

Aimard Gustave

**The Pirates of the
Prairies: Adventures in the
American Desert**



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PREFACE

The present is the second of the series of Indian tales, commencing with the "Trail-Hunter," and which will be completed in one more volume, entitled the "Trapper's Daughter." It must be understood, however, that each of these volumes is complete in itself, although the characters already introduced to the reader are brought on the stage again, and continue their surprising adventures through succeeding works. For this, Gustave Aimard can quote the example of his predecessor, Fenimore Cooper, whose "Deer Slayer," appears in a long succession of volumes, not necessarily connected, but which all repay perusal. I believe that few who have commenced with one volume of Cooper's Indian tales, but have been anxious to follow the hero through the remainder of his adventures; and I sincerely trust that a perusal of the "Pirates of the Prairies" may lead to a demand for the other volumes by the same author, which have already appeared, and for those which have still to follow.

LASCELLES WRAXALL.

CHAPTER I

THE CACHE

Two months have elapsed since we left the Trail-Hunter commencing his adventurous journey, and we are in the heart of the desert. Before us immensity is unfolded. What pen, however eloquent, would venture to describe those illimitable oceans of verdure to which the North Americans have in their imagery, given the poetic and mysterious name of the Far West? That is to say, the truly unknown region, with its scenes at once grand and striking, soft and terrible; unbounded prairies in which may be found that rich and luxuriant Flora, against whose magic growth only the Indian can successfully struggle.

These plains, at the first glance, offer the dazzled eye of the rash traveller who ventures on them a vast carpet of verdure embossed with flowers, furrowed by large streams; and they appear of a desperate regularity, mingling in the horizon with the azure of the sky.

It is only by degrees, when the sight grows accustomed to the picture, that, gradually mastering the details, the visitor notices here and there rather lofty hills, the escarped sides of the water courses, and a thousand unexpected accidents which agreeably break that monotony by which the eye is at first saddened, and which the lofty grass and the giant productions of the Flora completely conceal.

How can we enumerate the products of this primitive nature, which form an inextricable confusion and interlacement, describing majestic curves, producing grand arcades, and offering, in a word, the most splendid and sublime spectacle it was ever given to man to admire through its eternal contrasts and striking harmony?

Above the gigantic ferns, the *mezquite*, the cactuses, nopales, larches, and fruit-laden arbutuses, rise the mahogany tree with its oblong leaves, the *moriche*, or pine tree, the *abanijo*, whose wide leaves are shaped like a fan, the *pirijao*, from which hang enormous clusters of golden fruit, the royal palm whose stem is denuded of foliage, and balances its majestic and tufted head at the slightest breath; the Indian cane, the lemon tree, the guava, the plantain, the *chinciroya*, or intoxicating fruit, the oak, the pine tree, and the wax palm, distilling its resinous gum.

Then, there are immense fields of dahlias, flowers whiter than the snows of the Caffre de Perote or the Chimborazo, or redder than blood, immense lianas twining and circling round the stems of trees and vines overflowing with sap; and in the midst of this inextricable chaos fly, run, and crawl, in every direction, animals of all sorts and sizes, birds, quadrupeds, reptiles, amphibious, singing, crying, howling and roaring with every note of the human gamut, some mocking and menacing, others soft and melancholy.

The stags and deer bounding timidly along, with ear erect and eye on the watch, the bighorn leaping from rock to rock, and then resting motionless on the verge of a precipice, the heavy and stupid buffaloes with their sad eyes; the wild horses, whose numerous *manadas* make the earth re-echo in their purposeless chase; the alligator, with its body in the mud, and sleeping in the sun; the hideous *iguana* carelessly climbing up a tree; the puma, that maneless lion; the panther and jaguar cunningly watch their prey as it passes; the brown bear, that gluttonous honey-hunter; the grizzly, the most formidable denizen of these countries; the *cotejo*, with its venomous bite; the chameleon, whose skin reflects every hue; the green lizard, and the basilisk crawling silent and sinister beneath the leaves; the monstrous boa, the coral snake, so small and yet so terrible; the *cascabel*, the *macaurel*, and the great striped serpent.

The feathered flock sing and twitter on the branches, hidden beneath the dense foliage; the tanagers, the curassos, the chattering *lloros*, the *haras*, the flycatcher, the toucans, with their enormous beaks, the pigeons, the *trogons*, the elegant rose flamingos, the swans balancing and sporting in the

streams, and the light and graceful gray squirrels leaping with unimaginable speed from creeper to creeper, from shrub to shrub.

In the highest regions of air, hovering in long circles over the prairie, the eagle of the Sierra Madre, with wide-spread wings, and the bald-headed vulture, select the prey on which they dart with the rapidity of lightning.

Then, suddenly, crushing under his horse's hoofs the sand and gold-studded pebbles sparkling in the sun, appears, as if by enchantment, an Indian, with his red skin glistening like new copper, robust limbs, gestures stamped with majesty and grace, and a commanding eye; a Navajo, Pawnee, Comanche, Apache or Sioux, who, whirling his lasso or *lakki* round his head, drives before him a herd of startled buffaloes or wild horses, or else a panther, ounce, or jaguar, that fly his presence with hoarse roars of rage and terror.

This child of the desert, so grand, so noble, and so disdainful of peril, who crosses the prairies with incredible speed, and knows its thousand turnings, is truly the king of this strange country, which he alone can traverse night and day, and whose countless dangers he does not fear. He struggles inch by inch with that European civilisation which is slowly advancing, driving him into his last intrenchments and invading his lands on all sides.

Hence, woe to the trapper or hunter who ventures to traverse these prairies alone! His bones will bleach on the plain, and his scalp adorn the shield of an Indian chief, or the mane of his horse.

Such is the sublime, striking, and terrible spectacle the Far West offers even at the present day.

The day on which we resume our story, at the moment when the sun attained its zenith, the mournful silence brooding over the desert was suddenly troubled by a slight sound, which was heard in the tufted clumps that border the Rio Gila, in one of the most unknown districts of this solitude.

The branches were cautiously parted, and amid the leaves and creepers a man displayed his face dripping with perspiration, and marked with an expression of terror and despair.

This man, after looking around him anxiously, and assuring himself that no one was on the watch, slowly disengaged his body from the grass and shrubs that conceal it, walked a few steps in the direction of the river, and fell to the ground, uttering a profound sigh.

Almost simultaneously an enormous mastiff, with a cross of the wolf and Newfoundland, bounded from the shrubs and lay down at his feet.

The man who appeared so unexpectedly on the banks of the Rio Gila was Red Cedar.¹

His position appeared most critical, for he was alone in the desert, without weapons or provisions. We say without weapons, for the long knife passed through his deerskin girdle was almost useless to him. In the Far West, that infinite ocean of verdure, an unarmed man is a dead man!

The struggle becomes impossible for him with the numberless enemies who watch his passing, and only await a favourable moment to catch him. Red Cedar was deprived of those inestimable riches of the hunter, a rifle and a horse. Moreover he was alone!

Man, so long as he can see his fellow, even though that fellow be an enemy, does not believe himself abandoned. In his heart there remains a vague hope for which he cannot account, but which sustains and endows him with courage.

But, so soon as every human form has disappeared, and man, an imperceptible grain of dust in the desert, finds himself face to face with God, he trembles, for the feeling of his weakness is then revealed to him; he comprehends how insignificant he is before these colossal works of nature, and how insensate is the struggle he must carry on, in order to raise only a corner of the winding sheet of sand gradually settling down on him, and which assails him from all sides at once.

Red Cedar was an old wood ranger. Many times, during his excursions in the prairies, he had found himself in almost desperate situations, and he had always got out of them by his boldness, patience, and above all, his firm will.

¹ See the Trail-hunter.

Still, he had never before been so denuded of everything as he was at this moment.

Still, he must make up his mind to something. He arose, stifling an oath, and whistling to his dog, the only being that remained faithful in his misfortunes, he set out, not even taking the trouble to find out his direction. In fact, what need had he to choose one? Were not all good for him, and would they not all lead within a given period to the same end – death?

He walked on thus for several hours with drooping head, seeing the bighorns and asshtas bounding round, as if mocking him. The buffaloes scarce deigned to raise their heads as he passed, and looked at him with their large melancholy eyes, as if comprehending that their implacable foe was disarmed, and they had nothing to fear from him. The elks, balanced on the points of the rocks, leaped and sported round him, while his dog, who did not at all comprehend this very novel affair, looked at its master, and seemed to ask him what it all meant.

The day passed thus, without producing the least change for the better in the squatter's position; but, on the contrary, aggravating it. At nightfall he fell on the sand, exhausted by fatigue and hunger. The sun had disappeared, and the darkness was already invading the prairie. The howling of the wild beasts could be heard as they emerged from their lair to quench their thirst and go in search of food. The disarmed squatter could not light a fire to keep them at bay.

He looked around him; a last instinct of preservation, perhaps, or the final gleam of hope, that divine spark which is never extinguished in the heart of the most unfortunate man, urged him to seek a shelter. He climbed up a tree, and after tying himself securely, through fear of a fall, if, as was very improbable, he fell asleep, he closed his eyes and sought slumber, in order to cheat for a few moments, at any rate, that hunger which devoured him, and forget his deplorable position.

But sleep does not thus visit the unfortunate, and obstinately refused to come, when most earnestly invoked. No one, who has not experienced it, can imagine the horror of a sleepless night in the desert! The darkness is peopled with mournful spectres, the wild beasts roar, the serpents twine round the trees, and at times clasp in their cold and viscous coils the wretched man half-dead with terror.

No one can say of how many centuries a minute is composed in this terrible situation, or the length of this nightmare, during which the sickly mind creates the most monstrous lucubrations. Especially when the stomach is empty, and, through that very circumstance, the brain is more easily invaded by delirium.

At sunrise the squatter breathed a sigh of relief. And yet, of what consequence to him was the appearance of light, for it was only the beginning of a day of intolerable suffering and frightful torture? But, at any rate, he could see, he could notice, what went on around him; the sun warmed and restored him some slight strength. He came down from the tree in which he had passed the night, and continued his journey.

Why did he go on? He did not know himself; still, he walked as if he had a point to reach, although he was perfectly well aware he had no help to expect from anyone, and that, on the contrary, the first face he perceived would be that of an enemy.

But the man whose mind is powerfully constituted is so. He never gives up; he struggles to the last moment, and if he cannot trust to Providence, he hopes in accident, without daring to confess it to himself.

It would be impossible for us to explain the thoughts that crossed the squatter's brain while, with uncertain step he crossed silently and sadly the vast solitudes of the prairie.

Toward midday, the heat became so intense, that, overcome by so much moral and physical suffering, he sank exhausted at the foot of a tree. He remained for a long time extended on the ground; but, at length, impelled by want, he rose with an effort, and sought for roots and herbs which might lull the hunger that gnawed his vitals. His search was long in vain, but at last he found a species of *yucca*, a pasty root somewhat like manioc, which he devoured with delight. He laid in a stock of this root, which he shared with his dog, and, after a deep draught from the stream, he prepared to

continue his journey, slightly re-invigorated by this more than frugal meal; when all at once his eye emitted a flash, his face grew animated, and he murmured in a voice trembling with emotion:

"Suppose it was one!"

This is what had caused Red Cedar's exclamation. At the moment he was setting out again after looking mechanically around him, he fancied he noticed at a certain spot that the grass was closer and taller than anywhere else. This difference, visibly only to a man long accustomed to the prairie, did not escape him.

The Indians and hunters, often compelled to make a hurried journey, either to avoid a hostile ambushade or follow up the game, are necessitated to abandon a large portion of their plunder or merchandise they carry with them for trading purposes. As they are not at all inclined to lose it, however, they make what is called in trapper language a *cache*.

It is effected in the following way.

They begin by spreading blankets and buffalo skins round the spot where they intend making the cache: then they remove large sods of grass, square, round, or oval, and dig out the soil, being careful to lay it on the blankets or skins. When the hole is deep enough, the sides are lined with buffalo hides, for fear of damp, and the articles are laid in it: the soil is then put in again, and the grass laid over it, which is watered to make it grow, and the rest of the earth is carried to the river, into which every particle is thrown, in order to hide any trace of the cache, which is so closely concealed, that a man must have an extraordinary skilful eye to discover one, and he often only finds old caches which have been ransacked and have nothing left in them.

The objects placed in the caches will keep for five or six years without deteriorating. How many things concealed in this way have been lost through the death of their owners who bear with them in the tomb the secret of the spot where they have deposited their wealth!

We have said, that the squatter imagined he had found such a cache. In his position, such a discovery was of inestimable value to him: it might offer him articles of primary necessity he wanted, and restore him, as it were, to life, by supplying him with means to recommence his existence of hunting, plunder, and vagabondage.

He stood for some minutes with his eye fixed on the spot where he suspected the cache, his mind agitated by undefinable feelings. At length he moderated his emotion, and his heart palpitating with fear and hope, carefully laid his blanket and buffalo robe by the cache to hold the earth, with that honesty innate in men accustomed to a prairie life, who, though they may be bandits and plunder the property of others unscrupulously, still consider it a point of honour not to squander it, or deprive the legal owner of anything but what is absolutely necessary to themselves; then he knelt down and with his knife removed a sod of grass.

It is impossible to describe the quiver and anxiety of this man when he first plunged his knife into the ground. He then carefully removed all the turf that seemed to him to form the outline of the cache. This first task ended, he rested for a moment to take breath, and at the same time to indulge in that emotion so full of pleasure and pain felt on accomplishing an act from which life or death depends.

After a quarter of an hour, he passed his hand over his dank forehead, and set to work resolutely, digging up the ground with his knife, and removing it with his hands to the blanket. It was really a rude task, especially for a man exhausted by fatigue and weakened by privations. Several times he was compelled to stop through the exhaustion of his strength: the work advanced slowly, and no sign as yet corroborated the squatter's belief.

Several times he was on the point of abandoning this vain search, but it was his only chance of safety; there alone, if he succeeded, would he find the means to become once more a wood ranger: hence he clung to this last plank of safety which chance offered him, with all the energy of despair, that Archimedean lever, which finds nothing impossible.

Still, the unhappy wretch had been digging for a long time; a large hole was gaping before him, but nothing offered him a prospect of success; hence, in spite of the invincible energy of his character, he felt despair invading his mind once again. A tear of impotent rage brooded in his fever-inflamed eyelids, and he hurled his knife into the hole, uttering an oath, and giving heaven a bitter look of defiance.

The knife sprung back with a metallic sound; the squatter seized it and examined it closely – the point was broken clean off.

He began digging again frenziedly with his nails, like a wild beast, disdaining the use of his knife any longer, and he soon laid bare a buffalo hide. Instead of lifting this skin at once, which doubtless covered all the treasures whose possession he coveted, he began gazing at it with terrible anxiety.

Red Cedar had not deceived himself: he had really discovered a cache. But what did it contain? Perhaps it had already been ransacked, and was empty. When he had only one movement to make, in order to assure himself, he hesitated – he was afraid!

During the three hours he had been toiling to reach this point, he had formed so many chimeras, that he instinctively feared to see them vanish suddenly, and fall back rudely into the frightful reality which held him in its iron claws.

For a long time he hesitated in this way; at length suddenly forming a resolve, with hands trembling with emotion, palpitating heart and bloodshot eye, he tore away the buffalo skin, with a movement rapid as thought. He felt dazzled, and uttered a roar like a wild beast – he had hit upon a thorough hunter's cache!

It contained iron traps of every description, rifles, double and single pistols, powder horns, bags filled with bullets, knives, and the thousand objects suitable for wood rangers.

Red Cedar felt himself born again: a sudden change took place in him, he became again the implacable and indomitable being he had been prior to the catastrophe, without fear or remorse, ready to recommence the struggle with all nature, and laughing at the perils and snares he might meet with on the road.

He selected the best rifle, two pairs of double-barrelled pistols, and a knife with a blade fifteen inches in length. He also took the necessary harness for a horse; two powder horns, a bag of bullets, and an elk skin game pouch richly embroidered in the Indian fashion, containing a tinderbox and all the necessaries for bivouacking. He also found pipes and tobacco, which he eagerly clutched, for his greatest privation had been the inability to smoke.

When he had loaded himself with all he thought he needed, he restored all to its primitive condition, and skilfully removed the traces which might have revealed to others the cache which had been so useful to himself. This duty of an honest man performed, Red Cedar threw his rifle over his shoulder, whistled to the dog, and went off hurriedly muttering:

"Ah, ah! You fancied you had forced the boar in its lair; we shall see whether it can take its revenge."

By what concurrence of extraordinary events was the squatter, whom we saw enter the desert at the head of a numerous and resolute troop, reduced to such a state of urgent peril?

CHAPTER II

THE AMBUSCADE

We said at the close of the "Trail-Hunter," that another band entered the desert at the heels of the troop commanded by Red Cedar. This band, guided by Valentine Guillois, was composed of Curumilla, General Ibañez, Don Miguel Zarate, and his son. These men were not seeking a placer, but vengeance.

On reaching the Indian territory, the Frenchman looked inquiringly round him, and stopping his horse, turned to Don Miguel.

"Before going further," he said, "I think we had better hold a council, and settle a plan of campaign from which we will not deviate."

"My friend," the hacendero answered "you know that all our hopes rest on you: act, therefore, as you think advisable."

"Good," Valentine said; "this is the hour when the heat compels all living creatures in the desert to seek shelter under the shade of the trees, so we will halt; the spot where we now are is admirably suited for a day's bivouac."

"Be it so," the hacendero answered laconically.

The horsemen dismounted, and removed their horses' bits, so that the poor creatures might obtain a little nourishment by nibbling the scanty and parched grass which grew on this ungrateful soil. The spot was really admirably chosen: it was a large clearing traversed by one of those many nameless streams which intersect the prairie in every direction, and which, after a course of a few miles, go to swell the rivers in which they are lost. A dense dome of foliage offered the travellers an indispensable shelter against the burning beams of a vertical sun. Although it was about midday, the air in the clearing, refreshed by the exhalations of the stream, invited them to enjoy that day sleep so well called the siesta.

But the travellers had something more serious to attend to than sleep. As soon as all the precautions were taken against any possible attack, Valentine sat down at the foot of a tree, making his friends a sign to join him. The three whites immediately acquiesced, while Curumilla, according to his wont, went rifle in hand to the skirt of the clearing, to watch over the safety of all. After a few moments' reflection, Valentine took the word:

"Caballeros," he said, "the moment has arrived for a frank explanation: we are at present on the enemy's territory; the desert extends for more than two thousand miles around us. We shall have to fight not only with the white men or redskins we meet on our road, but also contend with hunger, thirst, and wild beasts of every description. Do not try to give my words any other meaning than that I myself attach to them. You have known me a long time, Don Miguel, and the friendship I have vowed to you."

"I know it, and thank you," Don Miguel said, gratefully.

"In short," Valentine continued, "no obstacle, of whatever nature it may be, will be powerful enough to check me in the mission I have undertaken."

"I am convinced of it, my friend."

"Good, but I am an old wood ranger; desert life, with its privations and perils, is perfectly familiar to me; the trail I am about to follow will only be child's play to me and the brave Indian, my companion."

"What are you coming to?" Don Miguel interrupted him anxiously.

"To this," the hunter frankly answered. "You caballeros, accustomed to a life of luxury and ease, will perchance not be able to endure the rude existence to which you are about to be condemned:

in the first moment of grief you bravely rushed, without reflecting, in pursuit of the ravishers of your daughter, and without calculating the consequences of your deed."

"That is true," Don Miguel murmured.

"It is, therefore, my duty," Valentine went on, "to warn you: do not be afraid to withdraw; but be frank with me as I am with you: Curumilla and myself will suffice to carry out the task we have undertaken. The Mexican frontier stretches out about ten miles behind you; return to it, and leave to us the care of restoring your child to you, if you do not feel capable of braving, without giving way, the innumerable dangers that menace us. A sick man, by delaying our pursuit, would not only render it impossible for us to succeed, but might expose us all to the risk of being killed and scalped. Hence, reflect seriously, my friend, and putting away any question of self-esteem, give me an answer that allows me full liberty of action."

During this species of sermon, whose justice he recognised in his heart, Don Miguel had remained with his head bowed on his chest, and with frowning eyebrows. When Valentine ceased, the hacendero drew himself up and took the hunter's hand, which he pressed warmly, as he said —

"My friend, what you have said to me it was your duty to say: your remarks do not at all offend me, because they were dictated by the friendship you bear me. The observations you have made to me, I had already made to myself; but, whatever may happen, my resolution is immovable. I shall not turn back till I have found my daughter again."

"I knew that such would be your reply, Don Miguel," the hunter said. "A father cannot consent to abandon his daughter in the hands of bandits, without attempting all means to deliver her; still, it was my duty to make the remark I did. Hence we will not speak about it again, but prepare on the spot to draw up our plans of action."

"Oh, oh," the general said, with a laugh, "I am anxious to hear that."

"You will excuse me, general," Valentine answered; "but the war we carry on is completely different from that of civilised people; in the desert craft alone can triumph."

"Well, let us be crafty: I ask nothing better, especially as, with the slight forces we have at our disposal, I do not see how we could act otherwise."

"That is true," the hunter continued, "There are only five of us; but, believe me, five determined men are more dangerous than might be supposed, and I soon hope to prove it to our enemies."

"Well spoken, friend," Don Miguel said, gladly. "*Cuerpo de Dios*, those accursed Gringos shall soon realise that fact."

"We have," Valentine continued, "allies who will second us valiantly when the moment arrives: the Comanche nation proudly calls itself the 'Queen of the Prairies,' and its warriors are terrible enemies. Unicorn will not fail us, with his tribe; and we have also a friend in the enemy's camp in the Chief of the Coras."

"What are you saying?" the General gaily remarked. "Why, our success is insured."

Valentine shook his head.

"No," he said; "Red Cedar has allies too: the Pirates of the Prairies and the Apaches will join him, I feel convinced."

"Perhaps so," Don Miguel observed.

"Doubt is not admissible under the circumstances; the scalp hunter is too well used to a desert life not to try and get all the chances of success on his side."

"But, if that happen, it will be a general war," the hacendero said.

"Doubtless," Valentine continued; "that is what I wish to arrive at. Two days' march from where we now are there is a Navajo village; I have done some slight services to Yellow Wolf, the principal chief; we must proceed to him before Red Cedar attempts to see him, and insure his alliance at all risks. The Navajos are prudent and courageous warriors."

"Do you not fear the consequences of this delay?"

"Once for all, caballeros," Valentine answered, "remember that in the country where we now are the straight line is ever the longest."

The three men bowed resignedly.

"Yellow Wolf's alliance is indispensable to us: with his support it will be easy for us to – "

The sudden appearance of Curumilla interrupted the hunter. "What is the matter now?" he asked him.

"Listen!" the chief answered laconically.

The four men anxiously stopped talking.

"By Heavens!" Valentine said, as he hurriedly arose, "What is the matter here?"

And, followed by his comrades, he stepped into the thicket. The Mexicans, whose senses were dulled, had heard nothing at the first moment; but the noise which had struck the hunter's practised ear now reached them. It was the furious galloping of several horses, whose hoofs re-echoed on the ground with a noise resembling that of thunder. Suddenly, ferocious yells were heard, mingled with shots.

The five travellers, hidden behind trees, peered out, and soon noticed a man mounted on a horse lathered with foam, who was pursued by some thirty mounted Indians.

"To horse!" Valentine commanded in a low voice. "We cannot let this man be assassinated."

"Hem!" the general muttered, "We are playing a dangerous game, for they are numerous."

"Do you not see that the man is of our own colour?" Valentine went on.

"That is true," said Don Miguel. "Whatever happens, we must not allow him to be massacred in cold blood by those ferocious Indians."

In the meanwhile, the pursuers and pursued had come nearer the spot where the hunters were ambushed behind the trees. The man the Indians were so obstinately following drew himself up haughtily in his saddle, and, while galloping at full speed, turned from time to time to fire his rifle into the thick of his enemies. At each discharge a warrior fell; his comrades then uttered fearful yells, and answered by a shower of arrows and bullets. But the stranger shook his head disdainfully, and continued his career.

"*Caspita!*" the general said with admiration; "That is a brave fellow."

"On my soul," Don Pablo exclaimed, "it would be a pity to see him killed."

"We must save him," Don Miguel could not refrain from saying.

Valentine smiled gently.

"I will try it," he said. "To horse!"

Each leaped into the saddle.

"Now," Valentine continued, "remain invisible behind the shrubs. These Indians are Apaches; when they come within range, you will all fire without showing yourselves."

Each set his rifle, and held in readiness. There was a moment of supreme expectation, and the hunters' hearts beat violently.

The Indians still approached, bowed over the necks of their panting steeds, brandishing their weapons furiously, and uttering at intervals their formidable war cry. They came up at headlong speed, preceded about one hundred yards by the man they were pursuing, whom they must soon catch up, for his wearied horse stumbled continually, and was sensibly diminishing its speed.

At length the stranger passed with lightning speed the thicket which concealed those who were about to try a diversion in his favour, that might ruin them.

"Attention," Valentine commanded in a low voice. The rifles were lowered on the Apaches.

"Aim carefully," the Trail-hunter added. "Every bullet must, kill its man."

A minute elapsed – a minute an age in length.

"Fire!" the hunter suddenly shouted; "Fire now."

Five shots were discharged, and the same number of Apaches fell.

CHAPTER III

AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE OF THE READER

On this unforeseen attack the Apaches uttered a yell of terror; but, before they could pull up their horses, a second discharge made four fresh victims in their ranks. A mad terror then seized on the Indians, and they turned and fled in every direction; ten minutes later they had disappeared. The hunters did not dream for a moment of pursuing them; but Curumilla had dismounted, and crawling out to the scene of action, conscientiously finished and scalped the Apaches who had fallen under his comrades' bullets. At the same time he lassoed a riderless horse which passed a few paces from him, and then rejoined his friends.

"To what tribe do those dogs belong?" Valentine asked him.

"The Buffalo," Curumilla made answer.

"Oh, oh," the hunter went on; "we were in luck's way then. Stanapat, I believe, is the chief of the Buffalo tribe."

Curumilla nodded an assent; and after hobbling the horse he had lassoed by the side of the others, quietly seated himself on the river bank.

The stranger had been quite as much surprised as the Apaches by the unforeseen help that had so providentially arrived at the moment when he believed himself hopelessly lost. At the sound of the firing he checked his horse, and, after a moment's hesitation, slowly turned back.

Valentine watched all his movements. The stranger, on reaching the thicket, dismounted, pulled back with a firm hand the brambles that barred his way, and boldly proceeded to the clearing where the hunters were ambushed. This man, whom the reader already knows, was no other than the person Red Cedar called Don Melchior, and of whom he seemed so terribly afraid.

When he found himself in the presence of the Mexicans, Don Melchior took off his hat and bowed courteously; the others politely returned his salute.

"*Viva Dios!*" he exclaimed. "I do not know who you are, caballeros; but I thank you sincerely for your interference just now. I owe my life to you."

"In the Far West," Valentine answered nobly, "an invisible bond connects all the individuals of one colour, who only form a single family."

"Yes," the stranger said, with a thoughtful accent, "it should be so; but unfortunately," he added, shaking his head in denial, "the worthy principles you enunciate, caballero, are but very slightly put in practice: but I ought not at this moment to complain of them being neglected, as it is to your generous intervention that I owe my being among the living."

The listeners bowed, and the stranger went on:

"Be kind enough to tell me who you are, gentlemen, that I may retain in my heart names which will ever be dear to me."

Valentine fixed on the man who thus spoke a piercing glance, that seemed to be trying to read his most secret thoughts. The stranger smiled sadly.

"Pardon," he then said, "any apparent bitterness in my words: I have suffered much, and, in spite of myself, gloomy thoughts often rise from my heart to my lips."

"Man is sent on the earth to suffer," Valentine gravely replied. "Each of us has his cross to bear here: Don Miguel de Zarate, his son and General Ibañez are a proof of my assertion."

At the name of Don Miguel, a vivid blush purpled the stranger's cheeks, and his eye flashed, despite all his efforts to remain unmoved.

"I have often heard of Don Miguel de Zarate," he said, with a bow. "I have been informed of the dangers he has incurred – dangers from which he only escaped by the aid of a man – an honest hunter."

"That hunter is before you," Don Miguel said. "Alas! We have other and greater dangers still to incur."

The stranger looked at him attentively for an instant – then stepped forward, and crossed his arms on his chest.

"Listen!" he said, in a deep voice. "It was truly Heaven that inspired you to come to my help – for from this moment I devote myself, body and soul, to your service; and I belong to you as the haft does to the blade. I know the reason that compelled you to break up all old habits to visit the frightful solitudes of the Far West."

"You know it?" the hunter exclaimed, in surprise.

"Everything," the stranger firmly answered. "I know the treachery which cast you into the power of your enemies. I know, too, that your daughter has been carried off by Red Cedar."

"Who are you, then, to be so well informed?" Valentine asked.

A sad smile played for a second round the stranger's lips.

"Who am I?" he said in a melancholy voice. "What matters, since I wish to serve you?"

"Still, as we answered your questions, we have a right to expect the same from you."

"That is just," the stranger said, "and you shall be satisfied. I am the man with the hundred names: in Mexico I am called Don Luis Arroyal, partner in the firm of Simpson, Carvalho, and Company – in the northern provinces of Mexico, where I have long rendered myself popular by foolish squandering, El Gambusino – on the coasts of the United States, and in the Gulf of Mexico, where I sometimes command a cutter, and chase the slavers, I am called the Unknown – among the North Americans, the Son of Blood – but my real name, and the one men give me who know the little about me I think proper to tell them – it is la Venganza (Vengeance). Are you satisfied now, gentlemen?"

No one replied. The hunters had all heard of this extraordinary man, about whom the strangest rumours were rife in Mexico, the United States, and even on the prairie. By the side of heroic deeds, and acts of kindness deserving all praise, he was branded with crimes of unheard-of cruelty and unexampled ferocity. He inspired a mysterious terror in the whites and redskins, who equally feared to come in contact with him, though no proof had ever yet been brought forward of the contradictory stories told about him.

Valentine and his comrades had frequently heard talk of Bloodson; but this was the first time they had found themselves face to face with him; and, in spite of themselves, they were surprised to see so noble and handsome a man. Valentine was the first to regain his coolness.

"For a long time," he said, "your name has been familiar to me. I was anxious to know you. The opportunity offers, and I am pleased with it, as I shall be at length able to judge you, which was hitherto impossible, through the exaggerated stories told about you. You say that you can be useful to us in the enterprise we are meditating, and we accept your offer as frankly as you make it. On an expedition like this, the help of a brave man must not be despised – the more so, as the man we wish to force in his lair is dangerous."

"More than you imagine," the stranger interrupted him in a gloomy voice. "I have been struggling with Red Cedar for twenty years, and have not yet managed to crush him. Ah! He is a rough adversary! I know it, for I am his most implacable enemy, and have in vain tried all the means at my command to take an exemplary vengeance on him."

While uttering these words, the stranger's face had assumed a livid tint; his features were contracted, and he seemed to be suffering from an extraordinary emotion. Valentine looked at him for an instant with a mingled feeling of pity and sympathy. The hunter, who had suffered so much, knew, like all wounded souls, how to feel for the grief of men who, like himself, bore their adversity worthily.

"We will help you," he said, as he cordially offered him his hand, "Instead of five, we shall be six, to fight him."

The stranger's eye flashed forth a strange gleam. He squeezed the offered hand, and answered in a dull voice, but with an expression impossible to render:

"We shall be fifty; for I have comrades in the desert."

Valentine bent a joyous glance on his companions at this news, which announced to him a valuable support, that he was far from anticipating.

"But fifty men are not sufficient to contend against this demon, who is associated with the Pirates of the Prairies, and allied with the most dangerous Indians."

"Do not trouble yourself about that," Valentine observed. "We will also ally ourselves with Indian tribes. But I swear to you that I shall not quit the prairie till I have seen the last drop of that villain's blood run out."

"May heaven hear you!" the stranger muttered. "If my horse were not so tired, I would ask you to follow me; for we have not a moment to lose if we wish to force the wild beast. Unfortunately, we are compelled to wait some hours."

Curumilla stepped forward. "Here is a horse for my pale brother," he said, as he pointed to the animal he had lassoed a few minutes previously.

The stranger uttered a cry of joy.

"To horse!" he loudly exclaimed, "To horse!"

"Where are you taking us?" Valentine asked.

"To join my comrades in the hiding place I have selected for them. Then we will arrange the means we must employ to destroy our common enemy."

"Good," Valentine remarked, "that is excellent reasoning. Are we far from the place?"

"No, twenty to twenty-five miles at the most; we shall be there by sunset."

"We will start then," Valentine added.

The gentlemen leaped into their saddles, and started at a gallop in the direction of the mountains. A few minutes later, the spot had returned to its usual calmness and silence. Nothing was left to prove that man had passed that way, save a few mutilated corpses over which the vultures were already beginning to circle with hoarse croaking before they settled upon them.

CHAPTER IV

RED CEDAR AT BAY

The six men rode one after the other, following one of those inextricable tracks made by the wild beasts, which cross the desert in every direction. Bloodson served as guide to the little party, followed immediately by Curumilla. The Indian chief, with the genius peculiar to his race, advanced silently as usual, but casting right and left peering glances, which nothing escaped, and which render the redskins peculiar beings.

All at once Curumilla dismounted, and bent over the ground, uttering an exclamation of surprise. This was so extraordinary a fact, and so contrary to the habits of the Ulmen of the Araucanos, that Valentine hurried up to enquire what had happened.

"What's the matter with you, chief?" he asked, as soon as he came up with him.

"My brother can look," Curumilla said simply.

Valentine dismounted and stooped to the ground. The Indian showed him a half-effaced footstep, which still bore, however, the shape of a horseshoe. The hunter looked at it for some time with the utmost attention, then began walking cautiously in the direction the hoof marks seemed to go. Others soon presented themselves to him. His comrades had stopped, and silently awaited his explanation.

"Well!" Don Miguel at length said.

"There is no doubt possible," Valentine answered, as if speaking to himself, "Red Cedar has passed along here."

"What," the general observed, "do you believe it?"

"I am sure of it. The chief has just shown me the perfectly formed mark of his horse's hoof."

"Oh! Oh!" Don Miguel objected, "a horseshoe is a very slight sign; all are alike."

"Yes, as one tree resembles the other," Valentine answered quickly. "Listen: the chief has observed that the squatter, I know not by what accident, is mounted on a horse shod on all four feet, while the men composing his band have theirs only shod on the front feet; in addition, this horse in stepping throws back its feet, which causes the mark to be indistinct."

"In truth," Bloodson remarked, "the observation is correct, and only an Indian could make it; but Red Cedar is at the head of a numerous party, which cannot have passed along this way, or we should notice the trail."

"That is true," the general said; "what do you conclude from that?"

"A very simple thing; it is probable that Red Cedar has, for reasons unknown to us, left his men encamped some miles from here, and has ridden this way alone."

"I have it," Bloodson said; "not far from the spot where we now are, there is a nest of pirates, and Red Cedar has probably gone to ask their assistance in case of need."

"That's it," Valentine added; "the track is quite fresh, so our man cannot be far from us."

"We must pursue him," Don Pablo quickly said, who had, till this moment, maintained a gloomy silence.

"What do you say, gentlemen?" Valentine asked, turning to the rest.

"Pursue him," they answered unanimously.

Then, without further deliberation, they began following the trail, under the guidance of Valentine and Curumilla.

What the hunter stated had really happened. Red Cedar, when he entered the desert, after installing his band in a strong position, remounted his horse and set out, warning all his comrades that he should return within four days at the most, and leaving them temporarily under the orders of the monk.

Red Cedar did not fancy himself so closely pursued by Valentine, and hence had taken but slight precautions to conceal his track.

As he proceeded alone, in spite of the trail found by Curumilla, he would doubtless have escaped pursuit, had not a dog followed him from camp without his knowledge. The track left by that animal served as a guide to the pursuers at the moment when they had completely lost his trail. Valentine and Curumilla had dismounted, and were advancing slowly and examining the sand and soil over which they passed.

"Take care," the Trail-hunter said to his comrades, who followed him step by step; "do not come on so quickly; when picking up a trail you must mind where you put your foot down, and not look on both sides. Stay," he added, suddenly stooping and stopping Don Pablo; "here are traces you were just about to efface. Let us have a look at this: they are the marks of the horseshoe we have lost for some time. Red Cedar's horse has a peculiar way of putting down its feet, which I guarantee to recognise at the first glance. Hum, hum," he continued, "now I know where to find him."

"You are sure of it?" Don Miguel interrupted.

"It is not difficult, as you shall see."

"Forward, forward!" Don Pablo and the general shouted.

"Caballeros," the hunter observed, "be good enough to remember that on the prairies you must never raise your voice. The branches have eyes and the leaves ears here. Now, to remount and cross the river."

The six men, combined in a compact body, in order to afford a greater resistance to the current, which was very powerful at this spot, forced their horses into the Gila. The passage was executed without any obstacle, and the horses soon landed on the other bank.

"Now," Valentine said, "open your eyes, for the hunt begins here."

Don Pablo and the general remained on the bank to guard the horses, and the remainder of the party set out, forming a line of tirailleurs sixty feet long. Valentine had recommended his companions to concentrate their researches on a space of one hundred and fifty yards at most, in a semicircle, so as to reach an almost impenetrable thicket, situated at the foot of the hill by the riverside.

Each man advanced cautiously, with his gun thrust forward, looking on all sides at once, and not leaving a bush, a pebble, or a blade of grass unexamined. Suddenly Curumilla imitated the cry of the jay, the signal for assembling in the event of any important discovery. All rushed toward the spot whence the signal came; in the midst of the lofty grass, the ground was trampled and the lower branches broken.

"Red Cedar's horse was tied up here," Valentine said. "Attention! We are about to catch the bear in his den. You know with what sort of men we have to deal; be prudent: if not, there will soon be broken bones and punctured skins among us."

Without adding a word further, the hunter again took the head of the file. He carefully parted the bushes, and unhesitatingly entered the thicket. At this moment the furious barking of a dog could be heard.

"Hilloh!" a rough voice shouted: "What's the matter, Black? Did not the redskins have a sufficient lesson last night, that they want to try it again?"

These words were followed by the grating sound of a rifle being cocked. Valentine made his comrades a sign to stop, and boldly advanced.

"They are not Indians," he said, in a loud and firm voice: "it is I, Koutonepi, an old acquaintance, who wishes to have a chat with you."

"I have nothing to say to you," Red Cedar, still invisible, answered. "I know not why you have followed me to this place: we never were such good friends, I fancy, that you should desire the pleasure of my company."

"That's true," the hunter remarked: "you may be fully assured that we were always very bad friends: but no matter; call off your dog."

"If your intentions are good, and you are alone, you can advance, and will be received as a friend."

And he whistled to his dog, which rejoined him.

"As regards my intentions, I can assure you that they are good," the Trail-hunter replied, as he drew back the branches.

He suddenly found himself in front of Red Cedar, who was standing, rifle in hand, in the narrow entrance of a grotto. The two men were scarce fifteen yards apart, examining each other suspiciously. This is, however, the custom of the prairies, where all meetings are the same: distrust always holds the first place.

"Stop," the squatter shouted. "For what we have to say to each other, we need not be ear to ear. What do we care if the birds and serpents hear our conversation? Come, speak! What have you come here for? Empty your wallet, and make haste about it; for I have no time to listen to your stories."

"Hum!" the other answered; "my stories are as good as yours, and perhaps you would have done better by spending your time in listening to them, rather than acting as you have done."

"What do you mean?" Red Cedar said, as he struck the ground with the butt of his rifle: "You know I am not fond of sermons. I am a free hunter, and act as I think proper."

"Come, come," the huntsman went on in a conciliatory tone, while quietly drawing nearer; "do not take up that tone: all may be arranged. Hang it, what is the question, if we come to that? Only about a woman you have carried off!"

The bandit listened to Valentine without attaching much importance to his remarks. For some instants his attentive ear appeared to be catching vague sounds; his eye sounded the depth of the woods; his nostrils dilated; and all the instincts of the wild beast were revealed. A presentiment told him that he was incurring some unknown danger.

On his side, the hunter watched the slightest movements of his adversary: not one of the changes on his face had escaped him, and though apparently unmoved, he kept on his guard.

"Traitor!" the squatter suddenly shouted, as he raised his rifle to his shoulder; "You shall die!"

"What a fellow you are!" Valentine retorted, as he dodged behind a tree. "Not yet, if you please."

"Surrender, Red Cedar!" Don Miguel shouted, as he appeared, followed by the stranger and Curumilla: "Surrender!"

"What do you say? I surrender! First try and force me to do so. I swear that I will kill you first," the bandit answered with a terrible accent: "I hold your life in my hands. Are you aware of that?"

"Come," Valentine retorted, "don't be so rough! There are four of us, and I suppose you do not intend to kill us all."

"For the last time, will you retire?" the bandit said, with a furious gesture.

"Come, come," Bloodson shouted in a loud voice, "do not attempt any useless resistance. Red Cedar, your hour has arrived."

At the sound of this voice, the bandit's face was suddenly covered by a livid pallor, and a convulsive tremor passed over his limbs.

"Look out, he is going to fire!" Valentine shouted.

Two shots were fired so closely together, that they sounded as one. The squatter's gun, shattered in his hands, fell to the ground. Valentine, who wished to capture the bandit alive, could only hit on this way of turning his bullet, which, in fact, whistled harmlessly past his ear.

"*Con mil demonios!*" the scalp hunter yelled, as he rushed madly into the grotto, closely followed by his enemies, with the exception of Curumilla.

There they found him armed with his pistols, like a boar tracked to its lair. The bandit struggled with all the frenzy of despair, not yet giving up the hope of escape. His dog, standing by his side, with bloodshot eyes and open jaws, only awaited a signal from its master to rush on the assailants. The squatter suddenly fired four shots, but too hurriedly to wound anybody. He then hurled the useless

weapons at his foemen's heads, and, bounding like a panther, disappeared at the end of the grotto, shouting with a sinister grin: —

"I am not caught yet!"

During all the incidents of this scene, the bandit had preserved his coolness; calculating the chances of safety left him, so that he might profit by them immediately. While occupying his enemies, he remembered that the grotto had a second outlet.

Suddenly he stopped, uttering a ghastly oath: he had forgotten that the swollen Gila at the moment inundated this issue. The villain walked several times round the grotto with the impotent rage of a wild beast that has fallen into a trap. He heard, in the windings of the cavern, the footsteps of his pursuers drawing closer. The sands were counted for him. One minute later, and he was lost.

"Malediction!" he said, "All fails me at once."

He must escape at all risks, and try to reach his horse, which was fastened up a short distance off on a small islet of sand, which the water, continually rising, threatened soon to cover. The bandit took a parting look round, bounded forward, and plunged into the abyss of waters, which hoarsely closed over him.

Valentine and his comrades almost immediately appeared, bearing torches; but the bandit had wholly disappeared. All was silent in the grotto.

"The villain has committed suicide," the hacendero said.

The hunter shook his head.

"I doubt it," he said.

"Listen!" the stranger hurriedly interrupted.

A shot echoed through the cave, and the three men rushed forward. This is what had happened:

Instead of following his comrades, the Indian chief, certain that the bandit had not been such a fool as to enter a cave without an outlet, preferred watching the banks of the river, in case Red Cedar tried to escape in that way. The chiefs' provisions were correct. Red Cedar, as we have seen, attempted to fly by the second outlet of the grotto. After swimming for some distance, the squatter landed on a small islet, and almost immediately disappeared in a dense clump of trees.

Not one of his movements had escaped Curumilla, who was hidden behind a projecting rock. Red Cedar reappeared on horseback. The Indian chief took a careful aim at him, and at the moment the animal put its hoof in the water it fell back, dragging down its rider with it. Curumilla had put a bullet through the horse's skull. Red Cedar rose with the rapidity of lightning, and dashed into the water. The hunters looked at each other for a moment in disappointment.

"Bah!" Valentine said, philosophically. "That bandit is not to be feared now; we have clipped his nails."

"That is true," said Bloodson; "but they will grow again!"

CHAPTER V

THE GROTTO

We will now resume our narrative at the point where we left it at the end of our first chapter, and rejoin Red Cedar, who thanks to the weapons found in the cache, had regained all his ferocity and was already dreaming of revenge.

The bandit's position, however, was still very perplexing, and would have terrified any man whose mind was not so strong as his own. However large the desert may be – however perfect a man's knowledge may be of the prairie refuges – it is impossible for him, if alone, to escape for any length of time the search of persons who have an interest in catching him.

This had just been proved to Red Cedar in a peremptory way: he did not conceal from himself the numberless difficulties that surrounded him, and could not dream of regaining his encampment. The enemies on his track would not fail to catch him, and this time they would not allow him to escape so easily.

This position was intolerable, and it must be put an end to at all risks. But Red Cedar was not the man to remain crushed by the blow that had struck him: he drew himself together again, in order to prepare his vengeance promptly. Like all evil natures, Red Cedar regarded as an insult all attempts persons made to escape from his perfidity. At this moment he had a rude account to settle with whites and redskins. Alone as he was, he could not think of rejoining his comrades and attacking the enemies, who would have crushed him under their heel like a venomous serpent: he needed allies.

His hesitation was but short, and his plan was formed in a few minutes. He resolved to carry out the project for which he had left his comrades, and proceeded toward an Apache village, situate a short distance off.

Still, he did not intend to go there, for the present at least, for, after a rapid walk of more than three hours, he suddenly turned to his right, and retiring from the banks of the Gila, which he had hitherto followed, he left the road to the village, and entered a mountainous region, differing entirely in its character from the plains he had hitherto traversed.

The ground rose perceptibly, and was intersected by streams that ran down to the Gila. Clumps of the ferns, drawing closer together, served as the advanced guard of a gloomy virgin forest on the horizon. The landscape gradually assumed a more savage and abrupt aspect, and spurs of the imposing Sierra Madre displayed here and there their desolate peaks.

Red Cedar walked along with that light and springy step peculiar to men accustomed to cover long distances on foot, looking neither to the right nor left, and apparently following a direction he was perfectly acquainted with. Smiling at his thoughts, he did not seem to notice that the sun had almost entirely disappeared behind the imposing mass of the virgin forest, and that night was falling with extreme rapidity.

The howling of the wild beasts could be heard echoing in the depths of the ravines, mingled with the miauwling of the carcajous and the barking of the prairie wolves – bands of which were already prowling at a short distance from the bandit. But he, apparently insensible to all these hints about getting a resting place for the night, continued his advance in the mountains, among which he had entered some time previously.

On reaching a species of crossroad, if such a term can be employed in speaking of a country where no roads exist, he stopped and looked all around him. After a few moments' hesitation, he buried himself in a narrow path running between two hills, and boldly climbed up a very steep ascent. At length, after a fatiguing climb, that lasted nearly three-quarters of an hour, he reached a spot where the path, suddenly interrupted, only presented a gulf, in the bottom of which the murmurs of invisible waters could be just heard.

The precipice was about twenty yards in width, and over it lay an enormous log, serving as a bridge. At the end of this was the entrance of a natural grotto, in which the flames of a fire flashed up at intervals. Red Cedar stopped – a smile of satisfaction curled his thin lips at the sight of the flames reflected on the walls of the grotto.

"They are there," he said, in a low voice, and as if speaking to himself.

He then put his fingers in his mouth, and imitated with rare skill the soft and cadenced note of the *maukawis*. An instant after, a similar cry was heard from the grotto; and Red Cedar clapped his hands thrice.

The gigantic shadow of a man, reflected by the light of the fire, appeared in the entrance of the grotto, and a rude and powerful voice shouted in the purest Castilian —

"Who goes there?"

"A friend," the bandit answered.

"Your name, *caray*," the stranger continued; "there are no friends in the desert at this hour of the night."

"Oh, oh!" Red Cedar continued; bursting into a hoarse laugh, "I see that Don Pedro Sandoval is as prudent as ever."

"Man or demon, as you know me so well," the stranger said, in a somewhat softer tone, "tell me what your name is, I say once again, or, by heaven, I'll lodge a couple of slugs in your skull. So do not let me run the risk of killing a friend."

"Come, come, calm yourself, *hidalgo*; did you not recognise my voice, and have you so short a memory that you have already forgotten Red Cedar."

"Red Cedar!" the Spaniard repeated in surprise, "then you are not hung yet, my worthy friend?"

"Not yet; to my knowledge, gossip. I hope to prove it to you ere long."

"Come across, in the devil's name; do not let us go on talking at this distance."

The stranger left the bridgehead, where he had stationed himself, probably to dispute the passage in case of necessity, and drew off, uncocking his rifle. Not waiting for a second invitation, Red Cedar bounded on to the tree and crossed it in a few seconds; he affectionately shook the Spaniard's hand, and then they entered the grotto together.

This grotto or cavern, whichever you please to call it, was wide and lofty, divided into several compartments by large frames of reeds, rising to a height of at least eight feet, and forming ten rooms or cells, five on either side the grotto, beginning at about twenty paces from the entrance – a space left free to act as kitchen and dining room. The entrance to each cell was formed by a zarapé, which descended to the ground after the fashion of a curtain door.

At the extremity of the passage that ran between the two rows of cells was another compartment, serving as storehouses; and beyond this a natural passage ran through the mountain, and terminated almost a league off, in an almost inaccessible ravine.

All proved that this grotto was not a bivouac chosen for a night or two, but an abode adopted for many years past, in which all the comfort had been collected which it is possible to procure in these regions remote from any centre of population.

Round the fire, over which an enormous quarter of elk meat was roasting, nine men, armed to the teeth, were sitting and smoking in silence. On Red Cedar's entrance, they rose and came up to shake his hand eagerly, and with a species of respect. These men wore the garb of hunters or wood rangers: their marked features, their ferocious and crafty faces, on which the traces of the most disgraceful and ignoble passions were marked in indelible characters, strongly lighted up by the fantastic flashes of the fire, had something strange and gloomy about them, which inspired terror and revulsion.

It could be guessed at the first glance that these men, the unclean scum of adventurers of all nations, lost in sin and compelled to fly to the desert to escape the iron hand of justice, had declared

an obstinate war against those who had placed them beyond the pale of the common law of nations, and were, in a word, what are called, by common consent, pirates of the prairies.

Pitiless men, a hundredfold more ruffianly than the most ferocious redskins, who conceal a soul of mud and a tiger's heart under a human appearance, and who, having adopted the savage life of the Far West, have assumed all the vices of the white and red races, without retaining one of their qualities. Villains, in a word, who only know murder and robbery, and for a little gold are capable of the greatest crimes. Such was the company Red Cedar had come so far to seek.

We are bound to add, and the reader will easily believe it, that he was not out of his place, and that his antecedents, on the contrary, gained him a certain degree of consideration from these bandits, with whom he had been long acquainted.

"Caballeros," Sandoval said, bowing with exquisite politeness to the brigands, his comrades, "our friend, Red Cedar, has returned among us; let us greet him like a jolly companion whom we have missed too long, and whom we are delighted to see again."

"Señores," Red Cedar answered, as he took a seat by the fire, "I thank you for your cordial reception, and hope soon to prove to you that I am not ungrateful."

"Well!" one of the bandits said, "Has our friend any good news to impart to us? It would be welcome, deuce take me! For a whole month we have had to scheme a living."

"Are you really in that state?" the squatter asked, with interest.

"Quite so," Sandoval confirmed him; "and Perico has only spoken the exact truth."

"Hang it all!" Red Cedar went on, "I have come at the right moment, then."

"Eh?" the bandits said, pricking up their ears.

"And yet I fancy that, for some time past, caravans have been becoming more numerous in the desert: there is no lack of white or red trappers, who every now and then can be saved the trouble of carrying their beaver skins. I have even heard speak of several parties of gambusinos."

"The gambusinos are as badly off as ourselves," Sandoval replied; "and as for trappers, they are the very men who injure us. Ah! My friend, the desert is not worth a hang now; the white men are drawing too close together, they are gradually invading the territory of the redskins, and who knows whether, in ten years from this time, we shall not have towns all round the spot where we now are?"

"There is some truth in your remark," Red Cedar observed, as he shook his head thoughtfully.

"Yes," Perico said; "and, unfortunately, the remedy is difficult, if not impossible to find."

"Perhaps so," Red Cedar went on, tossing his head in a way which caused the Pirates to wonder what he was driving at. "In the meanwhile," he added, "as I have made a long journey, feel very tired, and have a tremendous appetite, I will feed, with your permission, especially as it is late, and the meal is admirably cooked."

Without further ceremony, Red Cedar cut a large slice of elk, which he placed before him, and began incontinently devouring. The pirates followed his example, and for some time the conversation was naturally suspended. A hunter's meal is never long; the present one was soon over, owing to the impatience of the band, whose curiosity was aroused to the highest degree by the few words dropped by the squatter.

"Well," Sandoval began again, as he lit a cigarette, "now that supper is over, suppose we have a chat. Are you agreeable, comrade?"

"Willingly," Red Cedar replied, as he settled himself comfortably, and filled his pipe.

"You were saying then – " Sandoval remarked.

"Pardon me," the squatter interrupted him; "I was saying nothing. You were complaining, I believe, about the whites destroying your trade by coming closer and closer to your abode."

"Yes, that was what I was saying."

"You added, if my memory serves me right, that the remedy was impossible to find?"

"To which you answered, perhaps."

"I said so, and repeat it."

"Explain yourself, then."

"The affair I have come to propose to you is extremely simple: For some years past the whites have been gradually invading the desert, which, in a given time which is not remote, will end by disappearing before the incessant efforts of civilisation."

"It is true."

"Well, if you like, within a month you shall be rich men."

"We will, *caray*," the bandits exclaimed in a formidable voice.

"I will tell you the affair in two words: I have discovered a placer of incalculable wealth; twenty leagues from here, I have left one hundred men devoted to my fortunes. Will you imitate them and follow me? I promise each of you more gold than he ever saw in his life or ever dreamed of possessing."

"Hum!" said Sandoval; "It is tempting."

"I thought of you, my old comrades," Red Cedar continued with hypocritical simplicity, "and have come. Now, you know my plan; reflect on what I have said to you; tomorrow, at sunrise, you will give me your answer."

And, without mingling further in the conversation, Red Cedar rolled himself up in a zarapé, and fell asleep, leaving the bandits to discuss among themselves the chance of success his magnificent proposal offered.

CHAPTER VI

THE PROPOSITION

Red Cedar, immediately that he entered the Far West, had, with the experience of old wood rangers which he possessed in the highest degree, chosen a suitable site for his band to encamp. He did not wish to enter the desert without ensuring allies on whom he could count, in the event of his being attacked.

The Pawnee ambuscade, prepared with the skill characteristic of the savages, which had been on the point of succeeding, and from which he had only escaped by accident, was a warning to him of the snares that would be laid for him, and the dangers that would menace him at every step during the long journey he was about to undertake across the prairies.

Red Cedar was one of those men who make it a principle to neglect nothing that can insure the success of their plans; he, therefore, resolved to protect himself from any attack as speedily as possible. His first care was to choose a spot where he could encamp his band, so as to be protected from all Indian marauders, and offer an advantageous resistance, in the case of a serious attack.

The Rio Gila forms a multitude of wooded islets, some of which rising in a conical form, are very difficult of access owing to the escarpment of their banks, and especially through the rapidity of the current. It was on one of these islands that Red Cedar bivouacked his men. Peru trees, mezquites, and cottonwood trees, which grew abundantly on this island, mingled with creepers that twined round their stems in inextricable confusion, formed an impenetrable thicket, behind which they could boldly sustain a siege, while offering the immense advantage of forming a wall of verdure, through whose openings it was easy to watch both banks of the river, and any suspicious movements on the prairie.

So soon as the gambusinos had landed on the island, they glided like serpents into the interior, dragging their horses after them, and being careful to do nothing that might reveal their encampment to the sharp-sighted Indians. So soon as the camp was established, and Red Cedar believed that, temporarily at least, his band was in safety, he assembled the principal leaders, in order to communicate his intentions to them.

They were, first, Fray Ambrosio, then Andrés Garote, Harry and Dick, the two Canadian hunters, and, lastly, the squatter's two sons, Nathan and Sutter, and the Chief of the Coras. Several trees had been felled to form a suitable site for the fires and the tents of the women, and Red Cedar, mounted on his steed, was soon in the centre of the chiefs collected around him.

"Señores," he said to them, "we have at length entered the Far West: our expedition now really commences, and I count on your courage, and, above all, your experience, to carry it out successfully; but prudence demands that on the prairies, where we run the risk of being attacked by enemies of every description at any moment, we should secure allies who, in case of need, could protect us efficiently. The ambuscade we escaped, scarce eight and forty hours ago, renders it a duty to redouble our vigilance, and, above all, hasten to enter into communication with the friends we possess in the desert."

"Yes," said the monk; "but I do not know these friends."

"But I know them, and that is enough," Red Cedar replied.

"Very good," Fray Ambrosio went on; "but where are they to be found?"

"I know where to find them. You are here in an excellent position, where you can hold your own for a long time, without any fear of it being carried. This is what I have resolved on."

"Come, gossip, explain yourself; I am anxious to know your plans," said the monk.

"You shall be satisfied: I am going to start at once in search of my friends, whom I am certain of finding within a few hours: you will not stir from here till my return."

"Hum! And will you be long absent?"

"Two days, then, at the most."

"That is a long time," Garote remarked.

"During that period you will conceal your presence as far as possible. Let no one suspect you are encamped here. I will bring you the ten best rifles in the Far West, and with their protection, and that of Stanapat, the great Apache Chief of the Buffalo tribe, whom I expect to see also, we can traverse the desert in perfect safety."

"But who will command the band in your absence?" Fray Ambrosio asked.

"You, and these caballeros. But remember this: you will under no pretext leave the island."

"'Tis enough, Red Cedar, you can start; we shall not stir till you return."

After a few more words of slight importance, Red Cedar left the clearing, swam his horse over the river, and on reaching firm ground, buried himself in the tall grass, where he soon disappeared.

It was about six in the evening, when the squatter left his comrades, to go in search of the men whom he hoped to make his allies. The gambusinos had paid but slight attention to the departure of their chief, the cause of which they were ignorant of, and which they supposed would not last long. The night had completely fallen. The gambusinos, wearied by a long journey, were sleeping, wrapped in their zarapés, round the fire, while two sentries alone watched over the common safety. They were Dick and Harry, the two Canadian hunters, whom chance had so untowardly brought among these bandits.

Three men leaning against the trunk of an enormous unguito were conversing in a low voice. They were Andrés Garote, Fray Ambrosio, and Eagle-wing. A few paces from them was the leafy cabin, beneath whose precarious shelter reposed the squatter's wife, her daughter Ellen, and Doña Clara.

The three men, absorbed in the conversation, did not notice a white shadow emerge from the cabin, glide silently along, and lean against the very tree, at the foot of which they were.

Eagle-wing, with that penetration which distinguishes the Indians, had read the hatred which existed between Fray Ambrosio and Red Cedar; but the Coras had kept this discovery in his heart, intending to take advantage of it when the opportunity presented itself.

"Chief," the monk said, "do you suspect who the allies are Red Cedar has gone to seek?"

"No," the other replied, "how should I know?"

"Still it must interest you, for you are not so great a friend of the Gringo as you would like to appear."

"The Indians have a very dense mind; let my father explain himself so that I may understand him, and be able to answer him."

"Listen," the monk continued, in a dry voice and with a sharp accent, "I know who you are: your disguise, clever and exact though it be, was not sufficient to deceive me: at the first glance I recognised you. Do you believe that if I had said to Red Cedar, this man is a spy or a traitor; he has crept among us to make us fall into a trap prepared long beforehand: in a word, this man is no other than Moukapec, the principal Cacique of the Coras? Do you believe, I say, that Red Cedar would have hesitated to blow out your brains, eh, chief? Answer."

During these words whose significance was terrible to him, the Coras had remained unmoved; not a muscle of his face had quivered. When the monk ceased speaking, he smiled disdainfully, and contented himself with replying in a haughty voice, while looking at him fixedly:

"Why did not my father tell this to the scalp hunter? He was wrong."

The monk was discountenanced by this reply, which he was far from expecting; he understood that he had before him one of those energetic natures over which threats have no power. Still he had advanced too far to draw back: he resolved to go on to the end, whatever might happen.

"Perhaps," he said, with an evil smile, "at any rate, I have it in my power to warn our chief in his return."

"My father will act as he thinks proper," the chief replied drily, "Moukapec is a renowned warrior, the barking of the coyotes never terrified him."

"Come, come, Indian, you are wrong," Garote interposed, "you are mistaken as to the Padre's intentions with respect to you; I am perfectly convinced that he does not wish to injure you in any way."

"Moukapec is not an old woman who can be cheated with words," the Coras said; "he cares little for the present intentions of the man, who, during the burning of his village, and the massacre of his brothers, excited his enemies to murder and arson. The chief follows his vengeance alone, he will know how to attain it without allying himself to one of his foes to get it. I have spoken."

After uttering these words, the Indian chief rose, dressed himself in his buffalo robe, and withdrew, leaving the two Mexicans disconcerted by this resistance which they were far from anticipating. Both looked after him for a while with admiration mingled with anger.

"Hum!" the monk at length muttered; "Dog of a savage, Indian, brute, beast, he shall pay me for it."

"Take care, señor Padre," the Gambusino said, "we are not in luck at this moment. Let us leave this man with whom we can effect nothing, and seek something else. Every man reaches his point who knows how to wait, and the moment will arrive to avenge ourselves on him; till then, let us dissimulate – that is the best thing, I believe, for us to do."

"Did you notice that, on leaving us, Red Cedar did not say a syllable about his prisoner?"

"For what good? He knows she is in perfect safety here, any flight from this island is impossible."

"That is true; but why did he carry off this woman?"

"Who knows? Red Cedar is one of those men whose thoughts it is always dangerous to sound. Up to the present, we cannot read his conduct clearly enough; let him return, perhaps then the object he has in view will be unfolded to us."

"That woman annoys me here," the monk said in a hollow voice.

"What's to be done? Down there at Santa Fe I did not hesitate to serve you in trying to get rid of her; but now it is too late – it would be madness to dream of it. What matter to us, after all, whether she be with us, or not? Believe me, make up your mind to it, and speak no more about it. Bah! She will not prevent us reaching the placer."

The monk shook his head with a dissatisfied air, but made no reply. The Gambusino wrapped himself in his zarapé, lay down on the ground, and fell asleep. Fray Ambrosio, for his part, remained plunged in gloomy thoughts. What was he thinking of? Some treachery, doubtless.

When the woman who had been leaning against the tree, perceived that the conversation was at an end, she glided softly away, and re-entered the cabin.

CHAPTER VII

ELLEN AND DOÑA CLARA

Since she had fallen again into the power of Red Cedar, Doña Clara, a prey to a gloomy sorrow, had yielded unresistingly to her abductors, despairing ever to escape from them; especially since she had seen the men in whose power she was, definitely take the road to the desert.

For a maiden, accustomed to all the refinements of luxury, and all those little attentions which a father's love continually lavished on her, the new existence commencing was an uninterrupted succession of tortures, among half savage ruffians, whose brutal ways and coarse language constantly made her fear insults she would have been too weak to repulse.

Still, up to this moment, Red Cedar's conduct had been – we will not say respectful, for the squatter was ignorant of such refinements – but, at any rate, proper, that is to say, he had affected to pay no attention to her while ordering his men not to trouble her in any way.

Doña Clara had been entrusted by the scalp hunter to his wife Betsy and his daughter Ellen.

The Megera, after giving the maiden an ugly look, had turned her back on her, and did not once address her – conduct which was most agreeable to the young Mexican. As for Ellen, she had constituted herself, on her private authority, the friend of the prisoner, to whom she rendered all those small services her position allowed her, with a delicacy and tact little to be expected from a girl educated in the desert by a father like hers.

At the outset, Doña Clara, absorbed in her grief, had paid no attention to Ellen's kindness, but gradually, in spite of herself, the young American's unchanging gentleness, and her patience, which nothing rebuffed, affected her; she had felt the services which the other occasionally rendered her, and had gradually learned to feel for the squatter's daughter a degree of gratitude which presently ripened into friendship.

Youth is naturally confiding; when a great grief oppresses it, the need of entrusting that grief to a person who seems to sympathise with it, renders it expansive. Alone among the bandits, to whom chance had handed her over, Doña Clara must inevitably – so soon as the first paroxysm of suffering had passed – seek for someone to console her, and help her in enduring the immense misfortune that crushed her.

And this had occurred much more rapidly than under ordinary circumstances, thanks to the sympathising kindness of the young American, who had in a few hours found the way to her heart.

Red Cedar, whom nothing escaped, smiled cunningly at the friendship of the two maidens, which, however, he feigned not to perceive. It was a strange thing, but this scalp hunter, this man that seemed to have nothing human about him, who perspired crime at every pore, whose ferocity was unbounded, had in his heart one feeling which attached him victoriously to the human family, a profound, illimitable love for Ellen – the love of the tiger for its cubs.

This frail girl was the sole creature for whom his heart beat more violently. How great, how powerful was the love Red Cedar experienced for this simple child! It was a worship, an adoration. A word from her little mouth caused the ferocious bandit to feel indescribable delight; a smile from her rosy lips overwhelmed him with happiness. By her charming caresses, her gentle and insinuating words, Ellen had power to govern despotically that gathering of birds of prey which was her family. The chaste kiss his daughter gave him every morning, was the sunbeam that for the whole day warmed the heart of the terrible bandit, before whom everybody trembled, and who himself trembled at a slight frown from her, who combined all the joy and happiness of his life.

It was with extreme satisfaction that he saw his daughter become his innocent accomplice by acquiring the confidence of his prisoner, and gaining her friendship. This gentle girl was in his sight the securest gaoler he could give Doña Clara. Hence, in order, to facilitate, as far as possible, all that

could enhance the friendship, he had completely closed his eyes, and feigned to be ignorant of the approximation between the two girls.

It was Ellen who had listened to the conversation between the monk and the Gambusino. At the moment she was re-entering the hut, the stifled sound of voices induced her to listen. Doña Clara was speaking in a low voice to a man, and that man was the Sachem of the Coras. Ellen, surprised in the highest degree, listened anxiously to their conversation, which soon greatly interested her.

After leaving the two Mexicans, Eagle-wing had, for some minutes, walked about the camp with an affected carelessness, intended to remove the suspicions of any who might have been tempted to watch his movements.

When he fancied he had dispelled any suspicions, the Indian chief insensibly drew nearer to the cabin, which served as a refuge to the maidens, and entered it, after assuring himself by a glance, that no one was watching.

Doña Clara was alone, at this moment. We have told the reader where Ellen was; as for the squatter's wife, faithful to her husband's instructions not to annoy the prisoner in any way, she was quietly asleep by the fire, in the clearing.

The maiden, with her head bowed on her bosom, was plunged in deep and sad thought. At the sound of the Indian's steps, she raised her head, and could not restrain a start of terror on seeing him.

Eagle-wing immediately perceived the impression he produced on her, he stopped on the threshold of the cabin, folded his arms on his chest, and bowed respectfully.

"My sister need not be alarmed," he said in a gentle and insinuating voice, "it is a friend who is speaking to her."

"A friend!" Doña Clara murmured, as she took a side glance at him; "the unfortunate have no friends."

The Indian drew a few steps nearer to her, and went on, as he bent over her:

"The jaguar has been forced to put on the skin of the crafty serpent, in order to introduce himself among his enemies, and gain their confidence. Does not my sister recognise me?"

The Mexican girl reflected for a moment, and then answered with hesitation, and looking at him attentively:

"Although the sound of your voice is not unfamiliar to me, I seek in vain to remember where, and under what circumstances I have already seen you."

"I will help my sister to remember," Eagle-wing continued. "Two days ago, at the passage of the ford, I tried to save her, and was on the point of succeeding, but before that my sister had seen me several times."

"If you will mention a date and a circumstance, I may possibly succeed in remembering."

"My sister need not seek, it will be useless; I prefer telling her my name at once, for moments are precious. I am Moukapec, the great Chief of the Coras, of the Del Norte. My sister's father and my sister herself often helped the poor Indians of my tribe."

"That is true," the maiden said, sadly. "Oh! I remember now. Poor people! They were pitilessly massacred, and their village fired by the Apaches. Oh! I know that horrible story."

A sardonic smile played round the chief's lips at these words.

"Coyote does not eat coyote," he said, in a hollow voice; "the jaguars do not wage war on jaguars. They were not Indians who assassinated the Coras, but scalp hunters."

"Oh!" she said, in horror.

"Let my sister listen," the Coras continued quickly; "now that I have told her my name, she must place confidence in me."

"Yes," she answered, eagerly, "for I know the nobility of your character."

"Thanks! I am here for my sister's sake alone. I have sworn to save her, and restore her to her father."

"Alas!" she murmured sadly, "that is impossible. You are alone, and we are surrounded by enemies. The bandits who guard us are a hundredfold more cruel than the ferocious beasts of the desert."

"I do not know yet in what way I shall set about saving my sister," the chief said, firmly; "but I shall succeed if she is willing."

"Oh!" she exclaimed with febrile energy, "If I am willing! Whatever requires to be done, I will do without hesitation. My courage will not fail me, be assured of that, chief."

"Good!" the Indian said with joy; "My sister is truly a daughter of the Mexican kings. I count on her when the moment arrives. Red Cedar is absent for a few days; I will go and prepare everything for my sister's flight."

"Go, chief; at the first sign from you I shall be ready to follow you."

"Good! I retire; my sister can take courage, she will soon be free."

The Indian bowed to the maiden, and prepared to leave the hut. Suddenly, a hand was laid on his shoulder. At this unexpected touch, in spite of his self-command, the chief could not repress a start of terror. He turned, and Red Cedar's daughter stood before him, with a smile on her lips. "I have heard all," she said in her pure and melodious voice.

The chief bent a long and sad look on Doña Clara.

"Why this emotion," Ellen continued, "which I read on your features? I do not mean to betray you, for I am a friend of Doña Clara. Reassure yourself; if accident has made me mistress of your secret, I will not abuse it – on the contrary, I will help your flight."

"Can it be so? You would do that?" Doña Clara exclaimed, as she threw her arms round her neck, and buried her face in her bosom.

"Why not?" she simply answered; "You are my friend."

"Oh! Oh! I love you, for you are good. You had pity on my grief, and wept with me." Eaglewing fixed on the maiden a glance of undefinable meaning.

"Listen," Ellen said; "I will supply you with the means you lack. We'll leave the camp this very night."

"We?" Doña Clara asked; "What do you mean?"

"I mean," Ellen continued, quickly, "that I shall go with you."

"Can it be possible?"

"Yes," she said, in a melancholy voice; "I cannot remain here longer."

On hearing these words, the Coras Chief quivered with joy; a sinister ray flashed from his dark eyes; but he immediately resumed his stoical appearance, and the maidens did not notice his emotion.

"But what shall we do to procure means of flight?"

"That is my affair, so do not trouble yourself about it. This very night, I repeat, we shall start."

"May Heaven grant it!" Doña Clara sighed.

Ellen turned to the chief and said:

"Does my brother know, at a short distance from the spot where we now are, any Indian pueblo where we can seek shelter?"

"Two suns from here, in a northwestern direction, there is a pueblo, inhabited by a tribe of my nation. It was thither I intended to lead my white father's daughter after her escape."

"And we shall be in safety with that tribe?"

"The daughter of Acumapichzin will be as safe as in her father's hacienda," the Indian answered, evasively.

"Good! Can my father leave the camp?"

"Who is strong enough to arrest the flight of the condor? Moukapec is a warrior, nothing stops him."

"My brother will set out."

"Good!"

"He will proceed by the shortest road to the pueblo of his nation, then he will return to meet us with the warriors he has collected, in order that we may defend ourselves, in the event of being followed by the Gambusinos."

"Very good," the Indian answered joyfully. "My sister is young, but wisdom dwells in her heart; I will do what she desires – when may I start?"

"At once."

"I go. What hour will my sister quit the camp?"

"At the hour when the owl sings its first hymn to the rising sun."

"My sister will meet me at the most four hours after her departure. She must remember in her flight always to go in a northwestern direction."

"I will do so."

Eagle-wing bowed to the maidens and left the cabin.

The gambusinos were in a deep sleep round the fire; only Dick and Harry were awake. The Coras glided like a phantom through the trees, and reached the edge of the water unnoticed, which was the more easy to effect, because the Canadians were not watching the island, from which they had no danger to apprehend, but had their eyes fixed on the prairie. The chief took off his clothes and made them into a parcel, which he fastened on his breast; he slipped into the water, and swam silently in the direction of the mainland.

So soon as the Indian left the cabin Ellen bent over Doña Clara, gave her a loving kiss on the forehead, and said softly – "Try to sleep for a few hours, while I prepare everything for our flight."

"Sleep!" the Mexican answered, "How can I with the restlessness that devours me."

"You must!" Ellen insisted, "For we shall have great fatigue to endure tomorrow."

"Well," Doña Clara said, softly, "I will try, as you wish it."

The maidens exchanged a kiss and a shake of the hand, and Ellen left the hut in her turn, smiling to her friend, who followed her with an anxious glance. When left alone, Doña Clara fell on her knees, clasped her hands, and addressed a fervent prayer to God. Then, slightly tranquilised by her appeal to Him, who is omnipotent, she fell back on the pile of dry leaves that served as her bed, and, as she had promised Ellen, attempted to sleep.

CHAPTER VIII

THE FLIGHT

The night covered the tranquil desert with its dark blue sky, studded with dazzling stars. A majestic silence brooded over the prairie; all were asleep in the island save the two Canadian sentries, who, leaning on their rifles, followed with absent eye the tall shadows of the wild beasts that slowly came down to drink in the river.

At times a mysterious quiver ran over the trees, and shook their tufted crests, whose leaves rustled with a strange sound.

Dick and Harry, the two worthy hunters, interchanged a few words in a low voice to while away the tedium of their long sentry go, to which they were condemned, when suddenly a white shadow glided through the trees, and Ellen stood by their side.

The young men started on seeing her; but the maiden greeted them with a smile, sat down on the grass, and with a graceful gesture made them a sign to seat themselves by her side. They hastened to obey her.

The hunters looked at the maiden, who smiled on them with that infantile grace which no expression can render.

"You were talking when I came up."

"Yes," Harry answered, "we were talking of you."

"Of me?" she said.

"Was it not for your sake alone that we joined this troop of bandits?" Dick said, in an ill-humoured tone.

"Do you regret being here?" she asked, with a soft smile.

"I did not say that," the young man continued; "but we are not in our place among these villains. We are free and loyal hunters, honourable wood rangers; the life we lead oppresses us."

"Were you not talking of that when my presence interrupted you?"

They remained silent.

"Answer boldly!" she went on.

"Good heavens! You know that such a life is as oppressive to me as it is to you."

"What do I know?" Harry said. "Many times I have proposed to you to fly, and leave these men whose hands are constantly polluted with blood, but you have ever refused."

"That is true," she said sadly; "alas! Although these men are criminal, one of them is my father."

"For two years that we have been following you everywhere, you have given us the same answer."

"It was because I hoped that my father and brother would abandon this career of crime."

"And now?"

"I have no hope left."

"In that case?" Harry exclaimed sharply.

"I am ready to follow you," she answered, sharply.

"Is that the truth? Is it your heart that is speaking, Ellen? Do you really consent to abandon your family and trust to our honour?"

"Listen," she answered, sorrowfully; "for two years I have thought deeply, and the more I reflect the more does it appear to me that Red Cedar is not my father."

"Can it be possible?" the hunter exclaimed, in amazement.

"I can say nothing certain; but when I go back I fancy (though this is vague and surrounded by shadows in my mind) I can remember another existence, very different from the one I am leading at present."

"You can remember nothing positive?"

"Nothing: I see pass, as in a vision, a lovely pale lady, a man with a proud glance, and of tall stature, who takes me in his arms, and covers me with kisses, and then – "

"Well, and then?" the hunters exclaimed, in a panting voice.

"And then I see flames, blood, and nothing more, but a man carrying me off through the night on an impetuous steed."

The maiden, after uttering these words in a broken voice, hid her head in her hands. There was a lengthened silence, during which the Canadians attentively observed her: at length they drew themselves up, and Harry laid his hand on her shoulder: she raised her head.

"What would you of me?" she said.

"Ask you a question."

"Speak!"

"Since you have grown up have you never tried to clear up your doubts by questioning Red Cedar?"

"Yes," she answered, "once."

"Well?"

"He listened to me attentively, let me say all I had to say, and then gave me a glance of undefinable meaning, shrugged his shoulders, and answered, 'You are silly, Ellen; you must have had a bad dream. That story is absurd.' Then he added, in an ironical voice, 'I feel sorry for you, poor creature, but you are really my daughter.'"

"Well," Dick said, in a tone of conviction, as he struck the butt of his rifle fiercely on the ground, "I tell you that he lied, and that man is not your father."

"Doves do not lay their eggs in the nests of vultures," Harry added. "No, Ellen, no, you are not that man's daughter."

The maiden rose, seized each of the hunters by the arm, and, after looking at them for a moment, said:

"Well, and I believe so too. I know not why, but for some days past a secret voice has cried in my heart and told me that this man cannot be my father; that is why I, who, up to this day, have always refused your offers, have come to trust myself to your honour, and ask you if you will protect my flight."

"Ellen," Harry answered in a grave voice, and with an accent full of respect, "I swear to you before that God who hears us, that my companion and myself will risk death to protect or defend. You shall always be a sister to us, and in that desert we are about to traverse in order to reach civilised countries, you shall be as safe and treated with as much respect as if you were in Quebec Cathedral, at the foot of the high altar."

"I swear that I will do all Harry has just said; and that you can, in all confidence, place yourself under the safeguard of our honour," Dick added, raising his right hand to Heaven.

"Thanks, my friends," the maiden answered. "I know your honour. I accept without reservation, persuaded as I am that you will fulfil your promise."

The two men bowed.

"When shall we start?" Harry asked.

"It will be better to take advantage of Red Cedar's absence to fly," said Dick.

"That thought is mine, too," Ellen remarked, but added, with some hesitation, "I should not like to fly alone."

"Explain yourself," Dick said.

"It is needless," Harry quickly interrupted him. "I know what you desire. Your thought is an excellent one, Ellen, and we gladly assent to it. The young Mexican lady can accompany you. If it be possible for us to restore her to her family, who must feel in despair about her, we will do it."

Ellen gave the young man a look, and slightly blushed.

"You are a noble-hearted fellow, Harry," she replied. "I thank you for having guessed what I did not know how to ask of you."

"Is there anything else you want of us?"

"No."

"Good! Then bring your companion here as speedily as possible, and, when you return, we shall be ready. The gambusinos are asleep. Red Cedar is absent. We have nought to fear, but you had better make haste, so that before sunrise we may be far enough from here not to fear those who will doubtless pursue us when they observe your flight."

"I only ask you for a few minutes," the maiden said, and soon disappeared in the shrubs.

In vain had Doña Clara sought sleep, in obedience to her friend's recommendations. Her mind, agitated by hopes and fears, had not allowed her to enjoy a moment's rest. With eye and ear on the watch, she listened to the voices of the night, and strove to distinguish, in the gloom, the shadows that at times glided through the trees.

Ellen found her awake, and ready to start. The maidens' preparations for flight were not lengthy, for they only took with them a few indispensable articles.

In rummaging an old box, which Red Cedar and his family employed to keep their clothes in, Ellen discovered a small coffer, about the size of her hand, of carved rosewood, inlaid with silver, which the squatter hardly ever left out of his possession, but which he had not thought it necessary to take with him on the present expedition.

The maiden examined this coffer for a moment, but it was closed. By an intuitive movement, for which she could not account, but which completely mastered her, she seized it, and put it in her bosom.

"Let us go," she said to Doña Clara.

"I am ready," the young Mexican replied, laconically, though her heart bounded.

The maidens left the hut, holding each other's hand. They crossed the clearing, and proceeded in the direction of the Canadians. The gambusinos lying ground the fire did not stir. They were all fast asleep.

For their part, the two hunters had made their preparations for flight. While Dick fetched out to the riverside the four sturdiest horses he could find, Harry collected the saddles and bridles of the other horses, and threw them into the river, where they immediately disappeared in the current. The Canadian had reflected that the time the gambusinos would occupy in making up their loss would be so much gained to them.

The maidens reached the riverbank at the moment when Dick and Harry were finishing saddling the horses. They mounted at once, the Canadians placed themselves at their side, and the fugitives forced their horses into the river. Fortunately, the water was low; and hence, although the current was rather powerful in the centre, the horses managed to cross the Gila without obstacle.

It was about eleven in the evening when the fugitives landed. So soon as they were concealed in the tall grass, so as not to be seen from the island, they drew bridle to let their horses breathe after the rude passage they had just made.

"Let us profit by the hours we have before us to travel the whole night," Harry said, in a low voice.

"Our absence will not be observed till sunrise," Dick observed. "The time spent in seeking us on the island, and in providing some substitute for the bridles, will give us twelve or fourteen hours which we must profit by to get away as far as possible."

"I ask nothing better," Harry said; "but, before starting, we must choose our road."

"Oh!" Ellen said, "the direction we must follow is easily settled: we must only go straight to the northwest."

"Be it so," the hunter went on; "one direction is as good as another. Our principal object is to get off as soon as possible: but why northwest rather than any other quarter of the wind?"

Ellen smiled.

"Because," she said, "a friend you know – the Indian chief who formed part of the band – left the camp before us, in order to warn his warriors, and bring us help in the event of an attack."

"Well thought of," the hunter said. "Let us be off, and not spare our horses, for on their speed our safety depends."

Each bowed over the neck of the horses. The little party started with the speed of an arrow in a northwestern direction, as had been agreed on. The four riders soon disappeared in the darkness; the footsteps of their horses ceased to re-echo on the hardened ground, and all fell back into silence.

The gambusinos were peacefully sleeping on the island.

CHAPTER IX

THE TEOCALI

We will now return to Valentine and his companions.

The six horsemen were still galloping in the direction of the mountains; and, about midnight, they stopped at the base of an enormous granite mass, which rose solitary and glowing in the prairie.

"This is the spot," said Bloodson, as he dismounted. His companions followed his example, and Valentine took a scrutinising glance around.

"If what I suppose be true," he said, "your dwelling might be an eagle nest."

"Or a vulture's," the stranger hoarsely answered. "Wait a few seconds."

He then imitated the cry of the tiger-serpent. Suddenly, as if by enchantment, the mass of granite was illumined from top to bottom, and torches, shaken by vague and indistinct forms, ran rapidly along the slopes, bounding with extreme velocity until they arrived close to the astonished travellers, who found themselves all at once surrounded by some fifty men in strange garbs and with sinister faces, rendered even more sinister by the reflection of the torches which the wind drove in every direction.

"These are my men," the stranger said, laconically.

"Hum!" Valentine remarked, "You have a formidable army."

"Yes," Bloodson went on; "for all these men are devoted to me. On many occasions, I have put their attachment to rude trials. They will let themselves be killed at a signal from me."

"Oh, ho!" the hunter went on, "The man who can speak thus is very strong, especially if he wish to gain an honourable end."

The stranger made no answer, but turned his head away.

"Where is Shaw?" he asked.

"Here I am, master," the man he had asked after said as he showed himself.

"What!" Valentine exclaimed, "Red Cedar's son!"

"Yes: did I not save his life which his brother sought to take? By that title he belongs to me. Now," he added "come, my guests, do not remain any longer outside. I will show you my domain. Shaw, do you take the horses."

The travellers followed the stranger, who, preceded by several torch-bearers, was already escalading the abrupt sides of the granite block. The ascent was ruder still. It was easy to recognise the steps of a staircase, beneath the roots, creepers, and brambles that overgrew them. The travellers were plunged in the utmost astonishment. Valentine and Curumilla alone affected an indifference which caused their host to ponder.

When about one-third up the mountain, Bloodson stopped before an excavation made by human hands, through whose gaping entrance a thread of light emerged.

"You did not, perhaps, expect," said Bloodson, as he turned to his friends, "to find in the Far West a keep as strong as this."

"I confess, Don Miguel, that I did not expect it."

"Oh, my friends, your memory fails you, I fancy," Valentine said with a smile; "this mountain, if I am not mistaken, is nothing but a Teocali."

"It is true," Bloodson said, with an air of annoyance he tried in vain to hide, "I have placed my abode in the interior of an ancient Teocali."

"There are a good many about here, history relates that it was in this country the Aztecs assembled before finally invading the plateau of Anahuac."

"For a stranger, Don Valentine," Bloodson remarked, "you were well acquainted with the history of this country."

"And with that of its inhabitants; yes, señor caballero," the hunter replied.

They went in, and found themselves in an immense hall, with white walls, loaded with sculpture, which, as Valentine had stated, must date back to the epoch of the Aztecs. A great number of torches, fixed in iron sockets, spread a fairylike light over this hall. Bloodson did the honours of this strange abode, as a man perfectly versed in the habits of civilised life. A few minutes after their arrival, the hunters enjoyed a meal which, though served in the desert, left nothing to be desired as regarded the delicacy of the dishes or the order in which it was served.

The sight of Shaw had involuntarily inspired Valentine with a secret distrust of their host; the latter, with the penetration and knowledge of mankind he possessed, at once noticed it, and resolved to get rid of it by a frank explanation between the hunter and himself.

As for Curumilla, the worthy Indian ate with good appetite, as was his wont, not uttering a word, though he did not lose a syllable of what was said around him, and his piercing eye had already scrutinised the most secret nooks of the spot where he was.

When the supper was ended, Bloodson gave a signal, and his comrades suddenly disappeared at the end of the hall, where they stretched themselves on piles of dry leaves which served them as beds. The hunters remained alone with their host, and at a sign from the latter, Shaw took a place by his side. For some time they smoked in silence, until Bloodson threw far from him the end of the cigarette he had been smoking, and took the word.

"Señores caballeros," he said, with a tone of frankness that pleased his hearers, "all that you see here may reasonably surprise you, I allow. Still, nothing is more simple; the men you, have seen belong to all the Indian tribes that traverse the desert; only one of them is a white man, and that is Shaw. If Don Pablo will be kind enough to reflect, he will tell you that the man found in the streets of Santa Fe with a knife in his chest was saved by me."

"In truth," the young man said, "Father Seraphin and myself picked up the poor wretch, who gave no sign of life. You only could recall him to existence."

"All the others are in the same case; proscribed by tribes, menaced with instant death by their enemies, they have sought a refuge with me. There is now another point, I desire to clear up, in order that no cloud may exist between us, and that you may place the most perfect confidence in me."

His hearers bowed respectfully.

"For what good?" Valentine said; "Every man in this world has his secret, caballero, and we do not ask for yours. We are connected by the strongest bond that can attach men, a common hatred for the same individual, and the desire to take a striking revenge on him – what more do we want?"

"Pardon me, in the desert, as in the civilised life of towns," Bloodson said with dignity, "men like to know those with whom accident has brought them into relationship. I am anxious you should know that the force I have at my service, and which is really formidable, Don Valentine, as you were good enough to observe, is employed by me to act as the police of the desert; repulsed by the world, I resolved to revenge myself on it by pursuing and destroying those pirates of the prairies who attack and plunder the caravans that cross the desert. It is a rude task I have undertaken, I assure you, for the villainies are numerous in the Far West, but I wage an obstinate war on them, and so long as Heaven permits, I will carry it on without truce or mercy."

"I have already heard what you say spoken of," Valentine replied, as he held out his hand sympathisingly; "the man who thus comprehends his mission on earth must be one in a thousand, and I shall ever be happy to be counted in the number of his friends."

"Thanks," Bloodson answered with emotion, "thanks for your remark, which compensates me for many insults and much miscomprehension. And now, caballeros, I place at your disposal the men who are devoted to me; do with them whatever you please, and I will be the first to offer the example of obedience."

"Listen," Valentine replied, after a moment's reflection; "we have to deal with a thorough-paced villain, whose principal weapon is cunning, and we shall only succeed in conquering him by

employing the same. A considerable party is soon tracked on the prairie; Red Cedar has the eye of a vulture and the scent of a dog; the more we are, the less chance we have of catching him."

"What is to be done then, my friend?" Don Miguel asked.

"This," Valentine went on: "surround him, that is to say, enclose him in a circle whence he cannot emerge, by securing allies among all the desert Indians; but it is understood that these allies will act separately, until we have so well succeeded in tracking the villain that he must surrender."

"Yes, your idea is good, though difficult and dangerous in its execution."

"Not so much as you suppose," Valentine responded warmly. "Listen to me: tomorrow, at daybreak, Curumilla and myself will go in search of Red Cedar's trail, and I swear to you that we shall find it again."

"Good," said Don Miguel; "and afterwards?"

"Wait; while one of us remains to watch the bandit, the other will return to warn you of the spot where he is. During that time you will have formed alliances with the *pueblos* Indians, and be in a condition to force the boar in its lair."

"Yes," Bloodson remarked, "that plan is simple, and for that very reason must succeed. It is a struggle of cunning, that is all."

"Yes," General Ibañez objected; "but why should we not go on his trail also?"

"Because," Valentine answered, "though you are as brave as your sword, general, you are a soldier – that is to say, you understand nothing of the Indian warfare we are about to carry on, a war composed entirely of ambushes and treachery. You and our friends, in spite of your well-known courage, and I might almost say, on account of it, would prove more injurious than useful, owing to your ignorance of the country in which we are, and the manners of the men we have to fight."

"That is true," Don Miguel said; "our friend is in the right, leave him to act; I am convinced that he will succeed."

"And so am I," Valentine exclaimed, with an accent of conviction; "that is why I wish to be free, so that I may act as I please."

"In short," the general went on, "in a game so serious as that we are playing with men so clever and determined as those we have to fight with, nothing must be left to accident. I resign myself to inaction; carry out your schemes as you think proper, Don Valentine."

"Pardon me," Don Pablo exclaimed, hotly. "My father and you may consent to remain here, for I can understand that your age and habits render you but little fitting for the life you would be obliged to lead; but I am going. I am strong, able to stand fatigue, and long accustomed by Valentine himself to the terrible demands of the desert life you are ignorant of. My sister's safety is at stake: we wish to rescue her from the hands of her ravishers; and hence I must join the men who are going in search of her."

Valentine gave him a glance full of tenderness. "Be it so," he said to him. "You will come with us, Pablo: this will complete your initiation into desert life."

"Thanks, my friend, thanks," the young man said gladly. "You have removed an immense weight from my heart. Poor sister! I shall coöperate, then, in her deliverance!"

"There is another man you must take with you, Don Valentine," Bloodson said.

"Why so?" Valentine asked.

"Because," the other answered, "as soon as you have departed, I shall go and visit the Indian villages: when the moment arrives, we must know where to meet."

"Yes, but how is it to be managed?"

"Shaw will accompany you."

A flash of joy passed into the young man's eye, although his face remained unmoved.

"So soon as you have found the trail, Shaw, who knows my hiding places, will be sent off by you to advise me, and he will find me, wherever I may be."

"Yes," the squatter's son said, laconically. Valentine examined him for a moment attentively, and then turned to Bloodson:

"Be it so," he said; "he shall come. I am greatly mistaken, or this young man has a greater interest than we suppose in the success of our plans; and we can trust entirely to him."

Shaw lowered his eyes with a blush.

"And now," Bloodson said, "it is late: we have hardly four hours of night left. I believe that we have come to a perfect understanding, and that we shall do well to sleep. We do not know what the morrow reserves for us."

"Yes, let us sleep," Valentine said, "for I intend starting at sunrise."

"Will your horses be rested?"

"Let them rest, for we do not want them; a trail can only be properly followed on foot."

"You are right; a man on foot can pass anywhere."

After exchanging a few more words, each rose to go and throw himself on a pile of dry leaves.

Don Miguel seized Valentine's arm and clutched it firmly, as he said, with tears in his voice, —

"Friend, restore me my daughter."

"I will do so," the hunter said, with emotion, "or die."

The hacendero went away a few paces, but then hurriedly returned to the Frenchman's side.

"Watch over my son," he said in a choking voice.

"Do not be alarmed, my friend," the hunter answered.

Don Miguel warmly pressed the hunter's hand, uttered a sigh, and retired.

A few moments later, and all were sound asleep in the Teocali, with the exception of the sentries that watched over the common safety.

CHAPTER X

THE WHITE GAZELLE

Red Cedar's proposition was too advantageous for the Pirates to hesitate about accepting it. This was the reason: —

For some years past a man had appeared on the prairies, at the head of fifty or sixty determined companions, and had waged such a rude war on the adventurers or pirates, that it had become almost impossible to carry on their old trade with impunity.

On his private authority, this man had constituted himself the defender of the caravans that crossed the desert, and protector of the trappers and hunters, whom they no longer dared plunder, through fear of being attacked by this unknown redressor of grievances.

This existence was growing insupportable, and an end must be put to it. Unfortunately the means had hitherto failed the pirates to deal a heavy blow, and free themselves from the crushing yoke Bloodson bowed them under. Hence they did not hesitate, as we have seen, to accept Red Cedar's proposition.

These men had been acquainted with the bandit for several years: he had, indeed, been their chief for some time; but at that period they were still civilised brigands, if we may employ that expression when speaking of such fellows, prowling along the frontiers of the American Union, assaulting isolated farms, and plundering and killing the defenceless inhabitants.

This band, which was at that time composed of about fifty, was gradually driven back on the desert, where Bloodson, who hunted them like wild beasts, had decimated them so thoroughly in many a fight, that the band, now reduced to only ten persons, was literally at bay, and compelled to live on the produce of the chase, or the rare occasions for plunder offered by isolated travellers, whom their unlucky star brought into the vicinity of the pirates' lair.

As they were perfectly concealed by the Indian garb they wore, the few travellers who escaped them fancied they had been plundered by redskins. This disguise caused their security, and allowed them to go at times and sell the produce of their plunder in the seaport towns.

We have said that the bandit band was composed of ten men, but we were incorrect; for one of them was a woman.

There was a strange anomaly in this creature, scarce twenty years of age, with delicate features, a tall and lithe form, living among these ruffians whom she ruled over with all the force of a vast mind, indomitable courage, and an iron will. The brigands had a superstitious adoration for her which they could not exactly account for; obeying her slightest caprices without a murmur, and ready to let themselves be killed at the least sign from her rosy fingers.

She was, as it were, their palladium. The girl was perfectly well aware of the uncontrolled power she exercised over her terrible guardians, and abused it constantly, while they never attempted resistance. The Indians themselves, seduced by the grace, vivacity, and sympathetic charms of the young creature, had christened her the White Gazelle; a name harmonising so well with her character, that she was known by no other.

She wore a fanciful costume of extraordinary wildness and eccentricity, which was admirably suited to the gentle, though decided, and slightly dreamy expression of her face. It was composed of loose Turkish trousers, made of Indian cashmere, fastened at the knees with diamond garters; while boots of stamped deer hide protected her leg, and imprisoned her little foot. To her heels were fastened heavy gold Mexican spurs; double-barrelled pistols and a dagger were passed through her China crape girdle, which confined her delicate waist. A jacket of violet velvet, buttoned over the bosom with a profusion of diamonds, displayed her exquisite bust. A brilliant-hued Navajo zarapé, fastened at the neck with a clasp of rubies, served as her cloak, and a Panama hat of extreme fineness

(*doble paja*), decorated with an eagle plume, covered her head, while allowing tresses of jet black hair to fall in disorder on her neck, and which, had they not been bound by a ribbon, would have trailed on the ground.

This girl was asleep when Red Cedar entered the cavern, and the pirates were accustomed to do nothing without her assent.

"Red Cedar is a man in whom we can place entire confidence," Pedro Sandoval said, as he summed up the affair, "but we cannot give him answer till we have consulted the *niña*."

"That is true," a second confirmed him – "hence, as any discussion will be useless, I think the best thing we can do, is to follow Red Cedar's example, and go to rest."

"Powerfully reasoned," said one of the bandits, called Orson; a little man with ignoble features, grey eyes, and a mouth extending from ear to ear, while laughing so as to display two rows of white teeth, wide and sharp as those of a wild beast; "so shall I say good night."

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