

Aimard Gustave

The Red Track: A Story of Social Life in Mexico



Gustave Aimard

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of Social Life in Mexico**

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PREFACE

The present volume of GUSTAVE AIMARD's works is a continuation of the "Indian Chief," and conclusion of the series comprising that work, the "Gold Seekers," and the "Tiger Slayer."

At the present moment, when we are engaged in a war with Mexico, I feel assured that the extraordinary and startling descriptions given in this volume of the social condition and mode of life in the capital of that country will be read with universal gratification; for I can assert confidently that; no previous writer has ever produced such a graphic and truthful account of a city with which the illustrated papers will soon make us thoroughly acquainted.

If a further recommendation be needed, it will be found in the fact that the present volume appears in an English garb before being introduced to French readers. GUSTAVE AIMARD is so gratified with the reception his works have found in this country, through my poor assistance, that he has considered he could not supply a better proof of his thankfulness than by permitting his English readers to enjoy, on this occasion, the first fruits of his versatile and clever pen. This is a compliment which, I trust, will be duly appreciated; for, as to the merits of the work itself, I have not the slightest doubt. Readers may imagine it impossible for GUSTAVE AIMARD to surpass his previous triumphs in the wildly romantic, or that he could invent anything equal to the "Prairie Flower," a work which I venture to affirm, to be the finest Indian tale ever yet written, in spite of the great authors who have preceded AIMARD; but I ask my reader's special admiration for the "RED TRACK," because in it our favourite author strikes out a new path, and displays versatility which puts to the blush those bilious critics – few in number – I grant, among the multitude of encouraging reviewers, who have ventured an opinion that GUSTAVE AIMARD can only write about Indian life, or, in point of fact, that he is merely a hunter describing his own experiences under a transparent disguise.

Well, be it so, I accept the assertion. GUSTAVE AIMARD is but a hunter; he has seen nought but uncivilized life; he has spent years among savages, and has returned to his own country to try and grow Europeanized again. What then? The very objection is a proof of his veracity; and I am fully of the conviction that every story he has told us is true. It is not reasonable to suppose that a man who has spent the greater part of his life in hunting the wild animals of America – who has been an adopted son of the most powerful Indian tribes – who has for years never known what the morrow would bring forth, should sit down to invent. The storehouse of his mind is too amply filled with marvels for him to take that needless trouble, and he simply repeats on paper the tales which in olden times he picked up at the camp fires, or heard during his wanderings with the wood rangers.

And it is as such that I wish GUSTAVE AIMARD to be judged by English readers. His eminent quality is truth. He is a man who could not set down a falsehood, no matter what the bribe might be, he has lived through the incidents he describes, and has brought back to Europe the adventures of a chequered life. He does not attempt to fascinate his readers by a complicated plot. He does not possess the marvellous invention of a Cooper, who, after a slight acquaintance with a few powerless Indians, wrote books which all admirers of the English language peruse. But GUSTAVE AIMARD possesses a higher quality, in the fact that he only notes down incidents which he has seen, or which he has received on undoubted evidence from his companions.

The present is the twelfth volume of GUSTAVE AIMARD's works to which. I have put my name; and, with the exception of a few captious criticisms whose motive may be read between the

lines, the great body of the British Press has greeted our joint efforts with the heartiest applause. The success of this series has been unparalleled in the annals of cheap literature. Day by day the number of readers increases, and the publication of each successive volume creates an excitement which cannot fail to be most gratifying to the publishers.

To please all parties, the proprietors of AIMARD's copyrights have projected an Illustrated Series, to which I would invite most earnest attention. Although by this time I am saturated with Indian life, I confess that I never thoroughly understood it till I saw the engravings after a Zwecker, a Huard, and a Corbould. The artists have carefully studied their subjects, and gone to the fountain-head for information; and the result is, that they have produced a series of works which only need to be seen to be appreciated. The last volume illustrated is "The Freebooters," which was entirely intrusted to Mr. Corbould, and though I do not wish for a moment to depreciate the other artists, I felt, on seeing the illustrations, that GUSTAVE AIMARD was worthily interpreted. All I can urge upon readers is, that they should judge for themselves.

To wind up this unusually long Preface, into which honest admiration for the author has alone induced me, I wish to say that it affords me an ever-recurring delight to introduce GUSTAVE AIMARD's works to English readers, while it causes me an extra pleasure, on this occasion, to be enabled to repeat that the present volume appears on this side of the Channel before it has been introduced to French readers. And, knowing as I do the number of editions through which AIMARD's books pass in his own native land, I can appreciate the sacrifice he has made on this occasion at its full value.

LASCELLES WRAXALL.

DRAYTON TERRACE, WEST BROMPTON,
March, 1862.

CHAPTER I.

THE SIERRA OF THE WIND RIVER

The Rocky Mountains form an almost impassable barrier between California and the United States, properly so called; their formidable defiles, their rude valleys, and the vast western plains, watered by rapid streams, are even to the present day almost unknown to the American adventurers, and are rarely visited by the intrepid and daring Canadian trappers.

The majestic mountain range called the Sierra of the Wind River, especially offers a grand and striking picture, as it raises to the skies its white and snow-clad peaks, which extend indefinitely in a north-western direction, until they appear on the horizon like a white cloud, although the experienced eye of the trapper recognizes in this cloud the scarped outline of the Yellowstone Mountains.

The Sierra of the Wind River is one of the most remarkable of the Rocky Mountain range; it forms, so to speak, an immense plateau, thirty leagues long, by ten or twelve in width, commanded by scarped peaks, crowned with eternal snows, and having at their base narrow and deep valleys filled with springs, streams, and rock-bound lakes. These magnificent reservoirs give rise to some of the mighty rivers which, after running for hundreds of miles through a picturesque territory, become on one side the affluents of the Missouri, on the other of the Columbia, and bear the tribute of their waters to the two oceans.

In the stories of the wood rangers and trappers, the Sierra of the Wind River is justly renowned for its frightful gorges, and the wild country in its vicinity frequently serves as a refuge to the pirates of the prairie, and has been, many a time and oft, the scene of obstinate struggles between the white men and the Indians.

Toward the end of June, 1854, a well-mounted traveller, carefully wrapped up in the thick folds of a zarapé, raised to his eyes, was following one of the most precipitous slopes of the Sierra of the Wind River, at no great distance from the source of the Green River, that great western Colorado which pours its waters into the Gulf of California.

It was about seven in the evening: the traveller rode along, shivering from the effects of an icy wind which whistled mournfully through the canyons. All around had assumed a saddening aspect in the vacillating moonbeams. He rode on without hearing the footfall of his horse, as it fell on the winding sheet of snow that covered the landscape; at times the capricious windings of the track he was following compelled him to pass through thickets, whose branches, bent by the weight of snow, stood out before him like gigantic skeletons, and struck each other after he had passed with a sullen snap.

The traveller continued his journey, looking anxiously on both sides of him. His horse, fatigued by a long ride, hobbled at every step, and in spite of the repeated encouragement of its rider seemed determined to stop short, when, after suddenly turning an angle in the track, it suddenly entered a large clearing, where the close-growing grass formed a circle about forty yards in diameter, and the verdure formed a cheery contrast with the whiteness that surrounded it.

"Heaven be praised!" the traveller exclaimed in excellent French, and giving a start of pleasure; "Here is a spot at last where I can camp for tonight night, without any excessive inconvenience. I almost despaired of finding one."

While thus congratulating himself, the traveller had stopped his horse and dismounted. His first attention was paid to his horse, from which he removed saddle and bridle, and which he covered with his zarapé, appearing to attach no importance to the cold, which was, however, extremely severe in these elevated regions. So soon as it was free, the animal, in spite of its fatigue, began browsing heartily on the grass, and thus reassured about his companion, the traveller began thinking about making the best arrangements possible for the night.

Tall, thin, active, with a lofty and capacious forehead, an intelligent blue eye, sparkling with boldness, the stranger appeared to have been long accustomed to desert life, and to find nothing extraordinary or peculiarly disagreeable in the somewhat precarious position in which he found himself at this moment.

He was a man who had reached about middle life, on whose brow grief rather than the fatigue of the adventurous life of the desert had formed deep wrinkles, and sown numerous silver threads in his thick light hair; his dress was a medium between that of the white trappers and the Mexican gambusinos; but it was easy to recognize, in spite of his complexion, bronzed by the seasons, that he was a stranger to the ground he trod, and that Europe had witnessed his birth.

After giving a final glance of satisfaction at his horse, which at intervals interrupted its repast to raise its delicate and intelligent head to him with an expression of pleasure, he carried his weapons and horse trappings to the foot of a rather lofty rock, which offered him but a poor protection against the gusts of the night breeze, and then began collecting dry wood to light a watch fire.

It was no easy task to find dry firewood at a spot almost denuded of trees, and whose soil, covered with snow, except in the clearing, allowed nothing to be distinguished; but the traveller was patient, he would not be beaten, and within an hour he had collected sufficient wood to feed through the night two such fires as he proposed kindling. The branches soon crackled, and a bright flame rose joyously in a long spiral to the sky.

"Ah!" said the traveller, who, like all men constrained to live alone, seemed to have contracted the habit of soliloquizing aloud, "the fire will do, so now for supper."

Then, fumbling in the alforjas, or double pockets which travellers always carry fastened to the saddle, he took from them all the requisite elements of a frugal meal; that is to say, cecina, pemmican, and several varas of tasajo, or meat dried in the sun. At the moment when, after shutting up his alforjas, the traveller raised his head to lay his meat on the embers to broil, he stopped motionless, with widely-opened mouth, and it was only through a mighty strength of will that he suppressed a cry of surprise and possibly of terror. Although no sound had revealed his presence, a man, leaning on a long rifle, was standing motionless before him, and gazing at him with profound attention.

At once mastering the emotion he felt, the traveller carefully laid the tasajo on the embers, and then, without removing his eye from this strange visitor, he stretched out his arm to grasp his rifle, while saying, in a tone of the most perfect indifference —

"Whether friend or foe, you are welcome, mate. 'Tis a bitter night, so, if you are cold, warm yourself, and if you are hungry, eat. When your nerves have regained their elasticity, and your body its usual strength, we will have a frank explanation, such as men of honour ought to have."

The stranger remained silent for some seconds; then, after shaking his head several times, he commenced in a low and melancholy voice, as it were speaking to himself rather than replying to the question asked him —

"Can any human being really exist in whose heart a feeling of pity still remains?"

"Make the trial, mate," the traveller answered quickly, "by accepting, without hesitation, my hearty offer. Two men who meet in the desert must be friends at first sight, unless private reasons make them implacable enemies. Sit down by my side and eat."

This dialogue had been held in Spanish, a language the stranger spoke with a facility that proved his Mexican origin. He seemed to reflect for a moment, and then instantly made up his mind.

"I accept," he said, "for your voice is too sympathizing and your glance too frank to deceive."

"That is the way to speak," the traveller said, gaily. "Sit down and eat without further delay, for I confess to you that I am dying of hunger."

The stranger smiled sadly, and sat down on the ground by the traveller's side. The two men, thus strangely brought together by accident, then attacked with no ordinary vigour, which evidenced a long fast, the provisions placed before them. Still, while eating, the traveller did not fail to examine his singular companion; and the following was the result of his observations.

The general appearance of the stranger was most wretched, and his ragged clothes scarce covered his bony, fleshless body; while his pale and sickly features were rendered more sad and gloomy by a thick, disordered beard that fell on his chest. His eyes, inflamed by fever, and surrounded by black circles, glistened with a sombre fire, and at times emitted flashes of magnetic radiance. His weapons were in as bad a condition as his clothes, and in the event of a fight this man, with the exception of his bodily strength, which must once have been great, but which privations of every description, and probably endured for a lengthened period, had exhausted, would not have been a formidable adversary for the traveller. Still, beneath this truly wretched appearance could be traced an organization crushed by grief. There was in this man something grand and sympathetic, which appeared to emanate from his person, and aroused not only pity but also respect for torture so proudly hidden and so nobly endured. This man, in short, ere he fell so low, must have been great, either in virtue or in vice; but assuredly there was nothing common about him, and a mighty heart beat in his bosom.

Such was the impression the stranger produced on his host, while both, without the interchange of a word, appeared an appetite sharpened by long hours of abstinence. Hunters' meals are short, and the present one lasted hardly a quarter of an hour. When it was over, the traveller rolled a cigarette, and, handing it to the stranger, said —

"Do you smoke?"

On this apparently so simple question being asked, a strange thing happened which will only be understood by smokers who, long accustomed to the weed, have for some reason or other been deprived of it for a lengthened period. The stranger's face was suddenly lit up by the effect of some internal emotion; his dull eye flashed, and, seizing the cigarette with a nervous tremor, he exclaimed, in a voice choked by an outburst of joy impossible to render —

"Yes, yes; I used to smoke."

There was a rather long silence, during which the two men slowly inhaled the smoke of their cigarettes, and indulged in thought. The wind howled fiercely over their heads, the eddying snow was piling up around them, and the echoes of the canyons seemed to utter notes of complaint. It was a horrible night. Beyond the circle of light produced by the flickering flame of the watch fire all was buried in dense gloom. The picture presented by these two men, seated in the desert, strangely illumined by the bluish flame, fend smoking calmly while suspended above an unfathomable abyss, had something striking and awe-inspiring about it. When the traveller had finished his cigarette, he rolled another, and laid his tobacco-pouch between himself and his guest.

"Now that the ice is broken between us," he said in a friendly voice, "and that we have nearly formed an acquaintance — for we have been sitting at the same fire, and have eaten and smoked together — the moment has arrived, I fancy, for us to become thoroughly acquainted."

The stranger nodded his head silently. It was a gesture that could be interpreted affirmatively or negatively, at pleasure. The traveller continued, with a good-humoured smile —

"I make not the slightest pretence to compel you to reveal your secrets, and you are at liberty to maintain your incognito without in any way offending me. Still, whatever may be the result, let me give you an example of frankness by telling you who I am. My story will not be long, and only consists of a very few words. France is my country, and I was born at Paris — which city, doubtless," he remarked, with a stifled sigh, "I shall never see again. Reasons too lengthy to trouble you with, and which would interest you but very slightly, led me to America. Chance, or Providence, perhaps, by guiding me to the desert, and arousing my instincts and aspirations for liberty, wished to make a wood ranger of me, and I obeyed. For twenty years I have been traversing the prairies and great savannahs in every direction, and I shall probably continue to do so, till an Indian bullet comes from some thicket to stop my wanderings for ever. Towns are hateful to me; passionately fond of the grand spectacles of nature, which elevate the thought, and draw the creature nearer to his Creator, I shall only mix myself up once again in the chaos of civilization in order to fulfil a vow made on the tomb of a friend. When

I have done that, I shall fly to the most, unknown deserts, in order to end a life henceforth useless, far from those men whose paltry passions and base and ignoble hatred have robbed me of the small amount of happiness to which I fancied I had a claim. And now, mate, you know me as well as I do myself. I will merely add, in conclusion, that my name among the white men, my countrymen, is Valentine Guillois, and among the redskins, my adopted fathers, Koutonepi – that is to say, 'The Valiant One.' I believe myself to be as honest and as brave as a man is permitted to be with his imperfect organization. I never did harm with the intention of doing so, and I have done services to my fellow men as often as I had it in my power, without expecting from them thanks or gratitude."

The speech, which the hunter had commenced in that clear voice and with that careless accent habitual to him, terminated involuntarily, under the pressure of the flood of saddened memories that rose from his heart to his lips, in a low and inarticulate voice, and when he concluded, he let his head fall sadly on his chest, with a sigh that resembled a sob. The stranger regarded him for a moment with an expression of gentle commiseration.

"You have suffered," he said; "suffered in your love, suffered in your friendship. Your history is that of all men in this world: who of us, but at a given hour, has felt his courage yield beneath the weight of grief? You are alone, friendless, abandoned by all, a voluntary exile, far from the men who only inspire you with hatred and contempt; you prefer the society of wild beasts, less ferocious than they; but, at any rate, you live, while I am a dead man!"

The hunter started, and looked in amazement at the speaker.

"I suppose you think me mad?" he continued, with a melancholy smile; "reassure yourself, it is not so. I am in full possession of my senses, my head is cool, and my thoughts are clear and lucid. For all that though, I repeat to you, I am dead, dead in the sight of my relations and friends, dead to the whole world in fine, and condemned to lead this wretched existence for an indefinite period. Mine is a strange story, and that you would recognize through one word, were you a Mexican, or had you travelled in certain regions of Mexico."

"Did I not tell you that, for twenty years, I have been travelling over every part of America?" the traveller replied, his curiosity being aroused to the highest pitch. "What is the word? Can you tell it me?"

"Why not? I am alluding to the name I bore while I was still a living man."

"What is that name?"

"It had acquired a certain celebrity, but I doubt whether, even if you have heard it mentioned, it has remained in your memory."

"Who knows? Perhaps you are mistaken."

"Well, since you insist, learn, then, that I was called Martial el Tigrero."

"You?" the hunter exclaimed, under the influence of the uttermost surprise; "why that is impossible!"

"Of course so, since I am dead," the stranger answered, bitterly.

CHAPTER II. THE DEAD ALIVE

The Tigrero had let his head fall on his chest again, and seemed engaged with gloomy thoughts. The hunter, somewhat embarrassed by the turn the conversation had taken, and anxious to continue it, mechanically stirred up the fire with the blade of his navaja, while his eyes wandered around, and were at times fixed on his companion with an expression of deep sympathy.

"Stay," he said, presently, as he thrust back with his foot a few embers that had rolled out; "pardon me, sir, any insult which my exclamation may seem to have contained. You have mistaken, I assure you, the meaning of my remarks; although, as we have never met, we are not such strangers as you suppose. I have known you for a long time."

The Tigrero raised his head, and looked at the hunter incredulously.

"You?" he muttered.

"Yes, I, caballero, and it will not be difficult to prove it to you."

"What good will it do?" he murmured; "what interest can I have in the fact of your knowing me?"

"My dear sir," the Frenchman continued, with several shakes of his head, "nothing happens in this world by the effect of chance. Above us, an intellect superior to ours directs everything here below; and if we have been permitted to meet in a manner so strange and unexpected in these desolate regions, it is because Providence has designs with us which we cannot yet detect; let us, therefore, not attempt to resist God's will, for what He has resolved will happen: who knows whether I may not be unconsciously sent across your path to bring you a supreme consolation, or to supply you with the means to accomplish a long meditated vengeance, which you have hitherto deemed impossible?"

"I repeat to you, señor," the Tigrero replied, "that your words are those of a stout-hearted and brave man, and I feel involuntarily attracted towards you. I think with you, that this accidental meeting, after so many days of solitude and grief, with a man of your stamp, cannot be the effect of unintelligent chance, and that at a moment when, convinced of my impotence to escape from my present frightful situation, I was reduced to despair and almost resolved on suicide, the loyal hand you offer me can only be that of a friend. Question me, then, without hesitation, and I will answer with the utmost frankness."

"Thanks for that speech," the hunter said, with emotion, "for it proves that we are beginning to understand each other, and soon, I hope, we shall have no secrets; but I must, before all else, tell you how it is that I have known you for a long time, although you were not aware of the fact."

"Speak, señor, I am listening to you with the most earnest attention."

Valentine reflected for a moment, and then went on as follows: —

"Some months ago, in consequence of circumstances unnecessary to remind you of, but which you doubtless bear in mind, you met at the colony of Guetzalli a Frenchman and a Canadian hunter, with whom you eventually stood on most intimate terms."

"It is true," the Tigrero replied, with a nervous start, "and the Frenchman to whom you allude, is the Count de Prébois Crancé. Oh! I shall never be able to discharge the debt of gratitude I have contracted with him for the services he rendered me."

A sad smile curled the hunter's lip. "You no longer owe him anything," he said, with a melancholy shake of the head.

"What do you mean?" the Tigrero exclaimed, eagerly; "surely the count cannot be dead!"

"He is dead, caballero. He was assassinated on the shores of Guaymas. His murderers laid him in his tomb, and his blood, so treacherously shed, cries to Heaven for vengeance: but patience, Heaven will not permit this horrible crime to remain unpunished."

The hunter hurriedly wiped away the tears he had been unable to repress while speaking of the count, and went on, in a voice choked by the internal emotion which he strove in vain to conquer: —

"But let us, for the present, leave this sad reminiscence to slumber in our hearts. The count was my friend, my dearest friend, more than a brother to me: he often spoke about you to me, and several times told me your gloomy history, which terminated in a frightful catastrophe."

"Yes, yes," the Tigrero muttered; "it was, indeed, a frightful catastrophe. I would gladly have found death at the bottom of the abyss into which I rolled during my struggle with Black Bear, could I have saved her I loved; but God decreed it otherwise, and may his holy name be blessed and praised."

"Amen!" the hunter said, sadly turning his head away.

"Oh!" Don Martial continued a moment later, "I feel my recollections crowding upon me at this moment. I feel as if the veil that covers my memory is torn asunder, in order to recall events, already so distant, but which have left so deep an impression on my mind. I, too, recognize you now; you are the famous hunter whom the count was trying to find in the desert; but he did not call you by any of the names you have mentioned."

"I dare say," Valentine answered, "that he alluded to me as the 'Trail Hunter,' the name by which the white hunters and the Indians of the Far West are accustomed to call me."

"Yes; oh, now I remember perfectly, that was indeed the name he gave you. You were right in saying that we had been long acquainted, though we had never met."

"And now that we meet in this desert," the hunter said, offering his hand, "connected as we are by the memory of our deceased friend, shall we be friends?"

"No, not friends," the Tigrero exclaimed, as he heartily pressed the hunter's honest hand; "not friends, but brothers."

"Well, then, brothers, and each for the other against all comers," the hunter answered. "And now that you are convinced that curiosity plays no part in my eager desire to know what has befallen you since the moment when you so hurriedly left your friends, speak, Don Martial, and then I will tell you, in my turn, what are the motives that directed my steps to these desolate regions."

The Tigrero, in a few moments, began his narrative as follows: —

"My friends must have fancied me dead, hence I cannot blame them for having abandoned me, although they were, perhaps, too quick in doing so without an attempt either to recover my corpse, or assure themselves at least that I was really dead, and that assistance would be thrown away; but though I am ignorant of what happened in the cavern after my fall, the bodies left on the battlefield proved to me afterwards that they had a tough fight, and were compelled to fly before the Indians; hence, I say again that I do not blame them. You are aware that I was attacked by Black Bear at the moment when I believed that I had succeeded in saving those whom I had sworn to protect. It was on the very verge of the pit that Black Bear and myself, enwreathed like two serpents, began a final and decisive struggle: at the moment when I had all but succeeded in foiling my enemy's desperate efforts, and was raising my arm to cut his throat, the war yell of the Comanches suddenly burst forth at the entrance of the cavern. By a supreme effort the Apache chief succeeded in escaping from my clutch, bounded on his feet, and rushed towards Doña Anita, doubtless with the intention of carrying her off, as the unforeseen assistance arriving for us would prevent the accomplishment of his vengeance. But the maiden repulsed him with that strength which despair engenders, and sought refuge behind her father. Already severely wounded by two shots, the chief tottered back to the edge of the pit, where he lost his balance. Feeling that he was falling, by an instinctive gesture, or, perhaps, through a last sentiment of fury, he stretched out his arms as if to save himself, caught hold of me as I rose, half-stunned by my recent contest, and we both rolled down the pit, he with a triumphant laugh, and I with a shriek of despair. Forgive me for having described thus minutely the last incidents of this fight, but I was obliged to enter into these details to make you thoroughly understand by what providential chance I was saved, when I fancied myself hopelessly lost."

"Go on, go on;" the hunter said, "I am listening to you with the greatest attention."

Don Martial continued: —

"The Indian was desperately wounded, and his last effort, in which he had placed all his remaining strength, cost him his life: it was a corpse that dragged me down, for during the few seconds our fall lasted he did not make a movement. The pit was not so deep as I fancied, not more than twenty or five-and-twenty feet, and the sides were covered with plants and grass, which, although they bent beneath our weight, prevented us from falling perpendicularly. The chief was the first to reach the bottom of the abyss, and I fell upon his body, which deadened my fall, though it was serious enough entirely to deprive me of consciousness. I cannot say how long I remained in this state, but, from a calculation I made afterwards, my faint must have lasted two hours. I was aroused by a cold sensation which suddenly affected me. I opened my eyes again, and found myself in utter darkness. At the first moment it was impossible for me to account for the situation in which I found myself, or what events had placed me in it; but my memory gradually returned, my thoughts became more lucid, and I only desired to emerge as speedily as possible from the pit into which I had fallen. I was suffering fearfully, although I was not actually wounded. I had received numerous contusions in my fall, and the slightest movement caused me an atrocious pain, for I was so bruised and shaken. In my present state I must endure the evil patiently: attempting to scale the sides of the pit when my strength was completely exhausted would have been madness, and I therefore resigned myself to waiting. I was in complete darkness, but that did not trouble me greatly, as I had about me everything necessary to light a fire. Within a few moments I had a light, and was enabled to look about me. I was lying at the bottom of a species of funnel, for the pit grew narrower in its descent, which had greatly helped to deaden my fall; my feet and legs almost to the knee were bathed in a subterranean stream, while the upper part of my body leant against the corpse of the Indian chief. The spot where I found myself was thirty feet in circumference at the most, and I assured myself by the help of my light that the sides of the pit, entirely covered with creepers, and even sturdy shrubs, rose in a gentle slope, and would not be difficult to escalate when my strength had sufficiently returned. At this moment I could not dream of attempting the ascent, so I bravely made up my mind, and although my anxiety was great about the friends I had left in, the cavern, I resolved to wait a few hours before proceeding to save myself. I remained thus for twenty hours at the bottom of the pit, *tête-à-tête* with my enemy's corpse. Many times during my excursions in the desert I had found myself in almost desperate situations, but never, I call heaven to witness, had I felt so completely abandoned and left in the hands of Providence. Still, however deplorable my position might be, I did not despair; in spite of the frightful pain I suffered, I had convinced myself that my limbs were in a satisfactory state, and that all I needed was patience. When I fancied my strength sufficiently restored, I lighted two torches, which I fixed in the ground, in order to see more clearly. I threw my rifle on my back, placed my navaja between my teeth, and clinging to the shrubs, by a desperate effort I began my ascent. I will not tell you of the difficulty I had in conquering the terrible shocks I was obliged to give my aching bones in surmounting almost unsurpassable obstacles; sufficient for you to know that I reached the mouth of the pit after an hour and a half's struggle, in which I expended all the energy a man possesses who hopes to save himself. When I reached the floor of the cavern, I lay for more than half an hour on the sand, exhausted, panting, unable to make the slightest movement, scarce breathing, hearing nothing, seeing nothing, not even conscious of the frightful state into which I was plunged. Fortunately for me, this terrible condition did not last long, the refreshing air from without, reaching me through the passages of the cavern, recovered me, and restored the entire use of my mental faculties. The ground around me was covered with dead bodies, and there had, doubtless, been a terrible struggle between the white men and the redskins. I sought in vain for the corpses of Doña Anita and her father. I breathed again, and hope re-entered my heart, for my sacrifice had not been fruitless. Those for whom I had given my life were saved, and I should see them again. This thought restored my courage, and I felt quite a different man. I rose without any excessive difficulty, and, supporting myself on my rifle, went toward the mouth of the cavern, after removing my stock of provision, and taking two powder horns from the

stores I had previously *cached*, and which my friends in their flight had not thought of removing. No words can describe the emotion I felt when, after a painful walk through the grotto, I at length reached the riverbank, and saw the sun once more: a man must have been in a similar desperate situation to understand the cry, or rather howl of joy which escaped from my surcharged bosom when I felt again the blessed sunbeams, and inhaled the odorous breath of the savannah. By an unreflecting movement, though it was suggested by my heart, I fell on my knees, and piously clasping my hands, I thanked Him who had saved me, and who alone could do so. This prayer, and the simple thanks expressed by a grateful heart, were, I feel convinced, borne upwards to heaven on the wings of my guardian angel.

"As far as I could make out by the height of the sun, it was about the second hour of the tarde. The deepest silence prevailed around me; so far as the vision could extend, the prairie was deserted; Indians and palefaces had disappeared: I was alone, alone with that God who had saved me in so marvellous a fashion, and would not abandon me. Before going further, I took a little nourishment, which the exhaustion of my strength rendered necessary. When, in the company of Don Sylva de Torr s and his daughter, I had sought a refuge in the cavern, our horses had been abandoned with all the remaining forage in an adjacent clearing, and I was too well acquainted with the instinct of these noble animals to apprehend that they had fled. On the contrary, I knew that, if the hunters had not taken them away, I should find them at the very spot where I had left them. A horse was indispensable for use, for a dismounted man is lost in the desert, and hence I resolved to seek them. Rested by the long halt I had made, and feeling that my strength had almost returned, I proceeded without hesitation towards the forest. At my second call I heard a rather loud noise in a clump of trees; the shrubs parted, and my horse galloped up and gladly rubbed its intelligent head against my shoulder. I amply returned the caresses the faithful companion of my adventures bestowed on me, and then returned to the cavern, where my saddle was. An hour later, mounted on my good horse, I bent my steps toward houses. My journey was a long one, owing to my state of weakness and prostration, and when I reached Sonora the news I heard almost drove me mad. Don Sylva de Torr s had been killed in the fight with the Apaches, as was probably his daughter, for no one could tell me anything about her. For a month I hovered between life and death; but God in His wisdom, doubtless, had decided that I should escape once again. When hardly convalescent, I dragged myself to the house of the only man competent of giving me precise and positive information about what I wanted to learn. This man refused to recognize me, although I had kept up intimate relations with him for many years. When I told him my name he laughed in my face, and when I insisted, he had me expelled by his peons, telling me that I was mad, that Don Martial was dead, and I an impostor. I went away with rage and despair in my heart. As if they had formed an agreement, all my friends to whom I presented myself refused to recognize me, so thoroughly was the report of my death believed, and it had been accepted by them as a certainty. All the efforts I attempted to dissipate this alarming mistake, and prove the falsehood of the rumour were in vain, for too many persons were interested in it being true, on account of the large estates I possessed; and also, I suppose, through a fear of injuring the man to whom I first applied – the only living relation of the Torr s family, who, through his high position, has immense influence in Sonora. What more need I tell you, my friend? Disgusted in every way, heartbroken with grief, and recognising the inutility of the efforts I made against the ingratitude and systematic bad faith of those with whom I had to deal, I left the town, and, mounting my horse, returned to the desert, seeking the most unknown spots and the most desolate regions in which to hide myself and die whenever God decrees that I have suffered sufficiently, and recalls me to Him."

After saying this the Tigrero was silent, and his head sunk gloomily on his chest.

"Brother," Valentine said gently to him, slightly touching his shoulder to attract his attention, "you have forgotten to tell me the name of that influential person who had you turned out of his house, and treated you as an impostor."

"That is true," Don Martial answered; "his name is Don Sebastian Guerrero, and he is military governor of the province of Sonora."

The hunter quickly started to his feet with an exclamation of joy.

"Don Martial," he said, "you may thank God for decreeing that we should meet in the desert, in order that the punishment of this man should be complete."

CHAPTER III. THE COMPACT

Don Martial gazed at the hunter in amazement.

"What do you mean?" he asked him. "I don't understand you."

"You will soon do so, my friend," Valentine answered. "How long have you been roaming about this neighbourhood?"

"Nearly two months."

"In that case you are well acquainted, I presume, with the mountains among which we are at this moment?"

"There is not a tree or a rock whose exact position I cannot tell, nor a wild beast trail which I have not followed."

"Good: are we far from a spot called the 'Fort of the Chichimèques?'"

The Tigrero reflected for a moment.

"Do you know by what Indians these mountains are inhabited?" he at length asked.

"Yes, by poor wretches who call themselves the Root-Eaters, and whom the hunters and trappers designate by the name of the 'Worthy of Pity.' They are, I believe, timid, harmless creatures, a species of incomplete men, in whom brutal instincts have stifled the intellect; however, I only speak of them from hearsay, for I never saw one of the poor devils."

"You are perfectly well informed about them, and they are what you depict them. I have often had opportunities of meeting them, and have lamented the degree of brutalization into which this hapless race has fallen."

"Permit me to remark that I do not see what connection can exist between this unhappy tribe and the information I ask of you."

"There is a very great one. Since I have been roaming about these mountains you are the first man of my own colour with whom I have consented to enter into relations. The Root-Eaters have neither history nor traditions. Their life is restricted to eating, drinking, and sleeping, and I have not learned from them any of the names given to the majestic peaks that surround us. Hence, though I perfectly well know the spot to which you refer, unless you describe it differently, it will be impossible for me to tell you its exact position."

"That is true; but what you ask of me is very awkward, for this is the first time I have visited these parts, and it will be rather difficult for me to describe a place I am not acquainted with. Still, I will try. There is, not far from here, I believe, a road which traverses the Rocky Mountains obliquely, and runs from the United States to Santa Fe; at a certain spot this road must intersect another which leads to California."

"I am perfectly well acquainted with the roads to which you refer, and the caravans of emigrants, hunters, and miners follow them in going to California, or returning thence."

"Good! At the spot where these two roads cross they form a species of large square, surrounded on all sides by rocks that rise to a considerable height. Do you know the place I mean?"

"Yes," the Tigrero answered.

"Well, about two gunshots from this square is a track winding nearly in an east-south-east course, along the side of the mountains. This track, at first so narrow that a horse even passes with difficulty, gradually widens till it reaches a species of esplanade, or terrace, if you like it better, which commands an extensive prospect, while on its edge are the remains of barbarous erections, which can, however, be easily recognized as an ancient parapet. This terrace is called the 'Fort of the Chichimèques,' though for what reason I cannot tell you."

"I know no more than you do on that head, although I can now assure you that I am perfectly acquainted with the place to which you refer, and have often camped there on stormy nights, because there is a deep cavern, excavated by human hands, and divided into several passages, every turning of which I know, and which has offered me a precious shelter during those frightful tempests which, at intervals, overthrow the face of nature in these regions."

"I was not aware of the existence of this grotto," the hunter said, with a glad start, "and I thank you for having told me of it; it will be very useful for the execution of the plans I have formed. Are we any great distance from this terrace?"

"In a straight line, not more than five or six miles, and, if it were day, I could show it to you; but as we must ride round to reach the caravan road, which we are obliged to follow in order to reach the tracks, we have about three hours' ride before us."

"That is a trifle, for I was afraid I had lost my way in these mountains, which are strange to me. I am delighted to find that my old experience has not failed me this time, and that my hunter's instincts have not deceived me."

While saying this, Valentine had risen to explore the clearing. The storm had ceased, the wind had swept away the clouds, the deep blue sky was studded with brilliant stars, and the moon profusely shed its rays, which imparted a fantastic appearance to the landscape by casting the shadows of the lofty trees athwart the snow, whose pallid carpet spread far as eye could see.

"'Tis a magnificent night," the hunter said, after carefully examining the sky for some moments. "It is an hour past midnight, and I do not feel the slightest inclination to sleep. Are you fatigued?"

"I am never so," the Tigrero answered, with a smile.

"All right: in that case you are like myself, a thorough wood ranger. What do you think of a ride in this magnificent moonlight?"

"I think that after a good supper and an interesting conversation nothing so thoroughly restores the balance of a man's thoughts as a night ride in the company of a friend."

"Bravo! that is what I call speaking. Now, as every ride to be reasonable should have an object, we will go, if you have no objection, as far as the Fort of the Chichimèques."

"I was about to propose it; and, as we ride along, you will tell me in your turn what imperious motive compelled you to come to these unknown regions, and what the project is to which you alluded."

"As for that," the hunter said, with a knowing smile, "I cannot satisfy you; at any rate not for the present, as I wish you to have the pleasure of a surprise. But be easy, I will not put your patience to too long a trial."

"You will act as you think proper, for I trust entirely to you. I know not why, but I am persuaded, either through a sentiment or sympathy, that in doing your own business you will be doing mine at the same time."

"You are nearer the truth at this moment than you perhaps imagine, so be of good cheer, brother."

"The happy meeting has already made a different man of me," the Tigrero said, as he rose.

The hunter laid his hand on his shoulder. "One moment," he said to him; "before leaving this bivouac, where we met so providentially, let us clearly agree as to our facts, so as to avoid any future misunderstanding."

"Be it so," Don Martial answered. "Let us make a compact in the Indian fashion, and woe to the one who breaks it."

"Well said, my friend," Valentine remarked, as he drew his knife from his belt. "Here is my navaja, brother; may it serve you as it has done me to avenge your wrongs and mine."

"I receive it in the face of that Heaven which I call as witness of the purity of my intentions. Take mine in exchange, and one half my powder and bullets, brother."

"I accept it as a thing belonging to me, and here is half my ammunition for you; henceforth we cannot fire at one another, all is in common between us. Your friends will be my friends, and you will point out your enemies to me, so that I may aid you in your vengeance. My horse is yours."

"Mine belongs to you, and in a few moments I will place it at your service."

Then the two men, leaning shoulder to shoulder, with clasped hands, eyes fixed on heaven, and outstretched arm, uttered together the following words:

"I take God to witness that of my own free will, and without reservation, I take as my friend and brother the man whose hand is at this moment pressing mine. I will help him in everything he asks of me, without hope of reward, ready by day and night to answer his first signal, without hesitation, and without reproach, even if he asked me for my life. I take this oath in the presence of God, who sees and hears me and may He come to my help in all I undertake, and punish me if I ever break my oath."

There was something grand and solemn in this simple act, performed by these two powerful men, beneath the pallid moonbeams, and in the heart of the desert, alone, far from all human society, face to face with God, confiding in each, and seeming thus to defy the whole world. After repeating the words of the oath, they kissed each other's lips in turn, then embraced, and finally shook hands again.

"Now let us be off, brother," Valentine said; "I confide in you as in myself; we shall succeed in triumphing over our enemies, and repaying them all the misery they have caused us."

"Wait for me ten minutes, brother; my horse is hidden close by."

"Go; and during that time I will saddle mine, which is henceforth yours."

Don Martial hurried away, leaving Valentine alone.

"This time," he muttered, "I believe that I have at length met the man I have been looking for so long, and whom I despaired to find; with him, Curumilla, and Belhumeur, I can begin the struggle, for I am certain I shall not be abandoned or treacherously surrendered to the enemy I wish to combat."

While indulging after his wont in this soliloquy, the hunter had lassoed his horse, and was busily engaged in saddling it. He had just put the bit in its mouth, when the Tigrero re-entered the clearing, mounted on a magnificent black steed.

Don Martial dismounted.

"This is your horse, my friend," he said.

"And this is yours."

The exchange thus effected, the two men mounted, and left the clearing in which they had met so strangely. The Tigrero had told no falsehood when he said that a metamorphosis had taken place in him, and that he felt a different man. His features had lost their marble-like rigidity; his eyes were animated, and no longer burned with a sombre and concentrated fire. Even though his glances were still somewhat haggard, their expression was more frank and, before all, kinder; he sat firm and upright in the saddle, and, in a word, seemed ten years younger.

This unexpected change had not escaped the notice of the all-observing Frenchman, and he congratulated himself for having effected this moral cure, and saved a man of such promise from the despair which he had allowed to overpower him.

We have already said that it was a magnificent night. For men like our characters, accustomed to cross the desert in all weathers, the ride in the darkness was a relaxation rather than a fatigue. They rode along side by side, talking on indifferent topics – hunting, trapping, expeditions against the Indians – subjects always pleasing to wood rangers, while rapidly advancing towards the spot they wished to reach.

"By-the-bye," Valentine all at once said, "I must warn you, brother, that if you are not mistaken, and we are really following the road to the Fort of the Chichimèques, we shall probably meet several persons there; they are friends of mine, with whom I have an appointment, and I will introduce them to you; for reasons you will speedily learn, these friends followed a different road from mine, and must have been waiting for some time at the place of meeting."

"I do not care who the persons are we meet, as they are friends of yours," the Tigrero answered; "the main point is that we make no mistake."

"On my word, I confess my incompetence, so far as that is concerned; this is the first time I have ventured into the Rocky Mountains, where I hope never to come again, and so I deliver myself entirely into your hands."

"I will do my best, although I do not promise positively to lead you to the place you want to reach."

"Nonsense!" the hunter said with a smile; "two places like the one I have described to you can hardly be found in these parts, picturesque and diversified though they be, and it would be almost impossible to lose our way."

"At any rate," the Tigrero answered, "we shall soon know what we have to depend on, for we shall be there within half an hour."

The sky was beginning to grow paler; the horizon was belted by wide, pellucid bands, which assumed in turn every colour of the rainbow. In the flashing uncertain light of dawn, objects were invested with a more fugitive appearance, although, on the other hand, they became more distinct.

The adventurers had passed the crossroads, and turned into a narrow track, whose capricious windings ran along rocks, which were almost suspended over frightful abysses. The riders had given up all attempts to guide their horses, and trusted to their instinct; they had laid their bridles on their necks, leaving them at liberty to go where they pleased – a prudent precaution, which cannot be sufficiently recommended to travellers under similar circumstances.

All at once a streak of light illumined the landscape, and the sun rose radiant and splendid; behind them the travellers still had the shadows of night, while before them the snowy peaks of the mountains – were glistening in the sun.

"Well," the hunter exclaimed, "we can now see clearly, and I hope that we shall soon perceive the Fort of the Chichimèques."

"Look ahead of you over the jagged crest of that hill," the Tigrero answered, stretching out his arm; "that is the terrace to which I am leading you."

The hunter stopped, for he felt giddy, and almost ready to fall off his horse. About two miles from him, but separated from the spot where he stood by an impassable canyon, an immense esplanade stretched out into space in the shape of a *voladero*; that is to say, in consequence of one of those earthquakes so common in these regions, the base of the mountain had been undermined, while the crest remained intact, and hung for a considerable distance above a valley, apparently about to fall at any moment; the spectacle was at once imposing and terrific.

"Heaven forgive me!" the hunter muttered, "but I really believe I was frightened; I felt all my muscles tremble involuntarily. Oh! I will not look at it again; let us get along, my friend."

They set out again, still following the windings of the tract, which gradually grew steeper; and, after a very zigzag course, reached the terrace half an hour later.

"This is certainly the place," the hunter exclaimed, as he pointed to the decaying embers of a watch fire.

"But your friends – ?" the Tigrero asked.

"Did you not tell me there was a grotto close by?"

"I did."

"Well, they doubtless concealed themselves in the grotto when they heard us approaching."

"That is possible."

"It is true: look."

The hunter discharged his gun, and at the sound three men appeared, though it was impossible to say whence they came. They were Belhumeur, Black Elk, and Eagle-head.

CHAPTER IV. THE TRAVELLERS

We must now leave Valentine and his companions on the esplanade of the Fort of the Chichimèques, where we shall join them again however, in order to attend to other persons destined to play an important part in the narrative we have undertaken to tell the reader.

About five or six leagues at the most from the spot where Valentine and the Tigrero met, a caravan, composed of some ten persons, had halted on the same night, and almost at the same moment as the hunter, in a narrow valley completely sheltered from the wind by dense clumps of trees.

The caravan was comfortably lodged on the bank of a running stream, the mules had been unloaded, a tent raised, fires lighted; and when the animals were hobbled, the travellers began to make preparations for their supper.

These travellers, or at any rate one of them, appeared to belong to the highest class, for the rest were only servants or Indian peons. Still the dress of this person was most simple, but his stiff manner, his imposing demeanour, and haughty air, evidenced the man long accustomed to give his orders without admitting refusal or even the slightest hesitation.

He had passed his fiftieth year; he was tall, well-built, and his movements were extremely elegant. His broad forehead, his black eyes large and flashing, his long gray moustaches and his short hair gave him a military appearance, which his harsh, quick way of speaking did not contradict. Although he affected a certain affability of manner, he at times involuntarily betrayed himself, and it was easy to see that the modest garb of a Mexican Campesino which he wore was only a disguise. Instead of withdrawing beneath the tent prepared for him, this person had sat down before the fire with the peons, who eagerly made way for him with evident respect.

Among the peons two men more especially attracted attention. One was a redskin, the other a half-breed, with a crafty, leering manner, who, for some reason or another, stood on more familiar terms with his master; his comrades called him Ño Carnero, and at times gave him the title of Capataz.

Ño Carnero was the wit of the caravan, the funny fellow – ever ready to laugh and joke, smoking an eternal cigar, and desperately strumming an insupportable guitar. Perhaps, though, he concealed beneath this frivolous appearance a more serious character and deeper thoughts than he would have liked to display.

The redskin formed the most complete contrast with the capataz; he was a tall, thin, dry man, with angular features and gloomy and sad face, illumined by two black eyes deeply set in their orbit, but constantly in motion, and having an undefinable expression; his aquiline nose, his wide mouth lined with large teeth as white as almonds, and his thin pinched up lips, composed a far from pleasant countenance, which was rendered still more lugubrious by the obstinate silence of this man, who only spoke when absolutely compelled, and then only in monosyllables. Like all the Indians, it was impossible to form any opinion as to his age, for his hair was black as the raven's wing, and his parchment skin had not a single wrinkle; at any rate he seemed gifted with no ordinary strength.

He had engaged at Santa Fé to act as guide to the caravan, and, with the exception of his obstinate silence, there was every reason to be satisfied with the way in which he performed his duty. The peons called him The Indian, or sometimes José – a mocking term employed in Mexico to designate the Indios mansos; but the redskin appeared as insensible to compliments as to jokes, and continued coldly to carry out the task he had imposed on himself. When supper was ended, and each had lit his pipe or cigarette, the master turned to the capataz.

"Carnero," he said to him, "although in such frightful weather, and in these remote regions, we have but little to fear from horse thieves, still do not fail to place sentries, for we cannot be too provident."

"I have warned two men, *mi amo*," the capataz replied; "and, moreover, I intend to make my rounds tonight; eh, José," he added, turning to the Indian, "are you certain you are not mistaken, and that you really lifted a trail?"

The redskin shrugged his shoulders disdainfully, and continued his quiet smoke.

"Do you know to what nation the sign you discovered belongs?" the master asked him.

The Indian gave a nod of assent.

"Is it a formidable nation?"

"Crow," the redskin answered hoarsely.

"Caray!" the master exclaimed, "if they are Crows, we shall do well to be on our guard, for they are the cleverest plunderers in the Rocky Mountains."

"Nonsense!" Carnero remarked with a grin of derision, "do not believe what that man tells you; the mezcal has got into his head, and he is trying to make himself of importance; Indians tell as many lies as old women."

The Indian's eye flashed; without deigning to reply he drew a moccasin from his breast, and threw it so adroitly at the capataz as to strike him across the face. Furious at the insult so suddenly offered him by a man whom he always considered inoffensive, the half-breed uttered a yell of rage, and rushed knife in hand on the Indian.

But the latter had not taken his eye off him, and by a slight movement he avoided the desperate attack of the capataz; then, drawing himself up, he caught him round the waist, raised him from the ground as easy as he would have done a child, and hurled him into the fire, where he writhed for a moment with cries of pain and impotent passion. When he at length got out of the fire, half scorched, he did not think of renewing the attack, but sat down growling and directing savage glances at his adversary, like a turnspit punished by a mastiff. The master had witnessed this aggression with the utmost indifference, and having picked up the moccasin, which he carefully examined —

"The Indian is right," he said, coldly, "this moccasin bears the mark of the Crow nation. My poor Carnero, you must put up with it, for though the punishment you received was severe, I am forced to allow that it was deserved."

The redskin had begun smoking again as quietly as if nothing had occurred.

"The dog will pay me for it with his traitor face," the capataz growled, on hearing his master's warning. "I am no man if I do not leave his body as food for the crows he discovers so cleverly."

"My poor lad," his master continued, with a jeer, "you had better forget this affair, which I allow might be disagreeable to your self-esteem; for I fancy you would not be the gainer by recommencing the quarrel."

The capataz did not answer; he looked round at the spectators to select one on whom he could vent his spite, without incurring any extreme risk; but the peons were on their guard, and offered him no chance. He then, with an air of vexation, made a signal to two men to follow him, and left the circle grumbling.

The head of the caravan remained for a few minutes plunged in serious thought; he then withdrew beneath his tent, the curtain of which fell behind him; and the peons lay down on the ground, one after the other, with their feet to the fire, and carefully wrapped up in their serapes, and fell asleep.

The Indian then took the pipe stem from his mouth, looked searchingly around him, shook out the ashes, passed the pipe through his belt, and, rising negligently, went slowly to crouch at the foot of a tree, though not before he had taken the precaution of wrapping himself in his buffalo robe, a measure which the sharp air rendered, if not indispensable, at any rate necessary.

Ere long, with the exception of the sentries leaning on their guns and motionless as statues, all the travellers were plunged in deep sleep, for the capataz himself, in spite of the promise he had made his master, had laid himself across the entrance of the tent.

An hour elapsed ere anything disturbed the silence that prevailed in the camp. All at once a singular thing happened. The buffalo robe, under which the Indian was sheltered, gently rose with

an almost imperceptible movement, and the redskin's face appeared, darting glances of fire into the gloom. In a moment the guide raised himself slowly along the trunk of the tree against which he had been lying, embraced it with his feet and hands, and with undulating movements resembling those of reptiles, he left the ground, and raised himself to the first branches, among which he disappeared.

This ascent was executed with such well-calculated slowness that it had not produced the slightest sound. Moreover, the buffalo robe left at the foot of the tree so well retained its primitive folds, that it was impossible to discover, without touching it, that the man it sheltered had left it.

When the guide was thoroughly concealed among the leaves, he remained for a moment motionless; though not in order to regain his breath after having made such an expenditure of strength, for this man was made of iron, and fatigue had no power over him. But he probably wished to look about him, for with his body bent forward, and his eyes fixed on space, he inhaled the breeze, and his glances seemed trying to pierce the gloom.

Before selecting as his resting place the foot of the tree in which he was now concealed, the guide had assured himself that this tree, which was very high and leafy, was joined at about two-thirds of its height by other trees, which gradually rose along the side of the mountain, and formed a wall of verdure.

After a few minutes' hesitation, the guide drew in his belt, placed his knife between his teeth, and with a certainty and lightness of movement which would have done honour to a monkey, he commenced literally hopping from one tree to another, hanging by his arms, and clinging to the creepers, waking up, as he passed, the birds, which flew away in alarm.

This strange journey lasted about three-quarters of an hour. At length the guide stopped, looked attentively around him, and gliding down the trunk of the tree on which he was, reached the ground. The spot where he now found himself was a rather spacious clearing, in the centre of which blazed an enormous fire, serving to warm forty or fifty redskins, completely armed and equipped for war. Still, singular to say, the majority of these Indians, instead of their long lances and the bows they usually employ, carried muskets of American manufacture, which led to the supposition that they were picked warriors and great braves of their nation; and this, too, was further proved by the numerous wolf tails fastened to their heels, an honourable insignia which only renowned warriors have the right to assume.

This detachment of redskins was certainly on the war trail, or at any rate on a serious expedition, for they had with them neither dogs nor squaws. In spite of the slight care with which the Indians are wont to guard themselves at night, the free and deliberate manner in which the guide entered their encampment proved that he was expected by these warriors, who evinced no surprise at seeing him, but, on the contrary, invited him with hospitable gestures to take a seat at their fire. The guide sat down silently, and began smoking the calumet which the chief seated by his side immediately offered him. This chief was still a young man, his marked features displaying the utmost craft and boldness. After a rather lengthened interval, doubtless expressly granted the visitor to let him draw breath and warm himself, the young chief bowed to him and addressed him deferentially.

"My father is welcome among his sons; they were impatiently awaiting his arrival."

The guide responded to this compliment with a grimace, in all probability intended to pass muster for a smile. The chief continued: —

"Our scouts have carefully examined the encampment of the Yoris, and the warriors of the Jester are ready to obey the instructions given them by their great sachem, Eagle-head. Is my father Curumilla satisfied with his red children?"

Curumilla (for the guide was no other than the reader's old acquaintance the Araucano chief) laid his right hand on his chest, and uttered with a guttural accent the exclamation, "Ugh!" which was with him a mark of the greatest joy.

The Jester and his warriors had been too long acquainted with Curumilla for his silence to seem strange to them; hence they yielded without repugnance to his mania, and carefully giving up the hope of getting a syllable out of his closed lips, began with him a conversation in signs.

We have already had occasion, in a previous work, to mention that the redskins have two languages, the written and the sign language. The latter, which has among them attained a high perfection, and which all understand, is usually employed when hunting, or on expeditions, when a word pronounced even in a low voice may reveal the presence of an ambuscade to the enemy, whether men or beasts, whom they are pursuing, and desire to surprise.

It would have been interesting, and even amusing, for any stranger who had been present at this interview to see with what rapidity the gestures and signs were exchanged between these men, so strangely lit up by the ruddy glow of the fire, and who resembled, with their strange movements, their stern faces, and singular attitudes, a council of demons. At times the Jester, with his body bent forward, and emphatic gestures, held a dumb speech, which his comrades followed with the most sustained attention, and which they answered with a rapidity that words themselves could not have surpassed.

At length this silent council terminated. Curumilla raised his hand to heaven, and pointed to the stars, which were beginning to grow dim, and then left the circle. The redskins respectfully followed him to the foot of the tree by the aid of which he had entered their camp. When he reached it, he turned round.

"May the Wacondah protect my father!" the Jester then said. "His sons have thoroughly understood his instructions, and will follow them literally. The great pale hunter will have joined his friends by this hour, and he is doubtless awaiting us. Tomorrow Koutonepi will see his Comanche brothers. At the *enditha* the camp will be raised."

"It is good," Curumilla answered, and saluting for the last time the warriors, who bowed respectfully before him, the chief seized the creeping plants, and, raising himself by the strength of his wrists, in a second he reached the branches, and disappeared in the foliage.

The journey the Indian had made was very important, and needed to be so for him to run such great risks in order to have an interview at this hour of the night with the redskins; but as the reader will soon learn what were the consequences of this expedition, we deem it unnecessary to translate the sign language employed during the council, or explain the resolutions formed between Curumilla and the Jester.

The chief recommenced his aerial trip with the same lightness and the same good fortune. After a lapse of time comparatively much shorter than that which he had previously employed, he reached the camp of the white men. The same silence prevailed in its interior; the sentinels were still motionless at their post, and the watch fires were beginning to expire.

The chief assured himself that no eye was fixed on him – that no spy was on the watch; and, feeling certain of not being perceived, he slid silently down the tree and resumed the place beneath the buffalo robe which he was supposed not to have left during the night.

At the moment when, after taking a final glance around, the Indian chief disappeared beneath his robe, the capataz, who was lying athwart the entrance of the hut, gently raised his head, and looked with strange fixity of glance at the place occupied by the redskin.

Had a suspicion been aroused in the Mexican's mind? Had he noticed the departure and return of the chief? Presently he let his head fall again, and it would have been impossible to read on his motionless features what were the thoughts that troubled him.

The remainder of the night passed tranquilly and peacefully.

CHAPTER V. THE FORT OF THE CHICHIMÈQUES

The sun rose; its beams played on the trembling yellow leaves of the trees, and tinged them with a thousand shades of gold and purple. The birds, cozily nestled in the bushes, struck up their matin carol; the awakening of nature was as splendid and imposing as it is in all mountainous countries.

The leader of the caravan left his tent and gave orders to strike the camp. The tent was at once folded up, the mules were loaded, and, so soon as the horses were saddled, the party started without waiting for the morning meal, for they generally breakfasted at the eleven o'clock halt, while resting to let the great heat of the day subside.

The caravan advanced along the road from Santa Fé to the United States, at a speed unusual under such circumstances. A military system was affected which was imposing, and, indeed, indispensable in these regions, infested not merely by numerous bands of predatory Indians, but also traversed by the pirates of the prairie, more dangerous bandits still, who were driven by their enemies beyond the pale of the law, and who, ambushed at the turnings of roads or in broken rocks, attacked the caravans as they passed, and pitilessly massacred the travellers, after plundering them of all they possessed.

About twenty yards ahead of the caravan rode four men, with their rifles on their thigh, preceded by the guide, who formed the extreme vanguard. Next came the main body, composed of six well-armed peons, watching the mules and baggage, under the immediate orders of the chief of the caravan. Lastly, the capataz rode about thirty paces in the rear, having under his orders four resolute men armed to the teeth.

Thus arranged to face any event, the caravan enjoyed a relative security, for it was not very probable that the white or red pillagers, who were doubtless watching it, would dare to attack in open day seventeen resolute and trained men. At night the horse thieves, who glide silently in the darkness during the sleep of the travellers, and carry off horses and baggage, were more formidable.

Still, either through accident, or the prudential measures employed by the chief of the caravan, since they had left Santa Fé, that is to say for more than a month, the Mexicans had not seen an Indian, or been alarmed. They had journeyed – apparently at least – with as much tranquillity as if, instead of being in the heart of the Rocky Mountains, they were moving along the roads in, the interior of Sonora. This security, however, while augmenting their confidence, had not caused their prudential measures to be neglected; and their chief, whom this unusual leniency on the part of the villains who prowl about these countries alarmed, redoubled his vigilance and precautions to avoid a surprise and a collision with the plunderers.

The discovery, made on the previous day by the guide, of an Indian Crow trail – the most determined thieves in these mountains – added to his apprehensions; for he did not hide from himself that, if he were compelled to fight, in spite of the courage and discipline of his peons, the odds would be against him, when fighting men thoroughly acquainted with the country, and who would only attack him with numbers sufficient to crush his band, however desperate the resistance offered might be.

When he left the camp, the chief of the caravan, suffering perhaps from a gloomy foreboding, spurred his horse and joined the Indian, who, as we said, was marching alone in front, examining the bushes, and apparently performing all the duties of an experienced guide. Curumilla, though he heard the hurried paces of the Mexican's horse, did not turn round, but continued trotting along carelessly on the sorry mule allotted to him for this expedition.

When the chief of the caravan joined him and brought his horse alongside the Indian, instead of speaking to him, he attentively examined him for some minutes, trying to pierce the mask of stoicism spread over the guide's features, and to read his thoughts. But, after a rather lengthened

period, the Mexican was constrained to recognize the inutility of his efforts, and to confess to himself the impossibility of guessing the intentions of this man, for whom, in spite of the service he had rendered the caravan, he felt an instinctive aversion, and whom he would like to force, at all risks, to make a frank explanation.

"Indian," he said to him in Spanish, "I wish to speak with you for a few moments on an important subject, so be good enough to put off your usual silence for awhile and answer, like an honest man, the questions I propose asking you."

Curumilla bowed respectfully.

"You engaged with me, at Santa Fé, to lead me, for the sum of four ounces, of which you received one half in advance, to lead me, I say, safely to the frontiers of Upper Mexico. Since you have been in my service I must allow that I have only had reason to praise the prudence in which you have performed your duties; but we are at this moment in the heart of the Rocky Mountains, that is to say, we have reached the most dangerous part of our long journey. Two days ago you lifted the trail of Crow Indians, very formidable enemies of caravans, and I want to consult with you as to the means to employ to foil the snares in which these Indians will try to catch us, and to know what measures you intend to employ to avoid a meeting with them; in a word, I want to know your plan of action."

The Indian, without replying, felt in a bag of striped calico thrown over his shoulder, and produced a greasy paper, folded in four, which he opened and offered the Mexican.

"What is this?" the latter asked, as he looked and ran through it. "Oh, yes, certainly; your engagement. Well, what connection has this with the question I asked you?"

Curumilla, still impassive, laid his finger on the paper, at the last paragraph of the engagement.

"Well, what then?" the Mexican exclaimed, ill-humouredly. "It is said there, it is true, that I must trust entirely to you, and leave you at liberty to act as you please for the common welfare, without questioning you."

The Indian nodded his head in assent.

"Well, *voto a Brios!*" the Mexican shouted, irritated by this studied coolness, in spite of his resolve to curb his temper, and annoyed at the man's obstinate refusal to answer, "what proves to me that you are acting for our common welfare, and that you are not a traitor?"

At this word traitor, so distinctly uttered by the Mexican, Curumilla gave a tiger glance at the speaker, while his whole body was agitated by a convulsive tremor: he uttered two or three incomprehensible guttural exclamations, and ere the Mexican could suspect his intentions, he was seized round the waist, lifted from the saddle, and hurled on the ground, where he lay stunned.

Curumilla leapt from his mule, drew from his belt two gold ounces, hurled them at the Mexican, and then, bounding over the precipice that bordered the road, glided to the bottom with headlong speed and disappeared at once.

What we have described occurred so rapidly that the peons who remained behind, although they hurried up at full speed to their master's assistance, arrived too late on the scene to prevent the Indian's flight.

The Mexican had received no wound; the surprise and violence of the fall had alone caused his momentary stupor; but almost immediately he regained his senses, and comprehending the inutility and folly of pursuit at such a spot with such an adversary, he devoured his shame and passion, and, remounting his horse, which had been stopped, he coolly gave orders to continue the journey, with an internal resolution that, if ever the opportunity offered, he would have an exemplary revenge for the insult he had received.

For the moment he could not think of it, for more serious interests demanded all his attention; it was evident to him that, in branding the guide as a traitor, he had struck home, and that the latter, furious at seeing himself unmasked, had proceeded to such extremities in order to escape punishment, and find means to fly safely.

The situation was becoming most critical for the chief of the caravan; he found himself abandoned and left without a guide, in unknown regions, doubtless watched by hidden foes, and exposed at any moment to an attack, whose result could but be unfavourable to himself and his people; hence he must form a vigorous resolve in order to escape, were it possible, the misfortunes that menaced the caravan.

The Mexican was a man endowed with an energetic organization, brave to rashness, whom no peril, however great it might be, had ever yet had the power to make him blench; in a few seconds he calculated all the favourable chances left him, and his determination was formed. The road he was following at this moment was assuredly the one frequented by the caravans proceeding from the United States to California or Mexico; and there was no other road but this in the mountains. Hence the Mexican resolved to form an entrenched camp, at the spot that might appear to him most favourable, fortify himself there as well as he could, and await the passing of the first caravan, which he would join.

This plan was exceedingly simple, and in addition very easy to execute. As the travellers possessed an ample stock of provisions and ammunition, they had no reason to fear scarcity, while, on the other hand, seven or eight days in all probability would not elapse without the appearance of a fresh caravan; and the Mexican believed himself capable of resisting, behind good entrenchments, with his fifteen peons, any white or red plunderers who dared to attack him.

So soon as this resolution was formed, the Mexican at once prepared to carry it out. After having briefly and in a few words explained to his disheartened peons what his intentions were, and recommending them to redouble their prudence, he left them, and pushed on in order to reconnoitre the ground and select the most suitable spot for the establishment of the camp.

He started his horse at a gallop and soon disappeared in the windings of the road, but, through fear of a sudden attack, he held his gun in his hand, and his glances were constantly directed around him, examining with the utmost care the thick chaparral which bordered the road on the side of the mountain.

The Mexican went on thus for about two hours, noticing that the further he proceeded the narrower and more abrupt the track became. Suddenly it widened out in front of him, and he arrived at an esplanade, across which the road ran, and which was no other than the Fort of the Chichimèques, previously described by us.

The Mexican's practised eye at once seized the advantages of such a position, and, without loss of time in examining it in detail, he turned back to rejoin the caravan. The travellers, though marching much more slowly than their chief, had, however, pushed on, so that he rejoined them about three-quarters of an hour after the discovery of the terrace.

The flight of the guide had nearly demoralized the Mexicans, more accustomed to the ease of tropical regions, and whose courage the snows of the Rocky Mountains had already weakened, if not destroyed. Fortunately for the chief's plans he had over his servants that influence which clever minds know how to impose on ordinary natures, and the peons, on seeing their master gay and careless about the future, began to hope that they would escape better than they had supposed from the unlucky position in which they found themselves so suddenly placed. The march was continued tranquilly; no suspicious sign was discovered, and the Mexicans were justified in believing that, with the exception of the time they would be compelled to lose in awaiting a new guide, the flight of the Indian would entail no disagreeable consequences on them.

Singularly enough, Carnero the capataz seemed rather pleased than annoyed at the sudden disappearance of the guide. Far from complaining or deploring the delay in the continuance of the journey he laughed at what had happened, and made an infinitude of more or less witty jests about it, which in the end considerably annoyed his master, whose joy was merely on the surface, and who, in his heart, cursed the mishap which kept them in the mountains, and exposed him to the insults of the plunderers.

"Pray, what do you find so agreeable in what has happened that you are or affect to be so merry, Ño Carnero?" he at length asked with considerable ill temper.

"Forgive me, mi amo," the capataz answered humbly; "but you know the proverb, 'What can't be cured must be endured,' and consequently I forgot."

"Hum!" said the master, without any other reply.

"And besides," the capataz added, as he stooped down to the chief, and almost whispering, "however bad our position may be, is it not better to pretend to consider it good?"

His master gave him a piercing look, but the other continued imperturbably with an obsequious smile —

"The duty of a devoted servant, mi amo, is to be always of his master's opinion, whatever may happen. The peons were murmuring this morning after your departure, and you know what the character of these brutes is; if they feel alarmed we shall be lost, for it will be impossible for us to get out of our position; hence I thought that I was carrying out your views by attempting to cheer them up, and I feign a gaiety which, be assured, I do not feel, under the supposition that it would be agreeable to you."

The Mexican shook his head dubiously, but the observations of the capataz were so just, the reasons he offered appeared so plausible, that he was constrained to yield and thank him, as he did not care to alienate at this moment a man who by a word could change the temper of his peons, and urge them to revolt instead of adhering to their duty.

"I thank you, Ño Carnero," he said, with a conciliatory air. "You perfectly understood my intentions. I am pleased with your devotion to my person, and the moment will soon arrive, I hope, when it will be in my power to prove to you the value I attach to you."

"The certainty of having done my duty, now as ever, is the sole reward I desire, mi amo," the capataz answered, with a respectful bow.

The Mexican gave him a side glance, but he restrained himself, and it was with a smile that he thanked the capataz for the second time. The latter thought it prudent to break off the interview here, and, stopping his horse, he allowed his master to pass him. The chief of the caravan was one of those unhappily constituted men who after having passed their life in deceiving or trying to deceive those with whom the accidents of an adventurous existence have brought them into contact, had reached that point when he had no confidence in anyone, and sought, behind the most frivolous words, to discover an interested motive, which most frequently did not exist. Although his capataz Carnero had been for a long time in his service, and he granted him a certain amount of familiarity — although he appeared to place great confidence in him, and count on his devotion, still, in his heart, he not only suspected him, but felt almost confident, without any positive proof, it is true, that he was playing a double game with him, and was a secret agent of his deceivers.

What truth there might be in this supposition, which held a firm hold of the Mexican's mind, we are unable to say at present; but the slightest actions of his capataz were watched by him, and he felt certain that he should, sooner or later, attain a confirmation of his doubts; hence, while feigning the greatest satisfaction with him, he constantly kept on his guard, ready to deal a blow, which would be the sharper because it had been so long prepared.

A little before eleven A.M. the caravan reached the terrace, and it was with a feeling of joy, which they did not attempt to conceal, that the peons recognized the strength of the position selected by their master for the encampment.

"We shall stop here for the present," the Mexican said. "Unload the mules, and light the fires. Immediately after breakfast we will begin entrenching ourselves in such a way as to foil all the assaults of marauders."

The peons obeyed with the speed of men who have made a long journey and are beginning to feel hungry; the fires were lighted in an instant, and a few moments later the peons vigorously attacked

their maize tortillas, their tocino, and their cecina – those indispensable elements of every Mexican meal. When the hunger of his men was appeased, and they had smoked their cigarettes, the chief rose.

"Now," he said, "to work."

CHAPTER VI. THE SURPRISE

The position which the leader of the caravan fancied he had been the first to discover, and where he had made up his mind to halt, was admirably selected to establish an intrenched camp – strong enough to resist for months the attacks of the Indians and the pirates of the prairies. The immense voladero hovering at a prodigious height above the precipices, and guarded on the right and left by enormous masses of rock, offered such conditions of security that the peons regained all their merry carelessness, and only regarded the mysterious flight of the guide as an accident of no real importance, and which would have no other consequences for them but to make their journey somewhat longer than the time originally arranged.

It was, hence, with well promising ardour that they rose on receiving their chiefs command, and prepared under his directions to dig the trench which was intended to protect them from a surprise. This trench was to be bordered by a line of tall stakes, running across the open space between the rocks, which gave the sole access to the terrace.

The headquarters were first prepared, that is to say, the tent was raised, and the horses hobbled near pickets driven into the ground.

At the moment when the leader proceeded with several peons armed with picks and spades toward the entrance, with the probable intention of marking the exact spot where the trench was to be dug, the capataz approached him obsequiously, and said with a respectful bow —

"Mi amo, I have an important communication to make to you."

His master turned and looked at him with ill-concealed distrust.

"An important communication to make to me?" he repeated.

"Yes, mi amo," the capataz replied with a bow.

"What is it? Speak, but be brief, Carnero, for, as you see, I have no time to lose."

"I hope to gain you time, excellency," the capataz said with a silent smile.

"Ah, ah, what is it?"

"If you will allow me to say two words aside, excellency, you will know at once."

"Diablo! a mystery, Master Carnero?"

"Mi amo, it is my duty to inform no one but your excellency of my discovery."

"Hum! then you have discovered something?"

The other bowed, but made no further answer.

"Very well then," his master continued, "come this way: go on, muchachos," he added, addressing the peons, "I will rejoin you in a moment."

The latter went on, while the leader retired for a few paces, followed by the capataz. When he considered that he had placed a sufficient distance between himself and the ears of his people, he addressed the half-breed again —

"Now, I suppose, Master Carnero," he said, "you will see no inconvenience in explaining yourself?"

"None at all, excellency."

"Speak then, in the fiend's name, and keep me no longer in suspense."

"This is the affair, excellency: I have discovered a grotto."

"What?" his master exclaimed, in surprise, "you have discovered a grotto?"

"Yes, excellency."

"Where?"

"Here."

"Here! that's impossible."

"It's the fact, excellency."

"But where?"

"There," he said, stretching out his arm, "behind that mass of rocks."

A suspicious look flashed from beneath his master's eyelashes.

"Ah!" he muttered, "that is very singular, Master Carnero; may I ask in what manner you discovered this grotto, and what motive was so imperious as to take you among those rocks, when you were aware how indispensable your presence was elsewhere?"

The capataz was not affected by the tone in which these words were uttered; he answered calmly, as if he did not perceive the menace they contained —

"Oh! mi amo, the discovery was quite accidental, I assure you."

"I do not believe in chance," his master answered "but go on."

"When we had finished breakfast," the capataz continued, soothingly, "I perceived, on rising, that several horses, mine among them, had become unfastened, and were straying in different directions."

"That is true," his master muttered, apparently answering his own thoughts rather than the remarks of the capataz.

The latter gave an almost imperceptible smile. "Fearing," he continued, "lest the horses might be lost, I immediately started in pursuit. They were easy to catch, with the exception of one, which rambled among the rocks, and I was obliged to follow it."

"I understand; and so it led you to the mouth of the grotto."

"Exactly, mi amo; I found it standing at the very entrance, and had no difficulty in seizing the bridle."

"That is indeed most singular. And did you enter the grotto, Master Carnero?"

"No, mi amo. I thought it my duty to tell you of it first."

"You were right. Well, we will enter it together. Fetch some torches of ocote wood, and show us the way. By the by, do not forget to bring weapons, for we know not what men or beasts we may find in caverns thus opening on a high road." This he said with a sarcastic air, which caused the capataz to tremble inwardly in spite of his determined indifference.

While he executed his master's orders, the latter selected six of his peons, on whose courage he thought he could most rely, ordered them to take their muskets, and, bidding the others to keep a good watch, but not begin anything till he returned, he made a signal to the capataz that he was ready to follow him. Ño Carnero had followed with an evil eye the arrangements made by his master, but probably did not deem it prudent to risk any remark, for he silently bowed his head, and walked toward the pile of rocks that masked the entrance of the grotto.

These granite blocks, piled one on top of the other, did not appear, however, to have been brought there by accident, but, on the contrary, they appeared to have belonged in some early and remote age to a clumsy but substantial edifice, which was probably connected with the breastwork still visible on the edge of the voladero on the side of the precipice.

The Mexicans crossed the rocks without difficulty, and soon found themselves before the dark and frowning entrance of the cavern. The chief gave his peons a signal to halt.

"It would not be prudent," he said, "to venture without precautions into this cavern. Prepare your arms, muchachos, and keep your eyes open; at the slightest suspicious sound, or the smallest object that appears, fire. Capataz, light the torches."

The latter obeyed without a word; the leader of the caravan assured himself at a glance that his orders had been properly carried out; then taking his pistols from his belt, he cocked them, took one in each hand, and said to Carnero —

"Take the lead," he said, with a mocking accent; "it is only just that you should do the honours of this place which you so unexpectedly discovered. Forward, you others, and be on your guard," he added, turning to the peons.

The eight men then went into the cavern at the heels of the capataz, who raised the torches above his head, doubtless in order to cast a greater light on surrounding objects.

This cavern, like most of those found in these regions, seemed to have been formed through some subterranean convulsion. The walls were lofty, dry, and covered at various spots with an enormous quantity of night birds, which, blinded and startled by the light of the torches, took to flight with hoarse cries, and flew heavily in circles round the Mexicans. The latter drove them back with some difficulty by waving their muskets. But the further they got into the interior of the cavern, the greater the number of these birds became, and seriously encumbered the visitors by flapping them with their long wings, and deafening them with their discordant cries.

They thus reached a rather large hall, into which several passages opened. Although the Mexicans were a considerable distance from the entrance, they found no difficulty in breathing, owing doubtless to imperceptible fissures in the rock, through which the air was received.

"Let us halt here for a moment," the leader said, taking a torch from the capataz; "this hall, if the cavern has several issues as I suppose, will afford us a certain refuge: let us examine the spot where we are."

While speaking he walked round the hall, and convinced himself, by certain still existing traces of man's handiwork, that at a former period the cave had been inhabited. The peons seated themselves idly on the blocks of granite scattered here and there, and with their guns between their legs carelessly followed their master's movements.

The latter felt the suspicions aroused in his mind by the sudden nature of Carnero's discovery gradually dissipated. He felt certain that for many years no human being had entered this gloomy cave, for none of those flying traces which man always leaves in his passage, whatever precaution he may take to hide his presence, had been discovered by him. All, on the contrary, evidenced the most utter abandonment and solitude, and hence the leader of the caravan was not indisposed to retire to this spot, which was so easy of defence, instead of throwing up an intrenched camp, always a long and difficult task, and which had the inconvenience of leaving men and animals exposed to a deadly climate for individuals accustomed to the heat of the Mexican temperature.

"While continuing his explanations, the leader conversed with the capataz in a more friendly manner than he had done for a long time, congratulating him on his discovery, and explaining his views, to which the latter listened with his usual crafty smile. All at once he stopped and listened – the two men were at this moment at the entrance of one of the passages to which we have referred.

"Listen," he said to the capataz, as he laid his hand on his arm to attract his attention, "do you not hear something?"

The latter bent his body slightly forward, and remained motionless for some seconds.

"I do," he said, drawing himself up, "it sounds like distant thunder."

"Is it not? or, perhaps, the rolling of subterranean waters."

"Madre de Dios! mi amo," the capataz exclaimed gleefully. "I can swear that you are right. It would be a piece of luck for us to find water in the cave, for it would add greatly to our security, as we should not be obliged to lead our horses, perhaps, a long distance to drink."

"I will assure myself at once if there is any truth in the supposition. The noise proceeds from that passage, so let us follow it. As for our men they can wait for us here; we have nothing to fear now, for if the pirates or the Indians were ambuscaded to surprise us, they would not have waited so long before doing so, and hence the assistance of our peons is unnecessary."

The capataz shook his head doubtfully.

"Hum," he said, "the Indians are very clever, mi amo; and who knows what diabolical projects those redskins revolve in their minds? I believe it would be more prudent to let the peons accompany us."

"Nonsense," said his master, "it is unnecessary; we are two resolute and well-armed men; we have nothing to fear, I tell you. Besides, if, against all probability, we are attacked, our men will hear the noise of the conflict, will run to our help, and will be at our side in an instant."

"It is not very probable, I grant, that we have any danger to apprehend; still I considered it my duty as a devoted servant, *mi amo*, to warn you, because in the event of Indians being hidden in these passages, of whose windings we are ignorant, we should be caught like rats in a trap, with no possibility of escape. Two men, however brave they may be, are incapable of resisting twenty or thirty enemies, and you know that Indians never attack white men save when they are almost certain of success."

These words seemed to produce a certain impression on the leader of the caravan. He remained silent for a moment, apparently reflecting seriously on what he had heard, but he soon raised his head, and shook it resolutely.

"Nonsense! I do not believe in the danger you seem to apprehend; after all, if it really exist, it will be welcome. Wait here, my men, and be ready to join us at the first signal," he added, addressing the peons, who answered by rising and collecting in the middle of the hall.

Their master left them a torch to light them during his exploration, took the other, and turning to Carnero, said, "Let us go."

They then entered the passage. It was very narrow, and ran downwards with a steep incline, so that the two men, who were unacquainted with its windings, were obliged to walk with the most serious attention, and carefully examining all the spots they passed.

The further they proceeded, the more distinct the sound of water became; it was evident that at a very short distance from the spot where they were, perhaps but a few steps, there ran one of those subterranean streams so frequently found in natural caverns, and which are generally rivers swallowed up by an earthquake.

All at once, without being warned by the slightest sound, the leader of the caravan felt himself seized round the waist, his torch was snatched roughly from his hand, and extinguished against a rock, and himself thrown down and securely bound, before he was able to attempt the slightest resistance, so sudden and well calculated had the attack been. Carnero had been thrown down at the same time as his master, and bound.

"Cowards, demons!" the Mexican yelled, as he made a superhuman effort to rise and burst his bonds; "show yourself, at least, so that I may know with whom I have to deal."

"Silence! General Don Sebastian Guerrero," a rough voice said to him, whose accent made him start, in spite of all his courage; "resign yourself to your fate, for you have fallen into the power of men who will not liberate you till they have had a thorough explanation with you."

General Guerrero, whom the readers of the "Indian Chief" will doubtless remember, made a movement of impotent rage, but he was silent; he perceived that the originators of the snare of which he was a victim were implacable enemies, as they had not feared to call him by his name, and more formidable than the pirates of the prairies or the redskins, with whom he at first thought he had to deal. Moreover, he thought that the darkness that surrounded him would soon cease, and then he would see his enemies face to face, and recognize them.

But his expectations were deceived. When his conquerors had borne him to the hall, where his peons were disarmed and guarded by peons, he saw, by the light of the torch that faintly illumined the hall, that among the men who surrounded him few wore the Mexican costume, it was true, but had their faces hidden by a piece of black crape, forming a species of mask, and so well fastened round their necks, that it was entirely impossible to recognize them.

"What do these men want with me?" he muttered as he let his head fall on his chest sadly.

"Patience!" said the man who had already spoken, and who overheard the general's remark, "you will soon know."

CHAPTER VII. THE EXPLANATION

There was a short delay, during which the conquerors appeared to be consulting together in a low voice; while doing so, an Indian chief, who was no other than the Jester, entered the hall, and uttered a few words in Comanche.

The general and the capataz were again picked up by the redskins, and at a sign from one of the masked men, transported on to the voladero. The appearance of the terrace had entirely changed during the general's short absence, and offered at this moment a most singular and picturesque scene.

One hundred and fifty to two hundred Indians, mostly armed with guns, and ranged in good order round the terrace, the centre of which remained free, faced the cavern, having among them the disarmed Mexicans, the baggage, horses, and mules of the caravan.

The tent still stood solitary in the middle of what was to have been the encampment; but the curtain was raised, and a horseman was standing in front of it, as if to defend the entrance, and protect the precious articles it contained from pillage.

At the moment when the party emerged from the cave, and appeared on the terrace, the horsemen drawn up at the entrance of the defile opened out to the right and left, leaving a passage for a small troop of men dressed in hunters' garb, and whom it was easy to recognize as white men, by the colour of their skin, although it was bronzed and freckled by the sun; two ladies, mounted on ambling mules, were in the midst of them.

This troop of strangers was composed of eight persons altogether, leading with them two baggage mules. As the men were disarmed, and walked on foot amid some fifty Indian horsemen, they had, in all probability, been surprised by a party of redskins, and made prisoners in some skilfully-arranged ambuscade.

The two ladies, one of whom was of a certain age while the other appeared scarce eighteen, and who might be supposed closely related, through the resemblance of their features, were treated with an exquisite politeness they were far from expecting by the Indians, and conducted to the tent, which they were requested to enter. The curtain was then lowered, to conceal them from the glances of the Indians, whose expression, although respectful, must necessarily be disagreeable to them.

The new comers, at a signal from their conductors, ranged themselves with the other prisoners; they were powerful men with marked features, whom the Indians had probably not given a chance to fight, otherwise they looked as if they would sooner be killed than yield.

They displayed neither fear nor depression, but their flashing looks and frowning brows showed that though they silently submitted to their fate, they were far from being resigned, and would eagerly seize the first opportunity to regain the liberty of which they had been so treacherously deprived.

Still, in spite of the determination they had doubtless formed to remain indifferent as to what took place around them, they soon felt themselves interested more than they liked in the strange drama which they involuntarily witnessed, and whose gloomy preparations were of a nature to arouse their curiosity to an eminent degree.

At the base of the rocks several blocks of granite had been arranged in a semicircle, thus forming a resemblance to that terrible Vehmic tribunal, which in olden times held its formidable assize on the banks of the Rhine, before which kings and even emperors were at times summoned to appear, and the resemblance was rendered more striking by the care the assailants took in hiding their features.

Two masked men took their seats on the granite blocks, and the Indians who carried the general laid him on the ground in front of this species of tribunal. The person who seemed to be the president

of this sinister assembly gave a sign, the prisoner's bonds at once fell off, and he found himself once more able to move his limbs.

The general drew himself up, crossed his hands on his chest, threw his body back haughtily, raised his head and looked at the men who had apparently constituted themselves his judges with a glance of withering contempt.

"What do you want with me, bandits?" he said; "enough of this; these insolent manoeuvres will not alarm me."

"Silence!" the president said coldly, "it is not your place to speak thus."

Then he remarked to the Jester, who was standing a few paces from him —

"Bring up the other prisoners, old and new; everybody must hear what is going to be said to this man."

The Jester gave a signal to the warriors; some of them dismounted, approached the prisoners, and, after loosening the cord that bound the capataz, they led him, as well as the peons and the prisoners of the second caravan, in front of the tribunal, where they ranged themselves in line. Then, at a signal from the Jester, the horsemen closed up round the white men, who were thus hemmed in by Comanche warriors.

The spectacle offered by this assemblage of men, with their marked features and quaint garb, grouped without any apparent regularity on this voladero, which was suspended as if artificially over a terrible gulf, and leant against lofty mountains, with their abrupt flanks and snowy crest, was not without a certain grandeur.

A deadly silence brooded at this moment over the esplanade; all chests were heaving, every heart was oppressed. Redskins, hunters, and Mexicans all understood instinctively that a grand drama was about to be performed; invisible streams could be heard hoarsely murmuring in the cavern, and at times a gust of wind whistled over the heads of the horsemen.

The prisoners, affected by a vague and undefined terror, waited with secret anxiety, not knowing what fate these ferocious victors reserved for them, but certain that, whatever the decision formed about them might be, prayers would be impotent to move them, and that they would have to endure the atrocious torture to which they would doubtless be condemned.

The president looked round the assembly, rose in the midst of a profound silence, stretched out his arm towards the general, who stood cold and passionless before him, and, after darting at him a withering glance through the holes made in the crape that concealed his face, he said in a grave, stern, and impressive voice —

"Caballeros, remember the words you are about to hear, listen to them attentively, so as to understand them, and not to be in error as to our intentions. In the first place, in order to reassure you and restore your entire freedom of mind, learn that you have not fallen into the hands of Indians thirsting for your blood, or of pirates who intend to plunder you first and assassinate you afterwards. No, you need not feel the slightest alarm. When you have acted as impartial witnesses, and are able to render testimony of what you have seen, should it be required, you will be at liberty to continue your journey, without the forfeiture of a single article. The men seated on my right and left, although masked, are brave and honest hunters. The day may perhaps arrive when you will know them; but reasons, whose importance you will speedily recognize, compel them to remain unknown for the present. I was bound to say this, señores, to you, against whom we bear no animosity, before coming to a final settlement with this man."

One of the travellers belonging to the second caravan stepped forward; he was a young man, with elegant and noble features, tall and well built.

"Caballero," he answered, in a distinct and sympathizing voice, "I thank you, in the name of my companions and myself, for the reassuring words you have spoken. I know how implacable the laws of the desert are, and have ever submitted to them without a murmur; but permit me to ask you one question."

"Speak, caballero."

"Is it an act of vengeance or justice you are about to carry out?"

"Neither, señor. It would be an act of folly or weakness if the inspirations of the heart could be blamed or doubted by honourable and loyal men."

"Enough of this, señor," the general said, haughtily; "and if you are, as you assert, an honourable man, show me your face, in order that I may know with whom I have to deal."

The president shrugged his shoulders contemptuously.

"No, Don Sebastian," he said, "for in that case the game would not be even between us. But be patient, caballero, and soon you will learn, if not who I am, at any rate the motives which have made me your implacable foe."

The general attempted to smile, but in spite of himself the smile died away on his lips, and though his haughty bearing seemed to defy his unknown enemies, a secret apprehension contracted his heart.

There was a silence for some moments, during which no other sound was audible save that of the breeze whistling through the denuded branches and the distant murmur of the invisible torrents in the quebradas.

The president looked round with flashing eyes, and folding his arms on his chest at the same time, as he raised his head, he began speaking again in a sharp, cutting voice, whose accents caused his hearers to tremble involuntarily. And yet they were brave men, accustomed to the terrible incidents of a desert life, and whom the most serious dangers could not have affected.

"Now listen, señores," he said, "and judge this man impartially; but do not judge him according to prairie law, but in your hearts. General Don Sebastian Guerrero, who is standing so bold and upright before you at this moment, is one of the greatest noblemen of Mexico, a *Cristiano viejo* of the purest blood, descended in a direct line from the Spanish Conquistadors. His fortune is immense, incalculable, and he himself could not determine its amount. This man, by the mere strength of his will, and the implacable egotism that forms the basis of his character, has always succeeded in everything he has undertaken. Coldly and resolutely ambitious, he has covered with corpses the bloody road he was compelled to follow in order to attain his proposed object, and he has done so without hesitation or remorse; he has looked on with a smiling face, when his dearest friends and his nearest relations fell by his side; for him nothing which men respect exists – faith and honour are with him but empty sounds. He had a daughter, who was the perfection of women, and he coldly lacerated that daughter's heart; he fatally drove her to suicide, and the blood of the poor girl spirted on his forehead, while he was triumphantly witnessing the legal murder of the man she loved, and whose death he resolved on, because he refused to palter with his honour, and aid this man in the infamous treachery he was meditating. This human-faced tiger, this monster with the mocking, sceptical face, you see, señores, has only one thought, one object, one desire – it is, to attain the highest rank, even if, to effect it, he were compelled to clamber over the panting corpses of his relations and friends sacrificed to his ambition; and if he cannot carve out an independent kingdom in this collapsing republic, which is called Mexico, he wishes to seize, at least, on the supreme magistracy, and be elected president. If this man's life merely comprised this egotistic ambition and these infamous schemes to satisfy it, I should content myself with despising, instead of hating him, and not being able to find an excuse for him, I should forget him. But no; this man has done more – he dared to lay hands on a man who was my friend, my brother, the Count de Prébois Crancé, to whom I have already referred, señores, without mentioning his name. Unable to conquer the count loyally, despairing of winning him over to his shameful cause, he at first tried to poison him; but, not having succeeded, and wishing to come to an end, he forgot that his daughter, an angel, the sole creature who loved him, and implored divine mercy for him, was the betrothed wife of the count, and that killing him would be her condemnation to death. In his horrible thirst for revenge, he ordered the judicial murder of my friend, and coldly presided at the execution, not noticing, in the joyous deliverance of his satisfied hatred, that his

daughter had killed herself at his side, and that he was trampling her corpse beneath his horse's feet. Such is what this man has done; look at him well, in order to recognize him hereafter; he is General Don Sebastian Guerrero, military governor of Sonora."

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