we have only ten leagues to go."

"Let us go, let us go!" Don Miguel exclaimed eagerly.

"Wait a moment; there is no such hurry. Don't be alarmed; we shall arrive in time."

He then turned to Curumilla, and said to him in Araucano a few words which the hacendero did not understand. The Indian rose without replying, and disappeared in the density of the forest.

"You know," Valentine continued, "that I prefer, through habit, travelling on foot; still, as under present circumstances minutes are precious, and we must not lose them, I have provided two horses."

"You think of everything, my friend."

"Yes, when I have to act for those I love," Valentine answered with a retrospective sigh.

There was a moment's silence between the two men, and at the end of scarce a quarter of an hour there was a noise in the shrubs, the branches parted, and Curumilla re-entered the clearing, holding two horses by the bridle. These noble animals, which were nearly untamed *mustangs*, bore a striking resemblance to the steeds of the Apaches, on whose territory our friends now were. They were literally covered with eagle plumes, beads, and ribbons, while long red and white spots completed their disguise, and rendered it almost impossible to recognise them.

"Mount!" Don Miguel exclaimed so soon as he saw them. "Time is slipping away."

"One word yet," Valentine remarked.

"Speak."

"You still have as chaplain a certain monk by the name of 'Fray Ambrosio.'"

"Yes."

"Take care of that man – he betrays you."

"You believe it?"

"I am sure of it."

"Good! I will remember."

"All right. Now we will be off," Valentine said, as he buried his spurs in his horse's flanks. And the three horsemen rushed into the darkness with headlong speed.

CHAPTER XII

EL MESON

The day on which our story commences the village of the Paso del Norte presented an extraordinary appearance. The bells were ringing out full peals, for the three hundredth anniversary of its foundation was celebrated. The population of Paso, greatly diminished since the proclamation of Mexican independence, was hurrying to the churches, which flashed with silver and gold. The houses were decorated with rich tapestry, and the streets strewn with flowers.

Toward nightfall the inhabitants, whom the intolerable heat of the tropical sun had kept prisoners in the interior of the houses, flocked out to inhale the sharp perfumes of the desert breeze, and bring back a little fresh air into their parched lungs. The town, which had for several hours appeared deserted, suddenly woke up: shouts and laughter were heard afresh. The walks were invaded by the mob, and in a few minutes the *mesóns* were thronged with idlers, who began drinking pulque and mezcal, while smoking their cigarettes, and strumming the jarabe and vihuela.

In a house of poor appearance, built like all its neighbours, of earth bricks, and situated at the angle formed by the Plaza Mayor and the Calle de la Merced, some twenty-five fellows, whom it was easy to recognise as adventurers by the feather in their hats, their upturned moustaches, and specially by the long bronzed-hilted sword they wore on the thigh, were drinking torrents of aguardiente and pulque at the gambling tables, while yelling like deaf men, swearing like pagans, and threatening at every moment to unsheathe their weapons.

In a corner of the room occupied by these troublesome guests two men, seated opposite each other at a table, seemed plunged in deep thought, and looked round them absently, not thinking about drinking the contents of their glasses, which had not been emptied for more than half an hour. These two men presented the most striking contrast. They were still young. The first, aged twenty-five at the most, had one of those frank, honest, and energetic faces which call for sympathy, and attract respect. His pallid brow, his face of a delicate hue, surrounded by his long black curls, his straight and flexible nose, his mouth filled with a double row of teeth of dazzling whiteness, and surmounted by a slight brown moustache, gave him a stamp of distinction, which was the more striking owing to the strict, and perhaps common, style of his attire.

He wore the costume of the wood rangers; that is to say, the Canadian *mitasse*, fastened round the hips, and descending to the ankle; *botas vaqueras* of deer skin, fastened at the knee; and a striped zarapé of brilliant colours. A panama straw hat was thrown on the table, within reach of his hand, by the side of an American rifle and two double-barrelled pistols. A machete hung on his left side, and the hilt of a long knife peeped out of his left boot.

His companion was short and thick-set; but his well-knit limbs and his outstanding muscles indicated no ordinary strength. His face, the features of which were commonplace enough, had a cunning look, which suddenly disappeared to make room for a certain nobility whenever under the influence of any sudden emotion; his eyebrows contracted; and his glance, ordinarily veiled, flashed forth. He wore nearly the same garb as his comrade; but his hat stained with rain, and the colours of his zarapé faded by the sun, evidenced lengthened wear. Like the first one we described, he was well armed.

It was easy to see at the first glance that these two men did not belong to the Hispano-American race, indeed, their conversation would have removed any doubts on that head, for they spoke in the French dialect employed in Canada.

"Hum!" the first said, taking up his glass, which he carelessly raised to his lips. "After due consideration, Harry, I believe we shall do better by mounting our horses again, and starting, instead of remaining in this horrible den, amid these *gachupinos*, who croak like frogs before a storm."

"Deuce take your impatience!" the other replied ill-temperedly. "Can't you remain a moment at rest?"

"You call it a moment, Harry. Why, we have been here an hour."

"By Jove! Dick, you're a wonderful fellow," the other continued with a laugh. "Do you think that business can be settled all in a moment?"

"After all, what is our game? For may the old one twist my neck, or a grizzly give me a hug, if I know the least in the world! For five years we have hunted and slept side by side. We have come from Canada together to this place. I have grown into a habit – I cannot say why – of referring to you everything that concerns our mutual interests. Still I should not be sorry to know, if only for the rarity of the fact, why on earth we left the prairies, where we were so well off, to come here, where we are so badly off."

"Have you ever repented, up to today, the confidence you placed in me?"

"I do not say so, Harry. Heaven forbid! Still I think – "

"You think wrong," the young man sharply interrupted. "Let me alone, and before three months you shall have three times your hat full of massive gold, or call me a fool."

At this dazzling promise the eyes of Dick, the smaller of the hunters, glistened like two stars. He regarded his comrade with a species of admiration.

"Oh, oh!" he said in a low voice, "It is a placer, is it?"

"Hang it!" the other said, with a shrug of his shoulders, "were it not, should I be here? But silence, our man has arrived."

In fact, a man entered at this moment. On his appearance a sudden silence fell on the mesón; the adventurers gambling and cursing at all the tables, rose as if moved by a spring, respectfully took off their plumed hats, and ranged themselves with downcast eyes to let him pass. The man remained for an instant on the threshold of the venta, took a profound glance at the company, and then walked toward the two hunters.

This man wore the gown of a monk; he had the ascetic face, with the harsh features and sharply-marked lines, that forms, as it were, the type of the Spanish monks of which Titian has so admirably caught the expression on his canvas. He passed through the adventurers, holding out right and left his wide sleeves, which they reverentially kissed. On approaching the two hunters he turned round.

"Continue your sports, my sons," he said to the company; "my presence need not disturb your frolics, for I only wish to speak for a few moments with those two gentlemen."

The adventurers did not let the invitation be repeated, but took their places again tumultuously, and soon cries and oaths recommenced with equal intensity. The monk smiled, took a butaca, and seated himself between the two hunters, while bending a searching glance on them. The latter had followed with a mocking eye all the interludes of this little scene, and without making a movement, they let the monk seat himself by their side. So soon as he had done so, Harry poured him out a large glass of pulque, and placed within his reach the squares of maize leaf and tobacco.

"Drink and smoke, señor padre," he said to him.

The monk, without any observation, rolled a cigarette, emptied the glass of pulque at a draught, and then leaning his elbows on the table and bending forward, said, —

"You are punctual."

"We have been waiting an hour," Dick observed in a rough voice.

"What is an hour in the presence of eternity?" the monk said with a smile.

"Let us not lose any more time," Harry continued. "What have you to propose to us?"

The monk looked around him suspiciously, and lowered his voice.

"I can, if you like, make you rich in a few days."

"What is the business?" Dick asked.

"Of course," the monk continued, "this fortune I offer you is a matter of indifference to me. If I have an ardent desire to obtain it, it is, in the first place, because it belongs to nobody, and will permit me to relieve the wretchedness of the thousands of beings confided to my charge."

"Of course, señor padre," Harry answered seriously. "Let us not weigh longer on these details. According to what you told me a few days back, you have discovered a rich placer."

"Not I," the monk sharply objected.

"No consequence, provided that it exists," Dick answered.

"Pardon me, but it is of great consequence to me. I do not wish to take on myself the responsibility of such a discovery. If, as I believe, people will go in search of it, it may entail the death of several persons, and the church abhors bloodshed."

"Very good: you only desire to profit by it."

"Not for myself."

"For your parishioners. Very good; but let us try to come to an understanding, if possible, for our time is too precious for us to waste it in empty talk."

"*Válgame Dios!*" the monk said, crossing himself, "How you have retained the impetuosity of your French origin! Have a little patience, and I will explain myself."

"That is all we desire."

"But you will promise me –"

"Nothing," Dick interrupted. "We are honest hunters, and not accustomed to pledge ourselves so lightly before knowing positively what is asked of us."

Harry supported his friend's words by a nod. The monk drank a glass of pulque, and took two or three heavy puffs at his cigarette.

"Your will be done," he then said. "You are terrible men. This is the affair."

"Go on."

"A poor scamp of a gambusino, lost, I know not how, in the great desert, discovered at a considerable distance off, between the Rio Gila and the Colorado, the richest placer the wildest imagination can conceive. According to his statement the gold is scattered over the surface, for an extent of two or three miles, in nuggets, each of which would make a man's fortune. This gambusino, dazzled by such treasures, but unable to appropriate them alone, displayed the greatest energy, and braved the utmost perils, in order to regain civilised regions. It was only through boldness and temerity that he succeeded in escaping the countless enemies who spied, and tracked him on all sides; but Heaven at length allowed him to reach Paso safe and sound."

"Very good," Dick observed. "All this may very possibly, be true; but why did you not bring this gambusino, instead of talking to us about the placer, of which you know as little as we do? He would have supplied us with information which is indispensable for us, in the event of our consenting to help you in looking for this treasure."

"Alas!" the monk replied, hypocritically casting his eyes down, "the unhappy man was not destined to profit by this discovery, made at the price of so many perils. Scarce two days after his arrival at Paso, he quarrelled with another gambusino, and received a stab which sent him a few hours later to the tomb."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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