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The Prairie Flower: A Tale of the Indian Border

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
A HUNTING ENCAMPMENT

America is the land of prodigies! Everything there assumes gigantic proportions, which startle the imagination and confound the reason. Mountains, rivers, lakes and streams, all are carved on a sublime pattern.

There is a river of North America – not like the Danube, Rhine, or Rhone, whose banks are covered with towns, plantations, and time-worn castles: whose sources and tributaries are magnificent streams, the waters of which, confined in a narrow bed, rush onwards as if impatient to lose themselves in the ocean – but deep and silent, wide as an arm of the sea, calm and severe in its grandeur, it pours majestically onwards, its waters augmented by innumerable streams, and lazily bathes the banks of a thousand isles, which it has formed of its own sediment.

These isles, covered with tall thickets, exhale a sharp or delicious perfume which the breeze bears far away. Nothing

disturbs their solitude, save the gentle and plaintive appeal of the dove, or the hoarse and strident voice of the tiger, as it sports beneath the shade.

At certain spots, trees that have fallen through old age, or have been uprooted by the hurricane, collect on its waters; then, attached by creepers and concealed by mud, these fragments of forests become floating islands. Young shrubs take root upon them: the petunia and nenuphar expand here and there their yellow roses; serpents, birds, and caimans come to sport and rest on these verdurous rafts, and are with them swallowed up in the ocean.

This river has no name! Others in the same zone are called Nebraska, Platte, Missouri; but this is simply the *Mecha-Chebe* the old father of waters, *the* river before all! the Mississippi in a word!

Vast and incomprehensible as is infinity, full of secret terrors, like the Ganges and Irrawaddy, it is the type of fecundity, immensity, and eternity to the numerous Indian nations that inhabit its banks.

Three men were seated on the bank of the river, a little below its confluence with the Missouri, and were breakfasting on a slice of roast elk, while gaily chatting together.

The spot where they were seated was remarkably picturesque. The bank of the river was formed of small mounds, enamelled with flowers. The strangers had selected for their halt the top of the highest mound, whence the eye embraced a magnificent

panorama. In the foreground, dense curtains of verdure which undulated with each breath of air: on the islands innumerable flocks of dark-winged flamingos, perched on their long legs, plovers and cardinals fluttering from bough to bough, while numerous alligators lazily wallowed in the mud. Between the islands, the silvery patches of water reflected the sunbeams. In the midst of these masses of coruscating light, fishes of every description sported on the surface of the water, and traced sparkling furrows. Further back, as far as the eye could reach, the tops of the trees that bordered the prairie, and whose dark green scarcely showed upon the horizon.

But the three men we have mentioned seemed to trouble themselves very slightly about the natural beauties that surrounded them, as they were fully engaged in appeasing a true hunter's appetite. Their meal, however, only lasted a few minutes, and when the last fragments had been devoured, one lighted his Indian pipe, the other took a cigar from his pocket. They then stretched themselves on the grass, and began digesting with that beatitude which characterizes smokers, while following with a languid eye the clouds of bluish smoke that rose in long spirals with each mouthful they puffed forth. As for the third man, he leant his back against a tree, crossed his arms, on his chest, and went to sleep most prosaically.

We will profit by this momentary repose to present these persons to our readers, and make them better acquainted with each other. The first was a Canadian half-breed, of about fifty

years of age, and known by the name of "Bright-eye." His life had been entirely spent on the prairie among the Indians, all of whose tricks he was thoroughly acquainted with.

Like the majority of his countrymen he was very tall, more than six feet in height: his body was thin and angular; his limbs were knotty, but covered with muscles, hard as ropes; his bony and yellow face had a remarkable expression of frankness and joviality, and his little grey eyes sparkled with intelligence; his prominent cheekbones, his nose bent down over a wide mouth supplied with long white teeth, and his rounded chin, made up a face which was the most singular, and, at the same time, the most attractive that could be imagined.

His dress differed in no respect from that of the other wood rangers; that is to say, it was a strange medley of European and Indian fashions, generally adopted by all the white prairie hunters and trappers. His weapons consisted of a knife, a pair of pistols, and an American rifle, now lying on the grass, but within reach of his hand.

His companion was a man of thirty to thirty-two years of age at the most, but who appeared scarce twenty-five, tall, and well made. His blue eyes, limpid as a woman's, the long light curls that escaped beneath the edge of his Panama hat, and floated in disorder on his shoulders, the whiteness of his skin, which contrasted with the olive and brown complexion of the hunter, were sufficient evidence that he was not born in the hot climate of America.

In fact, this young man was a Frenchman, Charles Edward de Beaulieu, and was descended from one of the oldest families in Brittany. But, under this slightly effeminate appearance, he concealed a lion's courage which nothing could startle or even surprise. Skilled in all bodily exercises, he was also endowed with prodigious strength, and the delicate skin of his white and unstained hands, with their rosy nails, covered nerves of steel.

The Count's dress would reasonably have appeared extraordinary in a country remote from civilization to anyone who had leisure to examine it. He wore a hunting jacket of green cloth, of a French cut, and buttoned over his chest; yellow doeskin breeches, fastened by a waist belt of varnished leather; a cartouche box, and a hunting knife in a bronzed steel sheath, and with an admirably chiselled hilt: while his legs were covered by long riding boots, coming up over the knee. Like his companion, he had laid his rifle on the grass: this weapon, richly damascened, must have cost an enormous sum.

The Count de Beaulieu, whose father followed the princes into exile and served them actively, first in Condé's army and then in all the Royalist plots that were incessantly formed during the Empire, was an ultra-Royalist. Left an orphan at an early age, and possessed of an immense fortune, he was nominated a lieutenant in the Gardes du Corps. After the fall of Charles X., the Count, whose career was broken up, was assailed by a fearful despondency, and an unenviable disregard for life filled his heart. Europe became hateful to him, and he resolved to bid it an eternal

farewell. After intrusting the management of his fortune to a confidential agent, the Count embarked for the United States.

But American life, narrow, paltry, and egotistic, was not made for him; for the young man understood the Americans no better than they did him. His heart was ulcerated by the meanness and trickery he saw daily committed by the descendants of the Plymouth Brethren, so he one day resolved to bury himself in the depths of the country, and visit those immense prairies whence the first lords of the soil had been driven by the cunning and treachery of their crafty despoilers.

The Count had brought with him from France an old servant of the family, whose progenitors, for many generations, had uninterruptedly served the Beaulieus. Before embarking, the Count imparted his plans to Ivon Kergollec, leaving him at liberty to remain behind or follow; the servant's choice was not long, he simply replied that his master had the right to do what he pleased without consulting him, and as it was his duty to follow his master everywhere, he should do so. Even when the Count formed the resolve of visiting the prairies, and thought it right to tell his servant his resolution, the answer was still the same. Ivon was about forty-five years of age, and was a true type of the hardy, simple, and withal crafty Breton peasant; he was short and stumpy, but his well-knit limbs and wide chest denoted immense strength. His brick-coloured face was illumined by two small eyes, which sparkled with cleverness and flashed like carbuncles.

Ivon, whose life had been spent calmly and lazily in the gilded

halls of Beaulieu House, had gradually assumed the regular habits of a nobleman's lackey; having had no occasion to prove his courage, he was completely ignorant of the possession of that quality, and, although during the last few months he had been placed in many dangerous circumstances while following his master, he was still at the same point, that is to say, he completely doubted himself, and had the innate conviction that he was as cowardly as a hare; so nothing was more curious after a meeting with the Indians than to hear Ivon, who had been fighting like a lion and performing prodigies of valour, excuse himself humbly to his master for having behaved so badly, as he was not used to fighting.

It is needless to say that the Count excused him, while laughing heartily, and telling him as a consolation – for the poor fellow was very unhappy at this supposed cowardice – that the next time he would probably do better, and that he would gradually grow accustomed to this life, which was so different from that he had hitherto led. At this consolation the worthy man-servant would nod his head sorrowfully, and reply, with an accent of thorough conviction: —

"No, sir, I can never have any courage. I feel sure of it; it is a sad truth, but I am a poltroon. I am only too well aware of it."

Ivon was dressed in a complete suit of livery, though, in regard to present circumstances, he was, like his companions, armed to the teeth, and his rifle leant against the tree by his side.

Three magnificent horses, full of fire and blood, hobbled a

few paces from the hunters, were carelessly browsing on the climbing peas and young tree shoots.

We have omitted to mention two peculiarities of the Count. The first was, he always carried in his right eye a gold eyeglass, fastened round his neck by means of a black ribbon; the second, that he continually wore kid gloves, which we confess, greatly to his annoyance, had now grown very dirty and torn.

And now, by what strange combination of chance were these three men, so differing in birth, habits, and education, met together some five or six hundred leagues from any civilized abode, on the banks of a river, if not unknown, at any rate hitherto unexplored, seated amicably on the grass, and sharing a breakfast which was more than frugal? We can explain this in a few words to the reader by cursorily describing a scene that occurred in the prairie about six months prior to the beginning of our narrative.

Bright-eye was a determined man, who, with the exception of the time he served the Hudson's Bay Company, had always hunted and trapped alone, despising the Indians too much to fear them, and finding in braving them that delight which the courageous man experiences, when, alone and beneath the eye of Heaven, he struggles, confiding in his own resources, against a terrible and unknown danger. The Indians knew and feared him for many a long year. Many times they had come into collision with him, and they had nearly always been compelled to retreat, leaving several of their men on the field. Hence they had sworn

against the hunter one of those hearty Indian hatreds which nothing can satiate save the punishment of the man who is the object of it.

But as they knew with what sort of man they had to deal, and did not care to increase the number of the victims he had already sacrificed, they resolved to await, with the peculiar patience characteristic of their race, the propitious moment for seizing their foe, and till then confine themselves to carefully watching all his movements, so as not to lose the favourable opportunity when it presented itself.

Bright-eye at this moment was hunting on the banks of the Missouri. Knowing himself watched, and instinctively suspecting a trap, he took all the precautions suggested to him by his inventive mind and the deep knowledge he possessed of Indian tricks. One day, while exploring the banks of the river, he fancied he noticed, a slight distance ahead of him, an almost imperceptible movement in the thick brushwood. He stopped, lay down, and began crawling gently in the direction of the thicket. Suddenly the forest seemed agitated to its most unexplored depths, A swarm of Indians rose from the earth, leaped from the trees, or rushed from behind rocks; the hunter, literally buried beneath the mass of his enemies, was reduced to a state of powerlessness, before he could even make an attempt to defend himself.

Bright-eye was disarmed in a twinkling; then a chief walked up to him, and holding out his hand, said coldly —

"Let my brother rise; the Redskin warriors are waiting for him."

"Good, good," the hunter growled; "all is not over yet, Indian, and I shall have my revenge."

The chief smiled.

"My brother is like the mockingbird," he said ironically; "he speaks too much."

Bright-eye bit his lips to keep back the insult that rose to them; he got up and followed his victors. He was a prisoner to the Piékanns, the most warlike tribe of the Blackfeet; and the chief who had taken him was his personal enemy. The chief's name was *Natah Otann* (the Grizzly Bear). He was a man of five-and-twenty at the most, with a fine intelligent face, bearing the imprint of honesty. His tall figure, well-proportioned limbs, the grace of his movements, and his martial aspect, rendered him a remarkable man. His long black hair, carefully parted, fell in disorder on his shoulders; like all the renowned warriors of his tribe, he wore on the back of his head an ermine skin, and round his neck bears' claws mingled with buffalo teeth, a very dear and highly-honoured ornament among the Indians. His shirt of buffalo hide, with short sleeves, was decorated round the neck with a species of collar of red cloth, ornamented with fringe and porcupine quills; the seams of the garment were embroidered with hair taken from scalps, the whole relieved by small bands of ermine skin. His moccasins of different colours, were loaded with very elegant embroidery, while his buffalo hide robe was

quilted inside with a number of clumsy designs, intended to depict the young warrior's achievements.

Natah Otann held in his right hand a fan made of a single eagle's wing, and, suspended round the wrist from the same hand by a thong, the short-handled long-lashed whip peculiar to the prairie Indians; on his back hung his bow and arrows in a quiver of a jaguar's skin; at his waist a bullet bag, his powder flask, his long hunting knife, and his club. His shield hung on his left hip, while his gun lay across the neck of his horse, which wore a magnificent panther skin for a saddle. The appearance of this savage child of the woods, whose cloak and long plumes fluttered in the wind, curveting, on a steed as untamed as himself, had something about it striking, and, at the same time, grand.

Natah Otann was the first sachem of his tribe. He made the hunter a sign to mount a horse one of the warriors held by the bridle, and the whole party proceeded at a gallop towards the camp of the tribe. They rode onward in silence, and the chief seemed to pay no attention to his prisoner. The latter, free in appearance, and mounted on an excellent horse, made not the slightest attempt to escape; at a glance he had judged the position, saw that the Indians did not lose sight of him, and that he should be immediately recaptured if he attempted flight. The Piékanns had formed their camp on the slope of a wooded hill. For two days they seemed to have forgotten their prisoner, to whom they never once spoke. On the evening of the second day, Bright-eye was carelessly walking about and smoking his pipe, when Natah

Otann approached him.

"Is my brother ready?" he asked him.

"For what?" the hunter said, stopping and pouring forth a volume of smoke.

"To die," the chief continued, laconically.

"Quite."

"Good; my brother will die tomorrow."

"You think so," the hunter replied with great coolness.

The Indian looked at him for a moment in amazement; then he repeated, "My brother will die tomorrow."

"I heard you perfectly well, chief," the Canadian said, with a smile; "and I repeat again, do you believe it?"

"Let my brother look," the sachem said, with a significant gesture.

The hunter raised his head.

"Bah!" he said, carelessly; "I see that all the preparations are made, and conscientiously so, but what does that prove? I am not dead yet, I suppose."

"No, but my brother will soon be so."

"We shall see tomorrow," Bright-eye answered, shrugging his shoulders.

And leaving the astonished chief, he lay down at the foot of a tree and fell asleep. His sleep was so real, that the Indians were obliged to wake him next morning at daybreak. The Canadian opened his eyes, yawned two or three times, as if going to put his jaw out, and got up. The Redskins led him to the post of torture,

to which he was firmly fastened.

"Well!" Natah Otann said, with a grin, "what does my brother think at present?"

"Eh!" Bright-eye answered, with that magnificent coolness which never deserted him, "do you fancy that I am already dead?"

"No, but my brother will be so in an hour."

"Bah!" the Canadian said, carelessly; "many things can happen within an hour."

Natah Otann withdrew, secretly admiring the intrepid countenance of his prisoner; but, after taking a few steps, he reflected, and returned to Bright-eye's side.

"Let my brother listen," he said, "a friend speaks to him."

"Go on, chief, I am all ears."

"My brother is a strong man; his heart is great," Natah Otann said; "he is a terrible warrior."

"You know something of that, chief, I fancy," the Canadian replied.

The sachem repressed a movement of anger.

"My brother's eye is infallible, his arm is sure," he went on.

"Tell me at once what you want to come to, chief, and don't waste your time in your Indian beating round the bush."

The chief smiled as he said, in a gentler voice, "Bright-eye is alone; his lodge is solitary. Why has not so great a warrior a companion?"

The hunter fixed a searching glance on the speaker.

"What does that concern you?" he said.

Natah Otann continued, —

"The nation of the Blackfeet is powerful; the young women of the Piekann tribe are fair."

The Canadian quickly interrupted him.

"Enough, chief," he said; "in spite of all your shiftings to reach your point, I have guessed your meaning; but I will never take an Indian girl to be my wife; so you can refrain from further offers, which will not have a satisfactory result."

Natah Otann frowned.

"Dog of the palefaces," he cried, stamping his foot angrily, "this night my young men will make war whistles of thy bones, and will drink the firewater out of thy skull."

With this terrible threat, the chief finally quitted the hunter, who regarded him depart with a shrug, and muttered, "The last word is not spoken yet; this is not the first time I have found myself in a desperate position, but I have escaped; there are no reasons why I should be less lucky today. Hum! this will serve me as a lesson: another time I will be more prudent."

In the meantime the chief had given orders to begin the punishment, and the preparations were rapidly made. Bright-eye followed all the movements of the Indians with a curious eye, as if he were a perfectly unconcerned witness.

"Yes, yes," he went on, "my fine fellows, I see you; you are preparing all the instruments for my torture; there is the green wood intended to smoke me like a ham; you are cutting the spikes you mean to run up under my nails. Eh, eh!" he added, with a

perfect air of satisfaction; "you are going to begin with firing; let's see how skilful you are. Ah, what fun it is for you to have a white hunter to torture. The Lord knows what strange ideas may be passing through your Indian noddles; but I recommend you to make haste, or it is very possible I may escape."

During this monologue, twenty warriors, the most skilful of the tribe, had ranged themselves about one hundred yards from the prisoner; the firing commenced; the balls all struck within an inch of the hunter's head, who, at each shot, shook his head like a drowned sparrow, to the great delight of the spectators. This amusement had gone on for some twenty minutes, and would probably have continued much longer, so great was the fun it afforded the Blackfeet; when suddenly a horseman bounded into the centre of the clearing, dispersed the Indians in his way by heavy blows of his whip, and profiting by the stupor occasioned by his unexpected appearance, galloped up to the prisoner, got down, quickly cut the thongs that bound him, thrust a brace of pistols in his hand, and remounted. All this was done in less time than it has taken us to write it.

"By Tobias!" Bright-eye joyfully exclaimed, "I was quite sure I wasn't going to die this time."

The Indians are not the men to allow themselves to be long subdued by any feeling; the first moment of surprise past, they surrounded the horseman, shouting, gesticulating, and brandishing their weapons furiously.

"Come, make way there, you scoundrels," the newcomer

shouted in a commanding voice, lashing violently at those who had the imprudence to come too near him. "Let us be off," he added, turning to the hunter.

"I wish for nothing better," the latter made answer; "but it does not seem easy."

"Bah! let us try it, at any rate," the stranger continued, carefully affixing his glass in his eye.

"We will," Bright-eye said cheerfully.

The stranger who had so providentially arrived, was the Count de Beaulieu, as our readers will probably have conjectured.

"Hilloh!" the Count shouted loudly, "come here, Ivon."

"Here I am, my lord," a voice answered from the forest; and a second horseman, leaping into the clearing, coolly ranged himself by the side of the first.

There was something strange in the group formed by these three stoical men in the midst of the hundreds of Indians yelling around them. The Count, with his glass in his eye, his haughty glance, and disdainful lip, was setting the hammer of his rifle. Bright-eye, with a pistol in each hand, was preparing to sell his life dearly, while the servant calmly awaited the order to charge the savages. The Indians, furious at the audacity of the white men, were preparing, with multitudinous yells and gestures, to take a prompt vengeance on the men who had so imprudently placed themselves in their power.

"These Indians are very ugly," the Count said; "now that you are free, my friend, we have nothing more to do here, so let us

be off."

And he made a sign, as if to force a passage. The Blackfeet moved forward.

"Take care," Bright-eye shouted.

"Nonsense," the Count said, shrugging his shoulders, "can these scamps intend to bar the way?"

The hunter looked at him with the air of a man who does not know exactly if he has to do with a madman or a being endowed with reason, so extraordinary did this remark seem to him. The Count dug his spurs into his horse.

"Well," Bright-eye muttered, "he will be killed, but for all that he is a fine fellow: I will not leave him."

In truth it was a critical moment: the Indians, formed in close column, were preparing to make a desperate charge on the three men – a charge which would, probably, be decisive, for the Europeans, without shelter, and entirely exposed to the shots of their enemies, could not hope to escape. Still, that was not the Count's conviction. Not noticing the gestures and hostile cries of the Redskins, he advanced towards them, with his glass still in his eye. Since the Count's apparition, the Indian sachem, as if struck with stupor at the sight, had not made a move, but stood with his eyes fixed upon him, under the influence of extraordinary emotion. Suddenly, at the moment when the Blackfeet warriors were shouldering their guns, or fitting their arrows to the bows, Natah Otann seemed to form a resolution: he rushed forward, and raising his buffalo robe, —

"Stop!" he shouted, in a loud voice.

The Indians, obedient to their chiefs voice, immediately halted. The sachem took three steps, bowed respectfully before the Count, and said in a submissive voice: —

"My father must pardon his children, they did not know him: but my father is great, his power is immense, his goodness infinite: he will forget anything offensive in their conduct toward him."

Bright-eye, astonished at this harangue, translated it to the Count, honestly confessing that he did not understand what it meant.

"By Jove!" the Count replied, with a smile, "they are afraid."

"Hum!" the hunter muttered, "that is not so clear: it is something else; but no matter, it will be diamond cut diamond."

Then he turned to Natah Otann.

"The great pale chief," he said, "is satisfied with the respect his red children feel for him: he pardons them." Natah Otann made a movement of joy. The three men passed through the ranks of the Indians, and buried themselves in the forest, their retreat being in no way impeded.

"Ouf!" Bright-eye said, as soon as he found himself in safety, "I'm well out of that; but," he added shaking his head, "there is something extraordinary about the matter, which I cannot fathom."

"Now, my friend," the Count said to him, "you are free to go whither you please."

The hunter thought for an instant. "Bah!" he replied, after a few moments had passed, "I owe you my life. Although I do not know you, you strike me as a good fellow."

"You flatter me," the Count remarked, smiling.

"My faith, no; I say what I think. If you are agreeable we will stay together, at any rate until I have acquitted the debt I owe you by saving your life in my turn."

The Count offered him his hand.

"Thanks, my friend," he said, much moved; "I accept your offer."

"That is settled, then," the hunter joyfully exclaimed, as he pressed the offered hand.

Bright-eye, at first attached to the Count by gratitude, soon felt quite a paternal affection for him. But he understood no more than the first day the young man's behaviour, for he acted under all circumstances as if he were in France, and, by his rashness, universally foiled the hunter's Indian experience. This was carried so far, that the Canadian, superstitious like all primitive natures, soon grew into the persuasion that the Count's life was protected by a charm, so many times had he seen him emerge victoriously from positions in which anyone else would have infallibly succumbed.

At length, nothing appeared to him impossible with such a companion, and the most extraordinary propositions the Count made him seemed perfectly feasible, the more so as success crowned all their enterprises by some incomprehensible charm,

and in a way contrary to all foresight. The Indians, by a strict agreement, had given up all contests with them, and even avoided any contact: if they perceived them at any time, all the Redskins, whatever tribe they might belong to, treated the Count with the utmost deference, and addressed him with an expression of terror mingled with love, the explanation of which the hunter sought in vain, for none of the Indians could or would give it.

This state of things had lasted for six months up to the moment when we saw the three men breakfasting on the banks of the Mississippi. We will now take up our story again at the point where we left it, terminating our explanation, which was indispensable for the right comprehension of what follows.

CHAPTER II
A TRAIL DISCOVERED

Our friends would probably have remained for a long time plunged in their present state of beatitude had not a slight sound in the river suddenly recalled them to the exigencies of their position.

"What's that?" the Count said, flipping off the ash from his cigar.

Bright-eye glided among the shrubs, looked for a moment, and then calmly returned to his seat.

"Nothing," he said; "two alligators sporting in the mud."

"Ah!" the Count said. There was a moment's silence, during which the hunter mentally calculated the length of the shadow of the trees on the ground.

"It is past midday," he said.

"You think so," the young man remarked.

"No; I am sure of it, sir Count."

"Confound you! you are at it again," the young man said with a smile. "I have told you to call me by my Christian name; but if you do not like that, call me like the Indians."

"Nay!" the hunter objected.

"What is the name they gave me, Bright-eye? I have forgotten."

"Oh! I should not like, sir – "

"Eh?"

"Edward, I meant to say."

"Come, that is better," the young man remarked laughingly; "but I must beg of you to repeat the nickname."

"They call you 'Glass-eye.'"

"Oh, yes! that's it;" the Count continued his laugh. "Only Indians could have such an idea as that."

"Oh," Bright-eye went on, "the Indians are not what you suppose them; they are as crafty as the demon."

"Come, stop that, Bright-eye; I always suspected you of having a weakness for the Redskins."

"How can you say that, when I am their obstinate enemy, and have been fighting them for the last forty years?"

"That is the very reason that makes you defend them."

"How so?" the hunter said, astonished at this conclusion, which he was far from expecting.

"For a very simple reason. No one likes to contend with enemies unworthy of him, and it is quite natural you should try to elevate those against whom you have been fighting for forty years."

The hunter shook his head.

"Mr. Edward," he said, with a thoughtful air, "the Redskins are people whom it takes many a long year to know. They possess at once the craft of the opossum, the prudence of the serpent, and the courage of the cougar. A few years hence you will not

despise them as you do now."

"My good fellow," the Count objected, "I hope I shall have left the prairies within a year. I am yearning for a civilized life. I want Paris, with its opera and balls. No, no; the desert does not suit me."

The hunter shook his head a second time. Then he continued, with a mournful accent, which struck the young man, and, as if rather speaking to himself, than replying to the Count's remarks —

"Yes, yes; that is the way with Europeans: when they arrive on the prairies, they regret civilized life, and the desert is only gradually appreciated; but when a man has breathed the odours of the savannah, when during long nights he has listened to the rustling of the wind in the trees, and the howling of the wild beasts in the virgin forests – when he has admired that proud landscape which owes nothing to art, where the hand of God is imprinted at each step in ineffaceable characters: when he has gazed on the glorious scenes that rise in succession before him – then he begins by degrees to love this unknown world, so full of mysteries and strange incidents; his eyes are opened to the truth, and he repudiates the falsehoods of civilization. At such a a moment he experiences emotions full of secret charms, and recognizing no other master save that God, in whose presence he feels himself so small, he forgets everything to lead a nomadic life, and remains in the desert, because there alone he feels free, happy – a man, in a word! Ah, sir, whatever you may say,

whatever you may do, the desert now holds you: you have tasted its joys and its griefs; it will not allow you to depart so easily – you will not see France again so speedily – the desert will retain you in spite of yourself."

The young man had listened with an emotion for which he could not account, to this long harangue. In his heart he recognized, through the hunter's exaggeration, the justice of his reasoning, and felt startled at being compelled to allow him to be in the right. Not knowing what to reply, or feeling that he was beaten, the Count suddenly turned the conversation.

"Hum!" he began, "I think you said it was past twelve?"

"About a quarter past," the hunter answered.

The Count consulted, his watch.

"Quite right," he said.

"Oh!" the hunter continued, pointing to the sun, "that is the only true clock; it never goes too fast or too slow, for Heaven regulates it."

The young man bowed his head affirmatively.

"We will start," he said.

"For what good at this moment?" the Canadian asked. "We have nothing pressing before us."

"That is true; but are you sure we have not lost our way?"

"Lost our way!" the hunter exclaimed, with a start of surprise, almost of anger; "no, no, it is impossible. I guarantee that within a week we shall be on Lake Itasca."

"The Mississippi really runs from that lake?"

"Yes; for, in spite of what is asserted, the Missouri is only the principal branch of that river: the savants would have done better to assure themselves of the fact, ere they declared that the Mississippi and Missouri are two separate rivers."

"What would you have, Bright-eye?" the Count said, laughingly. "Savants are the same in all countries; being naturally indolent, they rely on one another, and hence the infinity of absurdities they put in circulation with the most astounding coolness."

"The Indians are never mistaken."

"That is true; but then the Indians are not savants."

"No; they see for themselves, and only assert what they are sure of."

"That is what I meant," the Count replied.

"If you will listen to me, Mr. Edward, we will remain here a few hours longer to let the great heat pass off, and when the sun is going down we will start again."

"Very good; let us rest then. Ivon appears to be thoroughly of our opinion, for he has not stirred."

The Count had risen; before sitting down, he mechanically cast a glance on the immense plain which lay so calmly and majestically at his feet.

"Eh!" he suddenly exclaimed, "what is that down there? – look, Bright-eye."

The hunter rose and looked in the direction indicated by the Count.

"Well – do you see nothing?" the young man remarked.

Bright-eye, with his hand over his eyes to shield them from the glare of the sun, looked attentively without replying.

"Well?" the Count said, at the expiration of a moment.

"We are no longer alone," the hunter answered; "there are men down there."

"How men? We have seen no Indian trail."

"I did not say they were Indians."

"Hum! I suppose at this distance it would be rather difficult to decide who they are."

Bright-eye smiled.

"You always judge from your knowledge obtained in the civilized world, Mr. Edward," he answered.

"Which means – ?" the young man said, intensely piqued at the observation.

"That you are always wrong."

"Hang it, my friend! You will allow me to observe, all individuality apart, that it is impossible at this distance to recognize anybody. Especially when nothing can be distinguished, save a little white smoke."

"Is not that enough? Do you believe that all smoke is alike?"

"That is rather a subtle distinction; and I confess that to me all smoke is alike."

"That's where the error is," the Canadian continued, with great coolness, "and when you have spent a few years in the prairie you will not be deceived."

The Count looked at him attentively, convinced that he was laughing at him; but the other continued, with the utmost calmness —

"What we notice down there is neither the fire of Indians nor of hunters, but is kindled by white men, not yet accustomed to a desert life."

"Perhaps you will have the goodness to explain."

"I will do so, and you will soon allow that I am correct. Listen, Mr. Edward, for this is important to know."

"I am listening, my good fellow."

"You are not ignorant," the hunter continued imperturbably, "that what is conventionally called the desert is largely populated."

"Quite true," the young man said, smiling.

"Good; but the enemies most to be feared in the prairies are not wild beasts so much as men; the Indians and hunters are so well aware of this fact that they try as much as possible to destroy all traces of their passage and hide their presence."

"I admit that."

"Very good; when the Redskins or the hunters are obliged to light a fire, either to prepare their food or ward off the cold, they select most carefully the wood they intend to burn, and never employ any but dry wood."

"Hum! I do not see the use of that."

"You will soon understand me," the hunter continued; "dry wood only produces a bluish smoke, which is difficult to detect

from the sky, and this renders it invisible at a short distance; while on the other hand, green wood, through its dampness, produces a white dense smoke, which reveals for a long distance the presence of those who kindle it. This is the reason why, by a mere inspection of that smoke, I told you just now that the people down there were white men, and strangers, moreover, to the prairie, else they would have employed dry wood."

"By Jove," the young man exclaimed, "that is curious, and I should like to convince myself."

"What do you intend doing?"

"Why, go and see who are the people that have lighted the fire."

"Why disturb yourself, since I have told you?"

"That is possible; but what I propose doing is for my personal satisfaction; since we have been living together you have told me such extraordinary things, that I should like, once in a way, to know what faith to place in them."

And not listening to the Canadian's observations, the young man aroused his servant.

"What do you want, my lord?" the latter said, rubbing his eyes.

"The horses, and quickly too, Ivon."

The Breton rose and bridled the horses; the Count leaped into the saddle; the hunter imitated him, though shaking his head; and the three trotted down the hill.

"You will see Mr. Edward," Bright-eye said, "that I was in the right."

"I am certain of it; still I should like to judge for myself."

"If that is the case, allow me to go in front; for, as we do not know with what people we may have to deal, it is as well to be on our guard."

The Canadian headed the party. The fire the Count had seen from the top of the hill was not so near as he supposed, the hunter was incessantly compelled to get out of the way of dense thickets which barred the way, and this lengthened the distance; so that they took nearly two hours in reaching the spot they were steering for. When they had at length arrived within a short distance of the fire which had so perplexed M. de Beaulieu, the Canadian stopped, making his companions a sign to imitate him. When they had done so, Bright-eye got down, gave his horse's bridle to Ivon, and taking his rifle in his hand, said, "I am going on a voyage of discovery."

"Go," the young man replied, laconically.

The Count was a man of tried courage; but since he had been in the prairie he had learned one thing, that courage without prudence is madness in the presence of enemies who never act without calling craft and treachery to their aid; hence, gradually renouncing his chivalrous ideas, he was beginning to adopt the habits of the desert, knowing very well that in an ambuscade the advantage nearly always remains with the man who first discovers the enemies whom chance may bring in his way. The Count, therefore, patiently awaited the hunter's return, who had silently glided among the trees, and disappeared in the direction

of the fire. At the end of about an hour the shrubs shook, and Bright-eye reappeared at a point opposite to that where he had started. The old wood ranger had been considerably bothered by the apparition of the distant fire which the Count pointed out to him from the top of the hill. So soon as he was alone, putting in practice the axiom, that the shortest road from one point to another is a curved line, the truth of which is proved in the prairie, he had taken a wide circuit, in order to come, if it were possible, on the trail of the men he wished to observe, and from it discover who they really were.

In the desert, the meeting most feared is that with man. Every stranger is at first an enemy, and hence persons generally accost each other at a distance, with the barrel of the gun advanced, and the finger on the trigger. With that infallible glance the experience of the savannahs had given him, Bright-eye had noticed from a distance a place where the grass was laid, and the strangers must have passed along that road. The hunter, still bent down to escape observation, soon found himself on the edge of a track about four feet wide, the end of which was lost in a virgin forest a short distance ahead. After stopping a minute, to recover his breath, the Canadian placed the butt of his rifle on the ground, and began carefully studying the traces so deeply imprinted on the plain. His investigation did not last ten minutes; then he raised his head with a smile, threw his rifle on his shoulder, and quietly returned to the spot where he had left his companions, not even taking the trouble to go to the fire. This brief examination had

told him all he wished to know.

"Well, Bright-eye, any news?" the Count asked, on noticing him.

"The people, whose fire we perceived," the hunter replied, "are American emigrants, pioneers who wish to set up their tent in the desert. The family is composed of six persons – four men and two women; they have a waggon to carry their baggage, and have with them a large number of beasts."

"Mount your horse, Bright-eye, and let us go and welcome these worthy people to the desert."

The hunter remained motionless and thoughtful, leaning on his rifle.

"Well," the Count said, "did you not hear me, my friend?"

"Yes, Mr. Edward, I perfectly understood you; but among the traces left by the emigrants I discovered others which appeared to me suspicious, and I should like, before venturing into their camp, to beat up the neighbourhood."

"What traces do you allude to?" the young man asked, quickly.

"Well," the hunter went on, "you know that, rightly or wrongly, the Redskins claim to be kings of the prairies, and will not endure there the presence of white men."

"I consider that they are perfectly right in doing so; since the discovery of America, the white men have gradually dispossessed them of their territory, and driven them back on the desert; they are defending their last refuge, and are justified in doing so."

"I am perfectly of your opinion, Mr. Edward; the desert ought to belong to the hunters and the Indians; unfortunately the Americans do not think so, and they daily quit their cities and proceed into the interior, establishing themselves here and there, and confiscating to their benefit the most fertile countries, and those richest in game."

"What can we do, my good friend?" the Count answered, with a smile; "it is an irremediable evil, which we must put up with; but I cannot yet see where you wish to arrive with these reflections, which, though extremely just, do not appear to me exactly suited to the occasion; so pray have the goodness to explain your meaning."

"I will do so. Well, I noticed, by certain signs, that the emigrants are closely followed by a party of Indians, who probably only await a favourable moment to attack and massacre them."

"The deuce!" the young man said; "that is serious of course you warned these worthy people of the danger that threatens them."

"I – not at all. I have not spoken to them, nor even seen them."

"What! you have not seen them?"

"No; so soon as I recognized the Indian sign, I hurried back to consult with you."

"Very good; but as you did not go to their camp, how were you able to give me such precise information about them and their number?"

"Oh, very easily," the hunter answered simply; "the desert is a book entirely written by the hand of God, and it cannot hide its secrets from a man accustomed to read it. I needed only to look at the trail for a few minutes to divine everything."

The Count fixed on the hunter a glance of surprise. Though he had been living in the prairie for more than six months, he could not yet understand the species of divination with which the hunter seemed gifted, with reference to facts that were to himself as a dead letter.

"Perhaps, though," he said, "the Indians whose trail you detected are harmless hunters."

Bright-eye shook his head.

"There are no harmless hunters among the Indians, especially when they are on the trail of white men. These Indians belong to three plundering tribes which I am surprised to see united; they doubtlessly meditate some extraordinary expedition, in which the massacre of these emigrants will be one of the least interesting episodes."

"Who are these Indians? Do you think they are numerous?"

The hunter reflected for a moment.

"The party I discovered is probably only the vanguard of a more numerous band," he answered; "as far as I could judge, there were not more than forty; but the Redskin warriors march with the speed of the antelope, and they can hardly ever be counted; the party is composed of Comanches, Blackfeet, and Sioux; that is to say, the three most warlike tribes in the prairie."

"Hum!" the Count remarked, after a moment's reflection, "if these demons really mean to attack the Americans, as everything leads us to suppose, the poor fellows appear to be in an awkward position."

"Unless a miracle occur, they are lost," the hunter said, concisely.

"What is to be done – how to warn them?"

"Mr. Edward, take care what you are going to do."

"Still we cannot allow men of our own colour to be murdered almost in our presence; that would be cowardly."

"Yes; but it would be astounding folly to join them; reflect that there are only three of us."

"I know it," the young man said, thoughtfully; "still I would never consent to abandon these poor people without trying to defend them."

"Stay, there is only one thing to be done, and perhaps Heaven will come to our aid."

"Come, be brief, my friend, time presses."

"In all probability, the Indians have not yet discovered our trail, although they must be a short distance from us. Let us, then, return to the spot where we breakfasted, and which commands the entire prairie. The Indians never attack their enemy before four in the morning; as soon as they attempt their attack on the emigrants, we will fall on their rear; surprised by the sudden aid given the Americans, it is possible they will fly, for the darkness will prevent them counting us, and they will never suppose that

three men were so mad as to make such an attack upon them."

"By Jove!" the Count said, laughing, "that is a good idea of yours, Bright-eye, and such as I expected from so brave a hunter as yourself; let us hurry back to our observatory, so as to be ready for every event."

The Canadian leaped on his horse, and the three men retraced their steps. But, according to his custom, Bright-eye, who was apparently a sworn foe to a straight line, made them describe an infinite number of turnings, to throw out any person whom accident brought on their track.

They arrived at the top of the hill just at the moment the sun was disappearing beneath the horizon. The evening breeze was rising, and beginning to agitate the tops of the great trees with mysterious murmurs. The howling of the tigers and cougars was already mingled with the lowing of the elks and buffaloes, and the sharp yelping of the red wolves, whose dusky outlines appeared here and there on the river bank. The sky grew more and more gloomy, and the stars began dotting the vault of heaven.

The three hunters sat down carelessly on the top of the hill, at the same spot they had left a few hours previously with the intention of never returning, and made preparations for supper, – preparations which did not take long, for prudence imperiously ordered them not to light a fire, which would have at once revealed their presence to the unseen eyes which were, at the moment, probably surveying the desert in every direction. While eating a few mouthfuls of pemmican, they kept their eyes fixed

on the camp of the emigrants, whose fire was perfectly visible in the night.

"Oh Lord!" Bright-eye said, "those people are ignorant of the first law of the desert, else they would guard against lighting a fire which the Indians can see for ten leagues round."

"Bah! that beacon will guide us where to go to their aid," the Count said.

"Heaven grant that it be not in vain."

The meal over, the hunter invited the Count and his servant to sleep for a few hours.

"For the present," he said, "we have nothing to fear; let me keep watch for all, as my eyes are accustomed to see in the darkness."

The Count did not allow the invitation to be repeated; he rolled himself in his cloak, and lay down on the ground. Two minutes later, himself and Ivon were sleeping the sleep of the righteous. Bright-eye took his seat against the trunk of a tree, and lit a pipe to soothe the weariness of his night watch. All at once, he bent his body forward, placed his ear to the ground, and seemed to be listening attentively. His practised ear had heard a sound at first imperceptible, but which seemed to be gradually drawing nearer.

The hunter silently cocked his rifle, and waited. At the expiration of about a quarter of an hour there was a slight rustling in the thicket, the branches parted, and a man made his appearance.

This man was Natah Otann, the sachem of the Piékanns.

CHAPTER III
THE EMIGRANTS

When he went out on the trail, the hunter's old experience did not deceive him; and the traces he had followed up were really those of an emigrant family. As it is destined to play a certain part in our story, we will introduce it to the reader, and explain, as briefly as possible, by what chain of events it was at this moment encamped on the prairies of the Upper Mississippi, or, to speak like the learned, on the banks of the Missouri.

The history of one emigrant is that of the mass. All are people who, burdened by a numerous family, find a difficulty in rendering their children independent, either through the bad quality of the land they cultivate, or because, in proportion as the population increases, the land, in the course of a few years, gains an excessive value.

The Mississippi has become during the last few years the highway of the world. Every vessel that enters on its waters brings the new establishments the means of supplying themselves, either by barter or for money, with the chief commodities of existence. Thus the explorers have spread along both banks of the river, which have become the highways of emigration, by the prospect they offer the pioneers of possessing fine estates, and holding them a number of years, without the troublesome process of

paying rent.

The word "country," in the sense we attach to it in Europe, does not exist for the North American. He is not, like our rustics, attached, from father to son, to the soil which has been the cradle of his family. He is only attached to the land by what it may bring him in; but when it is exhausted by too large a crop, and the colonist has tried in vain to restore its primitive fertility, his mind is speedily made up. He disposes of things too troublesome or expensive to transport; only keeps what is absolutely necessary, as servants, horses, and domestic utensils; says good-bye to his neighbours, who press his hand as if the journey he is about to undertake is the simplest matter in the world, and at daybreak, on a fine spring morning, he gaily sets out, turning a parting and careless glance at that country where he and his family have lived so long. His thoughts are already directed forward; the past no longer exists for him, the future alone smiles on him and sustains his courage.

Nothing is so simple, primitive, and at the same time picturesque, as the departure of a family of pioneers. The horses are attached to the wagons, already laden with the bed furniture and the younger children, while on the other side are fastened the spinning wheels, and swaying behind, a skin filled with tallow and pitch. The axes are laid in the bottom of the cart, and cauldrons and pots roll about pell-mell in the horses' trough; the tents and provisions are securely fastened under the vehicle, suspended by ropes. Such is the moveable estate of

the emigrant. The eldest son, or a servant, bestrides the first horse, the pioneer's wife sits on the other. The emigrant and his sons, with shouldered rifles, walk round the wagon, sometimes in front, sometimes behind, followed by their dogs, touching up the oxen and watching over the common safety.

Thus they set out, travelling by short stages through unexplored countries and along frightful roads, which they are generally compelled themselves to make: braving cold and heat, rain and snow, striving against Indians and wild beasts, seeing at each spot almost insurmountable difficulties rising before them: but nothing, stops the emigrants, no peril can check them, no impossibility discourage them. They march on thus for whole months, keeping intact in their hearts that faith in their luck which nothing shakes, until they at length reach a site which offers them those conditions of comfort which they have sought so long.

But, alas! how many families that have left the cities of America full of hope and courage have disappeared, leaving no other trace of their passage of the prairie than their whitened bones and scattered furniture. The Indians, ever on the watch at the entrance of the desert, attack the caravans, mercilessly massacre the pioneers, and carry off into slavery their wives and daughters, avenging themselves on the emigrants for the atrocities to which they have been victims during so many centuries, and continuing, to their own profit, that war of extermination which the white men inaugurated on their

landing in America, and which, since that period, has gone on uninterruptedly.

John Black belonged to the class of emigrants we have just described. One day, about four months previously, he quitted his house, which was falling to ruins, and loading the little he possessed on a cart, he set out, followed by his family, consisting of his wife, his daughter, his son, and two menservants who had consented to follow his fortunes. Since that period they had not stopped. They had marched boldly forward, cutting their way by the help of their axes through the virgin forests, and determined on traversing the desert, until they found a spot favourable for the establishment of a new household.

At the period when our story takes place, emigration was much rarer than it is at present, when, owing to the recent discovery of auriferous strata in California and on the Fraser River, an emigration fever has seized on the masses with such intensity, that the old world is growing more and more depopulated, to the profit of the new. Gold is a magnet whose strength attracts, without distinction, young or old, men or women, by the hope, too often deceived, of acquiring in a little time, at the cost of some slight fatigue, a fortune; which, however, rarely compensates for the labour undergone in its collection.

It was, therefore, unusual boldness on the part of John Black thus to venture, without any possible aid, into a country hitherto utterly unexplored, and of which the Indians were masters. Mr. Black was born in Virginia: he was a man of about fifty, of

middle height, but strongly built, and gifted with uncommon vigour; and, although his features were very ordinary, his face had a rare expression of firmness and resolution.

His wife, ten years younger than himself, was a gentle and holy creature, on whose brow fatigue and alarm had long before formed deep furrows, beneath which, however, a keen observer could have still detected traces of no ordinary beauty.

William Black, the emigrant's son, was a species of giant of more than six feet in height, aged two-and-twenty, of Herculean build, and whose jolly, plump face, surrounded by thick tufts of hair of a more than sandy hue, breathed frankness and joviality.

Diana, his sister, formed a complete contrast with him. She was a little creature, scarce sixteen years of age, with eyes of a deep blue like the sky, apparently frail and delicate, with a dreamy brow and laughing mouth, which belonged both to woman and angel; and whose strange beauty seduced at the first glance and subjugated at the first word that fell from her rosy lips. Diana was the idol of the family – the cherished idol, that everyone adored, and who, by a word or a glance, could command the obedience of the rude natures that surrounded her, and who only seemed to live that they might satisfy her slightest caprices.

Sam and James, the two labourers, were worthy Kentucky rustics, of extraordinary strength, and who concealed a great amount of cunning beneath their simple and even slightly silly aspect. These two young fellows, one of whom was twenty-six,

the other hardly thirty, had grown up in John Black's house, and had vowed to him an unbounded devotion, of which they had furnished proofs several times since the journey began.

When John left his house to go in search of a more fertile country, he proposed to these two men to leave him, not wishing to expose them to the dangers of the precarious life which was about to begin for himself; but both shook their heads negatively, replying to all that was said to them, that it was their duty to follow their master, no matter whither he went, and they were ready to accompany him to the end of the world. The emigrant had been obliged to yield to a determination so clearly expressed, and replied, that as matters were so, they might follow him. Hence these two honest labourers were not regarded as servants, but as friends, and treated in accordance. In truth, there is nothing like a common danger to draw people together; and during the last four months John Black's family had been exposed to dangers innumerable.

The emigrant took with him a rather large number of beasts, which caused the caravan, despite all the precautions taken, to leave such a wide trail, as rendered an Indian attack possible at any moment. Still, up to the present moment, when we pay them a visit, no serious danger had really menaced them. At times they were exposed to rather smart alarms; but the Indians had always kept at a respectable distance, and limited themselves to demonstrations, hostile it is true, but never followed by any results.

During the first week of their march, the emigrants, but little versed in the mode of life of the Redskins, who incessantly prowled round the party, had been afflicted with the most exaggerated fears, expecting every moment to be attacked by those ferocious enemies, about whom they had heard stories which might make the bravest tremble; but, as so frequently happens, they had grown used to this perpetual threat of the Indians, and, while taking the strictest precautions for their safety, they had learned almost to deride the dangers which they had so much feared at the outset, and felt convinced that their calm and resolute attitude had produced an effect on the Redskins, and that the latter would not venture to come into collision with them.

Still, on this day a vague restlessness had seized on the party: they had a sort of secret foreboding that a great danger menaced them. The Indians, who, as we have said, usually accompanied them out of reach of gunshot, had all at once become invisible. Since their start from their last camping ground, they had not seen a single one, though they instinctively suspected that, if the Indians were invisible, they were not the less present, and possibly in larger numbers than before. Thus the day passed, sorrowfully and silently for the emigrants: they marched side by side, eye and ear on the watch, with their fingers on the trigger, not daring to impart their mutual fears, but (to use a Spanish expression) having their beards on their shoulders, like men expecting to be attacked at any moment. Still, the day

passed without the slightest incident occurring to corroborate their apprehensions.

At sunset, the caravan was at the foot of one of those numerous mounds to which we have already alluded, and so large a number of which border the banks of the river at this spot. John Black made a sign to his son, who drove the cart, to stop, get down, and join him: while the two females looked around them restlessly, the four men, assembled a few paces in the rear, were engaged in a whispered conversation.

"Boys," Mr. Black said to his attentive companions, "the day is ended, the sun is descending behind the mountains over there, it is time to think about the night's rest. Our beasts are fatigued; we ourselves need to collect our strength for tomorrow's labour; I think, though open to correction, that we should do well to profit by the short time left us to establish our camp."

"Yes," James answered, "we have in front of us a hillock, on the top of which it would be easy for us to take up our quarters."

"And which," William interrupted him, "we could convert into an almost impregnable fortress in a few hours."

"We should have a hard job in getting the wagon up the hill," the father said, shaking his head.

"Nonsense," Sam objected, "not so much as you suppose, Master Black; a little trouble, and we can manage it."

"How so?"

"Why," the servant replied, "we need only unload the wagon."

"That's true; when it's empty, it will be easy to get it to the

top of the hill."

"Stay," William observed, "do you think, father, that it is really necessary to take all that trouble? A night is soon spent, and I fancy we should do well to remain where we are: the position is an excellent one; it is only a few paces to the river bank, and we can lead our oxen to water."

"No; we must not remain here, the place is too open, and we should have no shelter if the Indians attacked us."

"The Indians!" the young man said, with a laugh; "why, we have not seen a single one the whole day."

"Yes; what you say, William, is correct, the Redskins have disappeared; but shall I tell you my real thoughts? It is really this disappearance, which I do not understand, that troubles me."

"Why so, father?"

"Because, if they are hiding, they are preparing some ambuscade, and do not wish us to know the direction where they are."

"Come, father, do you really believe that?" the young man remarked in a light tone.

"I am convinced of it," the emigrant said earnestly. The two servants bowed their heads in affirmation.

"You will pardon me, father, if I do not share your opinion," the young man continued. "For my own part, on the other hand, I feel certain that these red devils, who have been following us so long, have eventually understood that they could gain nothing from us but bullets, and, like prudent men, have given

up following us further."

"No, no; you are mistaken, my son, it is not so."

"Look ye, father," the young man continued, with a certain amount of excitement, "allow me to make an observation which, I think, will bring you over to my way of thinking."

"Do so, my son; we are here to exchange our opinions freely, and select the best: the common interest is at stake, and we have to act for the safety of all: under circumstances so grave as the present, I should never forgive myself for neglecting good advice, no matter from whom it came; speak, therefore, without timidity."

"You know, father," the young man went on, "that the Indians understand honour differently from ourselves; that is to say, when the success of an expedition is not clearly proved to them, they have no shame about resigning it, because what they seek in the first place is profit."

"I know all that, my son; but I do not see yet what you are driving at."

"You will soon understand me. For nearly two months, from sunrise, the moment we set out, to sunset, which is generally the time of our halt, the Redskins have been following us step by step, and we have been unable to escape for a single moment these most troublesome neighbours, who have watched our every movement."

"That is true," John Black said, "but what do you conclude from that?"

"A very simple thing: they have seen that we were continually on our guard, and that if they attempted to attack us, they would be beaten; hence they have retired, that is all."

"Unfortunately, William, you have forgotten one thing."

"What is it?"

"This: the Indians, generally not so well armed as the white men, are afraid to attack them, especially when they suppose they shall have to deal with persons almost as numerous as themselves, and in the bargain, sheltered behind wagons and bales of merchandise; but that is not at all the case here: since they have been watching us, the Indians have had many opportunities of counting us, and have done so long ago."

"Yes," Sam said.

"Well, they know that we are only four – they are at least fifty, if they are not more numerous. What can four men, in spite of all their courage, effect against such a considerable number of enemies? Nothing, The Redskins know it, and they will act in accordance; that is, when the opportunity offers, they will not fail to seize it."

"But – " – the young man objected.

"Another consideration to which you have not paid attention," John Black quietly continued, "is that the Indians, whatever the number of their enemies may be, never quit them without having attempted, at least once, to surprise them."

"In truth," William answered, "that astonishes me on their part: however, I am of your opinion, father; even if the

precautions we propose taking only serve to reassure my mother and sister, it would be well not to neglect them."

"Well spoken, William," the emigrant remarked, "let us therefore set to work without delay."

The party broke up, and the four men, throwing their rifles on their shoulders, began making active preparations for the encampment. Sam collected the oxen by the aid of the dogs, and led them down to the river to drink. John, in the meanwhile, went up to the wagon.

"Well, my love," his wife asked him, "why this halt, and this long discussion? Has any accident occurred?"

"Nothing that need at all alarm you, Lucy," the emigrant answered; "we are going to camp, that is all."

"Oh, gracious me! I do not know why, but I was afraid lest some misfortune had happened."

"On the contrary; we are quieter than we have been for a long time."

"How so, father?" Diana asked, thrusting her charming face from under the canvas which concealed her.

"Those rascally Indians, who frightened us so much, my darling Diana, have at length made up their minds to leave us; we have not seen a single one during the whole day."

"Oh, all the better!" the girl said quickly, as she clapped her dainty palms together; "I confess that I am not brave, and those frightful Red men caused me terrible alarm."

"Well, you will not see them again, I hope," John Black said,

gaily; though while giving his daughter this assurance to appease her fears, he did not believe a word he uttered. "Now," he added, "have, the goodness to get down, so that we may unload the wagon."

"Unload the wagon," the old lady remarked, "why so?

"It is just possible," the husband answered, anxious not to reveal the real reason, "that we may remain here a few days, in order to rest the cattle."

"Ah, very good," she said; and she got out, followed by her daughter.

The two ladies had scarce set foot on ground, ere the men began unloading the wagon. This task lasted nearly an hour. Sam had time enough to lead the cattle to water, and collect them on the top of the hill.

"Are we going to camp, then?" Mrs. Black asked.

"Yes," her husband answered.

"Come, Diana," the old lady said.

The two women packed up some kitchen utensils, and clomb the hill, where, after lighting the fire, they began preparing supper. So soon as the cart was unloaded, the two labouring men, aided by William, pushed it behind, while John Black, at the head of the team, began flogging the horses. The incline was rather steep, but owing to the vigour of the horses and the impatience of the men, who at each step laid rollers behind the wheels, the wagon at last reached the top. The rest was as nothing, and within an hour the camp was arranged as follows.

The emigrants formed, with the bales and trees they felled, a large circle, in the midst of which the cattle were tied up, and then put up a tent for the two women. When this was effected, John Black cast a glance of satisfaction around. His family were temporarily protected from a coup de main – thanks to the manner in which the bales and trees were arranged, and the party were enabled to fire from under cover on any enemy that might attack them, and defend themselves a long time successfully.

The sun had set for more than an hour before these various preparations were completed, and supper was ready. The Americans seated themselves in a circle round the fire, and ate with the appetite of men accustomed to danger – an appetite which the greatest alarm cannot deprive them of. After the meal, John Black offered up a prayer, as he did every evening before going to rest; the others standing, with uncovered heads, listened attentively to the prayer, and when it was completed, the two ladies entered the hut prepared for them.

"And now," Black said, "let us keep a careful watch the night is dark, the moon rises late, and you are aware that the Indians choose the morning, the moment when sleep is deepest, to attack their enemies."

The fire was covered, so that its light should not reveal the exact position of the camp; and the two servants lay down side by side on the grass, where they soon fell asleep: while father and son, standing at either extremity of the camp, watched over the common safety.

CHAPTER IV
THE GRIZZLY BEAR

All was calm in the prairie; not a sound disturbed the silence of the desert. On the sudden appearance of the Indian, whatever the emotion Bright-eye might feel, it was impossible for Natah Otann to perceive anything: the hunter's face remained calm, and not a muscle moved.

"Ah!" he said, "the sachem of the Piékanns is welcome: does he come as a friend or an enemy?"

"Natah Otann comes to sit by the fire of the palefaces, and smoke the calumet with them," the chief replied, casting a searching glance around him.

"Good: if the chief will wait a moment, I will light the fire."

"Bright-eye can light it, the chief will wait: he has come to talk with the palefaces, and the conversation will be long."

The Canadian looked fixedly at the Redskin; but the Indian was impassive like himself, and it was impossible to read anything on his features. The hunter collected a few handfuls of dry wood, struck a light, and soon a bright flame sprung up, and illumined the mount. The Indian drew near the fire, took his calumet from his girdle, and began grimly smoking. Bright-eye not wishing to remain in any way behindhand, imitated his every movement with perfectly feigned indifference, and the two men

sat for several moments puffing clouds of smoke at each other. Natah Otann at length broke the silence.

"The pale hunter is a warrior," he said; "why does he try to hide himself like the water rat?"

Bright-eye did not consider it advisable to reply to this insinuation, and continued smoking philosophically, while casting a side-glance at his questioner.

"The Blackfeet have the eye of the eagle," Natah Otann continued, "their piercing eyes see all that happens on the prairie."

The Canadian made a sign of assent, but did not yet reply; the chief continued: —

"Natah Otann has seen the trail of his friends the palefaces, his heart quivered with pleasure in his breast, and he has come to meet them."

Bright-eye slowly removed his pipe from his lips, and turning towards the Indian, examined him carefully for an instant, and then answered —

"I repeat to my brother that he is welcome: I know that he is a great chief, and am happy to see him."

"Wah!" the Indian said, with a cunning smile: "is my brother so satisfied as he says at my presence?"

"Why not, chief?"

"My brother is angry still that the Blackfeet fastened him to the stake of torture."

The Canadian shrugged his shoulders contemptuously, and

coldly answered: —

"Nonsense, chief! why do you fancy I am angry with you or your nation? war is war; I have no reproaches to make to you. You wished to kill me, I escaped; so we are quits."

"Good: does my brother speak the truth? has he really forgotten?" the chief asked with some vivacity.

"Why not?" the Canadian answered cautiously. "I have not a forked tongue, the words my mouth utters come from my heart: I have not forgotten the treatment you made me undergo, I should lie if I said so: but I have forgiven it."

"*Ochi*! my brother is a greatheart: he is generous."

"No: I am merely a man who knows Indian customs, that is all: you did no more and no less than all the Redskins do under similar circumstances: I cannot be angry with you for having acted according to your nature."

There was a silence; the two men went on smoking. The Indian was the first to interrupt it.

"Then my brother is a friend," he said.

"And you?" the hunter asked, answering one question by another.

The chief rose with a gesture full of majesty, and threw back the folds of his buffalo robe.

"Would an enemy come like this?" he asked, in a gentle voice.

The Canadian could not repress a movement of surprise; the Blackfoot was unarmed, his girdle was empty: he had not even his scalping knife, – that weapon from which the Indians part so

unwillingly. Bright-eye offered him his hand.

"Shake hands, chief," he said to him. "You are a man of heart: now speak, I am listening to you: and, in the first place, will you have a draught of firewater?"

"The firewater is an evil counsellor," the chief replied, with a smile; "it makes the Indians mad: Natah Otann does not drink it."

"Come, come, I see that I was mistaken with regard to you, chief; that pleases me: speak, my ears are open."

"What I have to say to Bright-eye other ears must not listen to."

"My friends are in a deep sleep, you can speak without fear; and even if they were awake, as you know, they do not understand your language."

The Indian shook his head.

"Glass-eye knows everything," he replied, "the Grizzly Bear will not speak before him."

"As you please, chief: still, I would remark that I have nothing to say to you: you can speak, therefore, or be silent at your ease."

Natah Otann seemed to hesitate for an instant, and then continued: —

"Bright-eye will follow his friend to the river bank, and there listen to the words of the Blackfoot chief."

"Hum!" the hunter said, "and who will watch over my companions during my absence? No, no," he added, "I cannot do that, chief. The Redskins have the cunning of the opossum: while I am near the river, my friends may be surprised. Who will

respond for their safety?"

The Indian rose.

"The word of a chief," he said, in a proud voice, and with a gesture full of majesty.

The Canadian looked at him attentively. "Listen, Redskin," he said to him, "I do not doubt your honour, so do not take in ill part what I am going to say to you."

"I listen to my brother," the Indian answered.

"I must watch over my companions. Since you insist on speaking to me in secret, I consent to follow you, but on one condition, that I do not lay aside my weapons; in that way, should one of those things happen, which are too common in the prairie, and which no human foresight can prevent, I shall be able to face the danger and sell my life dearly: if what I propose suits you, I am ready to follow you; if not, not."

"Good," the Indian said, with a smile, "my pale brother is right, a true hunter never quits his weapons. Bright-eye may follow his friend."

"Very well, then," the Canadian said, resolutely, as he threw his rifle on his shoulder.

Natah Otann began descending the hill. While gliding noiselessly through the shrubs and thickets, the Canadian walked literally in his footsteps; but though pretending the most perfect security, he did not omit carefully examining the vicinity, and lending an ear to the slightest sound, but all was calm and silent in the desert, and after some ten minutes' walk the two men reached

the riverside.

The Mecha-Chebe rolled its waters majestically in a bed of golden sand, while at times a few vague shadows appeared on the bank: they were wild beasts coming to drink in the river. Two leagues from them, at the top of the hill, sparkled the last flames of an expiring fire, which appeared at intervals between the branches. Natah Otann stopped at the extremity of a species of small promontory, the point of which advanced some distance into the water. This spot was entirely free from vegetation: the eye could survey the prairie for a great distance, and detect the slightest movement in the desert.

"Does this place suit the hunter?" the chief asked.

"Capitally," Bright-eye replied, resting the butt of his rifle on the ground, and crossing his hands over the muzzle: "I am ready to hear the communication my brother wishes to make me."

The Indian walked up and down the sand with folded arms and drooping head, like a man who is reflecting deeply. The hunter followed him with his glance, waiting calmly, till he thought proper to offer an explanation. It was easy to see that Natah Otann was ripening in his brain one of those bold projects such as Indians frequently imagine, but knew not how to enter upon it. The hunter resolved to put a stop to this state of things.

"Come," he said, "my brother has made me leave my camp; he invited me to follow him; I consented to do so: now that, according to his desire, we are free from human ears, will he not speak, so that I may return to my companions?"

The Indian stopped before him.

"My brother will remain," he said; "the hour is come for an explanation between us. My brother loves Glass-eye?"

The hunter regarded his querist craftily.

"What good of that question?" he asked: "it must be a matter of indifference to the chief whether I love or not the man he pleases to call Glass-eye."

"A chief never loses his time in vain discourses," the Indian said, peremptorily; "the words his lips utter are always simple, and go straight to the point; let my brother then answer as clearly as I interrogate him."

"I see no great inconvenience in doing so. Yes, I love Glass-eye; I love him not only because he saved my life, but because he is one of the most honourable men I ever met."

"Good! for what purpose does Glass-eye traverse the prairie? My brother doubtlessly knows."

"My faith, no! I confess to you, chief, my ignorance on that head is complete. Still, I fancy that, wearied with the life of cities, he has come here with no other object than to calm his soul by the sublime aspect of nature, and the grand melodies of the desert."

The Indian shook his head; the hunter's metaphysical ideas and poetic phrases were so much Hebrew to him, and he did not understand them.

"Natah Otann," he said, "is a chief, he has not a forked tongue; the words he utters are as clear as the blood in his veins. Why does not the hunter speak his language to him?"

"I answer your questions, chief, and that is all. Do you fancy that I would go out of my way to interrogate my friend as to his intentions? They do not concern me; I have no right to seek in a man's heart for the motive of his actions."

"Good! my brother speaks well; his head is grey, and his experience long."

"That is possible, chief; at any rate you and I are not on such friendly terms that we should exchange our thoughts without some restriction, I fancy; you have kept me here for an hour without saying anything, so it is better for us to separate."

"Not yet."

"Why not? Do you imagine I am like you, and that instead of sleeping o' nights as an honest Christian should do, I amuse myself with rushing about the prairie like a jaguar in search of prey?"

The Indian began laughing.

"Wah!" he said, "my brother is very clever; nothing escapes him."

"By Jingo! there is no great cleverness in guessing what you are doing here."

"Good! then let my brother listen."

"I will do so, but on the condition that you lay aside once for all those Indian circumlocutions in which you so adroitly conceal your real thoughts."

"My brother will open his ears, the words of his friend will reach his heart."

"Come, make an end of it."

"As my brother loves Glass-eye, he will tell him from Natah Otann that a great danger threatens him."

"Ah!" the Canadian said, casting a suspicious glance at the other, "and what may the danger be?"

"I cannot explain further."

"Very good," Bright-eye remarked, with a grin, "the information is valuable, though not very explicit; and pray what must we do to escape the great danger that menaces us?"

"My brother will wake his friend, they will mount their horses, and retire at full speed, not stopping till they have crossed the river."

"Hum! and when we have done that, we shall have nought more to fear?"

"Nothing."

"Only think of that," the hunter said, ironically; "and when ought we to start?"

"At once."

"Better still." Bright-eye walked a few paces thoughtfully; then he returned, and stood before the chief, whose eyes sparkled in the gloom like those of a tiger cat, and who followed his every movement.

"Then," he said, "you cannot reveal to me the reason that forces us to depart?"

"No!"

"It is equally impossible, I suppose, for you to tell me of the

nature of the danger that menaces us?" he went on.

"Yes."

"Is that your last word?"

The Indian bowed his head in affirmation.

"Very good, as it is so," Bright-eye said all at once, striking the ground with the butt of his rifle, "I will tell it you."

"You?"

"Yes, listen to me carefully; it will not be long, and will interest you I hope."

The chief smiled ironically.

"My ears are open," he said.

"All the better, for I shall fill them with news which, perhaps, will not please you."

"I listen," the impassive Indian repeated.

"As you said to me a moment back – and the confidence on your part was useless, for I have known you so long on the prairie – the Redskins have the eyes of an eagle, and they are birds of prey, whom nothing escapes."

"Go on."

"Here I am; your scouts have discovered, as was not difficult, the trail of an emigrant family; that trail you have been following a long time so as not to miss your blow; supposing that the moment had arrived to deal it, you have assembled Comanches, Sioux, and Blackfeet, all demons of the same breed, in order this very night to attack people whom you have been watching for so many days, and whose riches you covet because you suppose

them so great – eh?"

Natah Otann's face revealed no emotion. He remained calm, although internally restless and furious at having his thoughts so well guessed.

"There is truth in what the hunter says," he replied, coldly.

"It is all true," Bright-eye exclaimed.

"Perhaps; but I do not see in it for what reason I should have come here to warn my Paleface brother."

"Ah, you do not see that; very well. I will explain it to you. You came to seek me, because you are perfectly well aware that Glass-eye, as you call him, is not the man to allow the crime you meditate to be committed with impunity in his presence."

The Blackfoot shrugged his shoulders. "Can a warrior, however brave he may be, hold his ground against four hundred?" he said.

"Certainly not," Bright-eye went on; "but he can control them by his presence, and employ his ascendency over them to compel them to give up their prospects; and that is what Glass-eye will undoubtedly do, for reasons of which I am ignorant, for all of you have for him an incomprehensible respect and veneration, and as you fear lest you may see him come among you at the first shot fired, terrible as the destroying angel, you seek to remove him by a pretext, plausible with anyone else, but which will produce on him no other effect than making him engage in the affair. Come, is that really all? have I completely unmasked you? Reply."

"My brother knows all; I repeat, his wisdom is great."

"Now, I presume, you have nothing to add? Very well, good night."

"A moment."

"What more?"

"You must."

"Very well; but make haste."

"My brother has spoken in his own cause, but not in that of Glass-eye; let him wake his friend, and impart our conversation to him; mayhap he is mistaken."

"I do not believe it, chief," the hunter answered, with a shake of his head.

"That is possible," the Indian persisted; "but let my brother do as I have asked him."

"You lay great stress on it, chief!"

"Great."

"I do not wish to vex you about such a trifle. Well! you will soon allow that I was right."

"Possibly; I will await my brother's reply for half an hour."

"Very good; but where shall I bring it to you?"

"Nowhere!" the Indian exclaimed, sharply. "If I am right, my brother will imitate the cry of the magpie twice; if I am mistaken, it will be that of the owl."

"Very good, that's agreed; you shall soon hear, chief."

The Indian bowed gracefully.

"May the Wacondah be with my brother!" he said.

After this courteous salutation, the two men parted. The

Canadian carelessly threw his rifle on his shoulder, and stalked back to his camp, while the Indian followed him with his glance, apparently remaining insensible; but as soon as the hunter had disappeared, the chief lay down in the sand, glided along in the shade like a serpent, and in his turn disappeared amid the bushes, following the direction taken by Bright-eye, though at a considerable distance.

The latter did not fancy himself followed; he therefore paid no attention to what went on around him, and regained his camp without noticing anything of an extraordinary nature. Had not the Canadian been preoccupied, and his old experience lulled to sleep for the moment, he would have certainly perceived, with that penetration which distinguished him, that the desert was not in its usual state of tranquillity: he would have felt unusual tremors in the leaves, and possibly have seen eyes flashing in the shade of the tall grass. He soon reached the camp where the Count and Ivon were sleeping profoundly. Bright-eye hesitated a few seconds ere awakening the young man whose sleep was so peaceful; still, reflecting that the least imprudence might entail terrible consequences, whose result it was impossible to calculate, he bent over him, and gently touched his shoulder. Though the touch was so slight, it sufficed to wake the Count; he opened his eyes, sat up, and looking at the old hunter —

"Is there anything fresh, Bright-eye?" he asked.

"Yes, Sir Count," the Canadian replied, seriously.

"Oh, oh, how gloomy you are, my good fellow," the young

man said, with a laugh. "What's the matter then?"

"Nothing, yet; but we may soon have a row with the Redskins."

"All the better, for that will warm us, as it is horribly cold," he replied, shivering. "But how do you know the fact?"

"During your sleep I received a visitor."

"Ah?"

"Yes."

"And who was the person who selected such an important moment to pay you a visit?"

"The sachem of the Blackfeet."

"Natah Otann?"

"Himself."

"Upon my word, he must be a somnambulist, to amuse himself by walking about the desert at night."

"He does not walk, he watches."

"Oh, I am in a bother; so keep me no longer in suspense; tell me what passed between you. Natah Otann is not the man to put himself out of the way without strong reasons, and I am burning to know them."

"You shall judge."

Without any further preface, the hunter described in its fullest details the conversation he had with the chief.

"By Jove! that's serious," the Count said when Bright-eye had ended his story. "This Natah Otann is a gloomy scoundrel, whose plans you fully penetrated, and you behaved splendidly in

answering him so categorically. For what has this villain taken me? Does he fancy, I wonder, that I shall act as his accomplice? Let him dare to attack those poor devils of emigrants down there, and by the saints, I swear to you, Bright-eye, that blood will be shed between us, if you help me."

"Can you doubt it?"

"No, my friend, I thank you; with you and my coward of an Ivon, I shall manage to put them to flight."

"Is my lord calling me?" the Breton asked, raising his head.

"No, no, Ivon, my good fellow; I only say that we shall soon have some fighting."

The Breton emitted a sigh, and muttered, as he lay down again, —

"Ah! if I had as much courage as I possess goodwill; but alas! as you know, I am a wonderful coward, and I shall prove more harm to you than good."

"You will do all you can, my friend, and that will be sufficient."

Ivon sighed in reply. Bright-eye had listened laughingly to this colloquy. The Breton still possessed the privilege of astonishing him, for he did not at all comprehend his singular organization. The Count turned towards him.

"So it is settled?" he said.

"Settled," the hunter answered.

"Then give the signal; my friend."

"The owl, I suppose?"

"By Jove!" the Count said.

Bright-eye raised his fingers to his mouth, and, as had been agreed with Natah Otann, imitated twice the cry of the owl, with rare perfection. Hardly had the echo of the last cry died away, than a great rumour was heard in the bushes, and, before the three men had time to put themselves in a posture of defence, some twenty Indians rushed upon them, disarmed them in a twinkling, and reduced them to a state of utter defencelessness. The Count shrugged his shoulders, leant against a tree, and, thrusting his glass in his eye, said, —

"This is very funny."

"Well, I can't see the point of the joke," muttered Ivon, in a grand aside.

Among the Indians, whom it was easy to recognize as Blackfeet, was Natah Otann! After removing the weapons of the white men, so that they could not attempt a surprise this time, he walked towards the hunter.

"I warned Bright-eye," he said.

The hunter smiled contemptuously.

"You warned us after the fashion of Redskins," he replied.

"What does my brother mean?"

"I mean that you warned us of a danger that threatened us, and not that you intended treachery."

"It is the same thing," the Indian replied, with utter calmness.

"Bright-eye, my friend, do not argue with those scoundrels," the Count said.

And turning haughtily to the chief, —

"Come! what do you want of us?" he asked.

Since his arrival on the prairie, and through his constant contact with the Indians the Count had almost unconsciously learned their language, which he spoke rather fluently.

"We do not wish to do you any hurt; we only intend to prevent your interference in our affairs," Natah Otann said respectfully; "we should be very sorry to have recourse to violent measures."

The young man burst into a laugh.

"You are humbugs! I can manage to escape, in spite of you."

"Let my brother try it."

"When the moment arrives; as for the present, it is not worth the trouble!"

While speaking in this light tone, the young man took his case from his pocket, chose a cigar, and, pulling out a lucifer match, stooped down and rubbed it on a stone. The Indians, considerably puzzled by his movements, followed them anxiously; but suddenly they uttered a yell of terror, and fell back several paces. The match had caught fire with the friction; a delicious blue flame sported about its extremity. The Count carelessly twisted the slight morsel of wood between his fingers, while waiting till all the sulphur was consumed. He did not notice the terror of the Indians.

The latter, with a movement as swift as thought, stooped down, and each picking up the first piece of wood he found at his feet, all began rubbing it against the stones. The Count, in

amazement, looked at them, not yet understanding what they were about. Natah Otann seem to hesitate for a moment; a smile of strange meaning played, rapidly as lightning, over his gloomy features; but reassuming almost immediately his cold impassiveness, he took a step forward, and respectfully bowing before the Count —

"My father commands the fire of the sun," he said, with all the appearance of a mysterious terror, while pointing to the match.

The young man smiled; he had guessed the secret.

"Which of you," he said haughtily, "would dare to contend with me?"

The Indians regarded each other with amazement. These men, so intrepid and accustomed to brave the greatest dangers, were vanquished by the incomprehensible power their prisoner possessed. As, while talking to the chief, the Count had not watched his match, it had gone out before he could use it, and he threw it away. The Indians rushed upon it, to assure themselves that the flame was real. Without appearing to attach any importance to this action, the Count drew a second match from his box, and renewed his experiment. His triumph was complete; the Redskins, in their terror, fell at his feet, imploring him to pardon them. Henceforth he might dare anything. These primitive men, terrified by the two miracles he had performed, regarded him as a superior being to themselves, and were completely mastered by him. While Bright-eye laughed in his sleeve at the Indians' simplicity, the young man cleverly

employed his triumph.

"You see what I can do," he said.

"We see it," Natah Otann made answer.

"When do you intend to attack the emigrants?"

"When the moon has set, the warriors of the tribe will assault their camp."

"And you?"

"Will guard our brother."

"So you now fancy that is possible," the Count said, haughtily.

The Redskins shuddered at the flash of his glance.

"Our brother will pardon us," the chief replied, submissively; "we only knew him imperfectly."

"And now?"

"Now we know that he is our master, let him command, and we will obey."

"Take care!" he said, in a tone which made them shudder, "for I am about to put your obedience to a rude trial."

"Our ears are open to receive our brother's words."

"Draw nearer."

The Blackfeet took a few hesitating steps in advance, for they were not yet completely reassured.

"And now listen to me attentively," he said, "and when you have received my orders, take care to execute them thoroughly."

CHAPTER V
THE STRANGE WOMAN

We are now obliged to return to the Americans' camp. As we have said, Black and his son were mounting guard, and the pioneer was far from easy in his mind. Although not yet possessed of all the experience required for a desert life, the four months he had spent in fatiguing marches and continued alarms had endowed him with a certain degree of vigilance, which, under existing circumstances, might prove very useful; not, perhaps, to prevent an attack, but, at least, to repulse it. The situation of his camp was, besides, excellent; for from it he surveyed the prairie for a great distance, and could easily perceive the approach of an enemy.

Father and son were seated by the fire, rising from time to time, in turn, to cast glances over the desert, and assure themselves that nothing menaced their tranquillity. Black was a man gifted with an iron will and a lion's courage; hitherto his schemes had been unsuccessful, and he had sworn to make himself an honourable position, no matter at what cost.

He was the descendant of an old family of squatters. The squatter being an individuality peculiar to America, and vainly sought elsewhere, we will describe him as he is, in a few words. On the lands belonging to the United States, not yet cleared

or put up for sale, large numbers of persons have settled, with the desire of eventually *purchasing* their lots. These inhabitants are called squatters. We will not say that they are the pick of the western emigrants, but we know that, in certain districts, they have constituted themselves a regular Government, and have elected magistrates to watch over the execution of the Draconian laws they have themselves laid down to insure the tranquillity of the territories they have invaded. But by the side of these quasi-honest squatters, who bow their necks beneath a yoke that is often harsh, there is another class of squatters, who understand the possession of land in its widest sense; that is to say, whenever they discover, in their vagabond peregrinations, a tract of land that suits them, they instal themselves there without any further inquiry, and caring nothing for the rightful owner, who, when he arrives with his labourers to till his estate, is quite annoyed to find it is in the hands of an individual who, trusting to the axiom that possession is nine points of the law, refuses to give it up, and if he insist, drives him away by means of his rifle and revolver.

We know a capital story of a gentleman, who, starting from New York with two hundred labourers, to clear a virgin forest he had purchased some ten years previously, and never turned to any use, found, on arriving at his claim, a town of four thousand souls built on the site of his virgin forest, of which not a tree remained. After numberless discussions, the said gentleman esteemed himself very fortunate in being able to depart with a whole skin, and without paying damages to his despoilers, whom

he had momentarily hoped to oust. But there is no more chance of ousting a squatter, than you can get a dollar out of a Yankee, when he has once pocketed it.

John Black belonged to the former of the two classes we have described. When he reached the age of twenty, his father gave him an axe, a rifle with twenty charges of powder, and a bowie knife, saying to him —

"Listen, boy. You are now tall and strong; it would be a shame for you to remain longer a burden on me. I have your two brothers to support. America is large; there is no want of land. Go in God's name, and never let me hear of you again. With the weapons I give you, and the education you have received, your fortune will soon be made, if you like: before all, avoid all disagreeable disputes, and try not to be hanged."

After this affectionate address, the father tenderly embraced his son, put him out of the cabin, and slammed the door in his face. From that moment John Black had never heard of his father – it is true that he never tried to obtain any news about him.

Life had been rough to him at the outset; but owing to his character, and a certain elasticity of principle, the sole inheritance his family had given him, he had contrived to gain a livelihood, and bring up his children without any great privations. Either through the isolation in which he had passed his youth, or for some other reason we are ignorant of, Black adored his wife and children, and would not have parted from them on any account. When fatality compelled him to give up the farm he

occupied, and look for another, he set out gaily, sustained by the love of his family, no member of which was ungrateful for the sacrifices he imposed on himself; and he had resolved to go this time so far, that no one would ever come to dispossess him, for he had been obliged to surrender his farm to its legitimate proprietor, which he had done on the mere exhibition of the title deeds, without dreaming of resistance – a conduct which had been greatly blamed by all his neighbours.

Black wished to see his family happy, and watched over it with the jealous tenderness of a hen for its chicks. Thus, on this evening, an extreme alarm had preyed on him, though he could not explain the cause: the disappearance of the Indians did not seem to him natural; everything around was too calm, the silence of the desert too profound: he could not remain at any one spot, and, in spite of his son's remarks, rose every moment to take a look over the intrenchments.

William felt for his father a great affection, mingled with respect: the state in which he saw him vexed him the more, because there was nothing to account for his extraordinary restlessness.

"Good gracious, father!" he said, "do not trouble yourself so much; it really causes me pain to see you in such a state. Do you suppose that the Indians would have attacked us by such a moonlight as this? Look, objects can be distinguished as in broad day; I am certain you might even read the Bible by the silvery rays."

"You are right for the present moment, Will. The Redskins are too crafty to face our rifles during the moonshine; but in an hour the moon will have set, and the darkness will then protect them sufficiently to allow them to reach the foot of the barricade unnoticed."

"Do not imagine they will attempt it, my dear father! Those red devils have seen us sufficiently close to know that they can only expect a volley of bullets from us."

"Hum! I am not of your opinion; our beasts would be riches to them: I do not wish to abandon them, as we should then be compelled to return to the plantations to procure others, which would be most disagreeable, you will allow."

"It is true; but we shall not be reduced to that extremity."

"May Heaven grant it, my boy; but do you hear nothing?"

The young man listened attentively.

"No," he said, at the end of a moment.

The emigrant proceeded with a sigh: "I visited the river bank this morning, and I have rarely seen a spot better suited for a settlement. The virgin forest that extends behind us would supply excellent firewood, without reckoning the magnificent planks to be obtained from it: there are several hundred acres around, which, from their proximity to the water, would produce, I am certain, excellent crops."

"Would you feel inclined to settle here, then?"

"Have you any objection?"

"I – none at all! provided we can live and work together. I care

little at what place we stop: this spot appears to me as good as another, and it is far enough from the settlements to prevent our being turned out, at least for a great number of years."

"That is exactly my view."

At this moment a gentle quivering ran along the tall grass.

"This time I am certain I am not mistaken," the emigrant exclaimed; "I heard something."

"And I too!" the young man said, rising quickly, and seizing his rifle.

The two men hurried to the entrenchments, but they saw nothing of a suspicious nature: the prairie was still perfectly calm.

"'Tis some wild beast going down to drink, or returning," Will said, to reassure his father.

"No, no," the latter replied, with a shake of the head; "it is not the noise made by any animal – it was the echo of a man's footfall, I am convinced."

"The simplest way is to go and see."

"Come then."

The two men resolutely climbed over the intrenchments, and with rifles outstretched, went round the camp, carefully searching the bushes, and assuring themselves that no foe lurked in them.

"Well!" they exclaimed, when they met.

"Nothing – and you?"

"Nothing."

"It is strange," John Black muttered, "and yet the noise was

very distinct."

"That is true; but I repeat, father, that it was nothing but an animal leaping somewhere near. In a night so calm as this, the slightest sound is heard for a great distance; besides, we are now certain that no one is concealed near us."

"Let us go back," the emigrant said, thoughtfully. They began climbing over the entrenchments; but both stopped suddenly, by mutual agreement, hardly checking a cry of amazement, almost of terror. They had just perceived a human being, whose outline it was impossible to trace at such a distance, crouched over the fire.

"This time I will have it out," the emigrant exclaimed, taking a prodigious bound into the camp.

"And I, too," his son murmured, as he followed his example.

But when they came opposite their strange visitor, their surprise was redoubled. In spite of themselves, they stopped to gaze on the stranger, without thinking to ask how he had entered their camp, and by what right he had done so.

As far as they could form a judgment, they soon began to consider the extraordinary being before them – a woman; but years, the mode of life she led, and perchance cares, had furrowed her face with such a multitude of cross hatchings, that it was impossible to conjecture her age, or whether she had formerly been lovely. The large black eyes, surmounted by thick brows crossing her curved nose, and deep sunk, flashed with a gloomy fire; her salient and empurpled cheekbones, her large

mouth studded with dazzling teeth, and her thin lips and square chin, gave her at first an appearance which was far from arousing sympathy and exciting confidence; while her long black hair, matted with leaves and grass, fell in disorder on her shoulders. She wore a costume more suited for a man than a woman. It was composed of a long robe of buffalo hide, with short sleeves, fastened on the hips by a girdle bedizened with beads. This robe had the skirt fringed with feathers, and only came down to the knee. Her *mitasses* were fastened round the ankles, and reached slightly above the knee, where they were held up by garters of buffalo hide. Her *humpis* or slippers were plain and unornamented. She wore iron rings on her wrist, two or three bead collars round her neck, and earrings. From her girdle hung on one side a powder flask, an axe, and a bowie knife; on the other, a bullet pouch and a long Indian pipe. Across her knees lay a rather handsome gun, of English manufacture.

She was crouching over the fire, which she gazed at fixedly, with her chin on the palm of her hand.

On the arrival of the Americans, she did not rise, and did not even appear to notice their presence. After examining her attentively for some time, Black walked up, and, tapping her on the shoulder, said —

"You are welcome, woman; it seems as if you were cold, and the fire does not displease you."

She slowly raised her head on feeling the touch, and, fixing on her questioner a gloomy glance, in which it was easy to perceive

a slight wildness, she replied in English, in a hollow voice, and with guttural accent —

"The Palefaces are mad; they ever think themselves in their towns; they forget that in the prairie the trees have ears and the leaves eyes to see and hear all that is done. The Blackfeet Indians raise their hair very skilfully."

The two men looked at each other on hearing these words, whose meaning they were afraid to guess, though they seemed somewhat obscure.

"Are you hungry? Will you eat?" John Black continued, "or is it thirst that troubles you? I can, if you like, give you a good draught of firewater to warm you."

The woman frowned.

"Fire-water is good for Indian squaws," she said, "what good would it do me to drink it? Others will come who will soon dispose of it. Do you know how many hours you still have to live?"

The emigrant shuddered, in spite of himself at this species of menace.

"Why speak to me thus?" he asked; "have you any cause of complaint against me?"

"I care little," she continued. "I am not among the living, since my heart is dead."

She turned her head in every direction with a slow and solemn movement, while carefully examining the country.

"Stay," she continued, pointing with her lean arm to a mound

of grass a short distance off, "'twas there he fell – 'tis there he rests. His head was cleft asunder by an axe during his sleep – poor James! This spot is ill-omened: do you not know it? The vultures and the crows alone stay here at long intervals. Why, then, have you come here? Are you weary of life? Do you hear them? They are approaching; they will soon be here."

Father and son exchanged a glance.

"She is mad. Poor creature!" Black muttered.

"Yes; that is what they all say on the prairies," she exclaimed, with some accusation in her voice. "They call me *Ohucahauck Chiké* (the evil one of the earth), because they fear me as their evil genius. You, also, fancy me mad, eh? ah! ah! ah!"

She burst into a strident laugh, which ended in a sob; she buried her face in her hands, and wept. The two men felt awed in spite of themselves; this strange grief, these incoherent words, all aroused their interest in favour of this poor creature, who appeared so unhappy. Pity was at work in their hearts, and they regarded her silently without daring to disturb her. In a few moments she raised her head, passed the back of her hand over her eyes to dry them, and spoke again. The wild expression had disappeared; the very sound of her voice was no longer the same; as if by enchantment, a complete change had taken place in her.

"Pardon," she said mournfully, "the extravagant words I have uttered. The solitude in which I live, and the heavy burden of woe which has crushed me so long, at times trouble my reason; and then the place where we now stand reminds me of terrible scenes,

whose cruel memory will never be erased from my mind."

"Madam, I assure you – ," John Black continued, not knowing what he said, so great was his surprise.

"Now the fit has passed away." She interrupted him with a gentle and melancholy smile, which gave her countenance a very different expression from that the Americans had hitherto remarked; "I have been following you for the last two days to come to your help; the Redskins are preparing to attack you – "

The two men shuddered: and, forgetting all else to think only of the pressing danger, they cast a restless glance around them.

"You know it?" Black exclaimed.

"I know all," she answered; "but reassure yourselves. You have still two hours ere their horrible war cry will sound in your ears; that is more than enough to render you safe."

"Oh! we have good rifles and keen sight," said William, clutching his weapon in his nervous hands.

"What can four rifles, however good they may be, do against two or three hundred tigers thirsting for blood, like those you will have to fight? You do not know the Redskins, young man."

"That is true," he answered; "but what is to be done?"

"Seek a refuge? – where find help in these immense solitudes?" the father added, casting a despairing glance around him.

"Did I not tell you I wished to help you?" she said, sharply.

"Yes; you told us so; but I try in vain to detect of what use you can be to us."

She smiled a melancholy smile.

"It is your good angel that brought you to the spot where you now are. While I was watching you all the day, I trembled lest you might not encamp here. Come!"

The two men, surprised by the ascendancy this strange creature had gained over them in a few minutes, followed her without reply. After walking about a dozen steps, she stopped, and turned toward them.

"Look," she said, stretching out her thin arm in a north-west direction, "your enemies are there, scarce two leagues off, buried in the tall grass. I have heard their plans, and was present at their council, though they little suspected it. They are only waiting for the moon to set, ere they attack you. You have scarce an hour left."

"My poor wife!" Black murmured.

"It is impossible for me to save you all: to fancy it would be madness; but I can, if you wish it, attempt to save your wife and daughter from the fate that menaces them."

"Speak! speak!"

"This tree, at the foot of which we are now standing, although apparently possessing all the vigour of youth, is internally hollow, so that only the bark stands upright. Your wife and daughter, supplied with some provisions, will get into the tree and remain there in safety till the danger has passed away. As for ourselves – "

"As for us," Black quickly interrupted her, "we are men

accustomed to danger: our fate is in the hands of God."

"Good; but do not despair: all is not lost yet."

The American shook his head.

"As you said yourself, what can four men do against a legion of demons like those who menace us? But that is not the question of the moment. I do not see the hole by which my wife and daughter can enter the tree."

"It is twenty to twenty-four feet up, hidden among the branches and leaves."

"The Lord be praised! they will be sheltered."

"Yes; but make haste and warn them, while your son and I make all the preparations."

Black, convinced of the necessity of haste, ran off, while the stranger and William constructed, with that dexterity produced by the approach of danger, a species of handy ladder, by which the two women could not merely ascend the tree, but go down into the cavity. Black waked the ladies, and called the servants; in a few words he explained to them what was passing; then, loading his wife and daughter with provisions, furs, and other indispensable objects, he led them to the spot where the stranger was expecting them.

"This is my most precious treasure," Black said; "if I save it, I shall be solely indebted to you."

The two ladies began thanking their mysterious protectress; but she imposed silence on them by a peremptory gesture.

"Presently, presently," she said; "if we escape, we shall

have plenty of time for mutual congratulations; but at this moment we have something more important to do than exchange compliments. We must get into a place of safety."

The two ladies fell back, quite repulsed by this rough reception, while casting a curious and almost alarmed glance on the strange creature. But the latter, perfectly stoical, seemed to notice nothing. She explained in a few clear words the means she had found to conceal them: recommended them to remain silent in the hollow tree, and then ordered them to mount. The two ladies, after embracing Black and his son, began resolutely ascending the rungs of the improvised ladder. They reached in a few seconds an enormous branch, on which they stopped, by the orders of the stranger. Black then threw down into the interior of the tree the furs and provisions, after which the ladder was placed inside, and the ladies glided through the hole.

"We leave you the ladder, which is useless to us," the stranger then said. "But be very careful not to come out till you have seen me again; the least imprudence, under the circumstances, might cost your lives. However, keep your minds at rest. Your imprisonment will not be long, a few hours at the most: so be of good cheer."

The ladies once again tried to express their gratitude; but, without listening, the stranger made Black a sign to follow her, and rapidly descended from the tree. Aided by the Americans, she then began removing every trace that might have revealed where the ladies were bestowed. When the stranger had assured

herself, by a final glance, that all was in order, and nothing could betray those who were so famously hidden, she sighed, and followed by the two men, walked to the intrenchments.

"Now," she said, "let us watch attentively around us, for these demons will probably crawl close up in the shadows. You are free and honest Americans, show these accursed Indians what you can do."

"Let them come!" Black muttered hoarsely.

"They will soon do so," she replied, and pointed to several almost imperceptible black dots, which, however, grew larger, and were evidently approaching the encampment.

CHAPTER VI
THE DEFENCE OF THE CAMP

The Redskins have a mode of fighting which foils all the methods employed by European tactics. In order to understand their system properly, we must, in the first place, bear in mind that the Indian idea of honour is different from ours. This understood, the rest may be easily admitted. The Indians, in undertaking an enterprise, have only one object – success, and all means are good to attain it. Gifted with incontestable courage, at times rash to an excess, stopping at nothing, and recoiling before no difficulty – for all that, when the success of these enterprises appears to them dubious, and that consequently the object is missed, they retire as easily as they advanced, not considering their honour compromised by a retreat, or by leaving the battlefield to an enemy more powerful than themselves, or well on his guard.

Thus, their system of fighting is most simple, and they only proceed by surprises. The Redskins will follow the enemy's trail for entire months with unequalled patience, never relaxing their watch for a moment, spying him night and day, while ever careful not to be themselves surprised: then, when the occasion at last presents itself, and they fancy the moment arrived to execute the project, all the chances for or against which they have so

long calculated, they act with a vigour and fury which frequently disconcert those they attack; but if after the first onset they are repulsed – if they see that those they attack will not let themselves be intimidated, and are prepared to resist, then, on a given signal, they disappear as if by enchantment, and, without any shame, begin watching again for a more favourable moment.

Black, on the advice of the stranger, had placed himself and his party in such positions that they could survey the prairie in every direction. The stranger and himself were leaning on their rifles in the angle that faced the river. The prairie at this moment presented a singular appearance. The breeze, which at sunset had risen with a certain strength, was gently dying out, scarce bending the tops of the great trees. The moon, almost departed, only cast over the landscape an uncertain and timorous gleam, which, in lieu of dissipating the gloom, only rendered the darkness visible, through the striking contrasts between the obscurity and the pale and fugitive rays of the declining planet.

At times, a dull roar or sharp bark rose in the silence, and, like a sinister appeal, reminded the emigrant that implacable and ferocious enemies were on the watch around, although invisible. The purity of the atmosphere was so great, that the slightest sound could be heard for an immense distance, and it was easy to distinguish the enormous blocks of granite that formed black dots on the ground.

"Do you know for certain that we shall be attacked this night?" the American asked, in a low voice.

"I was present at the last council of the chiefs," the unknown replied distinctly.

The emigrant bent on her a scrutinising glance, which she recognised, and immediately understood; she shrugged her shoulders disdainfully.

"Take care," she said to him, with a certain emphasis, "let not doubt invade your mind; what interest should I have in deceiving you?"

"I know not," he replied dreamily "but I also ask myself what interest you have in defending me?"

"None; since you place the matter on that footing, what do I care whether your wealth is plundered, your wife, your daughter, and yourself scalped? it is a matter of supreme indifference to me; but must the affair be only regarded from that side? Do you imagine that material interests have a great weight with me? If that is your opinion, I shall withdraw, leaving you to get out of your present position in the best way you can."

While uttering these words, she had thrown her rifle over her shoulder, and prepared to climb over the palisade, but Black quickly checked her.

"You do not understand me," he said; "any man in my place would act as I do; my position is fearful, you allow it yourself; you entered my camp, and it is impossible for me to guess how. Still, I have hitherto put the utmost confidence in you, as you cannot deny; but I do not know who you are, or what motive causes you to act. Your words, far from explaining, plunge me,

on the contrary, into greater uncertainty; the safety of my entire family and all I possess is at stake: reflect seriously on all this, and I defy you to disapprove of my not putting utter confidence in you, although you are, doubtlessly, deserving of it, so long as I do not know who you are."

"Yes," she answered, after a moment's reflection, "you are right, the world is so, people must first of all give their name and quality; egotism is so thoroughly the master over the whole surface of the globe, that even to do a person a service, you require a certificate of honesty, for no one will admit disinterestedness of heart, – that aberration of generous minds, which practical people brand as madness. Unfortunately, you must take me for what I appear, at the risk of seeing me go away, and hence any confidence on my part would be superfluous. You will judge me by my acts, the only proof I can and will give you of the purity of my intentions; you are free to accept or decline my assistance, and after all is over, you can thank or curse me at your choice."

Black was more perplexed than ever; the stranger's explanations only rendered the fog denser, instead of affording him light. Still, in spite of himself, he felt himself attracted toward her. After a few moments of serious reflection, he raised his head, struck his rifle barrel smartly with his right hand, and looking his companion well in the face, said in a firm voice, —

"Listen, I will no longer try to learn whether you come from God or the devil; if you are a spy of our enemies, or our devoted

friend – events, as you said, will soon decide the question. But bear this in mind, I will carefully watch your slightest gesture, your every word. At the first suspicious word or movement, I will put a bullet through your head, even if I am killed the moment after. Is that a bargain?"

The stranger began laughing.

"I accept," she said. "I recognise the Yankee in that proposition."

After this, the conversation ceased, and their entire attention was concentrated on the prairie. The most profound calm still continued to brood over the desert; apparently, all was in the same state as at sunset. Still the stranger's piercing eyes distinguished on the river bank several wild beasts flying precipitately, and others escaping across the river, instead of continuing to drink. One of the truest axioms in the desert is: – there can be no effect without a cause. Everything has a reason in the prairie, all is analysed or commented on; a leaf does not fall from a tree, a bird fly away, without the observer knowing or guessing why it has happened.

After a few moments of profound examination, the stranger seized the emigrant's arm, and bending down to his ear, said in a weak voice, like the sighing of the breeze, one word which made him tremble, as she stretched out her arm in the direction of the plain.

"Look!"

Black bent forward.

"Oh!" he said a minute after, "what is the meaning of this?"

The prairie, as we have already mentioned, was covered in several places by blocks of granite and dead trees; singularly enough, these black dots, at first a considerable distance from the camp, seemed approaching insensibly, and now were only a short way from it. As it was physically impossible for rocks and trees to move of their own accord, there must be a cause for this, which the worthy emigrant, whose mind was anything but subtle, cudgelled his brains in vain to guess. This new Birnam Wood, which moved all alone, made him excessively uncomfortable; his son and servants had also noticed the same fact, though equally unable to account for it. Black remarked specially that a tree he remembered perfectly well seeing that same evening more than one hundred and fifty feet from the mound, had suddenly come so close, that it was hardly thirty paces off. The stranger, without evincing any emotion, whispered —

"They are the Indians!"

"The Indians?" he said, "impossible!"

She knelt behind the palisade, shouldered her rifle, and after taking a careful aim, pulled the trigger. A flash traversed the darkness, and at the same moment the pretended tree bounded like a deer. A terrible yell was raised, and the Redskins appeared, rushing toward the camp like a herd of wolves, brandishing their weapons, and howling like demons. The Americans, very superstitious people, reassured by seeing that they had only to deal with men, when they feared some spell, received their

enemies bravely with a rolling and well-directed fire. Still, the Indians, probably knowing the small number of white men, did not recoil, but pushed on boldly. The Redskins were hardly a few yards off, and were preparing to carry the barricades, when a shot, fired by the stranger, tolled over an Indian ahead of the rest, at the instant he turned to his comrades to encourage them to follow him.

The fall of this man produced an effect which the Americans, who fancied themselves lost, were far from anticipating. As if by enchantment, the Indians disappeared, the yells ceased, and the deepest silence prevailed again. It might be supposed that all that had passed was a dream. The Americans regarded each other with amazement, not knowing to what they should attribute this sudden retreat.

"That is incomprehensible," Black said, after assuring himself by a hasty glance that none of his party were wounded; "can you explain that, mistress, you, who seem to be our guardian angel, for it is to your last shot we owe the rest we at present enjoy?"

"Ah!" she said, with a sarcastic smile, "you are beginning to do me justice, then."

"Do not speak about that," the emigrant said, with an angry voice; "I am a fool; pardon me, and forget my suspicions."

"I have forgotten them," she replied. "As for that which astounds you, it is very simple. The man I killed, or, at any rate, wounded, was an Indian chief of great reputation; on seeing him fall, his warriors were discouraged, and they ran to carry him off

the field, lest his scalp should fall into your hands."

"Oh, oh!" Black said, with a gesture of disgust; "do these Pagans fancy we are like themselves? No, no! I would kill them to the last man, in self-defence, and no one could blame me for it; but as for scalping, that is a different matter. I am an honest Virginian, without a drop of red blood in my veins. My father's son does not commit such infamy."

"I approve your remarks," the stranger said, in a sorrowful voice; "scalping is a frightful torture; unfortunately, many white men on the prairies do not think like you; they have adopted Indian fashions, and scalp, without ceremony, the enemies they kill."

"They are wrong."

"Possibly; I am far from justifying them."

"So that," the emigrant joyfully exclaimed, "we are free from these red devils."

"Do not rejoice yet; you will soon see them return."

"What, again?"

"They have only suspended their attack to carry off their killed and wounded, and probably to invent some other plan, to get the better of you."

"Oh, that will not be difficult; in spite of all our efforts, it will be impossible for us to resist that flock of birds of prey, who rush on us from all sides, as on a carcass. What can five rifles effect against that legion of demons?"

"Much, if you do not despair."

"Oh, as for that, you may be easy, we will not yield an inch; we are resolved to die at our posts."

"Your bravery pleases me," the stranger said, "perhaps all will end better than you suppose."

"May Heaven hear you, my worthy woman."

"Let us lose no time; the Indians may return to the charge at any moment, so let us try to be as successful this time as the first."

"I will."

"Good! Are you a man of resolution?"

"I fancy I have proved it."

"That is true. How many days' provisions have you here?"

"Four, at the least."

"That is to say, eight, if necessary."

"Pretty nearly."

"Good! Now, if you like, I will get rid of your enemies for a long time."

"I ask nothing better."

Suddenly the war cry of the Redskins was again heard, but this time more strident and unearthly than the first.

"It is too late!" the stranger said, sorrowfully, "All that is left is to die bravely."

"Let us die, then; but first kill as many of these Pagans as we can," John Black answered. "Hurrah! my boys, for Uncle Sam!"

"Hurrah!" his comrades shouted, brandishing their weapons.

The Indians responded to this challenge by yells of rage, and the combat recommenced, though this time it was more

serious. After rising to utter their formidable war cry, the Indians scattered, and advanced slowly toward the camp, by crawling on the ground. When they found in their road the stump of a tree or a bush capable of offering them shelter, they stopped to fire an arrow or a bullet. The new tactics adopted by their enemies disconcerted the Americans, whose bullets were too often wasted; for, unluckily, the Indians were almost invisible in the gloom, and, with that cunning so characteristic of them, shook the grass so cleverly, that the deceived emigrants did not know where to aim.

"We are lost," Black exclaimed despondingly.

"The position is indeed becoming critical; but we must not despair yet," the stranger remarked; "one chance is left us; a very poor one, I grant; but which I shall employ when the moment arrives. Try to hold out in a hand-to-hand fight."

"Come," the emigrant said, shouldering his rifle, "there is one of the devils who will not get any further."

A Blackfoot warrior, whose head rose at this moment above the grass, had his skull fractured by the American's bullet. The Redskins suddenly rose, and rushed, howling, on the barricade, where the emigrants awaited them firmly. A point-blank discharge received the Indians, and a hand-to-hand fight began. The Americans, standing on the barricades and clubbing their rifles, dashed down every one who came within their reach. Suddenly, at the moment when the emigrants, overpowered by numbers, fell back a step, the stranger rushed up the barricade,

with a torch in her hand, and uttering such a savage yell, that the combatants stopped, with a shudder. The flame of the torch was reflected on the stranger's face, and imparted to it a demoniac expression. She held her head high, and stretched out her arm, with a magnificent gesture of authority.

"Back!" she shrieked. "Back, devils!"

At this extraordinary apparition, the Redskins remained for a moment motionless, as if petrified, but then they rushed headlong down the slope, flying, with the utmost terror. The Americans, interested witnesses of this incomprehensible scene, gave a sigh of relief. They were saved! Saved by a miracle! They then rushed toward the stranger, to express their gratitude to her.

She had disappeared!

In vain did the Americans look for her everywhere; they could not imagine whither she was gone: she seemed to have suddenly become invisible. The torch she held in her hand, when addressing the Indians, lay on the ground, where it still smoked; it was the only trace she left of her presence in the emigrants' camp.

John Black and his companions lost themselves in conjectures on her account, while dressing, as well as they could, the wounds they had received in the engagement, when his wife and daughter suddenly appeared in the camp. Black rushed toward them.

"How imprudent of you!" he exclaimed. "Why have you left your hiding place, in spite of the warnings given you?"

His wife looked at him in amazement.

"We left it," she replied, "by the directions of the strange woman to whom we are all so deeply indebted this night."

"What! have you seen her again?"

"Certainly; a few moments back she came to us; we were half dead with terror, for the sounds of the fighting reached us, and we were completely ignorant of what was occurring. After reassuring us, she told us that all was over, that we had nothing more to fear, and that, if we liked, we could rejoin you."

"But she – what did she do?"

"She led us to this spot; then, in spite of our entreaties, she went away, saying that as we no longer needed her, her presence was useless, while important reasons compelled her departure."

The emigrant then told the ladies all about the events of the night, and the obligations they owed to this extraordinary female. They listened to the narrative with the utmost attention, not knowing to what they should attribute her strange conduct, and feeling their curiosity aroused to the utmost pitch. Unfortunately, the peculiar way in which the stranger had retired, did not appear to evince any great desire on her part to establish more intimate relations with the emigrants.

In the desert, however, there is but little time to be given to reflections and comments; action is before all; men must live and defend themselves. Hence Black, without losing further time in trying to solve the riddle, occupied himself actively in repairing the breaches made in his entrenchments, and fortifying his camp more strongly, were that possible, by piling up on the barricades

all the articles within reach. When these first duties for the common safety were accomplished, the emigrant thought of his cattle. He had placed them at a spot where the bullets could not reach them, close to the tent, into which his wife and daughter had again withdrawn, and had surrounded them by a quantity of interlaced branches. On entering this corral, Black uttered a cry of amazement, which was soon changed into, a yell of fury. His son and the men ran up; the horses and one-half the cattle had disappeared. During the fight the Indians had carried them off, and the noise had prevented their flight being heard. It seemed probable that the stranger's interference, by striking the Indians with terror, had alone prevented the robbery being completed, and the whole of the cattle carried off.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.