

Aimard Gustave

The Trapper's Daughter: A Story of the Rocky Mountains



Gustave Aimard

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Story of the Rocky Mountains**

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PREFACE

In the present volume another series of Indian adventures is concluded, and the further career of the hero is described in the series beginning with the "Tiger-slayer." It must be understood, however, that the stories are not arbitrarily connected – each is complete in itself; but those who have read one volume will, I hope, be sufficiently interested in the hero to desire to know more of his career. The following, therefore, is the order in which the volumes should be read: —

1. TRAIL HUNTER

2. PIRATES OF THE PRAIRIES

3. THE TRAPPER'S DAUGHTER

4. TIGER SLAYER

6. GOLD SEEKERS

7. INDIAN CHIEF

In all probability, M. Aimard will favour us with other volumes; but, in the mean time, the above can be read collectively or separately, with equal interest.

LASCELLES WRAXALL

CHAPTER I

THE JACAL

About three in the afternoon, a horseman, dressed in the Mexican costume, was galloping along the banks of a stream, an affluent of the Gila, whose capricious windings compelled him to make countless detours. This man, while constantly keeping his hand on his weapons, and watching for every event, urged his horse on by shouts and spur, as if anxious to reach his journey's end.

The wind blew fiercely, the heat was oppressive, the grasshoppers uttered their discordant cries under the herbage that sheltered them; the birds slowly described wide circles in the air, uttering shrill notes at intervals: coppery clouds were incessantly passing athwart the sun, whose pale, sickly beams possessed no strength; in short, all presaged a terrible storm.

The traveller seemed to notice nought of this; bowed over his horse's neck, with his eyes fixed ahead, he increased his speed, without noticing the heavy drops of rain that already fell, and the hoarse rolling of distant thunder which began to be heard.

Still this man, had he wished it, could easily have sheltered himself under the thick shade of the aged trees in the virgin forest which he had been skirting for more than an hour, and thus let the heaviest part of the storm pass; but a weightier interest, doubtless, urged him on, for, while increasing his speed, he did not think of drawing his zarapé over his shoulders to protect him from the rain, but contented himself, as each gust of wind howled past him, with drawing his hat a little tighter on his head, while repeating to his horse, in a sharp tone:

"Forward! Forward!"

In the meanwhile, the stream, whose banks the traveller was following, grew gradually narrower, and at a certain spot the bank was completely obstructed by an undergrowth of shrubs and interlaced creepers, which completely prevented any approach. On reaching this point the traveller stopped; he dismounted, carefully inspected the vicinity, took his horse by the bridle, and led it into a copse, where he concealed it; attaching it with his lasso to the trunk of a large tree, after removing the *bozal* to let it browse at liberty.

"Rest here, Negro," he said, as he softly patted it; "do not neigh, for the enemy is at hand – I shall soon return."

The intelligent animal seemed to comprehend the words its master addressed to it, for it stretched out his head and rubbed it against his chest.

"Good, good, Negro! Wait awhile!"

The stranger then took from his holsters a brace of pistols, which he placed in his girdle, threw his rifle on his shoulder, and started hurriedly in the direction of the river. He buried himself without hesitation in the shrubs that bordered the stream, carefully separating the branches which at each step barred his progress. On reaching the edge of the water he stopped for a moment, bent forward, seemed to be listening, and then drew himself up, muttering:

"There is no one; all is safe."

He then stepped on a mass of intertwined lianas, which extended from one bank to the other, and formed a natural bridge. This bridge, apparently so slight, was firm, and though it oscillated under the traveller's footsteps, he crossed it in a few seconds. He had scarce reached the other bank, when a girl emerged from a clump of trees which concealed her.

"At last!" she said, as she ran up to him: "oh! I was afraid you would not come, Don Pablo."

"Ellen," the young man answered, with his whole soul in his glance, "death alone would keep me away."

The traveller was Don Pablo Zarate; the girl, Ellen, Red Cedar's daughter.¹

"Come," she said.

The Mexican followed her, and they walked on for some time without exchanging a word. When they had passed the chaparral which bordered the river, they saw a short distance before them a wretched *jacal*, which leant solitary and silent against a rock.

"There is my home," the maiden said, with a sad smile.

Don Pablo sighed, but made no reply, and they continued to walk in the direction of the *jacal*, which they soon reached.

"Sit down, Don Pablo," the maiden went on, as she offered her comrade a stool, on which he sank. "I am alone; my father and two brothers went off this morning at sunrise."

"Are you not afraid," Don Pablo answered, "of remaining thus alone in the desert, exposed to innumerable dangers, so far from all help?"

"What can I do? Has not this life been ever mine?"

"Does your father go away often?"

"Only during the last few days. I know not what he fears, but he and my brothers seem sad and preoccupied, they go on long journeys, and when they return quite worn out, the words they address to me are harsh and snappish."

"Poor child!" said Don Pablo, "I can tell you the cause of these long journeys."

"Do you fancy I have not guessed it?" she replied; "No, no, the horizon is too gloomy around us for me not to perceive the gathering storm which will soon burst over us; but," she added, with an effort, "let us speak of ourselves, the moments are precious; what have you done?"

"Nothing," the young man said, mournfully; "all my researches have been in vain."

"That is strange," Ellen muttered; "and yet the coffer cannot be lost."

"I am as convinced of that as you are; but into whose hands has it fallen? That is what I cannot say."

The maiden reflected.

"When did you notice its disappearance?" Don Pablo went on a moment after.

"Only a few minutes after Harry's death; frightened by the sounds of the fight and the fearful uproar of the earthquake, I was half mad. Still, I can remember a circumstance which will doubtless put us on the right track."

"Speak, Ellen, speak, and whatever is to be done I will do."

The girl looked at him for a moment with an indefinable expression. She bent over to him, laid her hand on his arm, and said, in a voice soft as a bird's song:

"Don Pablo, a frank and loyal explanation between us is indispensable."

"I do not understand you," the young man stammered, as he let his eyes fall.

"Yes you do," she replied, with a sad smile; "you understand me, Don Pablo; but no matter, as you pretend to be ignorant of what I wish to say to you, I will explain myself in such a way that any further misconception will be impossible."

"Speak! Ellen; though I do not suspect your meaning, I have a foreboding of misfortune."

"Yes," she continued, "you are right; a misfortune is really concealed under what I have to say to you, if you do not consent to grant me the favour I implore of you."

Don Pablo rose.

"Why feign longer? Since I cannot induce you to give up your plan, Ellen, the explanation you ask of me is needless. Do you believe," he went on, as he walked in great agitation up and down the *jacal*, "that I have not already regarded the strange position in which we find ourselves from every side? Fatality has impelled us toward each other by one of those accidents which human wisdom cannot foresee. I love you, Ellen, I love you with all the strength of my soul, you, the daughter of

¹ See the Trail Hunter and Pirates of the Prairies.

the enemy of my family, of the man whose hands are still red with my sister's blood, which he shed by assassinating her coldly, in the most infamous manner. I know that, I tremble at thinking of my love, which, in the prejudiced eyes of the world, must seem monstrous. All that you can say to me, I have said repeatedly to myself; but an irresistible force drags me on this fatal incline. Will, reason, resolution, all are broken before the hope of seeing you for a moment and exchanging a few words with you. I love you, Ellen, so as to leave for your sake, relatives, friends, family, aye, the whole universe."

The young man uttered these words with sparkling eye, and in a sharp stern voice, like a man whose resolution is immovable. Ellen let her head droop, and tears slowly ran down her pallid cheeks.

"You weep!" he exclaimed, "Oh Heavens! Can I be mistaken? You do not love me?"

"I love you, Don Pablo!" she replied in a deep voice; "yes, I love you more than myself; but alas! That love will cause our ruin, for an insurmountable barrier separates us."

"Perhaps," he exclaimed impetuously; "no, Ellen, you are mistaken, you are not, you cannot be the daughter of Red Cedar. Oh, that coffer, that accursed coffer, I would give half the time Heaven will still grant me to live, could I recover it. In it, I feel certain, are the proofs I seek."

"Why cheat ourselves with a wild hope, Don Pablo? I believed too lightly in words uttered unmeaningly by the squatter and his wife: my childhood recollections deceived us, that is unhappily too certain. I am now convinced of it: all proves it to me, and I am really that man's daughter."

Don Pablo stamped his foot angrily.

"Never, never," he shouted, "it is impossible, the vulture does not pair with the dove, demons cannot be betrothed to angels. No, that villain is not your father! Listen, Ellen; I have no proof of what I assert – all seems, on the contrary, to prove that I am wrong; appearances are quite against me; but still, mad as it may seem, I am sure that I am right, and that my heart does not deceive me when it tells me that man is a stranger to you."

Ellen sighed.

Don Pablo continued.

"See, Ellen, the hour has arrived for me to leave you. Remaining longer with you would compromise your safety; give me then the information I am awaiting."

"For what good?" she murmured despairingly, "The coffer is lost."

"I am not of your opinion; I believe, on the contrary, that it has fallen into the hands of a man who intends to make use of it, for what purpose I am ignorant, but I shall know it, be assured."

"As you insist on it, listen to me, then, Don Pablo, though what I have told you is extremely vague."

"A gleam, however weak it may be, will suffice to guide me, and perhaps enable me to discover what I seek."

"May Heaven grant it!" she sighed; "This is all I can tell you, and it is quite impossible for me to say certainly whether I am not mistaken, for, at the moment, terror so troubled my senses that I cannot say positively I saw what I fancied I saw."

"Well, go on," the young man said, impatiently.

"When Harry fell, struck by a bullet, and was writhing in the last throes, two were near him, one already wounded, Andrés Garote the ranchero, the other, who stooped over his body, and seemed riffling his clothes – "

"Who was he?"

"Fray Ambrosio. I even fancy I can remember seeing him leave the poor hunter with a badly restrained movement of joy, and hiding in his bosom something which I could not distinguish."

"No doubt but he had seized the coffer."

"That is probable, but I cannot say positively, for I was, I repeat, in a condition which rendered it impossible for me to perceive anything clearly."

"Well," said Don Pablo, pursuing his idea; "what became of Ambrosio?"

"I do not know; after the earthquake, my father and his comrades rushed in different directions, each seeking his safety in flight. My father, more than any other, had an interest in concealing his trail, the monk left us almost immediately, and I have not seen him since."

"Has Red Cedar never spoken about him before you?"

"Never."

"That is strange! No matter. I swear to you, Ellen, that I will find him again, if I have to pursue him to hell; it is that scoundrel who has stolen the coffer."

"Don Pablo," the maiden said as she rose, "the sun is setting, my father and brothers will soon return, we must part."

"You are right, Ellen, I leave you."

"Farewell, Don Pablo, the storm is bursting; who knows if you will reach your friends' bivouac safe and sound?"

"I hope so, Ellen, but if you say to me farewell, I reply that we shall meet again: believe me, dear girl, put your trust in Heaven, for if we have been permitted to love, it is because that love will produce our happiness."

At this moment lightning flashed across the sky, and the thunder burst ominously.

"There is the storm," the maiden exclaimed; "go, go, in Heaven's name!"

"Good bye, my well-beloved, good bye," the young man said, as he rushed from the jacal; "put your trust in Heaven, and in me."

"Oh, Heaven!" Ellen exclaimed, as she fell on her knees, "Grant that my presentiments have not deceived me, or I shall die of despair."

CHAPTER II

INSIDE THE CABIN

After Don Pablo's departure, the maiden remained for a long time thoughtful, paying no attention to the mournful sounds of the raging tempest, or the hoarse whistling of the wind, every gust of which shook the jacal, and threatened to carry it away. Ellen was reflecting on her conversation with the Mexican; the future appeared to her sad, gloomy, and storm-laden. In spite of all the young man had said to her, hope had not penetrated to her heart; she felt herself dragged involuntarily down the incline of a precipice, into which she must fall: all told her that a catastrophe was imminent, and that the hand of God would soon fall terribly and implacably on the man whose crimes had wearied justice.

Toward midnight, the sound of horses was heard, gradually approaching, and several persons stopped before the jacal. Ellen lit a torch of candlewood and opened the door: three men entered. They were Red Cedar and his two sons, Nathan and Sutter.

For about a month past, an inexplicable change had taken place in the squatter's way of acting and speaking. This brutal man, whose thin lips were constantly curled by an ironical smile, who ever had in his mouth mockery and cruel words, who only dreamed of murder and robbery, and to whom remorse was unknown, had been for some time sad and morose: a secret restlessness seemed to devour him; at times, when he did not fancy himself observed, he gave the girl long glances of inexplicable meaning, and uttered profound sighs while shaking his head in a melancholy way.

Ellen had noticed this change, which she could not account for, and which only augmented her alarm; for it needed very grave reasons thus to alter a nature so energetic and resolute as Red Cedar's.

But what were these reasons? Ellen sought them in vain, but nothing gave an embodiment to her suspicions. The squatter had always been kind to her, so far as his savage training permitted it, treating her with a species of rough affection, and softening, as far as was possible, the harshness of his voice when he addressed her. But since the change which had taken place in him, this affection had become real tenderness. He watched anxiously over the maiden, continually striving to procure her those comforts and trifles which so please women, which it is almost impossible to procure in the desert, and hence possess a double value.

Happy when he saw a faint smile play on the lips of the poor girl, whose sufferings he guessed without divining the cause, he anxiously examined her, when her pallor and red eyes told him of sleepless nights and tears shed during his absence. This man, in whom every tender feeling seemed to be dead, had suddenly felt his heart beat through the vibration of a secret fibre, of whose existence he had ever been ignorant, and he felt himself re-attached to humanity by the most holy of passions, paternal love. There was something at once grand and terrible in the affection of this man of blood for this frail and delicate maiden. There was something of the wild beast even in the caresses he lavished on her; a strange blending of a mother's tenderness with the tiger's jealousy.

Red Cedar only lived for his daughter and through his daughter. With affection shame had returned, that is to say, while continuing his life of brigandage, he feigned, before Ellen, to have completely renounced it, in order to adopt the existence of the wood rangers and hunters. The maiden was only half duped by this falsehood: but how did it concern her? Completely absorbed in her love, all that was beyond it became to her indifferent.

The squatter and his sons were sad, and seemed buried in thought when they entered the jacal; they sat down without uttering a word. Ellen hastened to place on the table the food she had prepared for them during their absence.

"Supper is ready," she said.

The three men silently approached the table.

"Do you not eat with us, child?" Red Cedar asked.

"I am not hungry," she replied.

"Hum!" said Nathan, "Ellen is dainty – she prefers Mexican cookery to ours."

Ellen blushed, but made no reply; Red Cedar smote the table with his fist angrily.

"Silence!" he shouted; "How does it concern you whether your sister eats or not? She is at liberty to do as she likes here, I suppose."

"I don't say the contrary," Nathan growled; "still she seems to affect a dislike to eat with us."

"You are a scoundrel! I repeat to you that your sister is mistress here, and no one has a right to make any remarks to her."

Nathan looked down angrily, and began eating.

"Come here, child," Red Cedar continued, as he gave his rough voice all the gentleness of which it was susceptible, "come here, that I may give you a trifle I have bought you."

The maiden approached and Red Cedar drew from his pocket a gold watch attached to a long chain.

"Look you," he said, as he put it round her neck, "I know that you have desired a watch for a long time, so here is one I bought of some travellers we met on the prairie."

While uttering these words, the squatter felt himself blush involuntarily, for he lied; the watch had been torn from the body of a woman killed by his hands when attacking a caravan. Ellen perceived this blush; she took off the watch and returned it to Red Cedar without saying a word.

"What are you about, girl?" he said, surprised at this refusal, which he was far from expecting; "Why don't you take this toy, which, I repeat to you, I procured expressly for you?"

The maiden looked at him sternly, and replied in a firm voice:

"Because there is blood on that watch, and it is the produce of a robbery – perhaps of a murder."

The squatter turned pale; instinctively he looked at the watch, and there was really a patch of blood on the case. Nathan burst into a coarse and noisy laugh.

"Bravo!" he said; "Well done – the little one guessed the truth at the first look."

Red Cedar, who had let his head droop at his daughter's reproaches, drew himself up as if a viper had stung him.

"I told you to be silent," he exclaimed, furiously; and seizing the stool on which he had been sitting, he hurled it at his son's head.

The latter avoided the blow and drew his knife – a struggle was imminent. Sutter, leaning against the walls of the jacal, with his arms crossed and his pipe in his mouth, prepared, with an ironical smile, to remain spectator of the fight; but Ellen threw herself boldly between the squatter and his son.

"Stay!" she shrieked; "Stay, in Heaven's name! What, Nathan, would you strike your father? And are you not afraid to hurt your first-born son?"

"May the devil twist my father's neck!" Nathan replied; "Does he take me for a child, or does he fancy I am disposed to put up with his insults? By heavens! We are bandits; our only law is force, and we recognise no other. My father will ask my pardon, and I will see whether I forgive him."

"Ask your pardon, dog!" the squatter shouted; and bounding like a tiger with a movement swifter than thought, he seized the young man by the throat and fell heavily on him.

"Ah, ah!" he continued, as he placed his knee on his chest, "The old lion is good yet. Your life is in my hands – what do you say? Will you play with me again?"

Nathan howled as he writhed like a serpent to free himself from the grasp that mastered him. At length he recognised his impotence, and confessed himself conquered.

"It is good," he said; "you are stronger than I – you can kill me."

"No," said Ellen, "that shall not be. Rise, father, and set Nathan free; and you, brother, give me your knife – should such a contest take place between father and son?"

She stooped down and picked up the weapon which the young man had let fall from his hand. Red Cedar rose.

"Let that serve you as a lesson," he said, "and teach you to be more prudent in future."

The young man, angered and ashamed of his downfall, sat down again without a word. The squatter turned to his daughter, and offered her the watch a second time.

"Will you have it?" he asked her.

"No," she replied, resolutely.

"Very good."

Without any apparent passion, he let the watch fall, and, putting his heel on it, reduced it to powder. The rest of the supper passed off without incident; the three men ate greedily, not speaking to each other, and waited on by Ellen. When the pipes were lit, the maiden wished to retire to the compartment which served as her bedroom.

"Stay, my child," Red Cedar said. "I have to speak with you."

Ellen sat down in a corner of the jacal and waited. The three men went on smoking silently for some time, while outside the storm still continued. At length, the young men shook the ashes out of their pipes, and rose.

"Then," said Nathan, "all is arranged."

"It is," replied Red Cedar.

"At what hour will they come to fetch us?" Sutter asked.

"At an hour before sunrise."

"Very good."

The brothers lay down on the ground, rolled themselves in their furs, and soon fell asleep. Red Cedar remained for some time plunged in thought, while Ellen did not stir. At length he raised his head.

"Come hither, child," he said.

She came up and stood before him.

"Sit down by my side."

"For what good, father? Speak, I am listening," she answered.

The squatter was visibly embarrassed; he knew not how to commence the conversation, but, after some moments' hesitation, he said:

"You are ill, Ellen."

The maiden smiled sadly.

"Did you not notice it before today, father?" she replied.

"No, my child; I have noticed your sadness for a long time past. You are not suited for a desert life."

"That is true," was all she said.

"We are about to leave the prairie," Red Cedar went on.

Ellen gave an almost imperceptible start.

"Soon?" she asked.

"This very day; in a few hours we shall be on the road."

The girl looked at him.

"Then," she said, "we will draw nearer to the civilised frontier?"

"Yes," he answered, with considerable emotion.

Ellen smiled mournfully.

"Why deceive me, father?" she asked.

"What do you mean?" he exclaimed; "I do not understand you."

"On the contrary, you understand me thoroughly, and it would be better to explain your thoughts to me frankly than try to deceive me for a purpose I cannot divine. Alas!" she continued, with a sigh, "Am I not your daughter, and must undergo the consequences of the life you have chosen?"

The squatter frowned.

"I believe that your words contain a reproach," he replied. "Life is scarce opening for you; then how do you dare to judge the actions of a man?"

"I judge nothing, father. As you say, life is scarce opening for me; still, however short my existence may have been, it has been one long suffering."

"That is true, poor girl," the squatter said, gently; "pardon me, I should be so glad to see you happy. Alas! Heaven has not blessed my efforts, though all I have done has been for your sake."

"Do not say that, father," she quickly exclaimed; "do not thus make me morally your accomplice, or render me responsible for your crimes, which I execrate, else you would impel me to desire death."

"Ellen, Ellen! you misunderstood what I said to you; I never had the intention," he said, much embarrassed.

"No more of this," she went on; "we are going, you said, I think, father? Our retreat is discovered, we must fly; that is what you wish to tell me?"

"Yes," he said, "it is that, though I cannot imagine how you have learned it."

"No matter, father. And in what direction shall we proceed?"

"Temporarily we shall conceal ourselves in the Sierra de los Comanches."

"In order that our pursuers may lose our trail?"

"Yes, for that reason, and for another," he added, in a low voice.

But, however low he spoke, Ellen heard him.

"What other?"

"It does not concern you, child, but myself alone."

"You are mistaken, father," she said, with considerable resolution; "from the moment that I am your accomplice, I must know all. Perhaps," she added, with a sad smile, "I may be able to give you good advice."

"I will do without it."

"One word more. You have numerous enemies, father."

"Alas! Yes," he said, carelessly.

"Who are those who compel you to fly today?"

"The most implacable of all, Don Miguel Zarate."

"The man whose daughter you assassinated in so cowardly a way."

Red Cedar struck the table passionately.

"Ellen!" he shouted.

"Do you know any other appellation more correct than that?" she asked, coldly.

The bandit looked down.

"Then," she continued, "you are about to fly – fly forever?"

"What is to be done?" he muttered.

Ellen bent over him, laid her white hand on his arm, and regarded him fixedly.

"Who are the men about to join you in a few hours?" she asked.

"Fray Ambrosio, Andrés Garote – our old friends, in short."

"That is just," the girl murmured, with a gesture of disgust, "a common danger brings you together. Well, my father, you and your friends are all cowards."

At this violent insult which his daughter coldly hurled in his teeth, the squatter turned pale, and rose suddenly.

"Silence!" he shouted, furiously.

"The tiger, when attacked in its lair, turns on the hunters," the girl went on, without displaying any emotion; "why do you not follow their example?"

A sinister smile played round the corners of the bandit's mouth.

"I have something better in my pocket," he said, with an accent impossible to describe.

The maiden looked at him for a moment.

"Take care," she at length said to him in a deep voice; "take care! The hand of God is on you, and His vengeance will be terrible."

After uttering these words, she slowly withdrew and entered the room set apart for her. The bandit stood for a moment, crushed by this anathema; but he soon threw up his head, shrugged his shoulders disdainfully, and lay down by the side of his sons, muttering in a hoarse and ironical voice:

"God! Does He exist?"

Soon, no other sound was audible in the jacal saving that produced by the breathing of the three men. Ellen was praying fervently, while the storm redoubled its fury outside.

CHAPTER III

A CONVERSATION

On leaving the cabin, Don Pablo recrossed the river, and found his way back to the thicket where he had tied his horse up. The poor animal, terrified by the lightning and the hoarse rolling of the thunder, uttered a snort of pleasure at seeing its master again. Without loss of a moment, the young man leaped into the saddle and started at a gallop.

The rain fell in torrents, the wind whistled violently, the young man feared at each moment losing his way, and groped through the immense solitude which stretched out before him, and which the darkness prevented him from sounding. Like all well-gifted men habituated to an adventurous life, Don Pablo de Zarate was well fitted for struggling. His will grew in proportion to the difficulties that rose before him, and instead of discouraging him, obstacles only confirmed him in his resolution. So soon as he had chosen an object, he reached it in spite of all.

His love for Ellen, born, as it were, through a thunderclap – as, in fact, most true loves spring into life, where the unexpected always plays the chief part – this love, we say, for which he was in no way prepared, and which surprised him at the moment which he least dreamed of it, had assumed, without his will, gigantic proportions, which all the reasons which should have rendered it impossible, only augmented.

Although he bore the deepest hatred for Red Cedar, and, had the opportunity presented itself, would have killed him without hesitation like a dog, his love for Ellen had become a worship, an adoration about which he no longer reasoned, but which he endured with that intoxication and that delight felt in forbidden things. This girl, who had remained so pure and chaste amid this family of bandits, possessed an irresistible attraction for him. He had said in his conversation with her he was intimately convinced that she could not be Red Cedar's daughter. It would have been impossible for him to give his reasons; but with that tenacity of purpose which only some few men possess he necessarily sought the proofs of this conviction which nothing supported, and, even more, he sought these proofs with the certainty of finding them.

For a month past, he had discovered, by an inexplicable chance, Red Cedar's retreat, which Valentine, the skilful trail-hunter, had been unable to detect. Don Pablo had immediately profited by his good fortune to see again the girl he had believed lost for ever. This unexpected success appeared to him a good omen; and every morning, without saying anything to his friends, he mounted his horse upon the first excuse that offered, and rode thirty miles to speak with her he loved for a few moments.

Every consideration was silent in presence of his love: he allowed his friends to exhaust themselves in vain researches, preciously keeping his secret in order to be happy, at least, for a few days; for he perfectly foresaw that the moment must arrive when Red Cedar would be discovered. But, in the meanwhile, he enjoyed the present. With all those who love in this way, the future is nothing, the present is all in all.

Don Pablo galloped on by the glare of the flashes, feeling neither the rain that inundated him, nor the wind that howled round his head. Absorbed in his love, he thought of the conversation he had held with Ellen, and pleased himself with recalling all the words that had been exchanged during the hour, which slipped away almost too rapidly.

All at once, his horse, to which he paid no attention, neighed, and Don Pablo raised his head intuitively. Ten paces ahead of him, a horseman was standing motionless across his path.

"Ah, ah!" said Don Pablo, as he drew himself up on the saddle, and cocked his pistols; "You are very late on the road, comrade. Let me pass, if you please."

"I am no later than yourself, Don Pablo," was the immediate response, "since I meet you."

"Halloh!" the young man shouted, as he uncocked his pistols, and returned them to his holsters; "What the deuce are you doing here, Don Valentine?"

"As you see, I am waiting."

"Whom can you be waiting for at this advanced hour?"

"For yourself, Don Pablo."

"For me!" the Mexican said in surprise; "That is strange."

"Not so much as you suppose. I desire to have a conversation with you, which no one must overhear; and as that was impossible in camp, I came to wait for you as you passed: that is simple enough, I fancy."

"It is; but what is less so, is the hour and spot you have selected, my friend."

"Why so?"

"Hang it, a terrible storm is let loose over our heads; we have no place here to shelter us; and I repeat, it is nearer morning than night."

"That is true; but time pressed, and I could not select the hour to my fancy."

"You alarm me, my friend; has anything new occurred?"

"Nothing that I know of, up to the present; but ere long we shall see something, you may feel assured."

The young man stifled a sigh, but made no reply. While exchanging these hurried sentences, the Trail-hunter and the Mexican had joined, and now rode side by side. Valentine continued —

"Follow me for a few moments. I will lead you to a spot where we can converse at ease, without fear of being disturbed."

"What you have to say to me must be very important?"

"You shall soon judge of that."

"And are you going to lead me far?"

"Only a few paces; to a grotto which I noticed in the flashes."

"Let us go then."

The two men spurred their horses, and galloped silently side by side; they went on thus for hardly a quarter of an hour in the direction of a thick chaparral which skirted the river.

"We have arrived," said Valentine, as he checked his horse and dismounted. "You had better let me go first, for it may happen that the cave we are about to enter may have an occupier not at all disposed to move for us, and it is as well to act prudently."

"What do you mean? To what occupier do you allude?"

"Hang it, I do not know," the Frenchman replied carelessly; "in any case, it is as well to be on one's guard."

While saying this, Valentine produced from under his zarapé two candlewood torches, which he lighted; he gave one to Don Pablo, and the two men, after hobbling their horses, opened the bushes and advanced boldly toward the cave. After walking a few steps, they suddenly found themselves at the entrance of one of those magnificent natural grottos formed by the volcanic convulsions so frequent in these parts.

"Attention!" Valentine muttered in a low voice to his comrade.

The sudden appearance of the two men startled a cloud of night birds and bats, which flew away heavily in all directions, uttering shrill cries. Valentine went on, not troubling himself about these funereal guests, whose sports he so unexpectedly noticed. All at once, a hoarse and prolonged growl came from a distant corner of the cave.

The two men stopped as if rooted to the ground. They found themselves face to face with a magnificent black bear, whose usual residence this cavern doubtless was, and which, standing on its hind legs with open mouth, showed the troublesome persons who came to trouble it so inopportunistically in its lair, a tongue red as blood, and glistening claws of a remarkable length. It balanced itself clumsily, according to the fashion of its congeners, and its round and dazzled eyes were fixed on

the adventurers in a manner that would cause reflection. Fortunately, they were not the men to let themselves be intimidated for long.

"Hum!" said Valentine, surveying the animal, "I was sure of it; there is a young fellow who seems inclined to sup with us."

"My rifle, on the contrary, will make us sup with him," Don Pablo said with a laugh.

"For Heaven's sake do not fire," the hunter said quickly, as he checked the young man who had already shouldered his rifle; "a shot fired at this spot will produce a fearful row: we do not know what sort of people may be prowling around us; so we must not compromise ourselves."

"That is true," Don Pablo remarked; "but what is to be done?"

"That is my business," Valentine replied; "take my torch, and hold yourself in readiness to help me."

Then, resting his rifle against the side of the cave, he went out, while the Mexican remained alone, facing the bear, which, dazzled and perplexed by the light, did not venture to stir. In a few minutes Valentine returned; he had been to fetch his lasso, fastened to the saddle bow.

"Now, stick your torches in the ground, to be ready for any accident."

Don Pablo obeyed; the hunter carefully prepared the lasso and whirled it round his head, while whistling in a peculiar way.

At this unexpected appeal the bear moved heavily two or three paces forward, but that was its ruin. The lasso started from the hunter's hands, the slipknot fell on the animal's shoulders, and the two men slipped back, tugging at it with all their strength. The poor quadruped, thus strangled and stretching out a tongue a foot long, tottered and fell, striving in vain to remove with its huge paws the unlucky collar that compressed its throat. But the hunters were not conquered by their enemy's tremendous efforts; they redoubled their strength, and did not loose the lasso till the bear had given its last sigh.

"Now," said Valentine, after he had assured himself that Bruin was really dead, "bring the horses in here, Don Pablo, while I cut off our enemy's paws, to roast them in the ashes while we are talking."

When the young man re-entered the grotto, leading the horses, he found Valentine, who had lighted a large fire, busied in flaying the bear, whose paws were gently roasting in the embers, as he had said. Don Pablo gave the horses their food, and then sat down before the fire near Valentine.

"Well," said the latter with a smile, "do you fancy this a comfortable place for a gossip?"

"Yes, it is," the young man carelessly replied, as he rolled between his fingers a husk cigarette with the dexterity apparently peculiar to the Spanish race; "we are all right here: I am ready for your explanation, my friend."

"I will give it you," the hunter said, who had finished skinning the bear, and quietly returned his knife to his boot, after carefully wiping the blade; "how long have you known Red Cedar's hiding place?"

At this point-blank question, which he was far from expecting, the young man started; a feverish flush covered his face, and he did not know what to answer.

"Why – ?" he stammered.

"About a month, I think?" Valentine continued, not appearing to notice his friend's confusion.

"Yes, about," the other replied, not knowing what he said.

"And for a month," Valentine continued, imperturbably, "you have left your father's side each night to go and make love to the daughter of the man who murdered your sister?"

"My friend," Don Pablo said, painfully.

"Would you assert that it is not true?" the hunter went on hastily, as he bent on him a glance which made him look down: "explain yourself, Pablo – I am waiting for your justification. I am curious to know how you will manage to prove to me that you have acted rightly."

The young man, while his friend was speaking, had time to regain, at any rate, a portion, if not all, of his coolness and presence of mind.

"You are severe," he said; "before accusing me, it would be, perhaps, worthwhile to listen to the reasons I have to offer you."

"Stay, my friend." Valentine said, quickly, "let us not turn from the question, but be frank; do not take the trouble to describe your love to me, for I know it as well as you do – I saw it born and grow; still, permit me to tell you certainly I thought that after the assassination of Doña Clara, this love, which had hitherto resisted everything, would die out. It is impossible to love those we despise. Red Cedar's daughter can only appear to you through a blood-stained cloud."

"Don Valentine," the young man exclaimed, in grief, "would you render that angel responsible for the crimes of a villain?"

"I will not discuss with you the famous theory which lays down that faults and crimes are personal; faults may be so, but in desert life the whole family must be responsible for the crimes of its chief; were it not so, no security would be possible for honest people."

"Oh, how can you speak thus!"

"Very good – let us change the ground, as that is disagreeable to you. You possess the noblest and most honourable nature of any man I know, Don Pablo. I presume you never had a thought of making Ellen your mistress?"

"No!" the young man savagely protested.

"Would you make her your wife, then?" Valentine said, with a cutting accent, as he looked him fixedly in the face.

Don Pablo bowed his head in despair.

"I am accursed!" he exclaimed.

"No," Valentine said, as he seized him sharply by the arm, "you are mad. Like all young men, passion sways and overpowers you – you listen to that alone; you despise the voice of reason, and hence commit faults which may speedily become, in spite of yourself, crimes."

"Do not speak thus, my friend."

"You have only reached faults as yet," Valentine said, imperturbably; "but take care."

"Oh, it is you who are mad, my friend, to say such things to me. Believe me, however great my love for Ellen may be, I shall never forget the duties imposed on me by the strange position in which fate has placed me."

"And yet for a month you have known the hiding place of the most implacable enemy of your family, and have kept it a profound secret, in order to satisfy the claims of a passion which can only have a disgraceful result for you! You see us vainly employing all the means in our power to discover the traces of our enemy, and you betray us coldly, deliberately, for the sake of a few love phrases which you find means to exchange daily with a girl, while making us believe that, like ourselves, you are engaged in fruitless researches. What name will you give to your conduct save that of a traitor?"

"Valentine, you insult me, the friendship you have for me does not authorise you to act thus; take care, for patience has its limits."

The hunter interrupted him by a coarse laugh.

"You see it, boy," he said sternly, "already you threaten me."

The young man rolled on the ground in despair.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, "I have suffered enough."

Valentine looked at him for a moment with tender pity, then bent over him, and touching his shoulder:

"Listen to me, Don Pablo," he said in a gentle voice.

CHAPTER IV

A BACKWARD GLANCE

We will now take up our narrative at the point where we left it at the conclusion of the "Pirates of the Prairies." During the six months which had elapsed since the mournful death of Doña Clara, certain events have taken place, which it is indispensable for the reader to know, in order properly to understand the following story.

He will probably remember that White Gazelle was picked up in a fainting condition by Bloodson, while at the side of the old pirate, Sandoval. He threw the girl across his horse's neck, and started at full speed in the direction of the teocali, which served him as a refuge and fortress. We will follow these two important persons, whom we reproach ourselves with having too long neglected.

Bloodson's mad course was frightful to look on. In the shadow of the night the horse bounded forward, trampling beneath its nervous hoofs everything they met, while its outstretched head cleft the air. Its ears were thrown back, and from its widely opened nostrils issued jets of steam which traced long white furrows in the gloom. It dashed forward, uttering snorts of pain, and biting between its clenched teeth the *bozal* which it covered with foam, while its flanks, torn by the spurs of its impatient rider, dripped with blood and perspiration. But the faster it went, the more did Bloodson torment it, and seek to increase its speed.

The trees and rocks disappeared with marvellous rapidity on either side the road, and White Gazelle was presently restored to life by the violent shocks the movements of the horse gave to her body. Her long hair trailed in the dust, her eyes, raised to Heaven, were bathed in tears of despair, grief, and impotence. At the risk of fracturing her skull against the stones, she made useless efforts to escape from the arms of her ravisher, but the latter fixed on her a glance whose passion revealed a ferocious joy, and did not appear to notice the terror he caused the girl, or rather seemed to derive from it an unspeakable pleasure. His compressed lips remained silent, only allowing passage at intervals to a shrill whistle intended to increase the ardour of his horse, which, exasperated by the pressure of its rider, seemed no longer to touch the ground, and devoured the space like the fantastic steed in the ballad of Lenore.

The girl uttered a cry, but it was lost in the gloomy echoes, drowned in the sound of this mad chase. And the horse still galloped on. Suddenly White Gazelle collected all her strength, and bounded forward with such vivacity, that her feet already touched the ground; but Bloodson was on his guard, and ere she had regained her balance, he stooped down without checking his steed, and seizing the girl by her long tresses, lifted her up, and placed her again before him. A sob burst from the Gazelle's chest, and she fainted once again.

"Ah, you shall not escape me," Bloodson yelled; "no one in the world can tear you from my grasp."

In the meanwhile darkness had been succeeded by day; the sun rose in all its splendour. Myriads of birds saluted the return of light by their joyous strains; nature had awakened gaily, and the sky, of a diaphanous azure, promised one of those lovely days, which the blessed climate of these countries has alone the privilege of offering.

A fertile landscape, exquisitely diversified, stretched out on either side the road, and blended with the distant horizon. The girl's body hung down the side of the horse, following unresistingly all the movements imparted to it; with her face covered with a livid paleness, half opened lips, clenched teeth, uncovered bosom and panting chest, she palpitated under Bloodson's hand, which pressed heavily upon her.

At length, they reached a cavern, where were encamped some forty Indians, armed for war; these were Bloodson's companions. He made them a sign, and a horse was brought to him; it was high

time, for the one he rode had scarce stopped ere it fell, pouring forth black blood from its nostrils, mouth, and ears. Bloodson mounted, took the girl before him, and started again.

"To the hacienda Quemada (the burnt farm)," he shouted.

The Indians, who doubtless were only awaiting their chief's arrival, followed his example, and soon the whole band, with the stranger at their head, galloped along, hidden by the dense cloud of dust they raised. After five hours' ride, whose speed surpasses all description, the Indians saw the tall steeples of a town standing out in the azure of the horizon, beneath a mass of smoke and vapour. Bloodson and his band had left the Far West.

The Indians turned slightly to the left, galloping across fields, and trampling under their horses' hoofs, with wicked fury, the rich crops that covered them. At the expiration of about half an hour, they reached the base of a lofty hill, which rose solitary in the plain.

"Wait for me here," said Bloodson, as he checked his horse; "whatever happens, do not stir till my return."

The Indians bowed in obedience, and Bloodson, burying his spurs in his horse's flanks, started again at full speed. But this ride was not long. When Bloodson had disappeared from his comrades' sight, he stopped his horse and dismounted. After removing the bridle, to let the animal browse freely on the thick and tall grass of the plain, the stranger raised in his arms the girl whom he had laid on the ground, where she remained senseless, and began slowly scaling the hillside.

It was the hour when the birds salute with their parting strains the sun, whose disc, already beneath the horizon, shed around only oblique and torpid beams. The shadow was rapidly invading the sky; the wind was rising with momentarily increasing violence, the heat was oppressive, large blackish clouds, fringed with grey and borne by the breeze, chased heavily athwart the sky, drawing nearer and nearer to the earth. In a word, all foreboded one of those hurricanes such as are only seen in these countries, and which make the most intrepid men turn pale with terror.

Bloodson still ascended, bearing the girl in his arms, whose lifeless head hung over his shoulder. Drops of lukewarm rain, large as dollars, had begun to fall at intervals, and spotted the earth, which immediately drank them up; a sharp and penetrating odour exhaled from the ground and impregnated the atmosphere.

But Bloodson still went up with the same firm step, his head drooping and eyebrows contracted. At length he reached the top of the hill, when he stopped and bent a searching glance around. At this moment, a dazzling flash shot athwart the sky, illuminating the landscape with a bluish tint, and the thunder burst forth furiously.

"Oh!" Bloodson muttered with a sinister accent, and as if answering aloud an internal thought, "nature is harmonising with the scene about to take place here; but the storm of the Heavens is not so terrible as the one growling in my heart. Come, come! I only needed this fearful melody. I am the avenger, and am about to accomplish the demoniacal task which I imposed on myself; during a night of delirium."

After uttering these ill-omened words, he continued his progress, proceeding toward a pile of half-calcined stones, whose black points stood out of the tall grass a short distance off. The top of the hill where Bloodson was, offered a scene of inexpressible savageness. Through the tufts of grass might be noticed ruins blackened by fire, pieces of wall, and vaults half broken in. Here and there were fruit trees, dahlias, cedars, and a *noria* or well, whose long pole still bore at one end the remains of the leathern bucket once employed to draw water.

In the centre of the ruins stood a large wooden cross, marking the site of a tomb; at the foot of this cross were piled up, with ghastly symmetry, some twenty grinning skulls, to which the rain, wind, and sun had given the lustre and yellowish tinge of ivory. Round the tomb, snakes and lizards, those guests of sepulchres, silently glided through the grass, watching with their round and startled eyes the stranger who dared to disturb their solitude. Not far from the tomb, a species of shed, made

of interlaced reeds, was falling to ruin, but still offered a scanty shelter to travellers surprised by a storm. It was toward this shed that Bloodson proceeded.

In a few minutes he reached it, and was thus sheltered from the rain, which at this moment fell in torrents. The storm had reached the height of its fury – the flashes succeeded each other uninterruptedly; the thunder rolled furiously, and the wind violently lashed the trees. It was, in a word, one of those awful nights on which deeds without a name, which the sun will not illumine with its brilliant beams, are accomplished.

Bloodson laid the girl on a pile of dry leaves in one of the corners of the shed, and after gazing on her attentively for some seconds, he folded his arms on his chest, frowned, and began walking up and down, muttering unconnected sentences. Each time he passed before the maiden, he stopped, bent on her a glance of undefinable meaning, and resumed his walk with a shake of his head.

"Come," he said hoarsely, "I must finish it! What! That girl, so strong and robust, lies there, pale, worn out, half dead. Why is it not Red Cedar that I hold thus beneath my heel? – but patience, his turn will come, and then!"

A sardonic smile played round his lips, and he bent over the girl. He gently raised her head, and was about to make her smell a bottle he had taken from her girdle, when he suddenly let her fall on her bed of leaves, and rushed away, uttering a cry of terror.

"No," he said, "it is not possible: I am mistaken, it is an illusion, a dream."

After a moments' hesitation, he returned to the girl, and bent over her again. But this time his manner had completely changed: though he had been rough and brutal previously, he was now full of attention to her. During the various events to which White Gazelle had been the victim, some of the diamond buttons which fastened her vest had been torn off, and exposed her bosom. Bloodson had noticed a black velvet scapulary, on which two interlaced letters were embroidered in silver, suspended round her neck by a thin gold chain. It was the sight of this mysterious cypher which caused Bloodson the violent emotion from which he was now suffering.

He seized the scapulary with a hand trembling with impatience, broke the chain, and waited till a flash enabled him to see the cypher a second time, and assure himself that he was not deceived. He had not long to wait: within a few seconds a dazzling flash illumined the hill. Bloodson looked, and was convinced: the cypher was really the one he fancied he had seen. He fell to the ground, buried his head in his hands, and reflected profoundly. Half an hour passed ere this man emerged from his statue-like immobility; when he raised his head, tears were coursing down his bronzed cheeks.

"Oh! this doubt is frightful!" he exclaimed; "at all risks I will remove it: I must know what I have to hope."

And drawing himself up haughtily to his full height, he walked with a firm and steady step toward the girl, who still lay motionless. Then, as we saw him once before with Shaw, he employed the same method which had been so successful with the young man, in order to recal White Gazelle to life. But the poor girl had been subjected to such rude trials during the last two days, that she was quite exhausted. In spite of Bloodson's eager care, she still retained her terrible corpse-like rigidity: all remedies were powerless. The stranger was in despair at the unsatisfactory results of his attempts to recall the girl to life.

"Oh!" he exclaimed at each instant, "She cannot be dead: Heaven will not permit it."

And he began again employing the measures whose futility had been proved to him. All at once he smote his forehead violently.

"I must be mad," he exclaimed.

And searching in his pocket, he drew from it a crystal flask, filled with a blood-red liquor; he opened with his dagger the girl's teeth, and let two drops of the fluid fall into her mouth. The effect was instantaneous: White Gazelle's features relaxed, a pinky hue covered her face; she faintly opened her eyes, and murmured in a weak voice —

"Good Heaven! Where am I?"

"She is saved!" Bloodson exclaimed with a sigh of joy, as he wiped away the perspiration that ran down his forehead. In the meanwhile the storm had attained its utmost fury; the wind furiously shook the wretched shed, the rain fell in torrents, and the thunder burst forth with a terrible din.

"A fine night for a recognition!" Bloodson muttered.

CHAPTER V

THE HACIENDA QUEMADA

It was a strange group formed by this charming creature and this rough wood ranger, at the top of this devastated hill, troubled by the thunder, and illumined by the coruscating lightning.

White Gazelle had fallen back again, pale and inanimate. Bloodson gazed out into the night, and reassured by the silence, bent a second time over the girl. Pallid as an exquisite lily laid prostrate by the tempest, the poor child seemed scarce to breathe. Bloodson raised her in his nervous arms, and bore her to a piece of broken wall, at the foot of which he laid his zarapé, and placed her on this softer couch. The girl's head hung senseless on his shoulder. Then he gazed at her for a long time: grief and pity were painted on Bloodson's face.

He, whose life had hitherto been but one long tragedy, who had no belief in his heart, who was ignorant of softer feelings and sweet sympathies; he, the avenger and slayer of the Indians, was affected, and felt something new stirring within him. Tears ran down his cheeks.

"Oh, my God!" he exclaimed anxiously, "Can she be dead? Yes," he added, "I was cowardly and cruel toward this poor creature, and God punishes me."

The name, which he only used to blaspheme, he now pronounced almost with respect; it was a species of prayer, a cry from his heart. This indomitable man was at length conquered, he believed.

"How to help her?" he asked himself.

The rain that continued to fall in torrents, and inundated the girl, at length recalled her to life; she partly opened her eyes, and muttered softly:

"Where am I? What has happened? Oh, I fancied I was dying."

"She speaks, she lives, she is saved," Bloodson exclaimed.

"Who is that?" she asked, as she raised herself with difficulty.

At the sight of the hunter's bronzed face, she was frightened, closed her eyes again, and fell back. She was beginning to remember.

"Take courage, my child," Bloodson said softening his rough voice, "I am your friend."

"You my friend!" she exclaimed, "what means that word on your lips?"

"Oh, pardon me, I was mad, I knew not what I did."

"Pardon you, why? Am I not born to sorrow?"

"What must she have endured?" Bloodson muttered.

"Oh, yes," she continued, speaking as in a dream. "I have suffered greatly. My life, though I am still very young, has, up to the present, been one long suffering; still, I can remember having been happy once – long, long ago. But the worst pain in this world is the remembrance of happiness in misfortune."

A sigh escaped from her overladen chest, she let her head fall in her hands, and wept. Bloodson listened to and gazed on her; this voice, these features, all he saw and heard augmented the suspicions in his heart, and gradually converted them into certainty.

"Oh, speak – speak again!" he continued, tenderly; "What do you remember of your youthful years?"

The girl looked at him, and a bitter smile curled her lips.

"Why, in misery, think of past joys?" she said, shaking her head mournfully; "Why should I tell you of these things – you, above all, who are my direst enemy? Do you wish to inflict fresh tortures on me?"

"Oh!" he said, with horror, "Can you have such thoughts? Alas! I have been very guilty toward you, I allow it, but pardon me – pardon me, I conjure you! I would lay down my life to spare you any pain."

White Gazelle regarded with amazement, mingled with terror, this rough man, almost prostrate before her, and whose face was bathed in tears. She did not understand his remarks after the way in which he had hitherto acted towards her.

"Alas!" she murmured, "My life is that of all unfortunate beings: there was a time when, like other children, I had the songs of birds to lull me to sleep, and flowers that smiled on me when I awoke; I had, too, a sister who shared in my sports, and a mother, who loved and embraced me. All that has fled forever."

Bloodson put up two poles, on which he suspended skins to shelter the girl from the storm, which was gradually clearing off. She watched him as he did so.

"I do not know," she said, sadly, "why I feel a necessity to tell you all this, when you have done me so much harm; whence comes the feeling which the sight of you produces in me? I ought to hate you."

She did not complete the sentence, but hid her face in her hands, sobbing violently.

"It is Heaven which permits it to be so, poor child," Bloodson replied, as he raised his eyes upward, and fervently made the sign of the cross.

"Perhaps so," she said, softly; "well, listen; whatever may happen, I wish to relieve my heart. One day I was playing on my mother's knees, my father was near us with my sister; all at once a terrible yell was heard at the gate of our hacienda; the Apache Indians were attacking us. My father was a resolute man, he seized his weapons, and rushed to the walls. What happened then? I cannot tell you. I was hardly four years of age at this time, and the terrible scene I witnessed is enveloped within my mind in a blood-stained cloud. I can only remember how my mother, who wept as she embraced us both, suddenly fell upon us, covering us with blood; in vain did I try to recal her to life by my caresses – she was dead."

There was a silence. Bloodson listened eagerly to this story with pallid face, frowning brow, convulsively pressing the barrel of his rifle, and wiping away at intervals the perspiration that poured down his face.

"Go on, child," he muttered.

"I remember nothing further; men resembling demons rushed into the hacienda, seized my sister and myself, and set out at the full speed of their horses. Alas, since that period I have never again seen my mother's sweet face, or my father's kindly smile; henceforth I was alone among the bandits who carried me off."

"But your sister, girl, your sister, what became of her?"

"I do not know; a violent quarrel broke out among our ravishers, and blood was shed. After this quarrel they separated. My sister was taken in one direction, I in another; I never, saw her again."

Bloodson seemed to make an effort over himself, then fixing his tear-laden eyes on her, he exclaimed, fervently —

"Mercedés! Mercedés! it is really you? Do I find, you again after so many years?"

White Gazelle raised her head quickly.

"Mercedés," she repeated, "that is the name my mother gave me."

"It is I, I, Stefano, your uncle! your father's brother!" Bloodson said, as he pressed her, almost mad with joy, to his breast.

"Stefano! My uncle! Yes, yes, I remember – I know."

She fell lifeless in Bloodson's arms.

"Wretch that I am, I have killed her – Mercedés, my beloved child, come to yourself!"

The girl opened her eyes again, and threw herself on Bloodson's neck, weeping with joy.

"Oh, my uncle! My uncle! I have a family at last, then. Thank God!" The hunter's face became grave.

"You are right, child," he said, "thank God, for it is He who has done everything, and who decreed that I should find you again on the tomb of those whom we have both been lamenting for so many years."

"What do you mean, uncle?" she asked, in surprise.

"Follow me, girl," the wood ranger replied; "follow me, and you shall know."

The girl rose with difficulty, leant on his arm, and followed him. By the accent of Don Stefano's voice, Mercedes understood that her uncle had an important revelation to make her. They found some difficulty in walking through the ruins, obstructed with grass and creepers, but at length reached the cross, where Bloodson stopped.

"On your knees, Mercedes," he said in a mournful voice; "on this spot your father and mother were buried by me fifteen years ago, on such a night as this."

The girl fell on her knees without replying, and Don Stefano imitated her. Both prayed for a long time with tears and sobs, and then they rose again. Bloodson made his niece a sign to sit down at the foot of the cross, placed himself by her, and after passing his hand over his forehead as if to collect his thoughts, he spoke in a dull voice, with an accent which, in spite of all his resolution, sorrow caused to tremble.

"Listen to me, child," he said, "for what you are about to hear will perhaps help us to find the murderers of your parents, if they still live."

"Speak, uncle," she said in a firm voice; "yes, you are right: Heaven willed it that our meeting should take place thus. Be assured that the murderers will not be suffered to go much longer unpunished."

"So be it," said Don Stefano; "for fifteen years I have been awaiting the hour of vengeance. Heaven will sustain me, I hope, till the moment when it strikes. Your father and I resided at the spot where we now are. This hill was occupied by a vast hacienda, which we built; the surrounding fields belonging to us, and were cleared by two hundred persons in our pay. Heaven blessed our labour, which prospered; everybody loved and respected us around, for our abode was always open to those whom misfortune struck. But if our countrymen esteemed us and applauded our efforts, the owners of an adjoining hacienda had vowed us an implacable hatred. For what reason? That I never succeeded in discovering. Was it jealousy or base envy? In any case these men hated us. There were three of them, and they did not belong to the Spanish race; they were North Americans, or, at any rate, I can for certainty say one of them, of the name of Wilkes, was so. Still, although the hatred that kept us apart was fierce, it was dull, and nothing led to the supposition that it would ever burst into life. About this time, important business compelled me to take a journey of several days. Your father, poor child, and myself, could not separate, for a secret presentiment seemed to warn us. When I returned, the hacienda was utterly destroyed, and only a few pieces of the walls still smoked. My brother and our whole family, as well as the servants, had been murdered."

Bloodson stopped.

"Terminate this sad story, uncle," the girl said, hastily, "I must know all, in order to take my share of the vengeance."

"That is true," Don Stefano replied; "but I have little more to say, and will be brief; during a whole night I traversed these smoky ruins, seeking the corpses of those I loved; and when, after infinite difficulty, I succeeded in finding them, I interred them piously, and took an oath to avenge them over their tomb. This oath I have religiously kept during fifteen years; unhappily, though I have punished many culprits, up to the present the leaders have escaped me by some extraordinary fatality. Your father, whom I found dying, expired in my arms ere he was able to tell me his assassins; and though I have strong grounds for accusing Wilkes and his companions, no proof has yet corroborated my suspicions, and the names of the villains are unknown to me. It was only the day before yesterday, when the scoundrel Sandoval fell, that I fancied I had discovered one of them at last."

"You were not mistaken, uncle; that man was really one of our ravishers," Mercedes replied, in a firm voice.

"And the others?" Don Stefano quickly asked.

"I know them, uncle."

At this revelation, Don Stefano uttered a cry that resembled the howl of a wild beast.

"At last!" he exclaimed, with such an outburst of fury, that the girl was almost terrified.

"And now, dear uncle," she went on, "permit me to ask you one question, after which I will answer yours, if you have any to ask."

"Speak, child."

"Why did you seize me and bring me here?"

"Because I fancied you the daughter of that Sandoval, and wished to immolate you on the tomb of his victims," Bloodson answered, in a trembling voice.

"Did you not hear, then, what the man said to me?"

"No; seeing you bent over him, I thought you were watching him die. Your fainting fit, which I attributed to sorrow, only augmented my certainty; that is why I rushed on you so soon as I saw you fall."

"But the letter you took from me would have revealed all to you."

"Do you think, then, child, I took the trouble to read it? No, I only recognised you by the scapulary hung round your neck."

"The finger of God is in all this," the girl said, with an accent of conviction; "it was really He who directed it all."

"Now it is your turn, Mercedes tell me who the assassins are."

"Give me the letter first, uncle."

"Here it is," he said, handing it to her.

The girl snatched it and tore it into the minutest fragments. Bloodson saw her do it without understanding her motive; when the last piece of paper was borne away by the breeze, the girl turned to her uncle.

"You wish to know the names of the assassins of my father, you say, uncle?"

"Yes."

"You are determined that the vengeance you have been pursuing so long shall not escape you, now that you are on the point of obtaining it, and you wish to carry out your oath to the end?"

"Yes; but why all these questions?" he asked, impatiently.

"I will tell you, uncle," she replied, as she drew herself up with strange resolution; "I, too, have also taken an oath, and do not wish to break it."

"What is its nature?"

"To avenge my father and mother, but to accomplish it I must be free to act as I think proper, and hence I will not reveal those means to you till the time arrives; today I cannot do it."

Such resolution flashed in the girl's jet-black eye, that Bloodson did not attempt to induce her to do what he desired; he understood that any pressing on his part would be useless.

"Very good," he answered, "be it so; but you swore to me –"

"That you shall know all when the moment arrives," she said, as she stretched out her right hand to the cross.

"Your word is enough; but may I at least know what you intend doing?"

"Up to a certain point you may."

"Go on."

"You have a horse?"

"At the foot of the hill."

"Bring it to me, uncle, and let me start; before all, let no one know the ties that unite us."

"I will be dumb."

"If ever you see or hear anything connected with me, believe nothing, feel surprised at nothing; say to yourself that I am acting on behalf of our common vengeance, for that alone will be true."

Don Stefano shook his head, and said:

"You are very young, child, for so rude a task."

"Heaven will help me, uncle," she replied, with a flashing glance; "the task is just and holy, for I desire to punish my father's assassins."

"Well," he continued, "your will be done: as you have said, it is a holy task, and I have no right to prevent you accomplishing it."

"Thanks, uncle," the girl said, feelingly; "and now, while I pray at my father's tomb, do you fetch me your horse, that I may set out without delay."

Bloodson retired without answering, and the girl fell on her knees at the foot of the cross. Half an hour later, after tenderly embracing Don Stefano, she mounted the horse, and started at a gallop in the direction of the Far West. Bloodson followed her as long as it was possible for him to see her in the darkness, and, when she had disappeared, he fell on the tomb on his knees, muttering in a hollow voice:

"Will she succeed? Who knows?" he added with an accent impossible to describe.

He prayed till day, but with the first beams of the sun he joined his comrades, and returned with them to the Far West.

CHAPTER VI

THE APACHES

At the shot fired by Pedro Sandoval, after the fashion, of a peroration to his too lengthened story, as we have seen, the Apaches, who had hitherto kept out of earshot, ran up at full speed. Red Cedar hurried in pursuit of Bloodson, but uselessly; he could not catch up to him, and was compelled to rejoin his comrades. The latter were already making preparations to bury the old pirate, whose body they could not leave to be devoured by the wild beasts and birds of prey. Sandoval was a great favourite of the Apaches, with whom he had lived a long time, and they had on many occasions, been able to appreciate his courage and marauding talents.

Stanapat had assembled his band, and was at the head of a certain number of resolute warriors, whom he divided into two parties, and then approached Red Cedar.

"Will my brother listen to the words of a friend?" he said.

"My father can speak; although my heart is very sad, my ears are open," the squatter answered.

"Good," the chief continued; "my brother will take a party of my young men, and put himself on the trail of the palefaces, while I pay the white warrior the duties proper for him."

"Can I thus leave a friend, before his body is placed in the ground?"

"My brother knows what he ought to do, but the palefaces are rapidly retiring."

"You are right, chief; I go, but I leave you my warriors – my comrades will be sufficient for me. Where shall I find you again?"

"At Bloodson's teocali."

"Good; will my brother soon be there?"

"In two days."

"The second sun will find me with all my warriors by the side of the sachem."

Stanapat bowed in reply: Red Cedar approached the corpse of Sandoval, bent down, and seized his frigid hand.

"Farewell, brother," he said, "pardon me for not being present at your funeral, but an important duty claims me; I am going to avenge you. Farewell, my old comrade, rest in peace, your enemies will not live many days – farewell!"

After this funeral oration, the squatter gave his comrades a signal, bowed once again to Stanapat, and started at a gallop, followed by the other pirates. When their allies were out of sight, the Apaches began the funeral ceremony, which had been interrupted by the conversation between their chief and the pirate. Stanapat ordered the corpse to be washed, the face painted of various colours, while the other Indians surrounded it, bewailing. Some, whose grief was more powerful or exaggerated, made incisions in their arms, or chopped off a joint of one of the left hand fingers, in sign of mourning. When all was ready, the sachem placed himself by the head of the corpse, and addressing the company, said:

"Why do you weep? Why do you lament? See, I do not weep; I, his oldest and most devoted friend. He has gone to the other land, the Wacondah has recalled him; but if we cannot bring him back among us, our duty is to avenge him. The palefaces have lulled him, we will kill as many palefaces as we can, in order that they may accompany him, and wait on him, and that he may enter the presence of the Wacondah as a great warrior should appear. Death to the palefaces!"

"Death to the palefaces!" the Indians shouted, brandishing their weapons.

The chief turned his head away, and a smile of contempt curled his thin lips at this enthusiastic explosion. But this, smile lasted no longer than a lightning flash. Reassuming at once, the Indian stoicism, Stanapat, with all the decorum customary on such occasions, clothed the body in the richest robes to be found, and the handsomest blankets. The corpse was then placed in a sitting posture, in the grave dug for it, whose bottom and sides had been lined with wood; a whip, weapons, and some other

articles were added, then the earth was thrown in, and the whole covered with heavy stones so that the coyotes could not pull out the body. This duty accomplished, at a signal from their chief the Apaches remounted their horses, and started at a gallop on the road leading to Bloodson's teocali, thinking no more of the comrade from whom they had separated for ever, than if he had never existed.

The Apaches marched for three days; at the evening of the fourth, after a fatiguing day across the sands, they halted at about a league from the Rio Gila, in a thick wood, where they hid themselves. So soon as the encampment was formed, Stanapat sent off scouts in various directions, to discover whether the other war parties of the allied nations were near, and to try and discover at the same time Red Cedar's trail.

When the sentinels were posted, for several warlike tribes of the Far West guard themselves with great care when on the war trail, Stanapat visited all the posts, and prepared to listen to the reports of the scouts, several of whom had already returned. The three first Indians whom he questioned, announced but little of importance; they had discovered nothing.

"Good," said the chief; "the night is dark, my young men have moles' eyes; tomorrow, at sunrise, they will see more clearly; they can sleep this night. At daybreak, they will start again, and perhaps discover something."

He made a signal with his hand to dismiss the scouts, who bowed respectfully to the chief, and retired in silence. Only one remained impassive and motionless, as if the words had not been addressed to him as well as to the others. Stanapat turned and looked at him for some seconds.

"My son, the Swift Elk, did not hear me doubtless," he said; "he can rejoin his comrades."

"The Elk heard his father," the Indian replied, coolly.

"Then why does he remain?"

"Because he has not told what he saw, and what he saw is important to the chief."

"Wah!" said Stanapat, "And what has my son seen which his brothers did not discover?"

"The warriors were seeking in another direction, that is why they did not perceive the trail."

"And my son has found one?"

Swift Elk bowed his head in affirmation.

"I await my son's explanation," the chief went on.

"The palefaces are two bowshot lengths from my father's camp," the Indian answered laconically.

"Oh! Oh!" the chief said doubtfully; "That seems to me too much."

"Will my father see?"

"I will see," Stanapat said as he rose.

"If my father will follow me, he will soon see."

"Let us go."

The two Indians started. Swift Elk led the sachem through the wood, and on reaching the river bank, he showed him a short distance off a rock, whose black outline rose silent and gloomy over the Gila.

"They are there," he said, stretching out his arm in the direction of the rock.

"My son has seen them."

"I have seen them."

"That is the Rock of Mad Buffalo, if I am not mistaken."

"Yes," the Indian answered.

"The position will be difficult to carry," the sachem muttered, as he carefully examined the rock.

This place was called the rock or hill of Mad Buffalo, which name it indeed still bears, for the following reasons. The Comanches had, some fifty years ago, a famous chief who rendered his tribe the most warlike and redoubtable of all in the Far West. This chief, who was called the Mad Buffalo, was not only a great warrior, but also a great politician. By the aid of sundry poisons, but especially

of arsenic, which he purchased of the white traders for furs, he had succeeded, by killing all those who opposed him, in inspiring all his subjects with an unbounded superstitious terror. When he felt that death was at hand, and understood that his last hour had arrived, he indicated the spot he had selected for his sepulchre.

It was a pyramidal column of granite and sand about four hundred and fifty feet in height. This pillar commands for a long distance the course of the river which washes its base and which, after making numberless windings in the plain, comes back close to it again. Mad Buffalo ordered that his tomb should be erected on the top of this hill, where he had been accustomed to go and sit. His last wishes were carried out with that fidelity the Indians display in such matters. His body was placed at the top of the hill, mounted on his finest steed, and over both a mound was formed. A pole stuck in the tomb bore the banner of the chief, and the numerous scalps which he had raised from his enemies in action.

Hence the mountain of Mad Buffalo is an object of veneration for the Indians, and when a redskin is going to follow the war trail for the first time, he strengthens his courage by gazing on the enchanted hill which contains the skeleton of the Indian warrior and his steed.

The chief carefully examined the hill: it was, in truth, a formidable position. The whites had rendered it even stronger, as far as was possible, by cutting down the tallest trees they found, and forming thick palisades lined with pointed stakes and defended by a ditch eighteen feet in width. Thus protected, the hill had been converted into a real impregnable fortress, unless regularly besieged.

Stanapat re-entered the wood, followed by his comrade, and went back to the bivouac.

"Is the chief satisfied with his son?" the Indian tasked ere he retired.

"My son has the eyes of a tapir; nothing escapes him."

Swift Elk smiled proudly as he bowed.

"Does my son," the chief continued, in an insinuating voice, "know the palefaces who are entrenched on the hill of Mad Buffalo?"

"Swift Elk knows them."

"Wah!" said the sachem; "my son is not mistaken; he has recognised the trail?"

"Swift Elk is never mistaken," the Indian answered in a firm voice; "he is a renowned warrior."

"My brother is right; he can speak."

"The pale chief who occupies the Rock of Mad Buffalo is the great white hunter whom the Comanches have adopted, and who is called Koutonepi."

Stanapat could not check a movement of surprise.

"Wah!" he exclaimed; "Can it be possible? My son is positively sure that Koutonepi is entrenched on the top of the hill?"

"Sure," the Indian said without hesitation.

The chief made Swift Elk a sign to retire, and, letting his head fall in his hands, he reflected profoundly.

The Apache had seen correctly; Valentine and his comrades were really on the rock. After the death of Doña Clara, the hunter and his friends started in pursuit of Red Cedar, not waiting, in their thirst for vengeance, till the earthquake was quite ended, and nature had resumed its ordinary course. Valentine, with that experience of the desert which he possessed so thoroughly, had, on the previous evening, discovered an Apache trail; and, not caring to fight them in the open, owing to the numerical weakness of his party, had scaled the hill, resolved to defend himself against any who dared to attack him in his impregnable retreat.

In one of his numerous journeys across the desert, Valentine had noticed this rock, whose position was so strong that it was easy to hold it against an enemy of even considerable force, and he determined to take advantage of this spot if circumstances compelled him at any time to seek a formidable shelter.

Without loss of time the hunters fortified themselves. So soon as the entrenchments were completed, Valentine mounted on the top of Mad Buffalo's tomb, and looked attentively out on the plain. It was then about midday: from the elevation where Valentine was, he surveyed an immense extent of country. The prairie and the river were deserted: nothing appeared on the horizon except here and there a few herds of buffaloes, some nibbling the thick grass, others carelessly reclining.

The hunter experienced a feeling of relief and indescribable joy on fancying that his trail was lost by the Apaches, and that he had time to make all preparations for a vigorous defence. He first occupied himself with stocking the camp with provisions, not to be overcome by famine if he were, as he supposed, soon attacked. His comrades and himself, therefore, had a grand buffalo hunt: as they killed them, their flesh was cut in very thin strips, which were stretched on cords to dry in the sun, and make what is called in the pampas *charqué*. The kitchen was placed in a natural grotto, which was in the interior of the entrenchments. It was easy to make a fire there with no fear of discovery, for the smoke disappeared through an infinite number of fissures, which rendered it imperceptible. The hunters spent the night in making water bottles with buffalo hides: they rubbed fat into the seams to prevent them leaking, and they had time to lay in a considerable stock of water. At sunrise Valentine returned to his look-out, and took a long glance over the plain to assure himself that the desert remained calm and silent.

"Why have you made us perch on this rock like squirrels?" General Ibañez suddenly asked him. Valentine stretched out his arm.

"Look," he said; "what do you see down there?"

"Not much; a little dust, I fancy," the general said cautiously.

"Ah!" Valentine continued, "Very good, my friend. And do you know what causes that dust?"

"I really do not."

"Well, I will tell you; it is the Apaches."

"*Caramba*, you are not mistaken?"

"You will soon see."

"Soon!" the general objected; "Do you think they are coming in this direction?"

"They will be here at sunset."

"Hum! You did well in taking your precautions, well, comrade. *Cuerpo de Cristo!* we shall have our work cut out with all these red demons."

"That is probable," Valentine said with a smile.

And he descended from the top of the tomb where he had hitherto been standing.

As the reader has already learned, Valentine was not mistaken. The Apaches had really arrived on that night at a short distance from the hill, and the scout found the trail of the whites. According to all probability, a terrible collision was imminent between them and the redskins; those two races whom a mortal hatred divides, and who never meet on the prairie without trying to destroy each other. Valentine noticed the Apache scout when he came to reconnoitre the hill; he then went down to the general, and said with that tone of mockery habitual to him —

"Well, my dear friend, do you still fancy I am mistaken?"

"I never said so," the general exclaimed quickly; "Heaven keep me from it! Still, I frankly confess that I should have preferred your being mistaken. As you see, I display no self-esteem; but what would you have? I am like that, I would sooner fight ten of my countrymen than one of these accursed Indians."

"Unfortunately," Valentine said with a smile, "at this moment you have no choice, my friend."

"That is true, but do not be alarmed; however annoyed I may feel, I shall do my duty as a soldier."

"Oh! Who doubts it, my dear general?"

"*Caspita*, nobody, I know: but no matter, you shall see."

"Well, good night; try to get a little rest, for I warn you that we shall be attacked tomorrow at sunrise."

"On my word," said the general with a yawn that threatened to dislocate his jaw, "I ask nothing better than to finish once for all with these bandits."

An hour later, with the exception of Curumilla, who was sentry, the hunters were asleep; the Indians, on their side, were doing the same thing.

CHAPTER VII

THE HILL OF THE MAD BUFFALO

About an hour before sunrise, Stanapat aroused his warriors, and gave them orders to march. The Apaches seized their weapons, formed in Indian file, and at a signal from their chief, entered the chaparral that separated them from the rock held by the white hunters. Although the distance was only two leagues, the march of the Apaches lasted more than an hour; but it was carried out with so much prudence, that the hunters, despite the watch they kept up, in no way suspected that their enemies were so near them. The Apaches halted at the foot of the rock, and Stanapat ordered the camp to be formed at once.

The Indians, when they like, can draw up their lines very fairly. This time, as they intended to carry on a regular siege, they neglected no precautions. The hill was surrounded by a ditch three yards wide and four deep, the earth of which, thrown up, formed a breastwork, behind which the Apaches were perfectly sheltered, and could fire without showing themselves. In the centre of the camp, two huts or *callis* were erected, one for the chiefs, the other intended for the council lodge. Before the entrance of the latter, the totem or emblem of the tribe, and the sacred calumet were hung up.

We will explain here what these two emblems are, which several writers have mentioned, though not described, but which it is very important to know, if a desire is felt to study Indian manners. The totem, or *kukevium*, is the national standard, the distinctive mark of each tribe. It is supposed to represent the patron animal of the tribe; coyote, jaguar, buffalo, etc., each tribe having its own; in this instance it was a white buffalo. The totem is a long staff, decorated with feathers of various colours, which are fastened perpendicularly from top to bottom. This standard is only carried by the principal chief of the tribe.

The calumet is a pipe, whose tube is four, six, even ten feet long; the latter is sometimes round, but more frequently flat. It is adorned with painted animals, hair, porcupine quills, or birds of brilliant colours. The bowl is usually of red or white marble; when the stone is of dark colour, it is painted white before using. The calumet is sacred: it was given to the Indians by the sun, and for that reason must never be polluted by contact with the ground.

In bivouacs, it is suspended between two cross poles fixed in the earth. The pipe bearer is regarded as heralds were formerly among ourselves: his person is inviolable. He is generally a renowned warrior of the tribe, whom a wound received in action has rendered incapable of further fighting.

The sun rose at the moment when the Apaches completed their entrenchments. The whites, in spite of their bravery, felt a shudder of terror run over their bodies when they found themselves thus invested on all sides. The more so, as by the dim light of breaking day they could see on the distant horizon several bands of warriors advancing from different points.

"Hum!" said Valentine, with a toss of his head, "It will be a sharp fight."

"Do you consider our situation a bad one?" the general asked him.

"Detestable."

"*Canarios!*" said General Ibañez: "We are lost in that case."

"Yes," the hunter answered, "unless a miracle occur."

"*Caspita*, what you say is not at all reassuring, my good fellow. Then, in your opinion, there is no hope?"

"Yes," Valentine answered, "one chance is left us."

"What is it?" the general asked quickly.

"That the man who is being hanged feels – the rope may break."

The general shrugged his shoulders.

"Reassure yourself," the hunter said, still in a sarcastic tone; "it will not break, I warrant you."

"That is the fine consolation you offer me," the general said in a tone, half of joke, half of annoyance.

"Hang it, what would you have? It is all I can offer you at this moment; but," he added, suddenly changing his accent, "all this does not prohibit our breakfasting, I suppose."

"On the contrary," the general answered, "for I declare I have a ferocious appetite, which, I assure you, has not been the case for a long time."

"To table, then," Valentine exclaimed with a laugh; "we have not a moment to lose if we wish to breakfast in peace."

"Are you sure of the fact?"

"Never mind, what can't be cured must be endured; and so to breakfast with what appetite you may."

The three men then proceeded to a leaf hut built up against Mad Buffalo's tomb, and, as they had said, made a hearty breakfast; perhaps, as the general asserted, it was because the sight of the Apaches had put them in a good temper. In the meanwhile, Stanapat, who had already formed his camp, hastened to send couriers in every direction, to have news of his allies as speedy as possible. The latter soon appeared, accompanied by the players of chichikouis and drummers. These warriors were at least five hundred in number, all handsome and well built, clothed in rich dresses, splendidly armed, and offering to prejudiced eyes the most frightful sight imaginable. The chief who arrived with this large party was Black Cat.

We will explain in a few words the arrival of this chief with his tribe among the Apache brothers – an arrival which may seem extraordinary, after the part he had played in the attack on the squatter's camp. Red Cedar had been surprised by the hunters at midnight, and his camp was at once fired by the assailants. The earthquake had so thoroughly complicated the situation, that none of the gambusinos perceived Black Cat's treachery, who, for his part, so soon as he had pointed out the position of the gambusinos, confined himself to sending his warriors ahead, while himself remaining with the rear guard, so as not to compromise himself, and be able to play the part that suited him best at the right moment. His trick was most perfectly successful; the gambusinos, attacked on all sides simultaneously, had only dreamed of defending themselves as well as they could, having no time to perceive if deserters from their allies were in the ranks of their enemies. Hence Black Cat was heartily welcomed by Stanapat, who was delighted at the help that reached him.

During the course of the day other bands entered the camp in turn, so that at sunset nearly fifteen hundred redskin warriors were collected at the foot of the rock, and the hunters were completely invested. The movements of the Indians soon made them comprehend that they did not intend to retire till they had reduced them.

The Indians are the shortest-sighted men in the world; and at the end of two days, as the state of things must be remedied, a grand buffalo hunt was organised. At daybreak, thirty-five hunters, under the orders of Black Cat, left the camp, crossed the wood, and entered the prairie. After a rapid ride of two hours, they forded the Little Tortoise River, on the banks of which they halted to let their horses breathe. During this halt they lit a *bois de vache* fire, at which they cooked their breakfast, and then set out again. At midday they examined the plain stretching out at their feet, from the top of a hill; they saw, at a considerable distance, several small herds of buffalo, each consisting of four or six male buffaloes, peaceably grazing.

The hunters cocked their guns, went down into the plain, and made a regular charge against these clumsy animals, which can run, however, very fast. Each soon started in pursuit of the buffalo nearest to him.

The buffaloes at times assume the offensive, and pursue in their turn the hunters for twenty to five-and-twenty yards; but it is easy to avoid them; so soon as they perceive the futility of pursuit, they fly in their turn. The Indians and half-breeds are so accustomed to this chase on horseback, that

they rarely require more than one shot to kill a buffalo. When they fire they do not shoulder the piece, but, on the contrary, stretch out both arms to their full extent; so soon as they are about ten paces from the animal, they fire in this position, then reload with incredible speed, for they do not ram the ball home with wadding, but let it fall directly on the powder to which it adheres, as they have previously held it in their mouths, and fire again at once.

Through this uncommon speed, the Indians produced in a short time a perfect massacre among the buffaloes; sixty-eight of these animals were killed in less than two hours, Black Cat having brought down eleven as his share. The buffaloes were cut up and loaded on horses brought for the purpose, then the hunters returned gaily to camp, conversing about all the singular or dramatic incidents of the hunt, with all the Indian vivacity. Thanks to this expedition, the Apaches were provisioned for a long time.

A short distance from the camp, the Indians perceived a rider coming toward them at full speed. Black Cat ordered a halt, and waited; it was evident that the person arriving thus could only be a friend, and any doubts were speedily dispelled. The Apaches recognised White Gazelle. We have said elsewhere that the Indians were much attached to this girl; they received her very graciously, and led her to Black Cat, who remained motionless till she joined him. The chief examined her for a moment attentively.

"My daughter is welcome," he said; "does she ask hospitality of the Apaches?"

"No, chief; I have come to join them against the palefaces, as I have done before," she replied, boldly; "besides, you know it as well as I do," she added.

"Good!" the chief continued; "we thank my daughter; her friends are absent, but we expect to see within a few hours Red Cedar and the Long-knives of the East."

A shade of dissatisfaction covered the girl's forehead; but she at once recovered, and ranged her horse by the side of the chief's, saying carelessly —

"Red Cedar can come when he likes — it does not concern me. Am I not a friend of the Apaches?"

"That is true," the Indian said, with a bow; "will my sister set out?"

"Whenever you please, chief."

The hunters started again at a gallop; an hour later, they entered the camp, where they were received with shouts of joy from the Apache warriors. Black Cat ordered a calli to be prepared for the girl; then, after visiting the sentries, and listening to the reports of the scouts, he sat down near the tree, at the foot of which White Gazelle had thrown herself, to reflect on the new duties imposed on her by the engagements into which she had entered with Bloodson.

"My daughter is sad," the old chief said, as he lit his pipe by the aid of a long wand, adorned with feathers, and painted of different colours; for, with that superstition natural to some Indians, he felt persuaded that if he once touched fire with his hands he would die on the spot.

"Yes," the girl answered, "my heart is gloomy; a cloud has spread over my mind."

"My sister must console herself: he whom she has lost will be avenged."

"The palefaces are strong," she said, looking at him fixedly.

"Yes," the chief replied, "the whites have the strength of a grizzly bear, but the Indians have the craft of the beaver; my sister can feel reassured, her enemies will not escape her."

"Does my father know it?"

"Black Cat is one of the great sachems of his tribe, nothing is hidden from him. At this moment all the pirates of the prairie, joined by the half-breeds, are advancing to surround the rock which serves as a refuge to the great pale warrior; tomorrow, perhaps, six thousand redskin warriors will be here. My sister can, therefore, see that her vengeance is assured; unless the palefaces fly through the air, or plunge into the waters, which cannot happen — they are lost."

The young girl made no reply; not thinking of the chief, whose piercing eye was fixed on her, she rose and began walking up and down in great agitation.

"Oh Heavens!" she said in a low voice, "They are lost! Oh, why am I but a woman, and can do nothing for them? How can they be saved?"

"What does my sister say? Has the Wacondah troubled her mind?" the chief asked her, as he stood before her, and laid a hand on her shoulder.

The Spaniard looked at him for a moment, then let her head fall in her hands, muttering in a choking voice, —

"Oh, Heavens! I am mad."

Black Cat took a searching glance around, and then bent down to the girl's ear.

"My sister must follow me," he said, in a firm and significant voice.

White Gazelle raised her head, and looked at him; the chief laid a finger, on his lip, as if to recommend silence to her, and, turning his back, entered the wood. The girl followed him anxiously, and they walked on thus for some minutes. At length they reached the top of a mound denuded of trees, where the eye could survey all around. Black Cat stopped and made the girl a sign to approach him.

"Here we can talk; let my sister speak; my ears are open."

"What can I say that my father does not know?" the girl replied, suspiciously.

"My sister wishes to save the palefaces, is it not so?"

"Well, yes," she said, with exaltation; "for reasons I cannot tell you, these men, who, a few days back, were hateful to me, have become dear to me; today I would save them at the peril of my life."

"Yes," the old man said, as if speaking to himself, "women are so; like the leaves the wind carries off, their mind changes its direction with the slightest breath of passion."

"Now you know my secret," she continued boldly, "I do not care about having discovered it to you; act as you think proper, but no longer count on me."

"On the contrary," the Apache replied with his sardonic smile, "I count on you more than ever."

"What do you mean?"

"Well," Black Cat continued, after taking a searching glance around, and letting his voice drop, "I wish to save them too."

"You?"

"I. Did not the pale chief enable me to escape the death that awaited me in the Comanche village? Did he not share with me as a brother the firewater of his gourd, to give me strength to sit my horse, and rejoin the warriors Of my tribe? Black Cat is a great chief. Ingratitude is a white vice; gratitude is a red virtue. Black Cat will save his brother."

"Thanks, chief," said the girl, as she pressed the old man's rough hands in hers; "thanks for your kindness. But, alas, time is slipping away rapidly, dawn will be here in a few hours, and perhaps we shall not succeed."

"Black Cat is prudent," the chief replied, "my sister must listen; but, in the first place, she may be glad to warn her friends that she is watching over them."

White Gazelle smiled in response; the Indian whistled in a peculiar fashion, and Sunbeam made her appearance.

CHAPTER VIII

BLACK CAT AND UNICORN

Black Cat had retained a profound gratitude to Valentine through the generosity with which the latter had saved his life. The chief sought by any means possible to pay the debt after the attack on the gambusino camp, during which he had so vigorously supported the hunter. All the time he was being carried down the swollen Gila in the buffalo hide canoes, Black Cat reflected seriously on the events taking place in his sight.

He knew, like all the Indian chiefs of the Far West, the causes of the hatred that separated the whites; moreover, he had been on several occasions enabled to appreciate the moral difference existing between the American squatter and the French hunter. Besides, the question was now settled in his mind; all his sympathies were attracted to Valentine. Still, it would be as well that his help, to be useful, should be freely accepted by his friends, so as to prevent any misunderstanding.

When the earth had regained its equilibrium, and all had returned to the order laid down at the commencement of the universe, Black Cat gave a signal, and the canoes ran a shore. The chief ordered his men to bivouac where they were, and await him; then noticing a short distance off, a herd of wild horses, he lassoed one, tamed it in a few minutes, leaped on its back, and started at a gallop. At this moment the sun rose splendidly on the horizon.

The Apache chief journeyed the whole day without stopping, except a few moments to let his horse breathe, and at sunset he found himself a bowshot from Unicorn's village. After remaining in thought for a few minutes, the Indian appeared to make up his mind; he urged on his horse, and boldly entered the village, which, however, was deserted. Black Cat traversed it in every direction, finding at every step traces of the fearful fight of which it had been the scene a few days previously; but he did not see a soul, not even a dog.

When an Indian is following a trail, he is never discouraged, but goes on until he finds it. Black Cat left the village at the opposite end, looked about for a minute, and then started unhesitatingly straight ahead. His admirable knowledge of the prairie had not deceived him; four hours later he reached the skirt of the virgin forest, under whose green arches we have seen Unicorn's Comanches disappear. Black Cat also entered the forest by the same road as the village population had followed, and within an hour saw the fires flashing through the trees. The Apache stopped for a moment, looked around him, and then went on.

Though apparently alone Black Cat felt that he was watched; he knew that since his first step in the forest, he was followed by invisible eyes. As he had not come however, in any warlike intention, he did not in any way attempt to conceal his trail. These tactics were comprehended by the Comanche sentries, who let him pass without revealing their presence, but still communicated the arrival of an Apache chief on their territory to each other, so that Black Cat's coming was known at the village, while he was still a long way from it.

The chief entered a large clearing, in the midst of which stood several huts. Several chiefs were silently seated round a fire, burning in front of a calli, which Black Cat recognised as the medicine lodge. Contrary to the custom generally adopted in such cases, no one seemed to notice the approach of the chief, or rose to do him honour, and give him welcome. Black Cat understood that something extraordinary was occurring in the village, and that he was about to witness a strange scene.

He was in no way affected by the cold reception accorded to him; he dismounted, threw his bridle over his horse's neck, and, walking to the fire, sat down opposite Unicorn, between two chiefs, who fell back to make room for him. Then, drawing the calumet from his girdle, he filled and lit it, and began smoking, after bowing to the company. The latter replied by the same gesture, but did not interrupt the silence. At length Unicorn took the calumet from his lips, and turned to Black Cat.

"My brother is a great warrior," he said; "he is welcome, his arrival is a happy omen for my young men, at a moment when a terrible chief is about to leave us, and proceed to the happy hunting grounds."

"The Master of Life protected me, in permitting me to arrive so opportunely; who is the chief about to die?"

"The Panther is weary of life," Unicorn replied, in a mournful voice; "he counts many winters, his tired arm can no longer fell the buffalo or the elk, his clouded eye only distinguishes with difficulty the nearest objects."

"The Panther is no longer useful to his brothers, but has become a burden to them; he must die," Black Cat remarked, sententiously.

"That is what the chief himself thought; he has this day communicated his intentions to the council assembled here round the fire, and I, his son, have undertaken to open for him the gates of another world."

"Panther is a wise chief; what can a man do with life when he grows a burden to others? The Wacondah has been kind to the redskins in giving them the necessary discernment to get rid of the aged and weak, and send them to another world, where they will be born again, and after this short trial, hunt with all the vigor of youth."

"My brother has spoken well," Unicorn answered, with a bow.

At this moment a movement took place in the crowd assembled round the sweating lodge, in which the old chief, was. The door opened, and Panther appeared. He was an old man of majestic height – in opposition to the majority of Indians, who retain for a long time the appearance of youth – his hair and beard, which fell in disorder on his shoulders and chest, were of a dazzling whiteness. On his face, whose features were imprinted with unconquerable energy, could be seen all the marks of a decrepitude which had attained its last limits. He was clothed in his handsomest costume, and painted and armed for war.

So soon as he appeared in the doorway of the hut all the chiefs rose. Unicorn walked up to him and respectfully offered his right arm, on which he leant. The old man, supported by his son, tottered up to the fire, before which he squatted. The other chiefs took their place by his side, and the warriors formed a wide circle round them. The great calumet of peace was brought in by the pipe bearer, who presented it to the old man, and when it had gone round the circle, Panther took the word. His voice was low and faint, but, owing to the deep silence that prevailed, it was heard by all.

"My sons," he said, "I am about to depart for another country; I shall soon be near the Master of Life. I will tell the warriors of our nation whom I meet on the road that the Comanches are still invincible, and their nation is the queen of the prairies."

A murmur of satisfaction, soon suppressed, however, greeted these words; in a moment the old man continued —

"Continue to be brave as your ancestors; be implacable to the palefaces, those devouring wolves, covered with an elk skin; let them ever assume the feet of the antelope, to fly more speedily before you, and may they never see the wolf tails you fasten to your heels. Never taste the firewater, that poison, by the help of which the palefaces enervate us, render us weak as women, and incapable of avenging insults. When you are assembling round the war or hunting fire in your camp, think sometimes of Panther, the chief, whose renown was formerly great, and who, seeing that the Wacondah forgot him on earth, preferred to die sooner than be longer a burthen to his nation. Tell the young warriors who tread the path for the first time, the exploits of your chief, Bounding Panther, who was so long the terror of the foes of the Comanches."

While uttering these words the old chief's eye had become animated, and his voice trembled with emotion. The Indians assembled round him listened to him respectfully.

"But what use is it to speak thus?" he went on, suppressing a sigh; "I know that my memory will not die out among you, for my son Unicorn is here to succeed me, and guide you in his turn

on the path where I so long led you. Bring my last meal, so that we may soon strike up 'the song of the Great Remedy.'"

Immediately the Indians brought up pots filled with boiled dog's flesh, and at a sign from Panther, the meal commenced. When it was ended the old man lit his calumet, and smoked, while the warriors danced round him, with Unicorn at their head. Presently the old man made a sign, and the warriors stopped.

"What does my father desire?" Unicorn asked.

"I wish you to sing the song of the Great Remedy."

"Good," Unicorn replied, "my father shall be obeyed."

Then he struck up that strange chant, of which the following is a translation, the Indians joining in chorus and continuing to dance:

"Master of Life, thou givest us courage! It is true that redskins know that thou lovest them. We send thee our father this day. See how old and decrepit he is! The Bounding Panther has been changed into a clumsy bear! Grant that he may find himself young in another world, and able to, hunt as in former times."

And the round danced on, the old man smoking his pipe stoically the while. At length, when the calumet was empty, he shook out the ashes on his thumbnail, laid the pipe before him, and looked up to heaven. At this moment the first signs of twilight tinged the extreme line of the horizon with an opaline hue, the old man drew himself up, his eye became animated, and flashed.

"The hour has come," he said, in a loud and firm voice; "the Wacondah, summons me. Farewell, Comanche warriors; my son, you have to send me to the Master of Life."

Unicorn drew out the tomahawk hanging from his belt, brandished it over his head, and without hesitation, and with a movement swift as thought, cleft the skull of the old man, whose smiling face was turned to him, and who fell without a sigh.

He was dead!

The dance began again more rapid and irregularly, and the warriors shouted in chorus:

"Wacondah! Wacondah! Receive this warrior! See, he did not fear death! He knew there was no such thing, as he was to be born again in thy bosom!

"Wacondah! Wacondah! Receive this warrior. He was just! The blood flowed red and pure in his heart! The words his chest uttered were wise!

"Wacondah! Wacondah! Receive this warrior! He was the greatest and most celebrated of thy Comanche children!

"Wacondah! Wacondah! Receive this warrior. See how many scalps he wears at his girdle.

"Wacondah! Wacondah! Receive this warrior!"

The song and dancing lasted till daybreak, when, at a signal from Unicorn, they ceased.

"Our father has gone," he said; "his soul has left his body, which it inhabited too long, to choose another abode. Let us give him a burial suited to so great a warrior."

The preparations were not lengthy; the body of the Bounding Panther was carefully washed, then interred in a sitting posture, with his war weapons; the last horse he had ridden and his dogs were placed by his side, after having their throats cut; and then a bark hut was erected over the tomb to preserve it from the profanation of wild beasts; on the top of the hut a pole was planted, surmounted by the scalps the old warrior had taken at a period when he, still young and full of strength, led the Comanches in action.

Black Cat witnessed all the affecting incidents of this mournful tragedy respectfully, and with religious devotion. When the funeral rites were ended, Unicorn came up to him.

"I thank my brother," the Comanche said, "for having helped us to pay the last duties to an illustrious warrior. Now I am quite at my brother's service, he can speak without fear; the ears of a friend are open, and his heart will treasure up the words addressed to it."

"Unicorn is the first warrior of his nation," Black Cat replied, with a bow; "justice and honour dwell in him: a cloud has passed over my mind and rendered it sad."

"Let my brother open his heart to me, I know that he is one of the most celebrated chiefs of his nation. Black Cat no longer counts the scalps he has taken from his enemies – what is the reason that renders him sad?"

The Apache chief smiled proudly at Unicorn's remarks.

"The friend of my brother, the great pale hunter, adopted by his tribe," he said sharply, "is running a terrible danger at this moment."

"Wah!" the chief said; "Can that be true? Koutonepi is the flesh of my bones; who touches him wounds me. My brother will explain."

Black Cat then narrated to Unicorn the way in which Valentine had saved his life, the leagues formed by the Apaches and other nations of the Far West against him, and the critical position in which the hunter now was, owing to the influence of Red Cedar with the Indians, and the forces he had at his command at this moment. Unicorn shook his head over the story.

"Koutonepi is wise and intrepid," he said; "loyalty dwells in his heart, but he cannot resist – how to help him? A man, however brave he may be, is not equal to one hundred."

"Valentine is my brother," the Apache answered; "I have sworn to save him. But what can I do alone?"

Suddenly a woman rushed between, the two chiefs: it was Sunbeam.

"If my master permits," she said with a suppliant look at Unicorn, "I will help you: a woman can do many things."

There was a silence, during which the chief regarded the squaw, who stood modest and motionless before them.

"My sister is brave," Black Cat at length said; "but a woman is a weak creature, whose help is of but very slight weight under such grave circumstances."

"Perhaps so," she said boldly.

"Wife," Unicorn said, as he laid his hand on her shoulder, "go whither your heart calls you; save my brother and pay the debt you have contracted with him: my eye will follow you, and at the first signal I will run up."

"Thanks," the young woman said, joyfully, and kneeling before the chief, she affectionately kissed his hand.

Unicorn went on —

"I confide this woman to my brother – I know that his heart is great: I am at my ease; farewell."

And after a parting signal he dismissed his guest; the chief entered his calli without looking back, and let the buffalo hide curtain fall behind him. Sunbeam looked after him; when he had disappeared, she turned to Black Cat.

"Let us go," she said, "to save our friend."

A few hours later, the Apache chief, followed by a young woman, rejoined his tribe on the banks of the Gila, and on the next day but one Black Cat arrived with his entire forces at the hill of Mad Buffalo.

CHAPTER IX

THE MEETING

The preceding explanations given, we will resume our story at the point where we left it at the end of chapter seven. Sunbeam, without speaking, offered the Spanish girl a piece of paper, a species of wooden skewer, and a shell filled with blue paint. The Gazelle gave a start of joy.

"Oh, I understand," she said.

The chief smiled.

"The whites have a great deal of knowledge," he said, "nothing escapes them; my daughter will draw a collar for the pale chief."

"Yes," she murmured, "but will he believe me?"

"My daughter will put her heart in that paper, and the white hunter will recognise it."

The girl heaved a sigh.

"Let us try," she said.

With a feverish movement she took the paper from Sunbeam's hand, hastily wrote a few words, and returned it to the young Indian, who stood motionless and stoical before her. Sunbeam rolled up the paper, and carefully fastened it round an arrow.

"Within an hour it will be delivered," she said, and she disappeared in the wood with the lightness of a startled fawn. This little affair took her less time to perform than we have been employed in describing it. When the Indian girl, taught long before by Black Cat the part she had to play, had gone off to deliver her message, the chief said —

"You see that, though we may not save them all, those who are dear to us will at any rate escape."

"May Heaven grant that you are not mistaken, father," the girl said.

"Wacondah is great — his power is unbounded — he can do everything — my daughter can hope."

After this a long conversation took place between the couple, at the end of which, White Gazelle glided unnoticed, among the trees, and proceeded to a hill a short distance from the post occupied by the whites, called Elk Hill, where she had given Don Pablo the meeting. At the thought of seeing the Mexican again, the girl had been involuntarily attacked by an undefinable emotion; she felt her heart contracted, and all her limbs trembled. The recollection of what had passed between her and him so short a time back still troubled her ideas, and rendered the task she had imposed on herself even more difficult.

At this moment she was no longer the rude amazon we have represented her to our readers, who, hardened since her childhood to the terrible scenes of prairie life, braved the greatest perils. She felt herself a woman; all the manliness in her had disappeared, only leaving a timid, trembling girl, who shuddered to find herself face to face with the man whom she reproached herself with having so cruelly outraged, and who, perhaps, on seeing her, would not condescend to enter into any explanation, but turn his back on her.

All these thoughts and many others whirled about in her brain while she proceeded with a furtive step to the place of meeting. The nearer she drew the more lively her fears became, for her mind retraced with greater force the indignity of her previous conduct. At length she arrived, and found the top of the hill still deserted. A sigh of relief escaped from her oppressed chest, and she returned thanks to Heaven for granting her a few moments' respite to prepare herself for the solemn interview she had craved.

But the first moment passed, another anxiety troubled her; she feared lest Don Pablo would not accept her invitation, but despise the chance of safety offered him. Then, with her head thrust forward, her eyes fixed on space, and striving to sound the depths of the gloom, she waited anxiously, counting the seconds. No one has yet been able to calculate how many centuries each moment is composed

of to a person who is waiting. The girl was beginning to doubt Don Pablo's arrival; a gloomy despair seized upon her, and she cursed the material responsibility which nailed her inactively to the spot.

Let us describe in a few words what was happening at this moment on the Hill of Mad Buffalo. Valentine, Curumilla and Don Pablo, seated on the crest of the hill, were silently smoking, each thinking apart of the means to be employed to escape from the painful position in which they were, when a shrill whistle was heard, and a long arrow, passing rapidly between the three men, buried itself deeply in the sods of the grassy mount, at the foot of which they were seated.

"What is that?" Valentine, the first to regain his coolness, exclaimed. "By heavens! Can the redskins be beginning the attack already?"

"Let us wake our friends," said Don Pablo.

"A friend!" grunted Curumilla, who had pulled the arrow out and examined it attentively.

"What do you mean, chief?" the hunter asked.

"Look!" the Indian replied laconically, as he gave him the arrow, and pointed to the paper rolled round it.

"So it is," Valentine said, as he unfastened the paper, while Curumilla picked up a burning log and held it to him as a candle.

"Hum!" Don Pablo muttered, "this mode of corresponding appears to me rather strange."

"We will see what it all means," the hunter answered.

He unfolded the paper, on which a few lines were written in Spanish, and read the following —

"The palefaces are lost; the Indian tribes, assembled from all parts and helped by the Pirates of the Prairies, surround them. The white men have no help to expect from anybody. Unicorn is too far off, Bloodson too much engaged in defending himself to have time to think of them. Don Pablo de Zarate can, if he likes, escape the death that menaces him, and save those who are dear to him. His fate is in his own hands. So soon as he has received this, let him leave his camp and proceed alone to Elk Hill, where he will meet a person prepared to supply him with the means he must seek in vain elsewhere; this person will await Don Pablo till sunrise. He is implored not to neglect this warning; tomorrow will be too late to save him, for he would infallibly succumb in a mad struggle.

"A FRIEND."

On reading this strange missive, the young man let his head sink on his chest, and remained for a long time plunged in deep thought.

"What is to be done?" he muttered.

"Why go, hang it all!" Valentine answered; "Who knows whether this scrap of paper may not contain the salvation of all of us?"

"But suppose it is treachery?"

"Treachery! Nonsense, my friend, you must be joking. The Indians are thorough rogues and traitors, I grant; but they have a fearful terror of anything written, which they believe emanates from the genius of evil. No, this letter does not come from the Indians. As for the pirates, they can use a rifle very well, but are completely ignorant of a goose quill; and I declare, from here to Monterey on one side and to New York, on the other, you will not find one who knows how to write. This letter, therefore, emanates from a friend; but who that friend is, is more difficult to guess."

"Then your opinion is to grant the meeting?"

"Why not? Taking, of course, all the precautions usual in such a case."

"Must I go alone?"

"*Canarios!* people always go alone to such meetings: that is settled," Valentine said with a grin; "still, they are accompanied, and would be fools were they not."

"Assuming that I am willing to follow your advice, I cannot leave my father alone here."

"Your father is safe for the present; besides, he has with him the general and Curumilla, who, I answer for it, will not let him be surprised in our absence. However, that is your affair; still, I would observe, that under circumstances so critical as ours, all secondary considerations ought to be laid aside. Canarios, friend! Think that the safety of all of us may be the reward of the venture."

"You are right, brother," the young man said boldly; "who knows whether I might not have to reproach myself with your death and my father's if I neglected this hint? I go."

"Good," the hunter said, "do so; for my part, I know what is left me to do. Be at your ease," he added with his ironical smile; "you will go alone to the meeting, but if you need help, I shall not be long in making my appearance."

"Very good; but the chief point is to leave this place and reach Elk Hill unnoticed by the thousand tiger-cat eyes the Apaches are probably fixing on us at this moment."

"Trust to me for that," the hunter answered.

In fact, a few minutes later, Don Pablo, guided by Valentine, was climbing up Elk hill, unnoticed by the Apaches.

In the meanwhile, White Gazelle was still waiting, her body bent forward, and listening for the slightest sound that would reveal the presence of the man she had so earnestly begged to come. Suddenly a rough hand was laid on her shoulder, and a mocking voice muttered in her ear: —

"Hilloh, Niña, what are you doing so far from the camp? Are you afraid lest your enemies should escape?"

The Spaniard turned with an ill-disguised movement of disgust, and saw Nathan, Red Cedar's eldest son.

"Yes, it is I," the bandit went on; "does that astonish you, Niña? We arrived an hour ago with the finest collection of vultures that can be imagined."

"But what are you doing here?" she said, scarce knowing why she asked the question.

"Oh!" he continued, "I have also come to revenge myself; I left my father and the others down there, and, have come to explore the country a little. But," he added, with a sinister laugh, "that is not the question at this moment. What the deuce sets you roaming about at this time of night, at the risk of having an unpleasant encounter?"

"What have I to fear – am I not armed?"

"That is true," the pirate replied with a grin; "but you are pretty, and, devil take me if I don't know fellows who, in my place, would laugh at the playthings you have in your girdle. Yes, you are very pretty, Niña, don't you know it? Hang me, as no one has yet told you so, I feel very much inclined to do so; what's your opinion, eh?"

"The wretch is mad with drink," the girl muttered, as she saw the brigand's flushed face, and his staggering legs.

"Leave me," she said to him, "the hour is badly chosen for jesting, we have, more important matters to arrange."

"Stuff, we are all mortal, and hang me if I care what may happen tomorrow! On the contrary, I find the hour splendidly chosen; we are alone, no one can over hear us; what prevents us, then, from expressing our adoration of one another?"

"No one, were it true," the girl answered resolutely; "but I am not in the humour to listen to your chattering; so be good enough to withdraw. I am awaiting here the war party of the Buffalo Apaches, who will soon arrive and take up their position on this hill; instead of losing precious time, you would do better to join Red Cedar and Stanapat, with whom you must settle all the details of the enemy's attack."

"That is true," the bandit answered, the words having slightly sobered him. "You are right, Niña, I will go; but what is put off is not lost; I hope on some other day to find you not so wild, my dear. Good bye!"

And, carelessly turning, the bandit threw his rifle on his shoulder, and went down the hill in the direction of the Apache camp. The young Spaniard, left alone, congratulated herself on escaping the danger that had momentarily threatened her, for she had trembled lest Don Pablo might arrive while Nathan was with her. Still, the news of Red Cedar's position heightened White Gazelle's apprehensions and redoubled her alarm about those whom she had resolved to save at all hazards. At the moment when she no longer hoped to see the young man, and was looking out for him more to satisfy her conscience than in the chance of seeing him, she saw, a little distance off, a man hurriedly walking towards her, and guessed, more than recognised, that it was Don Pablo.

"At last!" she exclaimed joyfully, as she rushed to meet him.

The young man was soon by her side, but on perceiving who it was, he fell back a pace.

"You," he said; "did you write to ask me here?"

"Yes," she answered, in a trembling voice, "I did."

"What can there be in common between us?" Don Pablo said, contemptuously.

"Oh! Do not crush me; I now can understand how culpable and unworthy my conduct was: pardon a madness which I deplore. Listen to me; in Heaven's name do not despise the advice I am about to give you, for your life and that of those you love are at stake."

"Thank Heaven, madam," the young man replied coldly; "during the few hours we were together, I learnt to know you sufficiently to place no faith in any of your protestations; I have only one regret at this moment, and that is, in having allowed myself to enter the snare you have laid for me."

"I lay a snare for you!" she exclaimed indignantly, "when I would gladly shed the last drop of my blood to save you."

"Save me – nonsense! Ruin me, you mean," Don Pablo continued, with a smile of contempt; "do you fancy me so foolish? Be frank, at least; your project has succeeded, and I am in your hands; produce your accomplices, who are doubtless hidden behind those trees, and I will not do them the honour of disputing my life with them."

"Oh, Heaven!" the girl exclaimed, as she writhed her hands in despair, "Am I not sufficiently punished, Don, Pablo? Listen to me, for mercy's sake! In a few minutes it will be too late; I wish to save you, I say."

"You lie impudently," Valentine exclaimed, as he leaped from a thicket; "only a moment ago, at that very spot, you told Nathan, the worthy son of your accomplice, Red Cedar, of the arrival of an Apache war party; deny it, if you dare."

This revelation was a thunderbolt for the girl; she felt that it would be impossible for her to disabuse the man she loved, and convince him of her innocence, in the face of this apparently so evident proof of her treachery. She fell crushed at the young man's feet.

"Oh," he said with disgust, "this wretched woman is my evil genius."

He made a movement to retire.

"A moment," Valentine exclaimed, as he stopped him; "matters must not end thus: let us destroy this creature, ere she causes us to be massacred."

He coldly placed the muzzle of a pistol on the girl's temple, and she did not flinch to escape the fate that threatened her. But Don Pablo hastily seized his arm.

"Valentine," he said, "what are you about, my friend?"

"It is true," the hunter replied; "when so near death, I will not dishonour myself by killing this wretch."

"Well done, brother," Don Pablo said, as he gave a glance of scorn to the Gazelle, who implored him in vain; men like us do not assassinate women. "Let us leave her and sell our lives dearly."

"Nonsense; death, perhaps, is not so near as you may fancy; for my part, I do not despair about getting out of this wasps nest."

They took an anxious glance into the valley to reconnoitre their position; the darkness was almost dissipated; the sun, though still invisible, tinged the sky with those reddish gleams which

precedes its appearance by a few moments. As far as the eye could reach, the plain was covered by powerful Indian detachments.

The two men saw that they had but a very slight chance of regaining their fortress; still, accustomed as they were to attempt impossibilities daily, they were not discouraged in the presence of the imminent danger that menaced them. After silently shaking hands, these two brave men raised their heads proudly, and with calm brow and flashing eye prepared to confront the horrible death that awaited them, if they were discovered.

"Stay, in Heaven's name," the maiden exclaimed, as she dragged herself on her knees to Don Pablo's feet.

"Back, viper," the latter answered, "let us die bravely."

"But I will not have you die," she replied, with a piercing cry; "I repeat that I will save you, if you consent."

"Save us! God alone can do that," the young man said mournfully; "be glad that we will not sully our hands with your perfidious blood, and do not trouble us further."

"Oh! Nothing will convince you then!" she said, with despair.

"Nothing," the Mexican answered coldly.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, her eye beaming with joy, "I have found it. Follow me, and you shall join your friends again."

Don Pablo, who had already gone some yards, turned back with hesitation.

"What do you fear?" she said; "you will still be able to kill me if I deceive you. Oh," she added madly, "what do I care for death, so that I save you!"

"In fact," Valentine remarked, "she is in the right, and then in our position, we must let no chance slip. Perhaps, after all, she speaks the truth."

"Yes, yes," the girl implored; "trust to me."

"Well, we will try it," said Valentine.

"Go on," Don Pablo answered laconically; "go on, we follow."

"Oh, thanks, thanks," she said eagerly, covering the the young man's hand with kisses and tears, which she had seized against his will; "you shall see that I can save you."

"Strange creature," the hunter said, as he wiped his eyes with the back of his rough hand; "she is quite capable of doing what she says."

"Perhaps so," Don Pablo replied, shaking his head gloomily: "but our position is truly desperate, my friend."

"A man can only die once, after all," the hunter remarked philosophically, as he threw his rifle over his shoulder; "I am most curious to know how all this will end."

"Come!" the Spanish girl said.

CHAPTER X

A WAR STRATAGEM

The two men followed her, and the three began crawling through the tall grass and silently descending the hill. This painful march was necessarily slow, owing to the innumerable precautions the fugitives were obliged to take so as not to be seen or tracked by the scouts the Indians had scattered all around to watch the movements of the white men, and of any relief which might come to them.

White Gazelle walked actively in front of the hunters, looking cautiously around, stopping to listen anxiously to the slightest sound in the bushes; and when her fears were calmed, she went on giving the men she guided a smile of encouragement.

"Sold!" Valentine said, with a laugh all at once, as he rested his rifle on the ground; "Come, come, the little wench is cleverer than I fancied."

The two men were surrounded by a numerous party of Apache Indians. Don Pablo did not utter a word; he only looked at the girl, who continued to smile.

"Bah!" the Frenchman muttered philosophically in an aside; "I shall kill my seven or eight of them, and after that, we shall see."

Completely reassured by this consoling reflection, the hunter at once regained all his clearness of mind, and looked curiously around him. They were in the midst of Black Cat's war party, and that chief now walked up to the hunter.

"My brother is welcome among the Buffalo Apaches," he said, nobly.

"Why jest, chief?" Valentine remarked; "I am your prisoner, do with me what you think proper."

"Black Cat does not jest; the great pale hunter is not his prisoner, but his friend; he has but to command and Black Cat will execute his orders."

"What mean these words?" the Frenchman said, with astonishment; "Are you not here, like all the members of your nation, to seize my friends and myself?"

"Such was my intention, I allow, when I left my village some days back, but my heart has changed since my brother saved my life, and he may have perceived it already. If I have come here it is not to fight, but to save him and his friends; my brother can, therefore, place confidence in my words – my tribe will obey him as myself."

Valentine reflected for a moment, then he said, as he looked searchingly at the chief:

"And what does Black Cat ask in return for the help he offers me?"

"Nothing; the pale hunter is my brother; if we succeed he will do as he pleases."

"Come, come, all is for the best," Valentine said, as he turned to the girl; "I was mistaken, so I will ask you to forgive me."

White Gazelle blushed with delight at these words.

"Then," Valentine continued, addressing the Indian chief, "I can entirely dispose of your young men?"

"Entirely.

"They will be devoted to me?"

"I have said so, as to myself."

"Good!" said the hunter, as his face brightened; "how many warriors have you?"

Black Cat held up ten times the fingers of his opened hands.

"One hundred?" Valentine asked.

"Yes," the chief replied, "and eight more."

"But the other tribes are far more numerous than yours?"

"They form a band of warriors twenty-two times and seven times more numerous than mine."

"Hum! That is a tidy lot, without counting the pirates."

"Wah! There are thrice the number of the fingers of my two hands of the Long-knives of the East."

"I fear," Don Pablo observed, "that we shall be crushed by the number of our enemies."

"Perhaps so," Valentine, who was reflecting, answered; "where is Red Cedar?"

"Red Cedar is with his brothers, the prairie half-breeds; he has joined Stanapat's party."

At this moment the Apache war cry burst forth on the plain, a tremendous discharge was heard, and the hill of the Mad Buffalo seemed begirt by a halo of smoke and flashing lightning. The battle had begun. The Indians bravely mounted to the assault. They marched toward the hill, continually discharging their muskets, and firing arrows at their invisible enemies.

At the spot where the chain of hills touches the Gila, fresh parties of Apaches could be seen incessantly arriving. They came up at a gallop, by troops of three to twenty men at a time. Their horses were covered with foam, leading to the presumption that they had made a long journey. The Apaches were in their war paint, covered with all sorts of ornaments and arms, with their bow and quiver on their back, and their musket in their hands. Their heads were crowned with feathers, among them being several magnificent black and white eagle plumes, with the large falling crest. Seated on handsome saddlecloths of panther skin, lined with red, all had the lower part of the body naked, with the exception of a long strip of wolf skin passed over the shoulder. Their shields were ornamented with feathers, and partly coloured cloth. These men, thus accoutred, had something grand and majestic about them which affected the imagination and inspired terror.

Many of them at once climbed the heights, lashing their wearied horses, so to arrive sooner at the battlefield, while singing and uttering their war cry.

The contest seemed most obstinate in the neighbourhood of the palisades; the two Mexicans and Curumilla, protected behind their entrenchments, replied to the Apaches with a deadly fire, bravely exciting each other to die weapons in hand. Several corpses already lay on the plain; riderless horses galloped in every direction, and the cries of the wounded were mingled with the yells of defiance of the assailants.

What we have described in so many words, Valentine and Don Pablo perceived in a few seconds, with the infallible glance of men long accustomed to prairie life.

"Come, chief," the hunter said, quickly, "we must rejoin our friends; help us; if not, they are lost."

"Good," Black Cat answered; "the pale hunter will place himself, with his friend, in the midst of my detachment; in a few minutes he will be on the hill. Above all, the pale chief must leave me to act."

"Do so; I trust entirely to you."

Black Cat said a few words in a low voice to the warriors who accompanied him; they at once collected round the two hunters, who entirely disappeared in their midst.

"Oh, oh," Don Pablo said, anxiously, "just look at this, my friend."

Valentine smiled as he took his arm.

"I have read the chief's intention," he said, "he is employing the only way possible. Do not be alarmed, all is for the best."

Black Cat placed himself at the head of his detachment, and gave a signal. A fearful yell burst through the air – the Buffalo tribe had sounded its war cry. The Apaches, carrying the two men with them, rushed furiously toward the hill, and ere Valentine and Don Pablo knew what was happening, they had rejoined their friends, and Black Cat's warriors fled in every direction, as if a fearful panic had seized on them.

Still the fight was not over; Stanapat's Indians rushed like tigers on the palisades, and let themselves be killed without recoiling an inch. The fight, if prolonged, must end fatally to the whites, whose strength was becoming exhausted. Stanapat and Red Cedar understood this, and hence redoubled their efforts to crush the enemy.

Suddenly, at the moment when the Apaches rushed furiously against the whites to attempt a final assault; the war cry of the Coras was heard, mingled with the discharge of firearms. The Apaches were surprised, and hesitated; Red Cedar looked around, and uttered a curse; the war cry of the Comanches rose behind the camp.

"Forward! Forward at all risks!" the squatter howled, as, followed by his sons and some of his men, he rushed by toward the hill.

But the scene had changed as if by enchantment. Black Cat, on seeing the help that had arrived for his friends, effected a junction with Unicorn; the united bands attacked the Apaches on the flank, while Moukapec, at the head of two hundred picked warriors of his nation, rushed on their rear.

The flight began, and soon changed into a rout; Red Cedar, and a small party of pirates collected around him, alone offered any resistance. From assailants they had become assailed, and there must be an end to it, or in a few minutes all would be over, as their retreat would be cut off.

"Hurrah!" Red Cedar shouted, as he waved his rifle over his head like a mace; "Down with the dogs! Take their scalps!"

"Take their scalps!" his companions exclaimed, imitating his movements, and massacring all that opposed their passage.

They had managed to clear a bloody way, and were slowly moving toward the river, when a man boldly threw himself before Red Cedar – it was Moukapec.

"I bring you my scalp, dog of the palefaces!" he shouted, as he dealt a blow at him with his tomahawk.

"Thanks," the bandit answered, as he parried the blow.

Eagle-wing bounded forward like a hyena, and before his enemy could prevent it, buried his knife in his thigh. Red Cedar uttered a yell of rage on feeling himself wounded, and drew his knife with one hand, while with the other he seized the Indian by the throat. The latter felt that he was lost; the blade flashed above his head, and was buried to the hilt in his chest.

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