

Aimard Gustave

The Rebel Chief: A Tale of Guerilla Life



Gustave Aimard

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CHAPTER I

LAS CUMBRES

No country in the world offers to the delighted traveller more charming landscapes than Mexico; among them all, that of Las Cumbres or the peak, is, without fear of contradiction, one of the most striking and most agreeably diversified.

Las Cumbres form a succession of defiles in the mountains, through which winds, with infinite meanderings, the road that runs to Puebla de los Ángeles (the town of the Angels), so called, because the angels, according to tradition, built the cathedral there. The road to which we allude, made by the Spaniards, runs along the side of the mountains with curves of extraordinary boldness, and is bordered on either side by an unbroken line of abrupt peaks, bathed in a bluish vapour at each turn of this road, which is, as it were, suspended over precipices clad with a luxurious vegetation. The scene changes, and grows more and more picturesque. The mountain peaks no longer rise behind one another, but gradually sink into the plain, while on the other hand, those left behind rise perpendicularly.

On July 2nd, 18 – , about four in the afternoon, at the moment when the sun, already low on the horizon, only shed its beams obliquely on the earth, calcined by the heat of the mediodía, and when the rising breeze was beginning to refresh the parching atmosphere, two horsemen, well mounted, emerged from a thick clump of yuccas, bananas, and purpled flowered bamboos, and turned into a dusty road, which led by a series of successive inclines to a valley in which a limpid stream ran through the verdure, and kept up its pleasant freshness.

The travellers, probably struck by the unexpected sight of the grand landscape which was so suddenly unfolded before them, stopped their horses, and after gazing for some minutes admiringly at the picturesque arrangement of the mountains, they dismounted, took off their horses' bridles, and sat down on the bank of the stream, with the evident intention of enjoying for a few minutes longer the effects of this admirable kaleidoscope, which is unique in the world.

Judging from the direction they were following, the travellers appeared to come from Orizaba, and to be going to Puebla de los Ángeles, whence they were at no great distance at the moment.

The two horsemen wore the attire of rich hacenderos, a costume which we have described too frequently to render a repetition necessary here: we will only mention one characteristic peculiarity rendered necessary by the slight degree of security on the roads at the time when our story takes place. Both were armed in a formidable manner, and carried with them a complete arsenal. In addition to the six-shot revolvers in their holsters, others were thrust through their belts. They carried in their hand a first-rate double barrel, turned out by Devismes, the celebrated Parisian gunsmith; and thus each was enabled to fire twenty-six rounds, without counting the machete, or straight sabre, hanging at their side, the triangular-bladed knife thrust into the right boot, and the lasso, or reata, coiled on the saddle, to which it was securely attached by a carefully riveted iron ring.

Certainly if men thus armed were endowed with a fair amount of courage, they might face without disadvantage even a considerable number of enemies. However, they did not seem to trouble themselves at all about the wild and solitary aspect of the spot where they were, and conversed gaily while half reclining on the green grass, and carelessly smoking their cigars – real Havana *puros*.

The elder of the riders was a man of from forty to forty-five years, though he did not seem more than six-and-thirty, above the middle height; he was elegantly, though powerfully built, his well knit limbs denoted great bodily strength, he had marked features, and an energetic and intelligent

countenance; his black sparkling eyes, ever in motion, were soft, but at times emitted brilliant flashes, when they were animated, and they then gave his face a harsh and savage expression impossible to describe; he had a lofty and spacious forehead, and sensual lips; a beard black and tufted like that of an Ethiopian, and mixed with silvery threads – fell on his chest; a luxuriant head of hair, thrown back, covered his shoulders, and his bronzed complexion was of a brick colour. In short, judging from his appearance, he was one of those determined men who are invaluable in certain critical circumstances, because a friend runs no risk of being deserted by them. Although it was impossible to distinguish his nationality, his brusque, sharp gestures, and his quick imperative speech, seemed to give him a Southern origin.

His companion – who was much younger, for he did not appear above eight-and-twenty years of age – was tall, rather thin, and delicate looking, though not at all sickly; his elegant slim stature, and extremely small feet and hands, denoted high birth; his features were fine, his countenance pleasing and intelligent, and stamped with a great expression of gentleness; his blue eyes, light hair, and, above all, the whiteness of his complexion, caused him at once to be recognised as a European belonging to the temperate clime, recently landed in America.

We have said that the two travellers were conversing together, and the language they employed was French; the turn of their phrases, and the want of accent, led to the supposition that they were expressing themselves in their own language.

"Well, Count," said the elder, "do you regret having followed my advice, and instead of being jolted over execrable roads, undertaking this journey on horseback in the company of your humble servant?"

"By Jove! I should be very difficult to please were it so," the one to whom the title of Count was given replied. "I have travelled through Switzerland, Italy, and the banks of the Rhine, like everybody else, and must confess that I never before saw such exquisite scenery as that which I have gazed on for the last few days – thanks to you."

"You are a thousand times too polite: the scenery is really very fine, and remarkably diversified," he added, with a sardonic expression which escaped his companion; "and yet," he remarked with a stifled sigh, "I have seen finer, still."

"Finer than this?" the Count exclaimed, stretching out his arm, and describing a semicircle in the air; "Oh, sir, that is not possible."

"You are young, my lord," the first speaker resumed with a sad smile; "your tourist travels have only been child's play. This attracts you by the contrast it forms to the other scenery, that is all; having never studied nature except from an opera stall, you did not suppose that it could hold such surprises in reserve for you; your enthusiasm has been suddenly raised to a diapason, which intoxicates you through the strangeness of the contrasts which are incessantly offered you; but if, like myself, you had wandered over the savannahs of the interior, the immense prairies over which the wild children of this country, whom civilisation has despoiled, roam in freedom – like myself, you would only have a smile of contempt for the scenery that surrounds us, and which at this moment you are admiring so conscientiously."

"What you say may be true," Mr. Oliver; "unfortunately I am not acquainted with the savannahs and prairies to which you refer, and probably shall never see them."

"Why not?" the first speaker interposed quickly; "You are young, rich, strong, and free – at least I suppose so. What is there to prevent you attempting an excursion into the great American desert? You are in a capital position at this moment to carry out such an expedition; it is one of those journeys, reputed impossible, of which you will be able to speak with pride hereafter when you return to your own country."

"I should like it," the Count answered with a tinge of melancholy; "unluckily that is impossible, for my journey must terminate at Mexico."

"At Mexico?" Oliver repeated in surprise.

"Alas! Yes, sir, so it is; I am not my own master, and am now obeying the influence of stranger's will. I have simply come to this country to be married."

"Married! At Mexico! you, my lord?" Oliver exclaimed in astonishment.

"Yes," very prosaically, "married to a woman I do not know, who does not know me either, and who doubtless feels no more love for me than I do for her: we are related – we were betrothed in the cradle, and now the moment has arrived to keep the promise made in our names by our parents – that is all."

"But in that case the young lady is French?"

"Not at all: she is Spanish, and I believe a bit of a Mexican."

"But you are a Frenchman?"

"Certainly, and from Touraine to boot," he replied with a smile.

"That being so, allow me to ask, sir, how it happens that – "

"Oh, very naturally so; my story will not be long, and as you seem inclined to hear it, I will tell it you in a very few words. You know my name – I am Count Ludovic Mahiet de la Saulay; my family, which belongs to the Touraine, is one of the oldest in that province, and goes back to the first Franks; one of my ancestors, so it is said, was one of the leaders of King Clovis, who gave him, as a reward for his faithful and valiant services, vast prairies bordered by willows, from which my family afterwards derived its name. I do not tell you of this origin through any absurd feeling of pride. Though of noble birth, I have been educated, thank Heaven, in ideas of progress sufficiently wide for me to know the value of a title in the present age, and to recognise that true nobility dwells entirely in elevated sentiments. Still, I was obliged to tell you these details concerning my family in order that you might thoroughly understand how my ancestors – who always held high offices under the different dynasties that have succeeded each other in France – happened to have a younger branch of the family Spanish, while the elder remained French. At the epoch of the league, the Spaniards, summoned by the partisans of the Guises, with whom they had formed an alliance against King Henry IV., then only called King of Navarre, were quartered for a rather lengthened period in Paris. I ask your pardon, my dear Mr. Oliver, for thus entering into details which may appear to you very wearisome."

"Pardon me, my lord, on the contrary, they greatly interest me; so pray go on."

The young man bowed and resumed —

"Now, the Count de Saulnay – alive at that time – was an impetuous partisan of the Guises, and a very intimate friend of the Duke of Mayence; the Count had three children – two sons, who fought in the ranks of the army of the League, and a daughter who was maid of honour to the Duchess of Montpensier, the sister of the Duke of Mayence. The siege of Paris lasted a long time, it was even abandoned, then resumed by Henry IV., who eventually bought for ready money a city which he despaired of seizing, and which the Duc de Brissac, Governor of the Bastille for the league, sold him. Many of the officers serving under the Duke de Mendoza, Commander of the Spanish troops, and that General himself, had their families with them. In short, the younger son of my ancestor fell in love with one of the Spanish General's nieces, asked her in marriage, and obtained her hand; while his sister consented, by the persuasion of the Duchess of Montpensier, to give hers to one of the General's aides-de-camp. The artificial and politic Duchess, thought by these alliances to keep the French nobility aloof from him whom she called, the Béarnais and the Huguenot, and retard his triumph if she did not render it impossible. As usually happens in such cases, her calculations proved to be false. The king re-conquered his kingdom, and those gentlemen most compromised in the troubles of the league, found themselves compelled to follow the Spaniards on their retreat, and leave France with them. My ancestor easily obtained his pardon of the king, who even deigned at a later date to give him an important command, and take his elder son into his service; but the younger, in spite of the entreaties and injunction of his father, never consented to return to France, and settled permanently in Spain. Still, though separated, the two branches of the family continued to maintain relations, and to intermarry. My grandfather married during the emigration a daughter of the Spanish

branch: it is now my turn to contract a similar alliance. You see, my dear sir, that all this is very prosaic, and not at all interesting."

"Then you are willing, with your eyes shut as it were, to marry a person you have never seen, and whom you do not even know?"

"What would you have? So matters are; my consent is useless in the affair; the engagement was solemnly made by my father, and I must honour his word. Besides," he added with a smile, "my presence here proves to you that I did not hesitate to obey. Perhaps, had my will been free, I should not have contracted this union; unfortunately it did not depend on me, and I was obliged to conform to my father's wishes. However, I must confess to you that having been brought up with the continual prospect of this marriage, and knowing it to be inevitable, I have gradually accustomed myself to the thought of contracting it, and the sacrifice is not so great to me as you might suppose."

"No matter," Oliver said with some degree of rudeness; "to the deuce with nobility and fortune if they impose such obligations – better a life of adventure in the desert and poor independence; at any rate you are your own master."

"I am perfectly of your opinion; but for all that, I must bow my head. Now, will you permit me to ask you a question?"

"Of course, most readily – two if you like."

"How is it that we – who met by accident at the French hotel in Veracruz, just after I had landed – have become so quickly and intimately attached?"

"As for that, it is impossible for me to answer. You pleased me at first sight, your manner attracted me. I offered you my services; you accepted them, and we started together for Mexico. That is the whole story. When we arrive there we shall separate, doubtless, never to meet again, and all will be settled."

"Oh! Oh! Mr. Oliver, permit me to believe that you are mistaken; that, on the contrary, we shall meet frequently, and that our acquaintance will soon become a solid friendship."

The other shook his head several times.

"My lord," he said at length, "you are a gentleman, rich, and of good standing in the world; while I am but an adventurer, of whose past life you are ignorant, and whose name you scarce know, even supposing the one I bear at this moment is real; our positions are too different; there is between us a line of demarcation too distinctly traced for us ever to stand on a footing of suitable equality toward each other. So soon as we have re-entered civilisation, I feel – for I am older than you, and have a greater experience of the world – that I should soon become a burden to you; hence do not insist on this point, but let us both remain in our place. This, be convinced, will be better both for you and me. I am at this moment your guide rather than your friend, and this position is the only one that suits me: leave it to me."

The Count was preparing to reply; but Oliver sharply seized his arm.

"Silence," he said; "listen –"

"I hear nothing," the young man remarked at the end of a moment.

"That is true," the other replied with a smile; "your ears are not like mine, open to every sound that troubles the silence of the desert; a carriage is rapidly coming up from the direction of Orizaba, and is following the same route as ourselves; you will soon see it appear, for I can perfectly distinguish the tinkling of the mule bells."

"It is doubtless the Veracruz diligence, in which my servants and luggage are, and which we are only a few hours ahead of."

"Perhaps it is; perhaps it is not. I should be surprised if it had caught us up so quickly."

"What does it matter to us?" the Count said.

"Nothing, that is true, if it is the diligence," the other replied after a moment's reflection; "at any rate it is as well to take our precautions."

"Precautions, why?" the young man asked in astonishment.

Oliver gave him a look of singular meaning.

"You know nothing as yet about American life," he said presently; "in Mexico, the first law of existence is always to put yourself on guard against the possible chances of an ambush. Follow me, and do what you see me do."

"Are we going to conceal ourselves?"

"Of course," he said, with a shrug of his shoulders.

Without any further reply, he went up to his horse, which he re-bridled, and leapt into the saddle with a lightness and dexterity denoting great practice, and then started at a gallop for a clump of liquidambar, distant a hundred yards at the most.

The Count, involuntarily overpowered by the ascendancy which this man had contrived to obtain over him through his strange mode of dealing since they had been travelling together, jumped into the saddle and went after him.

"Good!" said the adventurer, as soon as they found themselves completely sheltered behind the trees; "Now let us wait."

Some minutes elapsed.

"Look!" Oliver said laconically, stretching out his hand in the direction of the little wood from which they had themselves emerged two hours previously.

The Count mechanically turned his head in the direction; at the same instant some ten irregular horsemen, armed with sabres and long lances, entered the valley at a gallop, and proceeded along the road towards the first defile of the Cumbres.

"Soldiers of the Veracruz President," the young man muttered; "what is the meaning of this?"

"Wait," the adventurer remarked.

The rolling of a carriage soon became distinct, and a berlin appeared, dragged at a tremendous pace by a team of six mules.

"Maldición!" the adventurer exclaimed with an angry gesture on perceiving the carriage.

The young man looked at his companion: the latter was pale as a corpse, and a convulsive tremor ran over all his limbs.

"What is the matter?" the Count asked him with interest.

"Nothing," he answered drily; "look –"

Behind the carriage a second squadron of cavalry came up at a gallop, following it at a slight distance, and raising clouds of dust as they passed.

Ere long cavalry and berlin entered the defile, when they soon disappeared.

"Confound it," the young man said with a laugh; "those are prudent travellers, at any rate; they will not run a risk of being plundered by the salteadores."

"Do you think so?" Oliver asked with an accent of biting sarcasm. "Well, you are mistaken, for they will be attacked within an hour, and probably by the soldiers paid to defend them."

"Nonsense – that is impossible."

"Would you like to see it?"

"Yes, for the rarity of the fact."

"You will have to take care though, for possibly powder may be burned."

"I hope so too."

"Then you are resolved to defend these travellers?"

"Certainly, if they are attacked."

"I repeat that they will be attacked."

"In that case we will fight."

"That will do: are you a good rider?"

"Don't trouble yourself about me; when you pass I will."

"Well, then, in Heaven's name, we have only just the time to get there; and mind and keep an eye on your horse, for on my soul, we are about to have such a ride as you never saw."

The two riders leant over their steeds' necks, and loosing the bridle, while at the same time digging in the spurs, they started on the track of the travellers.

CHAPTER II

THE TRAVELLERS

At the period when our story takes place, Mexico was going through one of those terrible crises, whose periodical return has gradually brought this hapless country into the extremity to which it is now reduced, and whence it cannot possibly emerge unaided. The following are the facts that occurred: —

General Zuloaga, nominated President of the Republic, one day found — it is not known why — power too oppressive for his shoulders, and abdicated in favour of General Don Miguel Miramón, who was consequently appointed interim President. The latter, an energetic and most ambitious man, began by governing at Mexico, where he was careful in the first instance to have his nomination to the first magistracy approved by Congress, who unanimously elected him, and by the ayuntamiento.

Miramón hence found himself *de facto* and *de jure* legitimate interim President; that is to say, for the period that must still elapse until the general elections.

Matters went on tolerably well for a considerable period; but Zuloaga, doubtless wearied of the obscurity in which he was living, altered his mind one fine day, and suddenly at a moment when it was least expected, issued a proclamation to the people, came to an understanding with the partizans of Juárez, who, in his quality of Vice President on Zuloaga's abdication, had not recognised the new President, but had himself elected constitutional President at Veracruz by a so-called national junta, and published a decree, by which he revoked his abdication, and took back from Miramón the power he had entrusted to him.

Miramón was but little affected by this unusual declaration, as he confided in the right he imagined he had, and which Congress had sanctioned. He went alone to the house inhabited by General Zuloaga, seized his person, and compelled him to follow him; saying with a sarcastic smile, —

"As you desire to resume the power, I am going to teach you how a man becomes President of the Republic."

And, keeping him as a hostage, though treating him with a certain degree of respect, he obliged him to accompany him on a campaign, which he undertook in the interior provinces against the generals of the opposite party, who, as we have said, assumed the name of Constitutionals.

Zuloaga offered no resistance: he apparently yielded to his fate, and accepted the consequences of his position so far as to complain to Miramón about not having a command in his army. The latter allowed himself to be deceived by this feigned resignation, and promised that his desire should be satisfied at the first battle. But one fine morning, Zuloaga and his aides-de-camp, who had been appointed to guard, rather than do him honour, suddenly disappeared, and it was learnt a few days after, that they had taken refuge with Juárez, from whose capital Zuloaga began protesting again more than ever against the violence done him, and fulminating decrees against Miramón.

Juárez is a cautious, cunning Indian, a profound dissimulator, a skilful politician. He is the only President of the Republic, since the declaration of independence, who was not a military man. Issuing from the lowest classes of Mexican society, he gradually rose, by dint of tenacity, to the eminent post which he so recently occupied. Knowing better than anyone else the character of the nation which he pretended to govern, no one knew so well as he how to flatter popular passions, and excite the enthusiasm of the masses. Gifted with an immeasurable ambition, which he carefully concealed beneath the cloak of a deep love for his country, he had gradually succeeded in creating a party, which, at the period of which we write, had grown formidable. The constitutional President organized his government at Veracruz, and from his cabinet instructed his generals to fight Miramón. Although he was not recognised by any power but the United States, he acted as if he were the true and legitimate depository of the national power. The adhesion of Zuloaga, whom he despised in his

heart for his cowardice and nullity, supplied him with the weapon he needed to carry out his plans successfully. He made him, so to speak, the standard of his party, by declaring that Zuloaga must first be restored to the power which had been violently torn from him by Miramón, and that they would then proceed to new elections. However, Zuloaga did not hesitate to recognise him solemnly as sole President, legitimately nominated by the free election of the citizens.

The question was distinctly laid down. Miramón represented the conservative party, that is to say, the party of the clergy, large landowners and merchants; while Juárez represented the absolute democratic party.

The war then assumed formidable dimensions. Unluckily, money is needed to wage war, and that was what Juárez was entirely without, for the following reasons:

In Mexico the public fortunes are not concentrated in the hands of the government. Each state, each province retains the free disposal and management of the private funds of the towns forming parts of its territory; so that, instead of the provinces being dependent on the government, the government and metropolis endure the yoke of the provinces, which, when they revolt, stop the subsidies, and place the power in a critical position. Moreover, two thirds of the public fortune are in the hands of the clergy, who take very good care not to part with it, and who, as they pay no taxes, or obligations of any sort, spend their time in lending out their money at a high rate of interest, and ostensibly engage in usury, which enriches them, while they run no risk of losing their capital.

Juárez, though master of Veracruz, found himself, then, in a very critical position; but he is a man of resources, and felt no embarrassment in finding the money he wanted. He first began by laying hands on the customs of Veracruz, then he organised cuadrillas, or guerillas, who had no scruples in attacking the haciendas of the partisans of Miramón, Spaniards settled in the country, and generally very rich, and of foreigners of all nations who possessed any worth taking. These guerillas did not restrict their exploits to this; they undertook to plunder travellers and attack convoys: and it must not be supposed that we are exaggerating the facts, on the contrary, we are toning them down. We must add, for the sake of being just, that Miramón, for his part, let no opportunity slip for employing the same means, when he had the chance; but this was rare, for his position was not so advantageous as that of Juárez for fishing with profit in troubled waters.

It is true that the guerilleros acted apparently on their own account, and were loudly disapproved by both governments, who feigned on some occasions to act with severity against them; but the veil was so transparent, that the farce deceived nobody.

Mexico was thus transformed into an immense brigand's cave, in which one half of the population plundered and assassinated the other. Such was the political situation of this hapless country at the epoch to which we allude. It is dubious whether it has much changed since, unless to become worse.

On the same day that our narrative commences – at the moment when the sun, still beneath the horizon, was beginning to bar the dark blue sky with brilliant beams of purple and gold, a rancho, built of reeds, and resembling – though it was very large – a hen house, offered an animated appearance, very singular at so early an hour.

This rancho, built in the centre of a grassy patch, in a delicious situation, only a few paces from the Rincón grande, had been changed a short time before into a venta, or inn, for travellers surprised by the night, or who, for some reason, preferred stopping here to pushing on to the town.

On a rather large space of ground left unoccupied in front of the venta, the bales of several convoys of mules were ranged in a semi-circle, and piled on one another with some degree of symmetry. In the middle of the circle the arrieros crouching near the fire, were boucaning tasajo for their breakfast, or repairing the saddles of the animals, which, separated in troops, were eating their provender of maize placed on pesadas spread out on the ground. A berlin, loaded with trunks and boxes, was standing in a shed by the side of a diligence, which had been forced to stop here, owing to an accident to one of its wheels. Several travellers, who had spent the night in the open air, rolled

up in their sarapes, were beginning to wake, while others were walking up and down, smoking their papilitos; some who were more active, had already saddled their horses, and were starting at a gallop in various directions.

Ere long, the mayoral of the diligence came out from under his vehicle, where he had slept on the grass, gave his animals their forage, washed the wounds produced by the harness, and then began summoning the travellers. The latter, aroused by his shouts, came out of the venta, half awake, and went to take their places in the coach. They were nine in number, with the exception of two individuals, dressed in the European style, and easily to be recognised as Frenchmen. All the rest wore the Mexican garb, and appeared to be true *hijos del país*, that is to say, children of the country.

At the moment when the driver, or mayoral – a pure-blooded Yankee – after succeeding, by dint of Yankee oaths mingled with bad Spanish, in getting his passengers into the vehicle, which was half dislocated by the jolting of the road, was taking up the reins to start, the galloping of horses, accompanied by the rattling of sabres, was heard, and a band of horsemen, dressed in a sort of uniform, though in very bad condition, halted in front of the rancho.

This troop, composed of twenty men, with hangdog faces, was commanded by an alférez, or sub-lieutenant, as poorly attired as his soldiers; but his weapons were in excellent condition.

This officer was a tall, thin, but muscular man, with a crafty face, sly eye, and bistre-coloured complexion.

"Hola, compadre," he shouted to the mayoral, "you are starting at a very early hour, it strikes me."

The Yankee, so insolent a moment before, suddenly changed his manner: he bowed humbly, with a false smile, and answered in a soothing voice, while affecting a great joy, which he probably did not feel, —

"Ah! Válgame Dios! It is Señor don José Dominquez! What a fortunate meeting! I was far from expecting so great a happiness this morning. Has your Excellency come to escort the diligence?"

"Not today; another duty brings me."

"Oh! Your Excellency is perfectly right; my travellers do not at all deserve so honourable an escort. They are costeños, who do not appear to me at all rich. Besides, I shall be obliged to stop at least three hours at Orezaba, to repair my coach."

"In that case, good-bye, and go to the deuce!" the officer answered.

The mayoral hesitated a moment, but then, instead of stating as he was ordered, he rapidly got down from his box and went up to the officer.

"You have some news to give me, have you not, compader?" the latter said.

"I have señor," the mayoral replied with a false laugh.

"Ah, ah," said the other, "and what is it, good or bad?"

"El Rayo is ahead on the road to Mexico." The officer gave an almost imperceptible start at this revelation, but at once recovered himself.

"You are mistaken," he said.

"No, I am not, for I saw him as I see you now." The officer seemed to reflect for a minute or two.

"Very good, I thank you, compader, I will take my precautions. And your travellers?"

"They are poor scamps, with the exception of the two servants of a French count, whose trunks fill, up the whole coach. The others do not deserve any notice. Do you intend to examine them?"

"I have not yet decided; I will think over it."

"Well, you will act as you think proper. Pardon me for leaving you, Señor don José, but my passengers are growing impatient and I must be off."

"Good-bye then for the present."

The mayoral mounted to his box, lashed his mules, and the vehicle started at a pace not very reassuring for those whom it contained, and who ran a risk of breaking their bones at every turn of the road.

So soon as the officer was alone he went up to the ventero who was engaged in measuring maize for some arrieros, and addressing him haughtily, asked:

"Eh! Have you not a Spanish caballero and a lady here?"

"Yes," the ventero replied, doffing his hat with a respect mingled with fear. "Yes, señor officer, a rather aged caballero, accompanied by a very young lady, arrived here yesterday a little after sunset, in the berlin which you can see there under the shed: they had an escort with them. From what the soldiers said, they have come from Veracruz, and are going to Mexico."

"Those are the people I am sent to serve as their escort as far as Puebla de los Ángeles; but they do not seem in any hurry to start: yet, it will be a long day's journey and they would do well to hurry."

At this moment an inner door was opened, a richly dressed gentleman entered the common room, and after slightly raising his hat and uttering the usual Ave Maria Purísima, he walked up to the officer who, on perceiving him, had taken several steps toward him.

This new personage was a man of about fifty-five years of age, but still in his prime: he was tall and elegant, his features were handsome and noble, and an expression of frankness and kindness was spread over his countenance.

"I am Don Antonio de Carrera," he said, addressing the officer; "I heard the few words you addressed to our host: I believe, Sir, that I am the person you have orders to escort."

"It is true, señor," the sub-lieutenant politely replied, "the name you have mentioned is really the one written on the order of which I am the bearer: I await your good pleasure, ready to do whatever you may desire."

"I thank you, señor: my daughter is slightly unwell, and I should be afraid of injuring her delicate health, if I set out at so early an hour. If you have no objection, we will remain a few hours longer here, and then set out after breakfast, which I shall feel honoured by your deigning to share."

"I offer you a thousand thanks, caballero," the officer replied with a courteous bow; "but I am only a rough soldier, whose society cannot be agreeable to a lady: be kind enough, therefore, to excuse if I refuse your gracious invitation, for which, however, I feel as grateful as if I had accepted it."

"I will not press you, señor, though I should have been flattered to have you as a guest: it is settled then that we are to remain here a little while longer?"

"As long as you please, señor: I repeat that I am at your orders."

After this exchange of politeness the two speakers separated, the old gentleman re-entered the rancho, and the officer went out to give his squadron orders to bivouac.

The soldiers dismounted, picketed their horses, and began strolling about, smoking a cigarette, and looking at everything with the restless curiosity peculiar to Mexicans.

The officer whispered a few words to a private, and the latter, instead of imitating the example of his comrades, remounted his horse and went off at a gallop.

About ten in the morning, the servants of Don Antonio de Carrera put the horses to the berlin, and a few minutes after the old gentleman came forth.

He gave his arm to a lady, so wrapped up in her veil and mantua that it was literally impossible to see anything of her face or divine the elegance of her form.

So soon as the young lady was comfortably seated in the berlin, Don Antonio turned to the officer who had hurried up to him.

"We will start whenever you please, señor lieutenant," he said to him.

Don José bowed.

The escort mounted: the old gentleman then entered the carriage, the door of which was closed by a footman who seated himself by the side of the coachman: four other well armed valets got up behind the carriage.

"Forward!" the officer shouted.

One half the escort went in front, the other half formed the rear guard. The driver lashed his horses, and carriage and horsemen soon disappeared in a cloud of dust.

"May heaven protect them," the ventero muttered, as he crossed himself and tossed in his hand two gold ounces given him by Don Antonio: "the old gentleman is a worthy man, but unfortunately Don José Dominquez is with him, and I am greatly afraid that his escort will be fatal to him."

CHAPTER III

THE SALTEADORES

In the meanwhile the carriage rolled along the Orizaba road, surrounded by its escort. But at a little distance from that town it turned off and reached by a short cut the Puebla road, along which it advanced in the direction of the defiles of Las Cumbres: while going at full speed along the dusty road, the two travellers caroused.

The lady who accompanied the old gentleman was a girl of sixteen or seventeen years at the most; her delicate features, her blue eyes bordered by long lashes which, in falling traced a brown semicircle on her velvety cheeks, her straight nose with its pink or flexible nostrils, her small mouth, whose coral lips when parted allowed a glimpse of her pearly teeth, her slightly dimpled chin, her pale complexion rendered even paler by the silky tresses of raven hair which surrounded her face and fell on her shoulders, produced one of those pale and attractive countenances, which are only seen in equinoctial countries, and which, while not possessing the piquancy of the frail beauties of our northern climes, have that irresistible attraction which makes one dream of the angel in the woman, and produces not only love but adoration.

Gracefully reclining in a corner of her carriage, half buried in masses of muslin, she allowed her eyes to wander pensively over the country, only answering absently and in monosyllables the remarks which her father addressed to her.

The old gentleman, though he affected a certain assurance, appeared, however, rather restless.

"I tell you, Dolores," he said, "all this is not clear in spite of the repeated affirmations of the heads of the Veracruz government, and the protection they feign to grant me. I have no confidence in them."

"Why not, papa?" the young lady asked carelessly.

"For a thousand reasons: the principal one is that I am a Spaniard, and you know that unfortunately at the present time, that name is a further motive for the hatred the Mexicans feel against Europeans generally."

"That is only too true, papa, but permit me to ask one question."

"Pray do so, Dolores."

"Well, I should like you to tell me the urgent motive which induced you to leave Veracruz suddenly, and take this journey with me, more especially, when usually you never take anyone with you on your excursions."

"The motive is very simple, my child, serious interests claim my presence at Mexico, where I must be as soon as possible. On the other hand, the political horizon is daily growing darker, and I reflected that a residence at our Hacienda del Arenal might become ere long, dangerous for our family. I therefore have resolved that, after leaving you at Puebla with our relation Don Luis de Pezal, whose god-daughter you are, and who loves you dearly, to push on to Arenal, where I shall take up your brother Melchior, and convey you to the capital, where it will be easy for us to find effectual protection, in the event, unhappily too easy to foresee, of the constituted power being suddenly overthrown and that of Veracruz substituted for it."

"And you have no other motive, but that, papa?" the young lady said, leaning forward, with a slight smile.

"What other motive could I have but what I have just told you, my dear Dolores?"

"You see I do not know, papa, since I ask you."

"You are a curious niña," he continued laughingly, shaking his finger at her, "you would like to make me confess my secret."

"Then you have a secret, papa?"

"That is possible; but for the present you must be satisfied with knowing so much, for I shall not tell it to you."

"Really, dear papa?"

"I pledge you my word."

"Oh, in that case I will not press you. I know too well that when you put on your big voice and knit your brows, it is useless to do so."

"You are a madcap, Dolores."

"No matter. I should have liked to know why you assumed a false name for this journey."

"Oh! I have no objection to tell you that: my name is too well known, as that of a rich man, for me to venture to carry it across country when so many bandits are swarming on the roads."

"You had no other motive?"

"No other, my dear child: I believe that is sufficient, and that prudence urged me to act as I have done."

"Very good, papa," she replied, shaking her head with a pout: "but," she suddenly exclaimed, "I fancy, papa, that the carriage is slackening its speed."

"It is true," the old gentleman answered, "what is the meaning of this?"

He pulled down the glass and thrust out his head, but could see nothing: the berlin was at this moment entering the defile of the Cumbres, and the road made so many winds, that it was impossible to see more than thirty yards before or behind. The old gentleman called up one of the servants who rode close to the carriage.

"What is the matter, Sanchez?" the traveller asked. "I fancy we are not going so fast as before."

"That is true, señor amo," Sanchez answered, "since we left the plain, we have not been advancing so rapidly, though I do not know the reason: the soldiers of our escort appear alarmed, and are talking together in a low voice, while incessantly looking round them: it is evident that they fear some danger."

"Could the salteadores or guerillas who infest the roads think of attacking us?" the old gentleman said with ill-disguised anxiety, "Pray inquire, Sanchez – Hem! The spot would be capitally chosen for a surprise, still, our escort is numerous, and unless they have an understanding with the bandits, I doubt whether the latter would venture to bar our way. Come, Sanchez, cross-question the soldiers adroitly, and report to me what you learn."

The servant bowed, checked his horse to let the carriage pass him, and then prepared to carry out the commission with which his master had intrusted him.

But Sanchez caught up the berlin again almost immediately: his features were distorted, his panting voice hissed between his teeth which were clenched by terror, and a cadaverous pallor covered his face.

"We are lost, señor amo," he muttered, as he bent down to the carriage window.

"Lost!" the old gentleman exclaimed with a nervous tremor, and giving his daughter, who was dumb with terror, a glance charged with the most impassioned paternal love: "Lost! You must be mad, Sanchez, explain yourself, in Heaven's name."

"It is unnecessary, mi amo," the poor fellow stammered. "Here is Señor Don José Dominquez, the chief of the escort, coming up: without doubt he will inform you of what is taking place."

"What is it? Better, on my soul, a certainty however terrible its nature, than such anxiety."

The carriage had halted on a species of platform, about one hundred yards square: the old gentleman looked out: the escort still surrounded, the berlin, but seemed to be doubled: instead of twenty horsemen there were forty.

The traveller understood that he had fallen into a trap: that any resistance would be madness, and that the only chance of safety lay in submission: still, as in spite of his age, he was endowed with a firm character and energetic mind, he would not thus allow himself vanquished at the first collision, and resolved to try and render his troublesome position as agreeable as he could.

After tenderly embracing his daughter, and recommending her to remain quiet and not interfere, whatever might happen, he opened the carriage door, and actively sprang into the road, with a revolver in each hand. The soldiers, though surprised at the action, did not make a move to oppose it, but remained immovable in their ranks.

The traveller's four servants ranged themselves behind him unhesitatingly, with their rifles in readiness to fire on receiving their master's order.

Sanchez had spoken truly; Don José Dominquez was coming up at a gallop; but he was not alone, another horseman accompanied him.

The latter was a short, thick set man, with stern features and a sidelong glance: the reddish tinge of his complexion proved him to be a full blooded Indian: he wore the sumptuous uniform of a colonel in a regular army.

The traveller at once recognised this unpleasant personage as Don Felipe Neri Irzabal, one of the guerillero chiefs of Juárez' party; he had met him twice or thrice at Veracruz.

It was with a nervous start and a thrill of terror that the old gentleman awaited the arrival of the two men; still, when they were only a few paces from him, instead of allowing them to question him, he was the first to speak.

"Hola, Caballeros," he shouted to them in a haughty voice, "what is the meaning of this, and why do you thus compel to interrupt my journey?"

"You shall learn, my dear sir," the guerillero replied with a grin; "and in the first place, that you may know at once what you have to expect, I arrest you in the name of the country."

"Arrest me! You?" the old gentleman protested. "By what right, pray?"

"By what right?" the other repeated with his ill-omened grin; "Viva Cristo! I might, if I thought proper, reply that it was by the right of force, and the reason would be peremptory, I imagine."

"Certainly," the traveller replied sarcastically, "and I presume it is the only one you can invoke."

"Well, you are mistaken, my good sir; I do not invoke it, but arrest you as a spy, convicted of high treason."

"Nonsense, you are mad, Señor Coronel. I a traitor and a spy!"

"Señor, for some time past the government of his most gracious Excellency, President Juárez, has had its eye on you; your movements have been watched; we know for what motive you so hurriedly left Veracruz, and with what object you are going to Mexico."

"I am going to Mexico on commercial business, and the President is well aware of the fact, as he Himself signed my safe conduct, and the escort that accompanies me was graciously granted me by him, without my having the necessity to ask for it."

"All that is true, Señor; our magnanimous President – who always feels a repugnance for rigorous measures – did not wish to have you arrested; he preferred, through consideration for your grey hairs, to leave you means of escape; but your last act of treachery has filled up the measure, and though he has been obliged to force himself to do so, the President recognised the necessity of acting vigorously against you without delay. I was sent after you with orders to arrest you, and this order I now execute."

"And may I know of what treason I am accused?"

"You must know better than anyone else, Señor Don Andrés de la Cruz, the motives which induced you to give up your own name and assume that of Don Antonio de Carrera."

Don Andrés – for such in reality was his name – was startled by this revelation; not that he felt himself guilty, for this change of name had been effected with the assent of the President; but he was confounded by the duplicity of the people who arrested him, and who, for want of better reasons, even played this one to make him fall into an infamous snare, in order to seize on a fortune which they had long coveted.

Don Andrés, however, overcame his emotion, and addressed the guerillero once more.

"Take care of what you are doing, Señor Coronel," he said; "I am not a nobody, and will not let myself be thus despoiled without complaining; there is at Mexico a Spanish ambassador, who will be able to procure me justice."

"I do not know what you mean," Don Felipe answered imperturbably; "If you are alluding to Señor Pachero, I do not think that his protection will be very profitable to you; for this gentleman, who entitles himself ambassador extraordinary of H.M. the Queen of Spain, has thought proper to recognise the government of the traitor Miramón. Hence we of the other party have nothing to do with him, and his influence with the national President is completely null. However, I have no occasion to discuss the point with you; whatever may happen, I arrest you. Will you surrender, or do you intend to offer a useless resistance? Answer."

Don Andrés surveyed the persons who surrounded him; he saw that he had no hope or support to expect from anyone but his own servants, hence he let his revolvers fall at his feet, and folded his arms on his chest.

"I surrender to force," he said in a firm voice; "but I protest before all those who surround me against the violence which is done me."

"Pray protest, my dear sir, you are quite at liberty to do so, and it is not of the slightest consequence to me. Don José Dominquez," he added, addressing the officer who had calmly and carelessly witnessed this scene, "we will at once proceed to a minute inspection of the baggage, and, above all, the papers of the prisoner."

The old gentleman shrugged his shoulders contemptuously.

"Well played," he said; "unluckily you are a little too late, caballero."

"What do you mean?"

"Only this, that the money and securities you expect to find in my baggage are no longer there. I knew you too well, señor, not to have taken my precautions in the provision of what is happening at this moment."

"Maldición!" exclaimed the guerillero, as he smote the pommel of his saddle with his fist; "Devil of a gachupeico; do not fancy you will escape in this way. I will know where you have hidden your treasures, even if I am obliged to flay you alive."

"Try it," Don Andrés said ironically, and he turned his back on him.

The bandit had revealed himself. The guerillero, after the outbreak into which his avarice had led him; had no reason to affect moderation toward a man whom he intended to plunder in such an audaciously cynical manner.

"Very good," he said, "we shall see," and bending down to Don José's ear, he whispered to him for a few minutes.

The two bandits were doubtless concerting together the most effectual means by which to force the Spaniard to reveal his secret, and place himself at their mercy.

"Don Andrés," the guerillero said a moment after with a nervous grin; "since that is the case, I will venture to interrupt your journey; before returning to Veracruz, we will proceed together to your hacienda of Arenal, where we shall be able to discuss our business far more comfortably than on this high road; be good enough to get into your carriage again, and we will start; besides, your daughter, the charming Dolores, doubtless requires to be re-assured."

The old gentleman turned pale, for he comprehended all the horrible extent of the threat which the bandit made him; he raised his eyes to Heaven, and prepared to return to the carriage.

But at the same instant a furious galloping was heard. The soldiers moved out of the way in terror, and a horseman, coming up at full speed, dashed like a tornado into the centre of the circle formed round the berlin.

This horseman was masked, a black veil entirely covered his face. He suddenly pulled up his horse on its hind legs, and fixing on the guerillero eyes that flashed like live coals through the holes in the veil, he asked in a sharp, menacing voice —

"What is going on here?"

By an instinctive gesture, the guerillero gave a pull at his bridle, and made his horse recoil without replying.

The soldiers and the officer himself crossed themselves in terror, and muttered in a low voice —

"El Rayo! El Rayo!"

"I asked you a question," the unknown said, after a few moments of expectation.

The forty odd men who surrounded him piteously hung their heads, and, gradually falling back, considerably enlarged the circle, as they cordially felt no desire to enter into a discussion with this mysterious personage.

Don Andrés felt hope return to his heart; a secret foreboding warned him that the sudden arrival of this stranger, though it might not entirely change his position, would at least produce a more advantageous phase for himself; moreover, he fancied that he could confusedly recall the stranger's voice, though it was impossible for him to remember where he had heard it. Hence, while everybody else fell back in terror, he, on the contrary, approached the stranger with an instinctive eagerness, for which he could not account.

Don José Dominquez, the commander of the escort, had disappeared; he had fled disgracefully.

CHAPTER IV

EL RAYO

At the period when our story takes place, one man in Mexico had the privilege of concentrating on himself the curiosity, fears, and, more than all, the sympathy of all.

This man was El Rayo, that is to say, the Thunder.

Who was El Rayo? Whence did he come? What did he do?

These three questions, short though they were, no one could have answered with certainty.

And yet a most extraordinary number of legends was current about him.

We will tell in a few words the facts known about him.

Toward the close of 1857 he had suddenly appeared on the road that runs from Mexico to Veracruz, the police control of which he undertook in his fashion, stopping convoys and mail coaches, protecting or levying blackmail on the passengers, that is to say, in the second event, obliging the rich to bleed their purses slightly in favour of their companions less favoured than themselves by fortune, and forcing the leaders of escorts to defend the persons they were ordered to accompany against the attacks of the salteadores.

No one could have said whether he was young or old, handsome or ugly, brown or fair, for his face had never been seen uncovered. As for his nationality, it is equally impossible to determine, for he spoke with the same facility and elegance Castilian, English, French, German and Italian.

This mysterious personage was perfectly well informed about everything that occurred in the territory of the republic; he knew not only the name and social position of the travellers with whom he thought proper to have dealings, but was also acquainted with certain peculiar facts about them which often rendered them very ill at ease.

A stranger thing than any we have yet mentioned was, that El Rayo was always alone, and never hesitated to bar the way of his adversaries, no matter what their number might be. We must add that the influence which his presence exercised over the latter was so great, that the mere sight of him sufficed to check any wish of resistance, and that a threat from him made a shudder of terror course through the veins of those whom he addressed.

The two presidents of the republic, while carrying on a deadly war to supplant each other, had each separately tried on several occasions to deliver the highway from so troublesome a caballero, who seemed to them a dangerous rival; but all their attempts to obtain this result had failed in a deplorable manner. El Rayo, being put on his guard, no one knew how, and perfectly informed as to the movements of the soldiers sent in search of him, always appeared suddenly before them, foiled their tricks, and compelled them to make a disgraceful retreat.

On one occasion, however, the Government of Juárez hoped that it was all over with El Rayo, and that he could not escape the measures taken to seize him.

It was learned that for some nights past he had been sleeping at a rancho situated a short distance from Paso-del-Macho; a detachment of twenty dragoons, commanded by Carvayal, one of the most cruel and determined guerilleros, was immediately, and with the utmost secrecy, sent to Paso-del-Macho.

The commandant had orders to shoot his prisoner so soon as he seized him, doubtless to prevent him from making any attempt to escape while being conveyed from Paso-del-Macho to Veracruz.

The detachment, therefore, set out in all haste; the dragoons, to whom a large reward was promised if they succeeded in their awkward expedition, were perfectly prepared to do their duty, as they felt ashamed of having been so long held in check by one man, and were burning to take their revenge at last.

The soldiers arrived in sight of the rancho; when about two leagues from El Paso they had met a monk, who, with his hood drawn over his face, and mounted on a sorry mule, was trotting on, and telling his beads.

The commandant invited the monk to join his squadron, which offer the monk accepted with some degree of hesitation. At the moment when the detachment, which was marching in rather loose order, reached the rancho, the monk dismounted.

"What are you doing, padre?" the commandant asked him.

"As you see, my son, I am getting off my mule; business calls me to a rancho a short distance off, and while leaving you to continue your journey, I ask your permission to leave you, while thanking you for the pleasant company you have afforded me since our meeting."

"Oh, oh!" the commandant said, with a coarse laugh, "That will not do, señor padre; we cannot separate in that manner."

"Why so, my son?" the monk asked, approaching the officer, though still holding his mule.

"For a very simple reason, my worthy Fray –"

"Pancraccio, at your service, señor caballero," the monk said, with a bow.

"Pancraccio – very good," the officer continued. "I want you, or, to speak more correctly, your good offices: in a word, I want you to shrive a man, who is about to die."

"Who is it?"

"Do you know El Rayo, señor padre?"

"Santa Virgin! Of course I know him, illustrious commandant."

"Well, it is he who is going to die."

"Have you arrested him?"

"Not yet; but in a few minutes it will be done, as I am seeking him."

"Nonsense! Where is he, then?"

"Why, there, in that rancho you can see," the officer replied, bending down complacently to the monk, and extending his arm in the direction he indicated to him.

"Are you sure of it, illustrious commandant?"

"¡Caray! Of course I am."

"Well, I fancy you are mistaken."

"Ah! What do you mean? Do you know anything?"

"Certainly I know something, for I am El Rayo, accursed ladrón!"

And before the officer, startled at this sudden revelation, which he was so far from expecting, had regained his coolness, El Rayo had seized him by the leg, hurled him on the ground, leaped into his saddle, and drawing two revolvers concealed under his gown, he dashed at full speed upon the detachment, firing with both hands simultaneously, and uttering his terrible war cry – "El Rayo! El Rayo!"

The soldiers, who were even more surprised than their officer by this rude, and so unexpected attack, disbanded, and fled in all directions.

El Rayo, after passing through the whole detachment, of whom he killed seven, and hurled an eighth to the ground with his horse's chest, suddenly checked the rapid pace of his steed, and after halting for a few minutes a hundred yards off with an air of defiance, seeing that the dragoons did not pursue him – which the poor horrified fellows had no intention of doing, as they only thought of flying, and left their officer in the lurch – he pulled his horse round, and returned to the officer, who was still lying on the ground as if dead.

"Eh, Commandant!" he said to him, as he dismounted, "Here is your horse; take it back, it will serve you to reform your soldiers; for my part I require it no longer. I am going to wait for you at the rancho, where, if you still have a desire to arrest me, and have me shot, you will find, me ready to receive you until eight o'clock tomorrow morning; so good-bye for the present."

He then waved his hand to him, bestrode his mule, and proceeded to the rancho, which he at once entered.

We need not add that he slept peacefully till the morning, and that the officer and soldiers so eager in his pursuit did not dare come to disturb his rest; they had gone back to Veracruz, without once looking round.

Such was the man whose unexpected apparition among the escort of the berlin had caused such great terror to the soldiers, and entirely chilled their courage.

El Rayo stood for an instant calm, cold, and frowning in the face of the soldiers grouped in front of him, and then said, in a sharp, distinct voice —

"Señores, I fancy you have forgotten that no one but myself has the right to give orders on the high roads of the Republic. Señor Don Felipe Neri," he added, turning to the officer, who was standing motionless a few paces from him, "you can turn back with your men; the road is perfectly free as far as Puebla — you understand me, I suppose?"

"I do understand you, Caballero; still, I fancy," the Colonel replied, with some hesitation, "that my duty orders me to escort —"

"Not a word more," El Rayo interrupted him violently; "weigh my words carefully, and mind you profit by them; those whom you expected to meet a few paces further on are no longer there; the corpses of several of them are serving as food for the vultures. You have lost the game for today, so take my advice, and turn back."

The officer again hesitated, and then, urging his horse forward a few yards, he said, in a voice which emotion caused to tremble —

"Señor, I know not whether you are a man or a demon thus alone to impose your will on brave men; to die is nothing for a soldier when he is struck in the chest when facing the enemy; once already I have recoiled before you, but do not wish to do so again, so kill me today, but do not dishonour me."

"I like to hear you speak thus, Don Felipe," El Rayo coldly answered, "for bravery becomes a soldier; in spite of your plundering instincts and bandit habits I see with pleasure that you do not lack courage, and I do not despair of converting you some day, if a bullet does not brutally cut your thread of life, and suddenly arrest your good intentions. Order your soldiers, who are trembling, like the poltroons they are, to fall back a dozen paces, for I am going to give you the satisfaction you desire."

"Ah, Caballero!" the officer exclaimed, "Can it be possible that you consent?"

"To stake my life against yours?" El Rayo interrupted him, mockingly — "Why not? You wish for a lesson, and that lesson you are about to receive."

Without losing an instant the officer turned his horse and ordered his troopers to fall back, a manoeuvre which they performed with the most praiseworthy eagerness.

Don Andrés de la Cruz, for we will now restore him his true name, had looked on with great interest at this scene, in which he had not as yet ventured to interfere.

When he saw the turn that matters were taking, he thought it, however, his duty to hazard a few observations.

"Pardon me, Caballero," he said, addressing the mysterious stranger, "while sincerely thanking you for your intervention in my favour, permit me to remark that I have been delayed in this defile for a long time already, and that I should like to continue my journey, in order to protect my daughter from danger, as soon as possible."

"No danger threatens Doña Dolores, señor," El Rayo coldly answered; "this delay of only a few minutes cannot possibly have any injurious consequences for her; besides, I wish you to witness this combat, which is to some extent fought in support of your cause, hence I beg you to have patience. But stay, here is Don Felipe returning; the affair will not take long. Fancy that you are betting on a cock fight, and I am convinced that you will take pleasure in what is going to happen."

"But still —" Don Andrés interposed.

"You would disoblige me by insisting further, caballero," El Rayo interrupted him, drily. "You have, as I know, excellent revolvers which Devismes sent you from Paris; be kind enough to lend one of them to Señor Don Felipe. They are loaded, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir," Don Andrés replied, offering the officer one of his pistols.

The latter took it, turned it over in his hands, and then raised his head with an air of disappointment.

"I do not know how to use these weapons," he said.

"Oh, that is very easy," El Rayo courteously replied, "and you will be perfectly acquainted with their mechanism in an instant. Señor Don Andrés, be kind enough to explain to this caballero the very simple management of these weapons."

The Spaniard obeyed, and the officer at once comprehended the explanation that was given him.

"Now, Señor Don Felipe," El Rayo resumed, still cold and impassive, "listen to me attentively. I consent to give you this satisfaction on the condition that whatever the issue of the combat may be, you agree to turn back immediately after, leaving Señor Don Andrés and his daughter at liberty to continue their journey if they may think proper: do you agree to this?"

"Certainly, señor."

"Very good. Now, then, this is what you and I are going to do; so soon as we have dismounted we will station ourselves twenty paces from each other: does that distance suit you?"

"Perfectly, Excellency."

"Good; then at a signal given by me, you will fire the six shots of your revolver; after that I will fire, but only once, as we are in a hurry."

"Pardon me, Excellency, but suppose I kill you with these six shots?"

"You will not kill me, señor," El Rayo answered coldly.

"Do you think so?"

"I am sure of it; to kill a man of my stamp, Señor Don Felipe," El Rayo said, with an accent of cutting irony, "a firm heart and a hand of iron are required: you possess neither."

Don Felipe made no reply, but devoured by a dull rage, with pale brow and frowning gesture, he resolutely went to place himself twenty paces from his adversary.

El Rayo dismounted and placed himself facing the officer, with his head thrown back, his right leg advanced, and his arms folded on his back.

"Now," he said, "pay great attention to aiming true; revolvers, good though they are, generally have the fault of carrying a little too high; do not hurry yourself. Are you ready? Well, then, fire."

Don Felipe did not let the invitation be repeated, but rapidly fired three shots.

"Too quick – much too quick," El Rayo cried to him; "I did not even hear the whistle of the bullets. Come, be calmer, and try to make good use of the three shots left you."

All eyes were fixed, all chests were panting. The officer, demoralized by the coolness of his adversary and the ill success of his firing, felt involuntarily fascinated by the black motionless statue before him, whose eyes he could see sparkling like live coals through the holes of the mask; drops of cold perspiration gathered on his hair, which stood erect with horror, and his former assurance had abandoned him.

Still, anger and pride gave him the necessary strength to conceal from the spectators the frightful agony he was suffering: by a supreme effort of the will he resumed an apparent calmness, and fired again.

"That is better," El Rayo said mockingly, "but a little too high. Try another."

Exasperated by this fire, Don Felipe pulled the trigger.

The bullet struck the rock about an inch above the stranger's head.

Only one bullet was now left in the revolver.

"Advance five paces," said El Rayo; "perhaps you will not then throw away your last chance."

Without replying to this cutting sarcasm, the officer bounded like a wild beast, stopped at fifteen paces, and fired.

"It is now my turn," the stranger said, as he fell back five paces to re-establish the distance; "you forgot to take your hat off, caballero, and that is a want of courtesy which I cannot tolerate."

Then drawing one of the pistols thrust through his belt, he cocked it, stretched out his arm and fired without taking the trouble of aiming. The officer's hat was hurled from his head and rolled in the dust.

Don Felipe uttered a howl like a wild beast.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, "You are a demon!"

"No," El Rayo answered, "I am an honest man. Now, begone. I leave you your life."

"Yes, I will go; but whether you are man or fiend, I will kill you. I swear it, even if I have to pursue you to the lowest pit of hell."

El Rayo went up to him, seized him violently by the arm, drew him on one side, and lifting the veil which covered his features, shewed him his face.

"You recognise me now, I suppose?" he said to him in a hollow voice; "But remember that now you have seen me face to face, our first meeting will be mortal. Begone."

Don Felipe made no reply; he remounted his horse, placed himself at the head of his terrified soldiers, and started at a gallop along the Orizaba road.

Five minutes later only the travellers and their servants remained on the plateau. El Rayo, doubtless taking advantage of the moment of surprise and disorder produced by the close of this scene, had disappeared.

CHAPTER V

THE HACIENDA DEL ARENAL

Four days had passed since the events recorded in our last chapter. Count Ludovic de la Saulay and Oliver were still riding side by side, but the place of the scene had completely changed.

All around them extended an immense plain covered with a luxuriant vegetation, intersected by a few water courses, on the banks of which were huddled the humble cabins of several unimportant pueblos; numerous flocks browsed here and there, watched by mounted vaqueros, bearing the reata on the saddle, a machete at their side, and a long lance in its rest. Along a road, whose windings formed a yellow track on the green carpet of the plain, appeared like black dots, teams of mules hurrying toward the snowy mountains, which closed in the horizon in the distance; gigantic clumps of trees diversified the landscape, and a little to the right, on the top of a rather high hill, proudly rose the massive walls of an important hacienda.

The two travellers were slowly following the last windings of a narrow track that ran down with a gentle slope to the plain; the curtains of trees which masqued the view suddenly falling back on the right and left, the landscape appeared suddenly to rise before them, as if it had been created by the magic wand of a mighty enchanter.

The Count stopped and burst into a cry of admiration at the sight of the magnificent kaleidoscope which was displayed before them.

"Ah, ah," said Oliver, "I was aware that you were an amateur, and it was a surprise I prepared for you; how do you like it?"

"It is admirable; I never saw anything so beautiful," the young man exclaimed enthusiastically.

"Yes," the adventurer resumed with a stifled sigh, "it is very fair for a country spoilt by the hand of man. As I have told you several times, it is only in the savannahs of the great Mexican desert that it is possible to see nature as God has made it; this is only theatrical scenery in comparison; a conventional landscape which signifies nothing."

The Count smiled at this sally.

"Whether conventional or not, I consider this view admirable."

"Yes, yes, I repeat, it is a very fair success. Think how lovely this landscape must have been in the early days of the world, since, in spite of all their clumsy efforts, men have not succeeded in entirely spoiling it."

The young man's laughter was redoubled at these words.

"On my faith," he said, "you are a charming companion, Mr. Oliver; and when I part from you, I shall often regret your agreeable company."

"In that case get ready to regret me, my lord," he replied with a smile, "for we have only a few minutes left to pass together."

"How so?"

"An hour at the most; but let us continue our journey. The sun is beginning to grow hot, and the shadow of the trees down there will be very agreeable to us."

They loosened their horses' bridles, and slowly went down the almost insensible incline which would lead them to the plain.

"Are you not beginning to feel the want of a rest after your fatigue, my lord?" the adventurer asked, as he carelessly rolled a cigarette.

"Really no, thanks to you; this journey has seemed to me delightful, although slightly monotonous."

"How monotonous?"

"Well, in France frightful stories are told about countries beyond the sea, where bandits are found in ambush every step you take, and you cannot go ten leagues without risking your life twenty times; hence it is with some degree of apprehension that we land on these shores. I had my head stuffed with stories to make one's hair stand on end. I was prepared for surprises, ambushes, desperate fights, and all that sort of thing. Well, after all, I have made the most prosaic journey in the world, without the slightest accident which I could narrate hereafter."

"You are not yet out of Mexico."

"That is true; but my illusions are destroyed. I no longer believe in Mexican bandits or ferocious Indians; it is not worth the while to come so far to see nothing more than is to be seen in this country. Confound travelling! Four days ago I believed that we were going to have an adventure; while you left me alone I formed tremendous plans of battle, and then at the end of two long hours of absence, you returned with a smiling face to announce to me that you were mistaken, and that you had seen nothing, and I was obliged to dismiss all my warlike intentions. This is really having ill luck."

"What would you have?" the adventurer replied, with an accent of almost imperceptible irony; "Civilization is so gaining on us, that we nowadays resemble the peoples of the old world, with the exception of a few slight shades."

"Laugh away, make fun of me, I give you full liberty to do so; but let us return to our subject, if you please."

"I wish nothing more, my lord. Did you not say among other things, while talking with me, that you intended to go to the Hacienda del Arenal, and that if you did not turn from the road instead of pushing straight on to Mexico, it was because you were afraid of losing yourself in a country which you do not know, and of not meeting persons capable of putting you on the right track again?"

"I did say so, sir."

"Oh! Since that is the case, the question is becoming extraordinarily simplified."

"How so?"

"Look before you, my lord. What do you see?"

"A magnificent building that resembles a fortress."

"Well, that building is the Hacienda del Arenal." The Count uttered a cry of astonishment.

"Can it be possible? You are not deceiving me?" he asked.

"For what purpose?" the adventurer said gently.

"Why! In this way the surprise is even more charming than I at first supposed it."

"Ah! By the bye. I forgot one circumstance, which, however is of some importance to you; your servants and all your baggage have been at the hacienda for the last two days."

"But how were my servants informed?"

"I warned them."

"You have hardly left me."

"That is true, only for a few minutes, but that was sufficient."

"You are an amiable companion, Mr. Oliver, I thank you sincerely for all your attentions to me."

"Nonsense, you are joking."

"Do you know the owner of this hacienda?"

"Don Andrés de la Cruz? Very well."

"What sort of man is he?"

"Morally or physically?"

"Morally."

"A true hearted and intelligent man, he does a great deal of good, and is accessible to the poor as well as the rich."

"Hum! You are drawing a magnificent portrait."

"It is below the truth; he has a great many enemies."

"Enemies?"

"Yes, all the scoundrels in the country, and thanks to God, they swarm in this blessed country."

"And his daughter, Dolores?"

"Is a delicious girl of sixteen, even better hearted than she is beautiful, innocent and pure; her eyes reflect heaven, she is an angel whom God has allowed to descend on earth, doubtless to shame human beings."

"You will accompany me to the hacienda, sir, I suppose?" said the Count.

"No, I shall not see Señor don Andrés; in a few minutes I shall have the honour of taking leave of you."

"To meet again soon, I hope!"

"I dare not promise it you, my lord."

They rode on silently, side by side, for a few moments longer.

They had hurried on their horses, and were now rapidly nearing the hacienda, whose buildings now appeared in their full extent.

It was one of those magnificent residences built in the earliest times of the conquest, half palace, half fortress, such as the Spaniards erected at that day on their estates, in order to hold the Indians in check, and resist their attacks during the numerous revolts which left a bloody stain on the first years of the European invasion.

The *almanas*, or battlements that crowned the walls, testified to the nobility of the owner of the hacienda; as gentlemen alone possessed the right of placing battlements on their mansions, and were very jealous of their right.

The dome of the hacienda chapel which rose above the walls, could be seen glistening in the ardent sunbeams.

The nearer the travellers approached, the more lively the landscape appeared; at each instant they met horsemen, arrieros with their mules. Indians running with burdens hanging on their back by a thong passed round their forehead. Then came herds, driven by vaqueros, to change their pasturage, monks trotting on mules, women, children, in a word busy persons of all ranks and sexes, who were coming and going, and crossing each other in all directions.

When they reached the foot of the hill crowned by the hacienda, the adventurer stopped his horse at the moment when it was entering the path that led to the main gate of the hacienda.

"My lord," he said, turning to the young man, "we have now reached our journey's end; permit me to take my leave of you."

"Not before you have promised to see me again."

"I cannot promise that, Count, as our roads are diametrically opposite. Besides, it will perhaps be better if we never meet again."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing insulting or personal to you; permit me to shake your hand ere we part."

"Oh, most willingly," the young man exclaimed, as he warmly offered him his hand.

"And now farewell – farewell, once again, time flies rapidly, and I ought to have been a long way from here before now."

The adventurer bent over his horse's neck, and darted with the speed of an arrow along a track in which he speedily disappeared.

The Count looked after him as long as it was possible to see him; and when he was hidden by a turn in the road, the young man heaved a sigh.

"What a singular character," he muttered in a low voice. "Oh! I shall see him again, it must be."

The young man lightly gave his horse the spur, and entered the path, which would lead him in a few minutes to the top of the hill, and the principal gate of the hacienda.

The young man dismounted in the first courtyard, and handed his horse to a groom, who led it away.

At the moment when the Count was walking towards a large door surmounted by a verandah, and which gave admission to the apartment, Don Andrés went out, ran eagerly toward him, pressed him warmly to his heart, and embraced him several times, while saying, —

"Heaven be praised! Here you are, at last! We were beginning to be in a mortal anxiety about you."

The Count, thus suddenly taken by surprise, had allowed himself to be seized and embraced without exactly comprehending what was happening to him, or with whom he had to deal; but the old gentleman, perceiving the amazement he felt, and which, in spite of his efforts, he could not succeed in completely concealing, did not leave him long in embarrassment, but stated his name, adding —

"I am your near relative, my dear Count — your cousin; hence, stand on no ceremony — act here as if you were at home: this house, with all it contains, is at your disposal, and belongs to you."

The young man began protesting, but Don Andrés once more interrupted him.

"I am an old fool," he said. "I am keeping you here, listening to my maundering, and forget that you have had a long ride, and must need rest. Come, I wish to have the pleasure of conducting you myself to your apartments, which have been ready for you for some days past."

"My dear cousin," the Count answered; "I thank you a thousand times for your kind attention; but I think it would be only polite for you to introduce me to Doña Dolores, ere I retire."

"There is no hurry for that, my dear Count: my daughter is at this moment shut up in her boudoir with her women. Let me announce you first, for I know better than you what is proper under the circumstances, — and go and rest yourself."

"Very well, my cousin; I will follow you. I will indeed confess, since you are so good as to place me so thoroughly at my ease, that I shall not be at all sorry to take a few hours' rest."

"Did I not know it?" Don Andrés replied, gaily; "But all young people are the same — they doubt nothing."

The hacendero thereupon led his guest to the apartments which had been tastefully prepared and furnished under the immediate inspection of Don Andrés, and were intended to serve as the Count's abode during the whole of the period he might be pleased to spend at the hacienda.

The suite of rooms, though not large, was arranged in a very sensible and comfortable manner, considering the resources of the country.

It consisted of four rooms. The Count's bedroom, with dressing room and bathroom attached, a study, serving as a drawing room, an antechamber, and a room for the Count's valets; so that he might have them within call by day and night.

By means of a few partitions, the suite had been separated from and rendered entirely independent of the other apartments in the hacienda. It was entered by three doors, one opening on the vestibule, the second into the common court yard, and the third leading by a flight of steps to the magnificent huerta, which, through its extent, might pass for a park.

The Count, newly landed in Mexico, and who, like all foreigners, formed a false idea of a country which he did not know, was far from expecting to find at the Hacienda del Arenal a lodging so convenient, and in such conformity with his rather serious tastes and habits, hence he was really ravished by everything he saw. He warmly thanked Don Andrés for the trouble he had been kind enough to take in rendering his stay in the house agreeable to him, and assured him that he was far from expecting so cordial a reception.

Don Andrés de la Cruz, highly pleased with this compliment, rubbed his hands in glee, and at length withdrew, leaving his relative at liberty to repose, if he thought proper.

When left alone with his valet, the Count, after changing his dress, and assuming another more suitable to the country than the one he was wearing, questioned his servant as to the way in which he had performed the journey from Veracruz, and the reception offered him on his arrival at the hacienda.

This valet was a man of about the same age as the Count, deeply attached to his master, whose foster brother he was; a powerfully-built fellow, tolerably good looking, very brave, and possessing a quality very precious in a servant – that of seeing nothing, hearing nothing, and only speaking when he received an express order to do so, and even then he did it as concisely as possible.

The Count was very fond of him, and placed unbounded confidence in him. His name was Raimbaut, and was a Basque; continually particular about etiquette, and professing a profound respect for his master. He never spoke of him save in the third person, and at whatever hour of the day or night the Count might call him, he never presented himself before him, unless dressed in the strict garb he had adopted, and which was composed of a black coat with a stand-up collar and gold buttons, a black waistcoat, black knee breeches, white silk stockings, buckled shoes, and white cravat. Thus dressed, with the exception of powder, which he did not wear, Raimbaut presented an amazing likeness to the steward of a great nobleman in the last century.

The Count's second servant was a tall lad, twenty years of age, robust and sturdy – godson of Raimbaut, who had undertaken to train him for his duties. He did the heavy work, and wore the Count's livery – blue and silver: his name was Lanca Ibarru. He was devoted to his master, and awfully afraid of his godfather, for whom he professed a profound veneration. He was active, courageous, crafty, and intelligent; but these qualities were slightly tarnished by his gluttony and pronounced taste for the *dolce far niente*.

Raimbaut's story was a short one. Nothing at all had happened to him, with the exception of the order which a strange man had delivered to him, as from his master, not to continue his journey to Mexico, but to have himself conducted to the Hacienda del Arenal, which order he had obeyed.

The Count recognised the truth of what the adventurer had told him: he dismissed his valet, sat down on a butaca, took up a book, and very shortly after fell fast asleep.

At about four in the afternoon, just as he was waking, Raimbaut entered the room, and announced that Don Andrés de la Cruz was waiting for him to sit down to table, as the hour for the evening meal had arrived.

The Count cast a glance at his toilette, and, preceded by Raimbaut, who acted as his guide, proceeded to the dining room.

CHAPTER VI

THROUGH THE WINDOW

The dining room of the Hacienda del Arenal was a vast, long room, lighted by Gothic windows lined with coloured glass. The walls, covered with oak paneling, rendered black by time, gave it the appearance of a Carthusian refectory in the fifteenth century. An immense horseshoe table, surrounded by benches, except at the upper end, occupied the entire centre of the room.

When Count de la Saulay entered the dining room, the other guests, numbering from twenty to five-and-twenty, were already assembled.

Don Andrés, like many of the great Mexican landowners, had kept up on his estates the custom of making his people eat at the same table with himself.

This patriarchal custom, which has long fallen into desuetude in Europe, was for all that, in our opinion, one of the best our forefathers left us. This community of life drew together the bonds which attach masters to servants, and rendered the latter, so to speak, vassals of the family whose private life they shared up to a certain point.

Don Andrés de la Cruz was standing at the end of the room, between Doña Dolores, his daughter, and Don Melchior, his son.

We will say nothing of Doña Dolores, with whom the reader is already acquainted. Don Melchior was a young man of nearly the same age as the Count. His tall stature and powerful limbs rendered him a gallant gentleman, in the common acceptance of the term. His features were manly and marked, and his beard was black and full. He had a large, well open eye, a fixed and piercing glance: his very brown complexion had a slight olive tinge; the sound of his voice was rather rough, his accent harsh, while his countenance was stern, and its expression became menacing and haughty upon the slightest emotion. His gestures were noble, and his manners distinguished; and he wore the Mexican costume in all its purity.

So soon as the introductions had been made by Don Andrés, the party took their seats. The hacendero, after bidding Ludovic sit on his right hand, by his daughter's side, made a sign to the latter. She repeated the *Benedicite*, the guests said *Amen*, and the meal commenced.

The Mexicans, like their Spanish ancestors, are extremely sober; they do not drink during meals. It is only when the dulces or sweets are brought in, that is to say, at dessert, that vessels containing water are placed on the table.

By a delicate attention, Don Andrés offered wine to his French guest, who was waited on by his valet, standing behind him, to the general amazement of the company.

The meal was silent, in spite of the repeated efforts of Don Andrés to animate the conversation. The Count and Don Melchior limited themselves to the exchange of a few conventional phrases, and then held their tongues. Doña Dolores was pale, and seemed to be unwell; she ate hardly anything, and did not utter a syllable.

At length dinner was over. They rose from table, and the servants of the hacienda dispersed to go to their work.

The Count, involuntarily disturbed by the cold and measured reception which Don Melchior had offered him, alleged the fatigue of the journey as a reason for wishing to retire to his apartments.

Don Andrés consented to this with much repugnance. Don Melchior and the Count exchanged a ceremonious bow, and turned their backs on each other. Doña Dolores gave the young man a graceful bow, and the Count withdrew, after warmly shaking the hand which his host held out to him.

It took Count de la Saulay, who was habituated to the comfortable elegance and pleasant relations of Parisian life, to become used to the sad, monotonous, and savage existence at the Hacienda del Arenal.

In spite of the cordial reception which had been given him by Don Andrés de la Cruz and the attention he did not cease to offer him, the young man speedily perceived that his host was the sole person of the family who regarded him favourably.

Doña Dolores, though very polite to him and even gracious in their daily relations when chance brought them together, still seemed to be embarrassed in his presence, and to shun every occasion when he could converse with her in private: so soon as she perceived that her father or brother was leaving the room, in which she happened to be with the Count, she at once broke off the begun conversation, blushing, faltered an excuse, and went away or rather flew away, light and rapid as a bird, and left Ludovic without further ceremony.

This conduct on the part of a girl to whom he had been betrothed from his childhood, for whose sake he had crossed the Atlantic almost against his will, and solely to honour the engagement made by his family in his name, naturally surprised and mortified a man like Count de la Saulay, whom his personal beauty, his wit and even his fortune had not hitherto accustomed to be treated with such strange want of ceremony and such complete contempt by the ladies.

Naturally but little inclined to the marriage which his family wished to force himself into, not feeling at all enamoured of his cousin, whom he had scarce taken the trouble to look at, and whom he was much disposed to consider a fool, on account of her want of tact towards himself, the Count would easily have taken advantage of the repugnance which she seemed to feel for him – would not only have consoled but congratulated himself on the breaking off of his marriage with her, had not his self-esteem been too extensively implicated, in a way very insulting to him.

However great might be the indifference he felt for the young lady, he was offended at the slight effect his dress, manners and luxurious habits had produced on her, and the coldly contemptuous way in which she had listened to his compliments and accepted his advances.

Though sincerely desirous in his heart that this marriage, which displeased him for a thousand reasons, might not be completed, he would still have liked that the rupture, without coming absolutely from him, should not come so distinctly from the young lady, and that circumstances should permit him while retiring with all the honours of war, to feel himself regretted by the girl who was to have been his wife.

Dissatisfied with himself and the persons by whom he was surrounded, feeling himself in a false position, which could not fail to become ridiculous ere long, the Count thought of getting out of it as speedily as possible. But, before provoking a frank and decisive explanation on the part of Don Andrés de la Cruz, who did not seem to suspect in the slightest degree the turn affairs were taking, the Count resolved to know positively what he had to depend on as regarded his affianced; for with that fatuity natural to all men spoiled by facile successes, he felt a mental conviction that it was impossible Doña Dolores would not have loved him, if her heart had not already been captivated by someone else.

This resolution once formed and fully resolved in his mind, the Count, who found himself very unoccupied at the hacienda, set about watching the young lady's conduct, determined, once he had acquired a certainty to retire and return as speedily as possible to France, which country he regretted every day more, and which he repented having so suddenly abandoned, in order to seek so humiliating an adventure two thousand leagues from home.

In spite of her indifference for the Count, we have remarked, however, that Doña Dolores felt herself obliged to be polite and attentive to the Count, although not so amiable as he might have desired: an example which her brother completely dispensed himself from following towards his father's guest, whom he treated with such marked coldness, that it would have been impossible for the Count not to notice it, though he disdained to let it be seen: hence he feigned to take the young man's rough and even brutal manner as natural and perfectly in accord with the manners of the country.

The Mexicans, let us hasten to state, are exquisitely polite, their language is always carefully chosen and their expressions flowery, and with the exception of the difference of dress, it is impossible

to distinguish a man of the people from a person of high rank. Don Melchior de la Cruz, through a singular anomaly, doubtless emanating from his natural sternness, was perfectly different from his countrymen: always gloomy, thoughtful and reserved, he generally only opened his mouth to utter a few sharp words, with a coarse tone and in a rough voice.

From the first moment that they met, Don Melchior and the Count seemed equally little satisfied with each other: the Frenchman appeared too mannered and effeminate to the Mexican and, *per contra*, the latter repulsed the other by the coarseness of his nature and the triviality of his gestures and expressions.

But if there had been only this instinctive antipathy between the two young men, it would probably have disappeared by degrees, and friendly relations would have been established between them, when they knew each other better and could consequently appreciate one another's good qualities; but this was not the case, it was neither indifference nor jealousy that Don Melchior felt for the Count, but a hearty Mexican hatred.

Whence did this hatred spring? What unknown familiarity of the Count had given birth to it? That was Don Melchior's secret.

The young hacendero was completely wrapped up in mysteries: his actions were as gloomy as his countenance: enjoying unbounded liberty, he used and abused it as he pleased to the fullest extent by going in and out without accounting to anybody: it is true that his father and mother, doubtless accustomed to this behaviour, never asked him any questions as to where he had been, or what he had been doing, when he reappeared after an absence which was frequently prolonged for a week.

On such occasions, which were very frequent, he was usually seen returning at the breakfast hour.

He bowed silently to the company, sat down without uttering a syllable, ate, then twisted a cigarette, which he lighted, and then withdrew to his apartments without further notice of the party.

Once or twice Don Andrés, who understood perfectly well how unpolite such conduct was towards his guest, tried to apologise for his son, by throwing the blame of this apparent rudeness on his very serious occupations, which completely absorbed him; but the Count replied that Don Melchior appeared to him a charming cavalier, that he saw nothing but what was perfectly natural in his mode of acting towards him, that the very want of ceremony he displayed was a proof of the friendship which he evidenced for him by treating him not as a stranger, but as a friend and relative, and that he would be most sorry if Don Melchior, on his account, set any restraint on his habits.

Don Andrés, though not duped by his guest's apparent gentleness, had not considered it prudent to dwell on this subject, and it dropped.

Don Melchior was feared by all the people belonging to the hacienda, and, according to all appearance, even by his father.

It was evident that this gloomy young man exercised over all who surrounded him an influence, which though occult, was probably the more formidable on that account, but no one dared to complain, and the Count, who alone might have ventured some observations, did not at all care about doing so for the very simple reason that regarding himself as a stranger spending a little while in Mexico, he felt no inclination to mix himself up in matters or intrigues which did not concern him and could not possibly affect him in the slightest degree.

Nearly two months had elapsed since the young man's arrival at the hacienda: he had passed the time in reading, or riding about the country, on which occasions he was nearly always accompanied by the majordomo of the hacienda, a man of about forty years of age, with a frank and open face, a short, muscular and powerfully built man, who appeared to be very intimate with his masters.

This majordomo, Leo Carral by name, had struck up a great liking for this young Frenchman, whose inexhaustible gaiety and liberality had touched his heart.

During their long rides over the plain, he took pleasure in perfecting the Count in art of riding made him understand the defective principles of the French school, and applied himself to render him a real *hombre de a caballo* and a *jinete* of the first class, just like himself.

We must add that his pupil profited perfectly by his lessons, and not only became within a short time a perfect horseman, but also a first rate shot. Thanks again to the worthy majordomo.

The Count, by the advice of his professor, had adopted the Mexican garb, an elegant and convenient costume, which he wore with unparalleled grace.

Don Andrés de la Cruz rubbed his hands with glee on seeing the man whom he already regarded almost as his son-in-law, assume the garb of the country – a certain proof in his eyes of the Count's intention to settle in Mexico. He had even on this occasion adroitly tried to lead the conversation to the subject he had nearest his heart, that is to say, the young man's marriage, with Doña Dolores. But the Count who was always on his guard, avoided this awkward subject, as he had done on several previous occasions, and Don Andrés withdrew, shaking his head and muttering —

"Yet we must come to an explanation."

It was at least the tenth time since the Count's arrival at the hacienda that Don Andrés de la Cruz promised himself to have an explanation with him, but up to then, the young man had always contrived to elude it.

One night when the Count, who had retired to his apartments, was reading later than his wont, at the moment when he closed his book and prepared to go to bed, raising his eyes accidentally, he fancied he saw a shadow pass before the glass door that opened on the huerta.

The night was advanced, all the inhabitants of the hacienda were or ought to be asleep two hours before, who was this prowler whom fancy impelled to stroll about so late?

Without accounting for the motive that urged him to act so, Ludovic resolved to find out.

He got up from the butaca in which he was seated, took from a table two revolvers, in order to be prepared for any event, and opening the door as softly as he could, he went forth into the huerta and proceeded in the direction where he had seen the suspicious shadow disappear.

The night was magnificent, the moon shed as much light as broad day, and the atmosphere was so transparent, that objects could be perfectly distinguished for a great distance.

As the Count very rarely entered the huerta, and hence was ignorant of its arrangement, he hesitated to enter the walks which he saw running before him in all directions, crossing each other as to form a perfect labyrinth, for he had no inclination to stay out all night, lovely though it was.

He therefore, stopped to reflect, perhaps he was mistaken, had been the dupe of an illusion, and what he had taken for a man's shadow, might possibly be that of a branch agitated by the night breeze, and which the moon beams had caused to dazzle his eyes.

This observation was not only just, but logical, hence the young man carefully guarded himself against yielding to it; at the end of an instant an ironical smile curled his lips and instead of entering the garden, he cautiously slipped along the wall which formed on this side a wall of verdure to the hacienda.

After gliding along thus for about ten minutes, the Count stopped, first to take breath and then to look about him.

"Good," he muttered after looking cautiously around, "I was not mistaken."

He then bent forward, cautiously parted the leaves and branches and looked out.

Almost immediately he drew himself back, suppressing a cry of surprise.

The spot where he was, was exactly opposite the suite of apartments occupied by Doña Dolores de Cruz.

A window in this suite was open, and Doña Dolores leaning on the window ledge, was talking to a man who was standing in the garden, but exactly opposite to her, a distance of scarce two feet separated the speakers, who appeared engaged in a most interesting conversation.

It was impossible for the Count to recognize the man, although he was only a few yards from him. In the first place, he had his back turned to him, and then he was wrapped up in a cloak which completely disguised him.

"Ah!" the Count muttered, "I was not mistaken." In spite of the blow this discovery dealt his vanity, the Count uttered these words with a mental satisfaction at having guessed correctly: this man, whoever he was, could only be a lover.

Still, though the two spoke softly, they did not lower their voices so as to render them inaudible at a short distance, and while blaming himself for the indelicate action he was committing, the Count, excited by vexation and possibly by unconscious jealousy, parted the branches and bent forward again for the purpose of listening.

The young lady was speaking. "Good heaven," she said with emotion, "I tremble, my friend, when I pass several days without seeing you: my anxiety is extreme and I even fear a misfortune."

"Confound it," the Count muttered, "that fellow is dearly beloved."

This aside made him lose the man's reply. The young lady continued:

"Am I condemned to remain much longer here?"

"A little patience: I trust that everything will be ended soon," the stranger answered in a low voice; "and what is he doing?"

"He is still the same, as gloomy and mysterious as ever," she replied.

"Is he here tonight?"

"Yes."

"Still as ill-tempered?"

"More so than ever."

"And the Frenchman?"

"Ah! Ah!" said the Count, "Let us hear what is thought of me."

"He is a most agreeable person," the young lady murmured in a trembling voice; "for the last few days he has seemed sad."

"Is he growing weary?"

"I fear so."

"Poor girl," the Count said, "she has perceived that I am growing tired; it is true that I take but little trouble to conceal the fact. But, by the way, can I be mistaken, and this man is no lover? It is very improbable, and yet who knows?" he added fatuously.

During this long aside, the two speakers had continued their conversation which had been totally unheard by the young man, when he began to listen again. Doña Dolores was concluding —

"I will do it, as you insist on it: but is it very necessary, my friend?"

"Indispensable, Dolores."

"Hang it! He is familiar," the Count said.

"I will obey then," the young lady continued,

"Now we must part: I have remained here too long as it is."

The stranger pulled his hat down over his eyes, muttered the word farewell, for the last time and went off at a quick pace.

The Count had remained motionless at the same spot, a prey to a profound stupefaction. The stranger passed close enough to touch him, though without seeing him: at this moment a branch knocked off his hat, a moon ray fell full on his face and the Count then recognized him.

"Oliver!" he muttered, "It is he then, that she loves."

He returned to his apartments tottering like a drunken man. This last discovery had upset him.

The young man went to bed, but could not sleep: he passed the whole night in forming the most extravagant projects. However, toward morning, his agitation appeared to give way to lassitude.

Before forming any resolution, he said, "I wish to have an explanation with her, very certainly I do not love her, but for my honour's sake, it is necessary that she should be thoroughly convinced

that I am not a fool and that I know everything. That is settled: tomorrow I shall request an interview with her."

Feeling calmer, after he had formed a definitive resolution, the Count closed his eyes and fell asleep.

On waking, he saw Raimbaut standing at his bed side, with a paper in his hand.

"What is it? What do you want?" he said to him.

"It is a letter for Monsieur le Comte," the valet answered.

"Ah!" he exclaimed; "Can it be news from France?"

"I do not think so; this letter was given to Lanca by one of the waiting women of Doña Dolores de la Cruz, with a request to deliver it to M. le Comte, as soon as he woke."

"This is strange," the young man muttered, as he took the note and examined it attentively; "it is certainly addressed to me," he muttered, at length deciding on opening it.

The note was from Doña Dolores de la Cruz, and only contained these few words, written in a delicate though rather tremulous hand.

"Doña Dolores de la Cruz earnestly requests Señor don Ludovic de la Saulay to grant her a private interview for a very important affair at three o'clock in the afternoon of today. Doña Dolores will await the Count in her own apartments."

"This time I cannot make head or tail of it," the Count exclaimed. "But stuff," he added, after a moment's reflection; "perhaps it is better that it should be so, and the proposition come from her."

CHAPTER VII

THE RANCHO

The state of Puebla is composed of a plateau mountain, more than five and twenty leagues in circumference, crossed by the lofty Cordilleras of Ahamiac.

The plains which surround the town are very diversified, cut up by ravines, studded with hills, and closed on the horizon by mountains covered by eternal snows.

Immense fields of aloes, the real vineyards of the country, as pulque, that beverage so dear to the Mexicans, is made from this plant, extend beyond the range of vision.

There is no sight so imposing as these commanding aloes, whose leaves, armed with formidable points, are thick, hard, lustrous, and from six to eight feet in length.

On leaving Puebla by the Mexico road, about two leagues further on, you come to the city of Cholula, formerly very important, but which, now fallen from its past splendour, only contains from twelve to fifteen thousand souls.

In the days of the Aztecs, the territory, which now forms the State of Puebla, was considered by the inhabitants a privileged Holy Land, and the sanctuary of the religion. Considerable ruins, very remarkable from an archæological point of view, still bear witness to the truth of our statement; three principal pyramids exist in a very limited space, without mentioning the ruins on which travellers tread at every step.

Of these three pyramids, one is justly celebrated; it is the one to which the inhabitants of the country give the name of *Monte hecho a mano*, the mountain built by human hands, or the great teocali of Cholula.

This pyramid, crowned with cypresses, and on the top of which now stands a chapel dedicated to "Nuestra Señora de los remedios," is entirely constructed of bricks, its height is one hundred and seventy feet, and its base, according to the calculations of Humboldt, is 1355 feet in length, or a little more than double the base of the pyramids of Cheops.

Monsieur Ampère remarks, with considerable tact and cleverness, that the imagination of the Arabs has surrounded with prodigies, the, to them, unknown cradle of the Egyptian pyramids, whose construction they refer to the deluge; and the same was the case in Mexico. On this subject he relates a tradition picked up in 1566, by Pedro del Rio, about the pyramids of Cholula, and preserved in his MSS., which are now in the Vatican.

We will in our turn, make a loan from the celebrated savant, and relate here this tradition, such as he gives it in his *Promenades en Amérique*.

"During the last great inundation, the country of Ahamioc (the plateau of Mexico), was inhabited by giants. All those who did not perish in this disaster, were changed into fishes, except seven giants who took refuge in the caverns. When the waters began to subside, one of these giants, of the name of Xelhua, who was an architect, erected near Cholula, in memory of the mountain of Tlaloc, which had served as a refuge to him and his brothers, an artificial column of a pyramidal form. The Gods, seeing with jealousy, this edifice, whose peak was intended to touch the clouds, and irritated by the audacity of Xelhua, hurled the heavenly fires against the pyramid, whence it happened, that many of the builders perished, and the work could not be completed. It was dedicated to the god of the air, 'Qualzalcoatl.'"

Might we not fancy ourselves reading the Biblical account of the building of the Tower of Babel?

There is in this narrative an error, which must not be imputed to the celebrated professor, but which we, in spite of our humble quality of romance writer, believe it useful to rectify.

Quetzalcoatl – the serpent covered with feathers, the root of which is *quetzalli* feathers, and *coatl* serpent, and not qualzalcoatl, which means nothing, and is not even a Mexican name – is the god of the air, the god legislator *par excellence*; he was white and bearded, his black cloak was studded with red crosses, he appeared at Tula, of which place he was high priest; the men who accompanied him wore black garments, in the shape of a cassock, and like him, were white.

He was passing through Cholula, on his way to the mysterious country whence his ancestors sprang, when the Cholulans implored him to govern them and give them laws; he consented, and remained for twenty years among them. After which, considering his mission temporarily terminated, he went to the mouth of the river Huasacoalio, when he suddenly disappeared, after solemnly promising the Cholulans that he would return one day to govern them.

Hardly a century ago the Indians, when carrying their offspring to the Chapel of the Virgin erected on the pyramid, still prayed to Quetzalcoatl, whose return among them they piously awaited, we will not venture to assert that this belief is completely extinct at the present day.

The pyramid of Cholula in no way resembles those to be seen in Egypt, covered with earth on all sides; it is a thoroughly wooded mount, the top of which can be easily reached, not only on horseback, but in a carriage.

At certain spots landslips had laid bare the sun-dried bricks employed in the construction.

A Christian chapel stands on the top of the pyramid at the very spot where the temple dedicated to Quetzalcoatl was built.

We cannot agree with certain authors who have asserted that a religion of love has been substituted for a barbarous and cruel faith; it would have been more logical to say that a true religion has followed a false one.

Never was the summit of the pyramid of Cholula stained with human blood; never was any man immolated there to the god adored in the temple, now destroyed, for the very simple reason that this temple was dedicated to Quetzalcoatl, and that the only offerings laid on the altar of this god consisted of productions of the earth, such as flowers and the first fruits of the crops, and this was done by the express order of the God legislator, an order which his priests did not dare infringe.

It was about four o'clock, a.m., the stars were beginning to disappear in the depths of the sky, the horizon was striped with large grey bands that incessantly changed their colour, and gradually assumed all the colours of the rainbow, until they at last became blended into one red mass; day was breaking, and the sun was about to rise. At this moment two horsemen issued from Puebla, and proceeded at a sharp trot along the Cholula road.

Both were carefully wrapped up in their zarapés, and appeared well armed.

At about half a league from the town they suddenly turned to the right and entered a narrow path cut through a field of agaré.

This path, which was very badly kept up, like all the means of communication in Mexico, formed numberless turns, and was cut up by so many ravines and quagmires, that there was the greatest difficulty in riding along it, without running the risk of breaking one's neck twenty times in ten minutes. Here and there came arroyos, which had to be crossed with the water up to the horses' girths; then there were mounds to ascend and descend; lastly, after at least twenty-five minutes of this difficult riding, the two travellers reached the base of a species of pyramid clumsily made by human hands, entirely covered with wood, and rising about forty feet above the plain.

This artificial hill was crowned by a vaquero's rancho, which was reached by steps cut at regular distances in the sides of the mound.

On reaching this spot the two strangers halted and dismounted.

The two men then left their horses to themselves, thrust the barrels of their guns into a crevice at the base of the hill, and pressed on them, using the butt as a leverage.

Although the pressure was not greatly exerted, an enormous stone, which seemed completely to adhere to the ground, became slowly detached, turned on invisible hinges, and unmasked the entrance of a cave which ran with a gentle incline underground.

This grotto doubtless received air and light through a great number of imperceptible fissures, for it was dry, and perfectly clear.

"Go, Lopez," said one of the strangers.

"Are you going up above?" the other asked.

"Yes; you will join me there in an hour, unless you see me beforehand."

"Good; that is understood."

He then whistled to the horses, which trotted up, and, at a signal from Lopez, entered the cavern without the slightest hesitation.

"Good bye for the present," said Lopez.

The stranger gave him an affirmative nod; the servant entered in his turn, let the stone fall behind him, and it fitted so exactly into the rock, that there was not the slightest solution of continuity, and it would have been impossible to find the entrance it concealed, even were its existence known, unless one had been acquainted beforehand with its exact position.

The stranger had remained motionless, with his eyes fixed on the surrounding plain, seeking, doubtless, to assure himself that he was really alone, and that he had nothing to fear from indiscreet glances.

When the stone had fallen into its place again, he threw his gun on his shoulder, and began slowly ascending the steps, apparently plunged in gloomy meditation.

From the top of the mound there was a vast prospect: on one side Lapotecas, Cholula, haciendas, and villages; on the other, Puebla, with its numerous painted and conical cupolas, which made it resemble an eastern city. Then the eye wandered over fields of aloes, Indian corn, and ajuves, in the midst of which the high road to Mexico wound, forming a yellow line.

The stranger remained for an instant pensive, with his eyes turned to the plain, which was completely deserted at this early hour, and which the first sunbeams were beginning to gild with lustrous tints: then, after breathing a suppressed sigh, he pushed the hurdle, covered with a cowhide, which served as door to the rancho, and disappeared in the interior.

The rancho externally had the wretched appearance of a hut almost falling into ruins; still, the interior was more comfortably arranged than might have been reasonably expected in a country where the exigencies of life, with the lower classes more especially, are reduced to what is most strictly necessary.

The first room – for the rancho contained several – served as parlour and sitting room, and communicated with a lean-to outside, used as a kitchen. The whitewashed walls of this room were adorned, not with pictures, but with six or eight of those coloured engravings, manufactured at Epinal, and with which that town inundates the world. They represented different episodes in the wars of the empires, and were decently framed and glazed. In a corner, about six feet from the ground, a statuette, representing Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexico, was placed on a mahogany console, edged with points, on which were fixed yellow wax tapers, three of which were lighted. Six equipales, four butacas, a sideboard covered with various household articles, and a large table placed in the middle of the room, completed the furniture of this apartment, which was lighted by two windows with red curtains. The floor was covered with a mat, of rather delicate workmanship.

We have omitted mention of an article of furniture very important through its rarity, and which was most unexpected in such a place: it was a Black Forest cuckoo clock, surmounted by some bird or other, which announced the hours and half-hours by singing.

This cuckoo was opposite the entrance door, and placed exactly between the two windows.

A door opened on the right into the inner room.

At the moment when the stranger entered the rancho, the room was empty.

He leant his gun in a corner, took off his hat, which he laid on a table, opened a window, up to which he drew a butaca, then rolled a husk cigarette, which he lit and smoked as calmly and coolly as if he were at home, though not till he had cast a glance at the clock, and muttered, —

"Half past five! Good! I have time: he will not arrive before."

While speaking thus to himself, the stranger threw himself back in the butaca; his eyes closed, his hand loosed its hold of the cigarette, and a few minutes later he was sleeping soundly.

His sleep had lasted about half an hour, when a door behind him was cautiously opened, and a pretty woman, three-and-twenty at the most, with blue eyes and light hair, came into the room stealthily, curiously stretching out her head, and fixing a kind, almost affectionate, glance on the sleeper.

The young woman's face evidenced gaiety and maliciousness, blended with extreme kindness. Her features, though not regular, formed a coquettish and graceful whole which pleased at the first glance. Her excessively white complexion distinguished her from the other rancheros' wives, who are generally copper-coloured Indians: her dress was that belonging to her class, but remarkably neat, and worn with a coquettishness that admirably became her.

She thus came up softly to the sleeper, with her head thrown back, and a finger laid on her lip, doubtless to recommend two persons who followed her – a middle-aged man and woman – to make as little noise as possible.

The woman appeared to be about fifty years of age, the man sixty; their rather ordinary features had nothing striking about them, excepting a certain expression of energetic decision spread over them.

The woman wore the garb of Mexican rancheros; as for the man, he was a vaquero.

All three, on coming close to the stranger, stopped before him, and watched him sleeping.

At this moment a sunbeam entered through the open window, and fell on the stranger's face.

"Vive Dieu!" the latter exclaimed in French, as he sprang up suddenly and opened his eyes; "Why, deuce take me, I really believe I was asleep!"

"Parbleu! Mr. Oliver," the ranchero replied, in the same language; "what harm is there in that?"

"Ah! There you are, my good friends," he said, with a pleasant smile, as he offered them his hand; "it is a joyous waking for me, since I find you at my side. Good day! Louise, my girl. Good day! Mother Therese; and good day to you, too, my old Loïck! You have cheerful faces, which it is a pleasure to look at!"

"How sorry I am that you woke up, Mr. Oliver," the charming Louise said.

"The more so, because you were doubtless fatigued," Loïck said.

"Stuff! I have forgotten it. You did not expect to find me here, eh?"

"Pardon me, Mr. Oliver," Therese replied; "Lopez informed us of your arrival."

"That confounded Lopez cannot hold his tongue," Oliver said, gaily; "he must always be chattering."

"You will breakfast with us, I hope?" the young woman asked.

"Is that a thing to ask, girl?" the vaquero said; "I should like to see Mr. Oliver decline, that is all."

"Come, rough, one," Oliver said, laughingly; "do not growl. I will breakfast."

"Ah! That is all right," the young woman exclaimed. And, aided by Therese, who was her mother, as Loïck was her father, she instantly began making preparations for the morning meal.

"But, you know," said Oliver, "nothing Mexican – I do not expect the frightful cooking of the country here."

"All right!" Louise answered, with a smile; "We will have a French breakfast."

"Bravo! The news doubles my appetite."

While the two women went backwards and forwards from the kitchen to the dining room, preparing the breakfast, and laying the table, the two men remained near the window, and were conversing together.

"Are you still satisfied?" Oliver asked his host.

"Perfectly," the other answered. "Don Andrés de la Cruz is a good master; besides, as you know, I have but few dealings with him."

"That is true. You only depend on No Leo Carral."

"I do not complain of him. He is a worthy man, although a majordomo. We get on famously together."

"All the better. I should have been grieved had it been otherwise. However, it was on my recommendation that you consented to take this rancho; and if there were anything – "

"I would not hesitate to inform you of it, Mr. Oliver; but in that quarter all goes well."

The adventurer looked at him fixedly.

"Then something is going wrong elsewhere?" he remarked.

"I do not say so, sir," the vaquero stammered, with embarrassment.

Oliver shook his head.

"Do you remember, Loïck," he said to him, sternly, "the conditions I imposed on you, when I granted you your pardon?"

"Oh! I do not forget them, sir."

"You have not spoken?"

"No."

"Then Dominique still believes himself?"

"Yes, still," he replied hanging his head; "but he does not love me."

"What makes you suppose so?"

"I am only too certain of it, sir: ever since you took him on the prairies, his character has completely changed. The ten years he spent away from me have rendered him completely indifferent."

"Perhaps it is a foreboding," the adventurer remarked in a hollow voice.

"Oh, do not say that, sir," the other exclaimed with horror, "musing is a bad counsellor: I was very guilty, but if you knew how deeply I have repented of my crime – "

"I know it and that is the reason why I pardoned you. Justice will be done, some day, on the real culprit."

"Oh, sir, and I tremble, wretch that I am, at having been mixed up in this sinister history, whose denouement will be terrible."

"Yes," the adventurer said with concentrated energy, – "very terrible indeed! And you will help in it, Loïck."

The vaquero gave a sigh, which did not escape the other.

"I have not seen Dominique," he said, with a sudden change of tone; "is he still asleep?"

"Oh no, you have instructed him too well, sir; he is always the first of us to rise."

"How is it that he is not here, in that case?"

"Oh," the vaquero said with hesitation, "he has gone out: hang it, he is free, now that he is twenty-two years of age."

"Already!" the adventurer muttered in a gloomy voice. Then suddenly shaking his head, he said:

"Let us breakfast."

The meal commenced under rather melancholy auspices, but thanks to the efforts of the adventurer, the former gaiety soon returned, and the end of the breakfast was as merry as could be desired.

All at once Lopez suddenly entered the rancho.

"Señor Loïck," he said, "here is your son: I do not know what he is bringing, but he is on foot and leading his horse by the bridle."

All rose and left the rancho. At about a gunshot from the rancho, they really saw a man leading a horse by the bridle: a rather heavy burden was fastened on the animal's back.

The distance prevented them from distinguishing the nature of this burden.

"It is strange," Oliver muttered in a low voice, after attentively examining the arrival for some moments, "can it be he? Oh, I must make certain without delay."

And, after making Lopez a sign to follow him, he rushed down the steps, to the amazement of the vaquero and the two women who soon saw him running, followed by Lopez, across the plain to meet Dominique.

The latter had noticed the two men and had halted to await their arrival.

CHAPTER VIII

THE WOUNDED MAN

A profound calm brooded over the country: the night breeze had died away; no other sound but the continual buzzing of the infinitely little creatures, that toil incessantly at the unknown task for which they were created by Providence, disturbed the silence of the night: the deep blue sky had not a cloud: a gentle, penetrating brilliancy fell from the stars and the moonbeams flooded the landscape with gleams that gave a fantastic appearance to the trees and mounts whose shadows they immoderately elongated: bluish reflections seemed to pervade the atmosphere whose dearness was such, that the heavy flight of the coleoptera buzzing round the branches could be easily distinguished: here and there fireflies darted like will-o'-the-wisps through the tall grass, which they lit up with phosphorescent gleams as they passed.

It was, in a word, one of those limpid and pure American nights, unknown in our cold climates less favoured by heaven, and which plunge the mind into gentle and melancholy reverie.

All at once a shadow rose on the horizon, rapidly increased and soon revealed the black and still undecided outline of a horseman; the sound of horses' hoofs striking the hardened ground hurried blows, soon left no doubt in this respect.

A horseman was really approaching and going in the direction of Puebla; half asleep on his steed, he held the bridle rather loose, and allowed it to go much as it pleased, until the animal, on reaching some cross roads, in the middle of which a cross stood, gave a sudden start and leaped on one side, cocking its ears and pulling back forcibly.

The rider, suddenly aroused from his sleep or, as is more probable, from his reflections, would have been thrown, had he not, by an instinctive movement, gathered up his horse by pulling at the bridle.

"Holah," he exclaimed, drawing himself up sharply and laying his hand on his machete, while he looked anxiously around, "what is going on here? Come, Moreno, my good horse, why this terror? There, calm yourself, my good boy, no one is thinking of us."

But though the master patted it as he spoke, and both seemed to be on good terms, the animal still continued to pull back and display signs of the most lively terror.

"This is not natural, by Heaven! You are not accustomed to be thus frightened for nothing: come, my good Moreno, what is it?"

And the traveller again looked around him, but this time more attentively and peering at the ground, "Ah!" he said all at once, on noticing a corpse stretched out on the road, "Moreno is right; there is something there, the body of some hacendero without doubt, whom the salteadores have killed to plunder him more at their ease, and whom they left, without paying further heed to him: let me have a look."

While speaking thus to himself in a low voice, the horseman had dismounted.

But, as our man was prudent, and, in all probability, long accustomed to traverse the roads of the Mexican confederation, he cocked his gun, and held himself in readiness either for attack or defence, in the event of the individual whom he proposed to succour suddenly rising to ask him for his money or his life, an eventuality quite in accordance with the manners of the country, and against which he must place himself on his guard.

He therefore approached the corpse and gazed at it for an instant with the most serious attention.

It only required one glance to attain for certainty that there was nothing to be feared from the unhappy man lying at his feet.

"Hum!" he continued, shaking his head several times, "This poor fellow seems to be very bad: if he is not dead, he is not worth much more, well, I suppose I must try to succour him, though I am afraid it will be lost trouble."

After this fresh aside, the traveller, who was no other than Dominique, the ranchero's son, to whom we just now alluded, uncocked his gun which he leant against the road side, so as to have it within reach in case of need, fastened his horse to a tree, and took off his zarapé, so as to be less impeded in his movements.

After taking all these precautions quietly and methodically, for he was a very careful man in everything, Dominique took off the alforjas or double pockets carried on the back of the saddle, put them on his shoulder, and kneeling down by the side of the out-stretched corpse, he opened the wounded man's clothes and put his ear to his chest, in which was a gaping wound.

Dominique was a man of tall stature, powerful and perfectly proportioned: his supple limbs were garnished with muscles thick as cords and hard as marble: he was evidently endowed with remarkable strength, joined to great skill in all his movements, which were not without a certain manly grace: he was, in a word, one of those powerful men uncommon in all countries, but who are most frequently found among those nations where the exigencies of a life of combat develop the personal faculties of the individual in frequently extreme proportions.

Although he was only two and twenty years of age, Dominique appeared at least eight and twenty. His features were handsome, masculine and intelligent, his black open eyes looked you boldly in the face, his ample forehead, his auburn hair that curled naturally, his large mouth with rather thick lips, his fiercely curled moustache, his well designed and squarely cut chin gave his face an expression of frankness, boldness and kindness, which was really attractive, while at the same time rendering him most distinguished looking. A singular thing in this man, who belonged to the humble class of vaqueros, his hands and feet were wonderfully small, and his hands more especially were exquisitely shaped.

Such physically was the new personage whom we introduce to the reader, and who is intended to play an important part in the course of this narration. "Well, he will have a job, to recover, if he does recover," Dominique continued as he rose, after vainly trying to feel the beating of his heart. Still he did not let himself be discouraged, he opened his alforjas and took out linen, a surgical case and a small locked box.

"Luckily I have kept up my Indian habits," he said with a smile, "and always carry my medicine bag about with me."

Without loss of time he probed the wound and washed it carefully. The blood dripped drop by drop from the violet edges of the wound, he uncorked a vial, poured on the wound a few drops of reddish liquor, and the blood at once ceased flowing as if by enchantment. Then with a skill that evidenced much practice he bandaged the wound, on which he delicately laid some herbs pounded and moistened with the red fluid he had before employed.

The unhappy man gave no sign of life, his body continued to retain the inert rigidity of a corpse; still a certain moistness existed at the extremities, a diagnostic which made Dominique suppose that life was not completely extinct in this poor body. After dressing the wound with care, he gently raised the man and leaned him against a tree: then he began rubbing his chest, temples and wrists with rum and water, only stopping from time to time to examine with an anxious eye his pale contracted face. Everything appeared to be useless: no contraction, no nervous quiver indicated the return of life. But there is nothing so persistent as the will of a man who desires to save his fellow man. Although he began seriously to doubt the success of his efforts, far from being discouraged, Dominique felt his ardor redoubled, and resolved not to give up his exertions, till he had attained the certainty that they were wasted. A striking picture was offered by the group formed on this deserted road upon this calm and luminous night, at the foot of the cross – the symbol of redemption – by these two men, one of whom impelled by the holy love of humanity lavished on the other the most paternal care.

Dominique ceased his frictions for a moment and smote his forehead, as if a sudden thought had risen to his brain.

"Where the deuce can my head be?" he muttered; and feeling in his alforjas, which seemed inexhaustible, so many things did they contain, he brought out a carefully stoppered gourd.

He opened the wounded man's clenched teeth with his knife blade, thrust the gourd between his lips, and poured into his mouth a portion of the contents, while examining his face anxiously. At the end of two or three minutes, the wounded man gave a slight shiver, and his eyelids moved, as if he were trying to open them.

"Ah!" said Dominique with joy, "This time I believe I shall win the day."

And, laying the gourd by his side, he recommenced his frictions with renewed ardour. A sigh faint as a breath issued from the wounded man's lips, his limbs began ere long to lose a little of their rigidity, life was returning by inches. The young man redoubled his efforts; by degrees the breathing, though faint and broken, became more distinct, the features relaxed and the cheek bones displayed two red spots, although the eyes remained closed, the lips moved as if the wounded man were trying to utter some words.

"Come," said Dominique with delight, "all is not over yet, but he will have had a very narrow squeak for it; bravo! I have not lost my time! But who on earth can have given him so tremendous a sword thrust? People do not fight duels in Mexico. On my soul! If I were not afraid of insulting him. I could almost swear I know the man who so nearly slit up this poor wretch; but patience, he must speak ere long, and then he will be very clever if I do not learn with whom he has had the row."

In the meanwhile life, after long hesitating to return to this body which it had almost abandoned, had commenced an earnest struggle with death, which it drove further and further away. The movements of the wounded man became more distinct and decidedly more intelligent. Twice already his eyes had opened, although they closed again immediately; but the improvement in him was sensible: he would soon recover his senses, it was now but a question of time. Dominique poured a little water into a cup, mixed with it a few drops of the liquid contained in the gourd, and put it to the patient's mouth: the latter opened his lips, drank and then gave a gasp of relief.

"How do you feel?" the young man asked him with interest.

At the sound of this unknown voice, a convulsive quiver agitated the whole of the wounded man's body; he made a gesture as if repulsing a terrifying image, and muttered in a low voice, "Kill me!"

"Certainly not!" Dominique exclaimed joyfully.

"I had too much trouble in recovering you for that."

The wounded man partly opened his eyes, glanced wildly around, and at length gazed at the young man with an expression of indescribable horror.

"The mask!" he exclaimed, "The mask! Oh! Back, back!"

"The brain has suffered a very severe shock," the young man muttered, "he is suffering from a feverish hallucination which, if it continued, might produce madness. Hum! The case is serious! What is to be done to remedy this?"

"Murderer!" the wounded man continued feebly; "Kill me."

"He insists on that as it seems; this man has fallen into some frightful snare, his troubled mind only recalls the last scene of murder, in which he acted so unfortunate a part. I must cut this short and restore him the calmness necessary for his cure, if not, he is lost."

"Do I not know perfectly well I am lost?" the wounded man who overheard the last word said; "Kill me, therefore, without making me suffer more."

"You hear me, señor," the young man answered "very good then, listen to me without interruption: I am not one of the men who brought you into your present state. I am a traveller, whom accident or rather Providence brought on this road, to come to your assistance and, as I hope, to save you: you understand me, do you not? Hence cease to invent chimeras; forget, if it be possible, for the

present at any rate, what passed between you and your assassins. I have no other desire but that of being useful to you: without me you would be dead: do not render more difficult the hard task I have taken on myself: your recovery henceforth depends on yourself."

The wounded man made a sudden effort to rise, but his strength betrayed him, and he fell back with a sigh of discouragement; "I cannot," he murmured.

"I should think not, wounded as you are. It is a miracle that the frightful sword thrust you received did not kill you on the spot: hence, do not any longer oppose what humanity orders me to do for you."

"But if you are not the assassin, who are you?" the wounded man asked, apprehensively.

"Who am I? A poor vaquero, who found you expiring here, and was fortunate enough to restore you to life."

"And you swear to me that your intentions are good?"

"I swear it, on my honour."

"Thanks!" the wounded man murmured.

There was a rather long silence.

"Oh! I wish to live;" the wounded man resumed, with concentrated energy.

"I can understand the desire – it is quite natural on your part."

"Yes; I wish to live, for I must avenge myself!"

"That sentiment is just, for vengeance is permitted."

"You promise that you will save me – do you not?"

"At least I will do all in my power."

"Oh! I am rich: I will reward you."

The ranchero shook his head.

"Why speak of reward?" he said. "Do you believe that devotedness can be bought? Keep your gold, caballero – it would be useless to me, for I have no wants to satisfy."

"Still, it is my duty."

"Not a word more on this subject, I must request, señor. Any pressure on your part would be a mortal insult to me. I am doing my duty in saving your life, and have no claim to any recompense."

"Act as you please, then."

"Promise me first not to raise any objection to what I may consider it proper to do on behalf of your health."

"I promise it."

"Good! In this way we shall always understand one another. Day will soon appear, and so we must not remain here any longer."

"But when can I go? I feel so faint, that I cannot possibly make the slightest movement."

"That need not disturb you. I will put you on my horse; and by making it go at a foot pace, it will carry you, without any dangerous jolts, to a safe place."

"I leave myself in your hands."

"That is the best thing you could do. Do you wish me to take you to your house?"

"My house!" the wounded man exclaimed, with ill-disguised terror, and making a movement as if he would try to fly. "You know me then, señor – know my residence?"

"I do not know you, and am ignorant where your house is situated. How could I know such details, when I never saw you before this night?"

"That is true," the wounded man muttered, speaking to himself. "I am mad! This man is honest." Then, addressing Dominique, he said in a broken and scarce distinct voice; "I am a traveller. I come from Veracruz, and was going to Mexico, when I was suddenly attacked, plundered of everything I possessed, and left for dead at the foot of this cross, when you so providentially discovered me. As for a home, I have no other at this moment but the one you may be pleased to offer me. This is my whole story: it is as simple as truth."

"Whether it be true or not does not concern me, señor. I have no right to interfere in your affairs against your will. Let me request you, therefore, to refrain from giving me information which I do not ask of you – which does not concern me, and which, in your present condition, can only be injurious to you, first, by causing you too great tension of mind, and then, by forcing you to speak."

In truth, it was only by a violent effort of the will, that the wounded man had succeeded in keeping up so long a conversation. The shock he had received was too powerful, his wound too severe, for him to talk any longer, without running the risk of falling into a fainting fit more dangerous than the one from which he had been so miraculously drawn by his generous saviour. Already he felt his arteries throbbing, a mist spread before his sight: there was a sinister buzzing in his ears; an icy sweat beaded on his temples; his thoughts, into which he had found it so difficult to introduce a little regularity and coherence, were beginning to desert him again: he understood that any lengthened resistance on his part would be madness, and he fell back in a state of discouragement, and heaving a sigh of resignation, —

"My friend," he murmured, in a faint voice, "do with me what you please; I feel as if I were dying."

Dominique watched his movements with an anxious eye: he hastened to make him drink a few drops of cordial, with which he had mixed a soporific. This help was efficacious, and the wounded man felt himself recalled to life. He tried to thank the young man.

"Silence!" the latter said to him, quickly; "You have talked too much already."

And he carefully wrapped him in his cloak, and laid him on the ground.

"There!" he continued; "So far you are all right; do not stir, and try to sleep, while I reflect on the means of removing you from here as quickly as possible."

The wounded man attempted no resistance; the opium he had swallowed was already acting upon him: he smiled softly, closed his eyes, and was soon plunged in a calm and strengthening sleep. Dominique watched him for a moment asleep with the most entire satisfaction.

"I like better to see him thus than as he was on my arrival," he said, gladly. "Ah! All is not over yet: now we must be off as rapidly as possible, if I do not wish to be impeded by the troublesome people who will soon flock along this road."

He unfastened his horse, put on the bridle again, and led it close to the wounded man. After making a species of seat on the animal's back with some blankets, to which he added his zarapé, pulling it off without the slightest hesitation, he raised the wounded man in his powerful arms, with as much ease as if he had been a child instead of a tall, rather corpulent man, and placed him softly on the seat, where he fastened him as well as he could, while carefully holding him to avoid a jolt, which might prove fatal.

When the young man felt assured that his patient was in a position as convenient as circumstances permitted, he started his horse, whose bridle he held, without leaving his place by the side of the wounded man, whom he supported, and proceeded straight to the rancho, where he preceded him about an hour, in order to introduce the adventurer there.

CHAPTER IX

A DISCOVERY

Dominique marched very gently, supporting with a firm hand the wounded man seated in his saddle, watching over him as a mother watches over her child, having only one desire – that of reaching the rancho as soon as possible, in order to give this stranger, who, without him, would have died so miserably, that attention which the precarious state in which he still was, necessitated.

In spite of the impatience he felt, it was unfortunately impossible to hurry his horse on for fear of an accident across the broken and almost impracticable roads he was compelled to follow: hence it was with an indescribable feeling of pleasure that, in coming within two or three gunshots of the rancho, he noticed some persons running towards him. Though he did not recognise them at first, his joy was great, for it was help arriving for him; and though he would assuredly have been unwilling to allow it, he recognised its extreme necessity for himself, and especially for the wounded man, as for some hours he had been stumbling along tracks nearly always impracticable, constrained to keep a constant watch on this man, whom, by an incomprehensible miracle, he had saved from a certain death, and whom the slightest neglect might kill.

When the men running towards him were only a few yards from him, he stopped and shouted to them with a joyous air, like a man delighted to be freed from an oppressive responsibility.

"Eh! Come on! Caray! You ought to have been here long ago."

"What do you mean, Dominique?" the adventurer asked in French. "What pressing need did you feel for us?"

"Why, that is plain enough, I fancy. Don't you see that I am bringing a wounded man?"

"A wounded man!" Oliver started with a tiger's bound, which brought him up to the young man's side. "To what wounded man are you alluding?"

"Hang it! To the one I have seated to the best of my ability on my horse, and whom I should not be sorry to see in a good bed; of which, between ourselves, he has the greatest need: for if he be still alive, it is, on my soul, through some incomprehensible miracle of providence!"

The adventurer, without replying, roughly pulled away the zarapé thrown over the wounded man's face, and examined it for some minutes with an expression of agony, grief, anger and regret, impossible to describe. His face, which had suddenly turned pale, assumed a cadaverous hue; a convulsive tremour ran over his whole body; his eyes, fixed on the wounded man, seemed to emit flashes, and had a strange expression.

"Oh!" he muttered in a low voice, convulsed by the storm that agitated his heart; "That man! It is he – really he! And is not dead!"

Dominique did not understand a word. He gazed at Oliver with amazement, not knowing what to think of the words he was uttering.

"But tell me," he at length said, with an outburst of passion, "what is the meaning of this? I save a man – Heaven knows how – by my care: in spite of a thousand difficulties I succeed in bringing here this poor wretch, who, without me, I may safely say, would have died like a dog, and this is how you greet me!"

"Yes, yes, rejoice!" the adventurer said to him, with a bitter accent; "You have committed a good action. I congratulate you on it, Dominique, my friend! It will benefit you, be sure, and that ere long!"

"You know that I do not understand you!" the young man exclaimed.

"Well! is there any need that you should understand me, poor boy?" he replied, with a disdainful shrug of his shoulders. "You have acted according to your nature, without reflection or afterthought. I have no more reproaches to address to you, than explanations to offer you."

"But, come; what do you mean?"

"Do you know this man?"

"Really, no. How should I know him?"

"I do not ask you that. Since you do not know him, how is it that you are bringing him to the rancho, without giving us notice?"

"For a very simple reason. I was returning from Cholula, when I found him lying across the road, groaning like a bull in the death throes. What could I do? Did not humanity command me to succour him? Is it permissible to let a Christian die in such a way without attempting to aid him?"

"Yes, yes," Oliver replied, ironically; "you acted well, and certainly I am far from blaming you. Of course, a man could not meet one of his fellow men in this cruel condition without assisting him." Then, suddenly changing his tone, and shrugging his shoulders with pity, he added; "Did you receive such lessons in humanity from the Redskins, among whom you lived so long?"

The young man attempted to answer, but he hurriedly checked him.

"Enough, now the evil is done," he said to him: "it is of no use alluding to it. Lopez will convey him to the cavern of the rancho, where he will nurse him. Go, Lopez, lose no time; lead away this man, while I talk with Dominique."

Lopez obeyed, and the young man allowed him to do so. He was beginning to comprehend that possibly his heart had deceived him, and that he had too easily given way to a feeling of humanity towards a man who was a perfect stranger to him.

There was a rather lengthened silence. Lopez had gone off with the wounded man, and had already disappeared in the cavern. Oliver and Dominique, standing face to face, remained motionless and pensive. At length the adventurer raised his head.

"Have you spoken with this man?"

"Only a few words."

"What did he tell you?"

"Not much that was sensible, he talked to me about an attack to which he had fallen a victim."

"Is that all?"

"Yes, or nearly so."

"Did he tell you his name?"

"I did not ask him for it."

"But he must have told you who he is."

"Yes, I think so: he told me that he had come a short time previously from Veracruz and was proceeding to Mexico, when he was attacked unawares and plundered by men whom he was unable to recognize."

"He told you nothing else about his name or position?"

"No, not a word."

The adventurer remained pensive for a moment.

"Listen," he then continued, "and do not take what I am going to say to you in ill part."

"From you, Master Oliver, I will hear anything you have the right to say everything to me."

"Good! Do you remember how we became acquainted?"

"Certainly: I was a child then, wretched and sickly, dying of want and misery in the streets of Mexico: you took pity on me, you clothed and fed me: not satisfied with this, you yourself taught me to read, write and cypher, and many other things."

"Go on."

"Then, you enabled me to find my parents again, or at least the persons who brought me up, and whom, in default of others, I have always regarded as my family."

"Good, what next?"

"Hang it, you know that as well as I do, Master Oliver."

"That is possible, but I wish you to repeat it to me."

"As you please: one day you came to the rancho, you took me away with you and took me to Sonora and Texas, where we hunted buffalo: at the end of two or three years, you caused me to be adopted by a Comanche tribe, and you left me, ordering me to remain on the prairies, and to lead the existence of a wood ranger, until you sent me an order to return to you."

"Very good, I see that you have a good memory: go on."

"I obeyed you, and remained among the Indians, hunting and living with them: six months ago, you came yourself to the banks of the Rio Gila, where I was at the time, and you told me that you had come to fetch me and that I must follow you. I followed you, therefore, without asking an explanation which I did not need: for do I not belong to you, body and soul?"

"Good, you still retain the same feeling."

"Why should I have changed? You are my only friend."

"Thanks, then you are resolved to obey me in everything?"

"Without hesitation, I swear it."

"That is what I wished to be certain of, now listen to me in your turn: this man whom you have succoured so foolishly – forgive the word – lied from the first to the last word he told you. The story he told you is a tissue of falsehoods: it is not true that he had only arrived a few days before from Veracruz, it is not true that he is going to Mexico, and lastly it is not true that he was attacked and plundered by strangers. This man I know: he has been at Mexico for the last eight months, he lives at Puebla, he was condemned to death by men who had a right to try him and with whom he is perfectly well acquainted: he was not attacked unawares, a sword was placed in his hand, and he received permission to defend himself – a permission which he took advantage of, and he fell in fair fight: finally, he was not plundered, because he had not to do with highwaymen but with men of honour."

"Oh, oh," said the young man, "this alters the case."

"Now answer this: you have pledged yourself to me? What do you mean by that?"

"This man, when he regained his senses and was able to speak, implored your protection; did he not?"

"That is true, Master Oliver."

"Good, and what did you answer him?"

"Hang it all, you understand that it was very difficult for me to abandon the poor fellow in the state he was in, especially after what I had done for him."

"Good, good; what then?"

"Well then, I promised to cure him."

"Nothing else?"

"Well no."

"And you only promised him this?"

"No, I pledged my word."

The adventurer gave a start of impatience.

"But supposing he recovers," he continued, "which between ourselves seems rather doubtful; when he is in a good state of health, will you consider yourself entirely free from him?"

"Oh yes, Master Oliver, completely."

"In that case, it is only a half evil."

"You know that I do not at all understand you?"

"Be content, Dominique, learn that you have not a lucky hand for a good deed."

"Because?"

"Because the man you have succoured and on whom you lavished such devoted attentions, is your deadly enemy."

"This man my deadly enemy?" he exclaimed with an astonishment mingled with doubt; "But I do not know him any more than he knows me."

"You suppose so, my poor fellow; but be convinced that I am not deceived and am telling you the truth."

"It is strange."

"Yes, very strange, indeed, but it is so: this man is even your most dangerous foe."

"What is to be done?"

"Leave me to act: I went to the rancho this morning with the intention of telling you that one of your enemies, the most formidable of all, was dead: you took care to make me a liar. After all, perhaps it is better it should be so: what God does is well, His ways are unknown to us, we must bow before the manifestation of His will."

"Then, it is your intention – ?"

"My intention is to order Lopez to watch over your patient: he will remain in the cavern where he will be taken the greatest care of, but you will not see him again, as it is unnecessary for you to know any more about him at present: in my turn, I pledge you my word that all the attention his condition demands shall be bestowed on him."

"Oh, I trust entirely to you, Master Oliver: but when he's cured, what shall we do?"

"We will let him go away in peace, he is not our prisoner: be at ease, we shall find him again without difficulty when we want him: of course it is understood that no one in the rancho is to go down to him or have any relations with him."

"Good: in that case you will tell them so, for I cannot undertake it."

"I will do so: but I shall not see him either; Lopez alone will remain in charge of him."

"Have you nothing more to say to me?"

"Yes, that I intend to take you away with me for a few days."

"Ah, are we going far?"

"You will see: in the meanwhile go to the rancho and prepare everything you want for your journey."

"Oh, I am ready," he interrupted.

"That is possible, but I am not; have I not to give Lopez orders about your wounded man?"

"That is true, and besides I must say good-bye to my family."

"That will be very proper, as you will probably be away for some time."

"Good, I understand, we are going to have a famous hunt."

"Yes, we are going to hunt," the adventurer said with an equivocal smile; "but not at all in the way you suppose."

"All right, I do not care. I will hunt in whatever way you please."

"I reckon on it; but come, we have lost too much time already."

They proceeded toward the mound. The adventurer entered the vault, and the young man went up to the rancho. Loïck and the two women were awaiting him on the platform considerably perplexed by the long conversation he had held with Oliver; but Dominique was impenetrable – he had lived too long in the desert to let the truth be drawn from his heart when he thought proper to conceal it. Under these circumstances, all the questions they showered on him were thrown away; he only answered by clever evasions, and at last his father and the two women, despairing of making him speak, resolved to leave him at peace. His breakfast was all ready on the table. As he was hungry, he took advantage of this pretext to change the conversation, and while eating, announced his departure. Loïck made no remark, for he was accustomed to these sudden absences.

At the end of about half an hour Oliver reappeared. Dominique rose and took leave of his family.

"You are taking him with you," said Loïck.

"Yes," Oliver replied, "for a few days; we are going into the Tierra Caliente."

"Take care," said Louise anxiously; "you know that Juárez' guerillas are scouring the country."

"Fear nothing, little sister," the young man said as he embraced her; "we shall be prudent. I will bring you back a handkerchief. You know that I have promised you one for a long time."

"I should prefer your not leaving us, Dominique," she replied sadly.

"Come, come," the adventurer remarked gaily; "do not be alarmed, I will bring him back safe and sound."

It appears that the occupants of the rancho had great confidence in Oliver's word, for on this assurance their anxiety became calmed, and they took leave of the two men in tolerably good spirits. The latter then left the rancho, descended the mound, and found their horses, ready to be mounted, awaiting them, tied up to a liquidambar tree. After giving a last parting signal to the inhabitants of the rancho, who were assembled on the platform, they leapt into their saddles, and went off at a gallop across country to strike the Veracruz road.

"Are we really going to the hot lands?" Dominique asked, while galloping by his comrade's side.

"We are not going so far, or nearly so; I am only taking you a few miles off to a hacienda, where I want you to make a new acquaintance."

"Bah! Why so? I care very little for new acquaintances."

"This one will be very useful to you."

"Oh, in that case it is different. I confess to you that I am not very fond of the Mexicans."

"The person to whom you will be introduced is not Mexican, but French."

"That is not at all the same thing; but why do you talk in that mysterious way? Are you not going to introduce me?"

"No, it is another person whom you know, and for whom you feel some liking."

"To whom are you alluding?"

"To Leo Carral."

"The majordomo of the hacienda del Arenal?"

"Himself!"

"In that case we are going to the hacienda?"

"Not exactly, but near it. I have given the majordomo a rendezvous, where he will wait for me, and we are going there now."

"In that case all is for the best. I shall be delighted to see Leo Carral again. He is a good fellow."

"And a man of honour and trust," Oliver added.

CHAPTER X

THE MEETING

Ever since Count de la Saulay's arrival at the hacienda del Arenal, Doña Dolores had treated him with a degree of reserve which the marriage projects made by the two families were far from justifying. The young lady had not only had no private interviews with the man whom she ought to consider to some extent her betrothed, but had not indulged in the slightest intimacy, or most innocent familiarity; while remaining polite, and even gracious, she had contrived, ever since the first day they met, to raise a barrier between herself and the Count – a barrier which he had never attempted to scale, and which had condemned him to remain, perhaps against his secret wishes, within the limits of the strictest reserve.

In these conditions, and especially after the scene at which he had been present on the previous evening, we can easily understand what the stupefaction of the young man must be on learning that Doña Dolores requested an interview with him. What could she have to say to him? For what motive did she grant him this meeting? What reason impelled her to act thus? Such were the questions which the Count did not cease to ask himself – questions which necessarily remained unanswered. Hence the young man's anxiety, curiosity, and impatience, were aroused to the highest degree, and it was with a feeling of joy, which he could not fully explain, that he at length heard the hour for the interview strike. Had he been in Paris instead of a Mexican hacienda, he would have certainly known beforehand what he had to expect from the message he had received, and his conduct would have been regulated beforehand.

But here the coldness of Doña Dolores toward him – a coldness which had never once thawed – the preference which after the last night's scene she seemed to give to another person, all combined to deprive this interview of the slightest supposition of love. Was it his renunciation of her hand, and immediate retirement, that Doña Dolores was about to request of him?

Singular contradiction of the human mind! The Count, who felt for this marriage a repulsion more and more marked, whose formal intention it was to have, as soon as possible, an explanation on this subject with Don Andrés de la Cruz, and whose firm resolution it was to withdraw, and renounce the alliance so long prepared, and which displeased him the more because it was forced on him – revolted at the supposition of this renunciation, which, without doubt, Doña Dolores was going to ask him; his wounded self-esteem made him regard this question under a perfectly new light, and the contempt which the young lady seemed to feel for his hand, filled him with shame and anger.

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