

Aimard Gustave

The Indian Scout: A Story of the Aztec City



Gustave Aimard

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PREFACE

The following work has been the most successful of all Gustave Aimard has published in Paris, and it has run through an unparalleled number of Editions. This is not surprising, however, when we bear in mind that he describes in it his personal experiences in the Indian Aztec city, from which no European ever returned prior to him, to tell the tale of his adventures. From this volume we learn to regard the Indians from a very different side than the one hitherto taken; for it is evident that they are something more than savages, and possess their traditions just as much as any nation of the Old World. At the present moment, when the Redskins appear destined to play an important part in the American struggle, I think that such knowledge as our Author is enabled alone to give us about their manners and customs, will be read with interest.

L. W.

CHAPTER I

THE SURPRISE

It was towards the end of May, 1855, in one of the least visited parts of the immense prairies of the Far West, and at a short distance from the Rio Colorado del Norte, which the Indian tribes of those districts call, in their language so full of imagery, "The endless river with the golden waves."

The night was profoundly dark. The moon, which had proceeded two-thirds of its course, displayed between the lofty branches of the trees her pallid face; and the scanty rays of vacillating light scarce brought out the outlines of the abrupt and stern scenery. There was not a breath in the air, not a star in the sky. A silence of death brooded over the desert – a silence only interrupted, at long intervals, by the sharp barking of the coyotes in search of prey, or the savage miaulings of the panthers and jaguars at the watering place.

During the darkness, the great American savannahs, on which no human sound troubles the majesty of night, assume, beneath the eye of heaven, an imposing splendour, which unconsciously affects the heart of the strongest man, and imbues him involuntarily with a feeling of religious respect.

All at once the closely growing branches of a floripondio were cautiously parted, and in the space thus left appeared the anxious head of a man, whose eyes, flashing like those of a wild beast, darted restless glances in every direction. After a few seconds of perfect immobility, the man of whom we speak left the clump of trees in the midst of which he was concealed, and leaped out on the plain.

Although his bronzed complexion had assumed almost a brick colour, still, from his hunting garb, and, above all, the light colour of his long hair, and his bold, frank, and sharply-marked features, it was easy to recognise in this man one of those daring Canadian wood rangers, whose bold race is daily expiring, and will probably disappear ere long.

He walked a few paces, with the barrel of his rifle thrust forward, and his finger on the trigger, minutely inspecting the thickets and numberless bushes that surrounded him; then, probably reassured by the silence and solitude that – continued to prevail around, he stopped, rested the butt of his rifle on the ground, bent forward, and imitated, with rare perfection, the song of the centzontle, the American nightingale.

Scarce had the last modulation of this song, which was gentle as a love sigh, died away in the air, when a second person bounded forward from the same shrub which had already offered passage to the hunter. It was an Indian; he stationed himself by the Canadian's side, and, after a few seconds' silence, said, affecting a tranquillity probably not responded to by his heart, – "Well?"

"All is calm," the hunter answered. "The *Cihuatl* can come."

The Indian shook his head.

"Since the rising of the moon, Mahchsi Karehde has been separated from Eglantine; he knows not where she is at this moment."

A kindly smile played round the hunter's lips.

"Eglantine loves my brother," he said, gently. "The little bird that sings in her heart will have led her on the trail of the Chief. Has Mahchsi Karehde forgotten the song with which he called her to his love meetings in the tribe?"

"The Chief has forgotten nothing."

"Let him call her then."

The Indian did not let the invitation be repeated. The cry of the walkon rose in the silence.

At the same moment a rustling was heard in the branches, and a young woman, bounding like a startled fawn, fell panting into the warrior's arms, which were opened to receive her. This pressure was no longer than a flash of lightning; the Chief, doubtlessly ashamed of the tender emotion he had yielded to in the presence of a white man, even though that white man was a friend, coldly repulsed

the young female, saying to her, in a voice in which no trace of feeling was visible, "My sister is fatigued, without doubt; no danger menaces her at this moment; she can sleep; the warriors will watch over her."

"Eglantine is a Comanche maid," she answered in a timid voice. "Her heart is strong; she will obey Mahchsi Karehde (the Flying Eagle). Under the protection of so terrible a chief she knows herself in safety."

The Indian bent on her a glance full of indescribable tenderness; but regaining, almost immediately, that apparent apathy which the Redskins never depart from, "The warriors wish to hold a council; my sister can sleep," he said.

The young woman made no reply; she bowed respectfully to the two men, and withdrawing a few paces, she lay down in the grass, and slept, or feigned to sleep. The Canadian had contented himself with smiling, on seeing the result obtained by the advice he had given the warrior, and listened, with an approving nod of the head, to the few words exchanged between the Redskins. The Chief, buried in thought, stood for a few minutes with his eyes fixed, with a strange expression, on the young, sleeping woman; then he passed his hand several times over his brow, as if to dissipate the clouds that oppressed his mind, and turned to the hunter.

"My brother, the Paleface, has need of rest. The Chief will watch," he said.

"The coyotes have ceased barking, the moon has disappeared, a white streak is rising on the horizon," the Canadian replied. "Day will speedily appear; sleep has fled my eyelids; the men must hold a council."

The Indian bowed, without further remark, and, laying his gun on the ground, collected a few armfuls of dry wood, which he carried near the sleeper. The Canadian struck a light; the wood soon caught, and the flame coloured the trees with its blood red hue. The two men then squatted by each other's side, filled their calumets with *manachie*, the sacred tobacco, and commenced smoking silently, with that imposing gravity which the Indians, under all circumstances, bring to this symbolic operation.

We will profit by this moment of rest, which accident offers us, to draw a portrait of these three persons, who are destined to play an important part in the course of our story.

The Canadian was a man of about forty-five years of age, six feet in height, long, thin, and dry; his was a nervous nature, composed of muscle and sinews, perfectly adapted to the rude profession of wood ranger, which demands a vigour and boldness beyond all expression. Like all his countrymen, the Canadian offered, in his features, the Norman type in its thorough purity. His wide forehead; his grey eyes, full of intelligence; his slightly aquiline nose; his large mouth, full of magnificent teeth; the long light hair, mingled with a few silvery threads which escaped from under his otter skin cap, and fell in enormous ringlets on his shoulders, – all these details gave this man an open, frank, and honest appearance, which attracted sympathy, and pleased at the first glance. This worthy, giant, whose real name was Bonnaire, but who was only known on the prairies by the sobriquet of Marksman, a sobriquet which he fully justified by the correctness of his aim, and his skill in detecting the lurking places of wild beasts, was born in the vicinity of Montreal; but having been taken, while very young, into the forests of Upper Canada, desert life possessed such charms for him, that he had given up civilized society, and for nearly thirty years had traversed the vast solitudes of North America, only consenting to visit the towns and villages when he wanted to dispose of the skins of the animals he had killed, or renew his provision of powder and bullets.

Marksman's companion, Flying Eagle, was one of the most renowned chiefs of the tribe of the White Buffaloes, the most powerful of all forming the warlike Comanche race, that untameable and ferocious nation, which, in its immeasurable pride, haughtily terms itself the Queen of the Prairies, a title which no other tribe dares to challenge. Flying Eagle, though still very young, for he was scarcely four-and-twenty, had already distinguished himself, on several occasions, by deeds of such unheard-

of boldness and temerity, that his mere name inspired the countless Indian hordes that constantly traverse the desert in every direction, with invincible terror.

He was tall, well built, and perfectly proportioned; his features were elegant, and his black eyes acquired, beneath the influence of any powerful emotion, that strange rigidity which commands respect; his gestures were noble, and his carriage graceful, and stamped with that majesty inborn in Indians. The Chief was attired in his war dress, and that was so singular, as to deserve a detailed description.

Flying Eagle wore the cap which only distinguished warriors, who have killed many warriors, have the right to assume; it is made of strips of white ermine, with a large piece of red cloth fastened at the back, and falling to the thigh, to which is fastened an upright crest of black and white eagle plumes, which begins at the head, and continues in close order to the extremity. Above his right ear he had passed through his hair a wooden knife, painted red, and about the length of a hand; this knife was the model of one with which he had killed a Dacotah chief; he wore, in addition, eight small wooden skewers, painted blue, and adorned at the upper extremity with a gilt nail, to indicate the number of bullets that had wounded him; over his left ear he wore a large tuft of yellow owl feathers, with the ends painted red, as the totem of the Band of Dogs; one half his face was red, and his body reddish brown, with stripes from which the colour had been removed by a moistened finger. His arms, starting from the shoulder, were adorned with twenty-seven yellow stripes, indicating the number of his exploits, while on his chest he had painted a blue hand, to announce that he had frequently made prisoners. Round his neck he wore a magnificent collar of grizzly bear's claws, three inches in length, and white at the point. His shoulders were covered by a large buffalo robe, falling almost to the ground, and painted of various colours. His breeches, composed of two separate parts, one for each leg, were tightly fastened to his waist belt, and fell almost to his ankles, embroidered externally with coloured porcupine quills, terminating in a long tuft that trailed on the ground. Wide stripes of black and white cloth were rolled round his hips, and fell before and behind in heavy folds. His slippers, of buffalo hide, were but slightly decorated; but wolf tails, trailing on the ground behind him, and equalling in number the enemies he had conquered, were fastened above his ankles. From his waist belt hung, on one side, his powder flask, ball pouch, and scalping knife: on the other, a quiver of panther skin filled with long, sharp arrows, and his tomahawk; his gun was laid on the ground, within reach of his hand.

This warrior, dressed in such a strange costume, had something imposing and sinister about him which inspired terror.

For the present we will confine ourselves to saying that Eglantine was not more than fifteen years of age; that she was very beautiful for an Indian girl; and wore, in all its elegant simplicity, the sweet costume adopted by the women of her nation. Ending here this description, which was perhaps too detailed, but which was necessary in order to know the men we have introduced in the scene, we will return to our narrative.

For a long time the two men smoked side by side without exchanging a syllable; at length, the Canadian shook out the ashes of his pipe on his thumb nail, and addressed his companion.

"Is my brother satisfied?" he said.

"Wah!" the Indian answered, and bowing assent; "my brother has a friend."

"Good!" the hunter continued; "and what will the Chief do now?"

"Flying Eagle will rejoin his tribe with Eglantine, and then return to seek the Apache trail."

"For what purpose?"

"Flying Eagle will avenge himself."

"As you please, Chief. I will certainly not try to dissuade you from projects against enemies who are also mine; still, I do not believe you look at the matter in the right light."

"What would my brother the Paleface warrior say?"

"I mean that we are far from the lodges of the Comanches, and before reaching them we shall have doubtlessly more than one turn-up with the enemies from whom the Chief considers himself freed, perhaps, too prematurely."

The Indian shrugged his shoulders disdainfully.

"The Apaches are old women, chattering, and cowardly," he said. "Flying Eagle despises them."

"That is possible," the hunter replied, with a toss of his head; "still, in my opinion, we should have done better in continuing our journey till sunrise, in order to put a greater distance between them and us, instead of halting so imprudently; we are still very near the camp of our enemies."

"The fire water has stopped the ears and closed the eyes of the Apache dogs; they are stretched on the ground and sleeping."

"Hum! that is not my opinion; I am, on the contrary, persuaded that they are watching and looking for us."

At the same instant, as if chance wished to justify the apprehensions of the prudent hunter, some dozen shots were fired; a horrible war cry, to which the Canadian and the Comanche responded, with a yell of defiance, was heard in the forest, and nearly thirty Indians rushed howling toward the fire, at which our three characters were seated; but the latter had disappeared, as if by enchantment.

The Apaches stopped with an outburst of passion, not knowing in what direction to turn, in order to find their crafty foes again. Suddenly three shots were fired from the interior of the forest, and three Apaches rolled on the ground, with holes in their chests. The Indians uttered a yell of fury, and rushed in the direction of the shots. At the moment they reached the edge of the forest, a man stepped forward, waving in his right hand a buffalo robe, as a signal of peace. It was Marksman, the Canadian.

The Apaches stopped with an ill-omened hesitation, but the Canadian, without seeming to notice the movement, walked resolutely toward them with the slow and careless step habitual to him; on recognizing him, the Indians brandished their weapons wrathfully, and wished to rush upon him, for they had many reasons for hating the hunter; but their Chief arrested them with a peremptory gesture.

"Let my brothers be patient," he said, with a sinister smile, "they will lose nothing by waiting."

CHAPTER II

THE GUEST

On the same day that our story begins, and about three miles from where the events narrated in our preceding chapter occurred, a numerous caravan had halted at sunset, in a vast clearing situated on the skirt of an immense virgin forest, the last species of which ended on the banks of the Rio Colorado.

This caravan came from the south-east, that is, from Mexico. It appeared to have been on the march for a long time, as far as possible to judge by the state in which the clothes of the men were, as well as the harness of the horses and mules. In fact, the poor beasts themselves were reduced to a state of leanness and weakness, which amply testified to the rude fatigue they must have endured. The caravan was composed of some thirty-five persons, all attired in the picturesque and characteristic costume of the half-bred hunters and Gambusinos, who alone, or in small bands, at the most of four, incessantly traverse the Far West, which they explore in its most mysterious depths, for the purpose of hunting, trapping, or discovering the numberless gold veins it contains in its bosom.

The adventurers halted, dismounted, fastened their horses to picket ropes, and began immediately, with that skill and quickness only attained by long habit, making their preparations to bivouac. The grass was pulled up over a considerable extent of ground; the baggage, piled up in a circle, formed a breastwork, behind which a sudden attack of the desert marauders might be resisted; and then fires were lighted in the shape of a St. Andrew's cross in the interior of the camp.

When all this had been attended to, some of the adventurers put up a large tent above a palanquin hermetically closed, which was carried by two mules, one before and one behind. When the tent was pitched, the mules were taken out of the palanquin, and the curtains, in falling, covered it so completely, that it was entirely concealed.

This palanquin was a riddle to the adventurers. No one knew what it contained, though the general curiosity was singularly aroused on the subject of a mystery so specially incomprehensible in this deserted country; each kept carefully to himself the opinions he had formed about it – above all, since the day when, in the midst of a difficult piece of country, and during the momentary absence of the chief of the Cuadrilla, who usually never left the palanquin, which he guarded like a miser does his treasure, a hunter leaned over and slightly opened one of the curtains; but the man had scarce time to take a furtive peep through the opening, ere the chief, suddenly coming up, split his skull open with a blow of his machete, and laid him dead at his feet. Then he turned to the terrified witnesses, and said calmly, – "Is there another among you who would like to discover what I think proper to keep secret?"

These words were uttered in such a tone of implacable raillery and furious cruelty, that these villains, for the most part without faith or law, and accustomed to brave, with a laugh, the greatest perils, felt an internal shudder, and their blood stagnated in their veins. This lesson had been sufficient. No one tried afterwards to discover the captain's secret.

The final arrangements had been scarcely made for the encampment, ere the sound of horses was heard, and two horsemen arrived at a gallop.

"Here is the Captain," the adventurers said to each other.

The newcomers gave their reins to men who ran up to receive them, and walked hastily toward the tent. On arriving there, the first stopped and addressed his companion: – "Caballero," he said to him, "you are welcome among us; although very poor ourselves, we will gladly share the little we possess with you."

"Thanks," the second said, with a bow, "I will not abuse your gracious hospitality; tomorrow, at sunrise, I think I shall be sufficiently rested to continue my journey."

"You will act as you think proper: seat yourself by this fire prepared for us, while I go for a few moments into that tent. I will soon rejoin you, and have the honour of keeping you company."

The stranger bowed, and took his place by the fire, lighted a short distance from the tent, while the captain let the curtain he had lifted fall behind him, and disappeared from his guest's sight.

The latter was a man of marked features, his stalwart limbs denoting a far from ordinary strength; the few wrinkles that furrowed his energetic face served to indicate that he had already passed midlife, though no trace of decrepitude was visible on his solidly-built body, and not a white hair silvered his long and thick locks, which were black as a raven's wing. He wore the costume of the rich Mexican hacenderos, that is to say, the *mancha*; the *zarapé*, of many colours; the velvet *calzoneras*, open at the knee, and *botas vaqueras*; his hat, of vicuna skin, gallooned with gold, was drawn in by a rich *toquilla*, fastened with a costly diamond; a sheathless machete hung from his right hip, merely passed through an iron ring: the barrels of two six-chambered revolvers shone in his waist belt, and he had thrown on the grass by his side an American rifle, beautifully damascened with silver.

When the Captain left him alone, this man, while installing himself before the fire in the most comfortable way possible, that is to say, arranging his *zarapé* and water bottles to serve as a bed, if necessary, had cast a furtive glance around, whose expression would, doubtless, have supplied the adventurers with serious matter of thought had they been able to notice it; but all were busied in getting the bivouac snug, and preparations for supper; and trusting entirely in the loyalty of prairie hospitality, they did not at all dream of watching what the stranger seated at their fire was about.

The unknown, after a few moments' reflection, rose and walked up to a party of trappers, whose conversation seemed very animated, and who were gesticulating with that fire natural to southern races.

"Eh!" one of them said, on noticing the stranger, "this señor will set us right with a word."

The latter, thus directly appealed to, turned toward the speaker.

"What is the matter, caballeros?" he asked.

"Oh, a very simple matter," the adventurer made answer; "your horse, a noble and handsome animal, I must allow, señor, will not associate with others; it stamps its feet and bites at the companions we have given it."

"Oh, that is, indeed, simple enough," a second adventurer remarked, with a grin; "that horse is a *costeño*, and too proud to associate with poor *tierras interiores* like our horses."

At this singular reason, all burst into an Homeric laugh. The stranger smiled cunningly.

"It may be the reason you state, or perhaps some other," he said gently; "at any rate, there is a very simple way of settling the dispute, which I will employ."

"Ah!" the second speaker said, "what is it?"

"This," the stranger replied, with the same air of placidity.

Then, walking up to the horse, which two men had a difficulty in holding, he said, – "Let go!"

"But if we let go, nobody knows what will happen."

"Let go! I answer for all then," addressing his horse, – "Lillo!" he said.

At this name, the horse raised its noble head, and fixing its sparkling eye on the man who had called it, with a sharp and irresistible movement, it threw off the two men who tried to check it, sent them rolling on the grass, to the shouts of their comrades, and rubbed its head against its master's chest with a neigh of pleasure.

"You see," the stranger said, as he patted the noble animal, "it is not difficult."

"Hum!" the first adventurer who picked himself up said, in an angry tone, and rubbing his shoulder; "that is a *demonio* to which I would not entrust my skin, old and wrinkled as it is at present."

"Do not trouble yourself any further about the horse, I will attend to it."

"On the faith of Domingo, I have had enough, for my part; 'tis a noble brute, but it has a fiend inside it."

The stranger shrugged his shoulders without replying, and returned to the fire, followed by his horse, which paced step by step behind him, not evincing the slightest wish to indulge further in those eccentricities which had so greatly astonished the adventurers, who are, however, all men well versed in the equine art. This horse was a pure barb of Arab stock, and had probably cost its present owner an enormous sum, and its pace seemed strange to men accustomed to American horses. Its master gave it provender, hobbled it near him, and then sat down again by the fire: at the same instant the Captain appeared in the entrance of the tent.

"I beg your pardon," he said, with that charming courtesy natural to the Hispano-Americans; "I beg your pardon, Señor Caballero, for having neglected you so long, but an imperative duty claimed my presence. Now, I am quite at your service."

The stranger bowed. "On the contrary," he replied, "I must ask you to accept my apologies for the cool manner in which I avail myself of your hospitality."

"Not a word more on this head, if you wish not to annoy me."

The Captain seated himself by his guest's side.

"We will dine," he said. "I can only offer you scanty fare; but one must put up with it, and I am reduced to tasajo and red beans with pimento."

"That is delicious, and I should assuredly do honour to it if I felt the slightest appetite; but, at the present moment, it would be impossible for me to swallow the smallest mouthful."

"Ah!" the Captain said, looking distrustfully at the stranger.

But he met a face so simply calm, a smile so frank, that he felt ashamed of his suspicions, and his face, which had grown gloomy, at once regained all its serenity.

"I am vexed. Still, I will ask permission to dine at once; for, differently from you, Caballero, I must confess to you that I am literally dying of hunger."

"I should be in despair at causing you the slightest delay."

"Domingo," the Captain shouted, "my dinner."

The adventurer, whom the stranger's horse had treated so roughly, soon came up limping, and carrying his chief's supper in a wooden tray; a few tortillas he held in his hand completed the meal, which was worthy of an anchorite.

Domingo was an Indian half-bred, with a knowing look, angular features, and crafty face: he appeared to be about fifty years of age, so far as it is possible to judge an Indian's age by his looks. Since his misadventure with the horse, Domingo felt a malice for the stranger.

"*Con su permiso*," the Captain said, as he broke a tortilla.

"I will smoke a cigarette, if that can be called keeping you company," the stranger said, with his stereotyped smile.

The other bowed politely, and fell to on his meagre repast with that eagerness which denotes a lengthened abstinence. We will take advantage of the opportunity to draw for the reader a portrait of the chief of the caravan.

Don Miguel Ortega, for such was the name by which he was known to his comrades, was an elegant and handsome young man, not more than six and twenty years of age, with a bronzed complexion, delicate features, haughty and flashing eyes; while his tall stature, well-shaped limbs, and wide and arched chest, denoted rare vigour. Assuredly, through the whole extent of the old Spanish colonies, it would have been difficult – if not impossible – to meet a more seductive cavalier, whom the picturesque Mexican costume became so well, or combining to the same extent as he did, those external advantages which charm women and captivate the populace. Still, for the observer, Don Miguel had too great a depth in his eye, too rude a frown, and a smile too false and perfidious, not to conceal, beneath his pleasing exterior, an ulcerated soul and evil instincts.

A hunter's meal, seasoned by appetite, is never long. The present one was promptly disposed of.

"There," the Captain said, as he wiped his fingers with a tuft of grass; "now for a cigarette to help digestion, and then I shall have the honour to wish you good night. Of course, you do not intend to leave us before daybreak."

"I can hardly tell you. That will depend, to some extent, on the weather tonight. I am in a considerable hurry, and you know, Caballero, that – as our neighbours, the Gringos, so justly remark – time is money."

"You know better than I do, Caballero, what you have to do. Act as you please; but, before I retire, accept my wishes for a pleasant night's rest, and the success of your plans."

"I thank you, Caballero."

"One last word, or rather, one last question before separating?"

"Ask it."

"Of course, if this question appears to you indiscreet, you are at perfect liberty not to answer it."

"It would surprise me, on the part of so accomplished a Caballero. Hence, be kind enough to explain yourself."

"My name is Don Miguel Ortega."

"And mine, Don Stefano Cohecho."

The Captain bowed.

"Will you allow me, in my turn," the stranger said, "to ask you a question?"

"I beg you to do so."

"Why this exchange of names?"

"Because, on the prairie it is good to be able to distinguish friends from foes."

"That is true. And now?"

"Now I am certain that I do not count you among the latter."

"¿Quién sabe?" Don Stefano retorted, with a laugh. "There are such strange accidents."

The two men, after exchanging a few more words in the most friendly manner, cordially shook hands. Don Miguel went into the tent, and Don Stefano, after turning his feet towards the fire, slept, or pretended to do so.

An hour later, the deepest silence reigned in the camp. The fires only produced a doubtful gleam; and the sentinels, leaning on their rifles, were themselves yielding to that species of vague somnolency, which is not quite sleep, but is no longer watching. All at once, an owl, probably hidden in a neighbouring tree, twice uttered its melancholy hu-hu.

Don Stefano suddenly opened his eyes, without changing his position; he assured himself, by an investigating glance, that all was quiet around him; then, after convincing himself that his machete and revolvers had not left him, he took up his rifle, and in his turn imitated the cry of the owl, which was answered by a similar whoop.

The stranger, after arranging his zarapé, so as to imitate a human body, whispered a few words to his horse while patting it, in order to calm it; and laying himself at full length on the ground, he crawled towards one of the outlets from the camp, stopping at intervals to look around him.

All continued to be tranquil. On reaching the foot of the breastwork formed by the baggage, he jumped up, leapt over the obstacles with a tiger's bound, and disappeared in the prairie. At the same instant a man rose, sprang over the entrenchment, and rushed in pursuit of him.

That man was Domingo.

CHAPTER III

A NIGHT CONFERENCE

Don Stefano Cohecho seemed to be thoroughly acquainted with the desert. So soon as he was on the prairie, and fancied himself safe from any curious eye, he raised his head haughtily, his step grew more confident, his eye sparkled with a gloomy fire, and he walked with long steps towards a clump of palm trees, whose small fans formed but a scanty protection by day against the burning sunbeams.

Still he neglected no precaution; at times he stopped hurriedly, to listen to the slightest suspicious sound, or interrogate with searching glance the gloomy depths of the forest. But after a few seconds, re-assured by the calm that prevailed around him, he jogged onwards with that deliberate step he had adopted on leaving the camp.

Domingo walked literally in his steps; spying and watching each of his movements with that sagacity peculiar to the half-breeds, while carefully keeping on his guard against any surprise on the part of the man he was following. Domingo was one of those men of whom only too many are met with on the frontiers. Gifted with great qualities and great vices, equally fit for good and evil, capable of accomplishing extraordinary things in either sense; but who, for the most part, are only guided by their evil instincts.

He was at this moment following the stranger, without exactly knowing the motive that made him do so; not, even having decided whether to be for or against him; awaiting, to make up his mind, a little better knowledge of the state of affairs, and the chance of weighing the advantage he should derive from treachery or the performance of his duty. Hence, he carefully avoided letting his presence be suspected, for he guessed that the mystery he wished to detect would, if he succeeded, offer him great advantages, especially if he knew how to work it.

The two men marched thus for nearly an hour, one behind the other, Don Stefano not suspecting for a moment that he was so cleverly watched, and that one of the most knowing scoundrels on the prairie was at his heels.

After numberless turnings in the tall grass, Don Stefano at length arrived at the bank of the Rio Colorado, which at this spot was as wide and placid as a lake, running over a bed of sand, bordered by thick clumps of cottonwood trees, and tall poplars, whose roots were bathed in the water. On reaching the river, the stranger stopped, listened for a moment, and, raising his fingers to his mouth, imitated the bark of a coyote. Almost immediately, the same signal rose in the midst of the mangrove trees, and a little birchbark canoe, pulled by two men, appeared on the bank.

"Eh!" Don Stefano said, in a suppressed voice, "I had given up all hopes of meeting you."

"Did you not hear our signal?" one of the men in the canoe answered.

"Should I have come without that? Still, it seems to me you could have come nearer to me."

"It was not possible."

The canoe ran on to the sand; the two men leaped on lightly, and in a second joined Don Stefano. Both were dressed and armed like prairie hunters.

"Hum!" Don Stefano continued; "it is a long journey from the camp here, and I am afraid that my absence may be noticed."

"That is a risk you must run," the first speaker remarked – a man of tall stature, with a grave and stern face, whose hair, white as snow, fell in long curls on his shoulders.

"Well, as you are here at last, let us come to an understanding; and make haste about it, for time is precious. What have you done since we parted?"

"Not much; we followed you at a distance, that is all, ready to come to your assistance if needed."

"Thanks; no news?"

"None. Who could have given us any?"

"That is true; and have you not met your friend Marksman?"

"No."

"*¡Cuerpo de Cristo!* That is annoying; for, if my presentiment do not deceive me, we shall soon have to play at knives."

"We will do so."

"I know it, Brighteye. I have long been acquainted with your courage; but you, Ruperto your comrade, and myself, are only three men, after all."

"What matter?"

"What matter? you say, when we shall have to fight thirty or forty hardened hunters! On my word, Brighteye, you will drive me mad with your notions. You doubt about nothing; but remember, that this time we have not to contend against badly-armed Indians, but white men, thorough game for the galleys, who will die without yielding an inch, and to whom we must inevitably succumb."

"That is true; I did not think of that; they are numerous."

"If we fall, what will become of her?"

"Good, good," the hunter said, with a shake of his head. "I repeat to you that I did not think of that."

"You see, then, that it is indispensable for us to come to an understanding with Marksman and the men he may have at his disposal."

"Yes; but where are you going to find in the desert the trail of a man like Marksman? Who knows where he is at this moment? He may be within gunshot of us, or five hundred miles off."

"It is enough to drive me mad."

"The fact is, that the position is grave. Are you, at least, sure this time that you are not mistaken, but are in the right trail?"

"I cannot say with certainty, though everything leads me to suppose that I am not mistaken. However, I shall soon know what I have to depend on."

"Besides, it is the same trail we have followed ever since leaving Monterey; the chances are it is they."

"What do we resolve on?"

"Hang it! I do not know what to say!"

"On my word, you are a most heart breaking fellow! What! cannot you suggest any way?"

"I must have a certainty, and then, as you said yourself, it would be madness for us thus to try a sudden attack."

"You are right. I will return to the camp; tomorrow night we will meet again, and I shall be very unlucky if this time I do not discover what it is so important for us all to know. Do you, in the meanwhile, ransack the prairie in every direction, and, if possible, bring me news of Marksman."

"The recommendation is unnecessary. I shall not be idle."

Don Stefano seized the old hunter's hand, and pressed it between his own.

"Brighteye," he said to him, with considerable emotion,

"I will not speak of our old friendship, nor of the services which I have been several times so fortunate as to render you; I will only repeat, and I know it will be sufficient for you, that the happiness of my whole life depends on the success of our expedition."

"Good, good; have confidence in me, Don José. I am too old to change my friends; I do not know who is right or wrong in this business; I wish that justice may be on your side; but that does not affect me. Whatever may happen, I will be a good and faithful companion to you."

"Thanks, my old friend. Tomorrow night, then."

After uttering these few words, Don Stefano, or, at least, the man who called himself so, made a move as if to withdraw; but Brighteye stopped him, with a sudden gesture.

"What is the matter?" the stranger asked.

The hunter laid a forefinger on his mouth, to recommend silence, and turned to Ruperto, who had remained silent and apathetic during the interview.

"*Coyote*," he said to him, in a low voice.

Without replying, Ruperto bounded like a jaguar, and disappeared in a clump of cottonwood trees, which was a short distance off. After a few moments, the two men who had remained, with their bodies bent forward in the attitude of listeners, without uttering a syllable, heard a rustling of leaves, a noise of broken branches, followed by the fall of a heavy body on the ground, and after that nothing. Almost immediately the cry of the owl rose in the night air.

"Ruperto calls us," Brighteye then said, "all is over

"What has happened?" Don Stefano asked anxiously.

"Less than nothing," the hunter replied, making him a sign to follow. "You had a spy at your heels; that is all."

"A spy?"

"By Jove! you shall see."

"Oh, oh! that is serious."

"Less than you suppose, as we have him."

"In that case, though, we must kill the man."

"Who knows? That will probably depend on the explanation we may have with him. At any rate, there is no great harm in crushing such vipers."

While speaking thus, Brighteye and his companion had entered the thicket. Domingo, thrown down, and tightly garotted by means of Ruperto's reata, was vainly struggling to break the bonds that cut into his flesh. Ruperto, with his hands resting on the muzzle of his rifle, was listening with a grin, but no other reply, to the flood of insults and recriminations which rage drew from the half-breed.

"*¡Dios me ampare!*" the latter shouted, writhing like a viper. "*¡Verdugo del Demonio!* Is this the way to behave between *gente de razón*? Am I a Redskin, to be tied like a plug of tobacco, and have my limbs fettered like a calf that is being taken to the shambles? If ever you fall into my hands, accursed dog! you shall pay for the trick you have played me."

"Instead of threatening, my good man," Brighteye interposed, "it seems to me you would do better by frankly allowing that you are in our power, and acting in accordance."

The bandit sharply turned his head, the only part of his person at liberty, toward the hunter.

"What right have you to call me good man, and give me advice, old trapper of muskrats?" he said to him, irritably. "Are you white men or Indians, to treat a hunter thus?"

"If, instead of hearing what did not concern you, Señor Domingo, for I believe that is your name," Don Stefano said, with a cunning look, "you had remained quietly asleep in your camp, the little annoyance of which you complain would not have occurred."

"I am bound to recognize the justice of your reasoning," the bandit replied ironically; "but, hang it! what would you have? I have ever suffered from a mania of trying to find out what people sought to hide from me."

The stranger looked at him suspiciously.

"And have you had the mania long, my good friend?" he asked him.

"Since my earliest youth," he answered, with effrontery.

"Only think of that! Then you must have learned a good many things?"

"An enormous quantity, worthy sir."

Don Stefano turned to Brighteye.

"My friend," he said to him, "just loosen this man's bonds a little. There is much to be gained in his company; I wish to enjoy his conversation for a little while."

The hunter silently executed the orders he received. The bandit uttered a sigh of satisfaction at finding himself more at his ease, and sat up.

"*¡Cuerpo de Cristo!*" he exclaimed, with a mocking accent. "The position is now, at any rate, bearable. We can talk."

"I think so."

"My faith! yes. I am quite at your service, for anything you please, Excellency."

"I will profit by your complaisance."

"Profit by it! profit by it, Excellency? I can only gain in talking with you."

"Do you believe so?"

"I am convinced of it."

"Indeed, you may be right; but tell me, beside that noble curiosity, which you so frankly confessed, have you not, by accident, a few other defects?"

The bandit appeared to reflect conscientiously for two or three minutes, and then answered, with an affable grin, —

"My faith! no, Excellency. I cannot find any."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Hum! it may be so, yet I do not believe it."

"Come, you see, you are not sure."

"That is indeed true!" the bandit exclaimed, with pretended candour. "As you know, Excellency, human nature is so imperfect."

Don Stefano gave a nod of assent.

"If I were to help you," he said, "perhaps —"

"We might find it out, Excellency," Domingo quickly interrupted him. "Well, help me, help me, I ask for nothing better."

"Hum! for instance — but notice that I affirm nothing; I suppose, that is all."

"*¡Caray!* I am well aware of it. Go on, Excellency, do not trouble yourself."

"Then, I say — have you not a certain weakness for money?"

"For gold, especially."

"That is what I meant to say."

"The fact is, gold is very tempting, Excellency."

"I do not wish to regard it as a crime, my friend. I only mention it; besides, that passion is so natural —"

"Is it not?"

"That you must be affected by it."

"Well, I confess, Excellency, that you have guessed it."

"Look you! I was sure of it."

"Yes, money gained honestly."

"Of course! Thus, for instance, suppose anyone offered you a thousand piastres to discover the secret of Don Miguel Ortega's palanquin?"

"Hang it!" the bandit said, fixing a sharp glance on the stranger, who, for his part, examined him attentively.

"And if that somebody," Don Stefano went on, "gave you in addition, as earnest penny, a ring like this?" While saying this, he made a magnificent diamond ring flash in the bandit's eyes.

"I would accept," the latter said, with a greedy accent, "even if I were compelled, in order to discover that secret, to imperil the share I hope for in Paradise."

Don Stefano turned to Brighteye. "Unfasten this man," he said, coldly, "we understand each other."

On feeling himself free, the half-breed gave a bound of joy. "The ring!" he said.

"There it is," Don Stefano said, as he handed it to him; "all is arranged."

Domingo laid his right-hand thumb across the left, and raised his head proudly. "On the Holy Cross of the Redeemer," he said, in a clear and impressive voice, "I swear to employ all my efforts

in discovering the secret Don Miguel hides so jealously; I swear never to betray the Caballero with whom I am treating at this moment: this oath I take in the presence of these three Caballeros, pledging myself, if I break it, to endure any punishment, even death, which it may please these three Caballeros to inflict on me."

The oath taken by Domingo is the most terrible a Spanish American can offer; there is not a single instance of it ever having been broken. Don Stefano bowed, convinced of the bandit's sincerity.

At this moment, several shots, followed by horrible yells, were heard at a short distance off. Brighteye started. "Don José," he said to the stranger, as he laid his hands on his shoulder, "Heaven favours us. Return to the camp; tomorrow night I shall probably have some news for you."

"But those shots?"

"Do not trouble yourself about them, but return to the camp, I tell you, and let me act."

"Well, as you wish it, I will retire."

"Till tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow."

"And I?" Domingo said. "Caramba, comrades, if you are going to play at knives, can you not take me with you?"

The old hunter looked at him attentively. "Eh!" he said, at the expiration of a moment, "your idea is not a bad one; you can come if you desire it."

"That is capital, for it is a pretext ready made to explain my absence."

Don Stefano smiled, and after reminding Brighteye once again of their meeting for the following night, he left the thicket, and proceeded toward the camp. The two hunters and the half-breed were left alone.

CHAPTER IV

INDIANS AND HUNTERS

As we have already said, at the spot where the three hunters were standing, the Rio Colorado formed a wide sheet, whose silvery waters wound through a superb and picturesque country. At times, on either bank, the ground rose almost suddenly into bold mountains of grand appearance; at other places, the river ran through fresh and laughing prairies, covered with luxuriant vegetation, or graceful and undulating valleys, in which grew trees of every description.

It was in one of these valleys that Brighteye's canoe had been pulled in. Sheltered on all sides by lofty forests, which begirt them with a dense curtain of verdure, the hunters would have escaped, even during the day, from the investigations of curious or indiscreet persons, who might have attempted to surprise them at this advanced hour of the night, by the flickering rays of the moon which only reached them after being followed through the leafy dome that covered them: they could consider themselves as being perfectly secure.

Reassured by the strength of his position, Brighteye, so soon as Don Stefano had left him, formed his plan of action with that lucidity which can only be obtained from a lengthened knowledge of the desert.

"Comrade," he said to the half-breed, "do you know the desert?"

"Not so well as you, certainly, old hunter," the latter answered, modestly, "but well enough to be of good service to you in the expedition you wish to attempt."

"I like that way of answering, for it shows a desire of doing well. Listen to me attentively; the colour of my hair, and the wrinkles that furrow my forehead, tell you sufficiently that I must possess a certain amount of experience; my whole life has been spent in the woods; there is not a blade of grass I do not know, a sound which I cannot explain, a footstep which I cannot discover. A few moments back, several shots were fired not far from us, followed by the Indian war yell; among those shots I am certain I recognized the rifle of a man for whom I feel the warmest friendship; that man is in danger at this moment – he is fighting the Apaches, who have surprised and attacked him during sleep. The number of shots leads me to suppose that my friend has only two companions with him; if we do not go to his help, he is lost, for his adversaries are numerous; the thing I am about to attempt is almost desperate; we have every chance against us, so reflect before replying. Are you still resolved to accompany Ruperto and myself; in a word, risk your scalp in our company?"

"Bah!" the bandit said, carelessly, "a man can only die once; perhaps I shall never again have so fine an opportunity of dying honestly. Dispose of me, old trapper – I am yours, body and soul."

"Good; I expected that answer; still, it was my duty to warn you of the danger that threatened you: now, no more talking, but let us act, for time presses, and every minute we waste is an age for the man we wish to save. Walk in my moccasins; keep your eye and ear on the watch; above all, be prudent, and do nothing without orders."

After having carefully inspected the cap on his rifle, a precaution imitated by his two companions, Brighteye looked round him for a few seconds, then, with that hunter's instinct which in them is almost second sight, he advanced with a rapid though silent step in the direction of the fighting, while making the men a sign to follow him.

It is impossible to form an idea, even a distant one, of what a night march is on the prairie, on foot, through the shrubs, the trees which have grown together, the creepers that twine in every direction. Walking on a shifting soil, composed of detritus of every nature accumulated during centuries, at one place forming mounds several feet high, surrounded by deep ditches, not only is it difficult to find a path through this inextricable confusion, when walking quietly onward, with no fear of betraying one's presence, but this becomes almost impossible when you have to open a passage

silently, not letting a branch spring back, or a leaf rustle; for that sound, though almost imperceptible, would be enough to place the enemy you wish to surprise on his guard.

A long residence in the desert can alone enable a man to acquire the necessary skill to carry out this rude task successfully. This skill Brighteye possessed in the highest degree; he seemed to guess the obstacles which rose at each step before him – obstacles the slightest of which, under such circumstances, would have made the most resolute man recoil, through his conviction of it being an impossibility to surmount them.

The two other hunters had only to follow the track so cleverly and laboriously made by their guide. Fortunately, the adventurers were only a short distance from the men they were going to help; had it been otherwise, they would have needed nearly the whole night to join them. Had Brighteye wished it, he could have skirted the forest and walked in the long grass – a road incomparably more easy, and especially less fatiguing; but, with his usual correctness of conception, the hunter understood that the direction he took was the only one which would permit him to go straight to the scene of action without being discovered by the Indians, who, in spite of all their sagacity, would never suspect that a man would dare to attempt such a route.

After a walk of about twenty minutes, Brighteye stopped – the hunters had arrived. On lightly moving the branches and brambles aside, they witnessed the following scene.

Before them, and scarce ten paces off, was a clearing. In the centre of that clearing three fires were burning, and were surrounded by Apache warriors, smoking gravely, while their horses, fastened to pickets, were nibbling the young tree shoots.

Marksman was standing motionless near the chiefs, leaning on his rifle, and exchanging a few words with them at intervals. Brighteye understood nothing of what he saw; all these men seemed on the best terms with the hunter, who, for his part, did not display the slightest uneasiness, either by his gestures or his face.

We have said that, after the Indians' sudden attack, Marksman advanced towards them, waving a buffalo robe in sign of peace. The Indians stopped, with that courteous deference which they display in all their relations, in order to listen to the hunter's explanations. A chief even stepped towards him, politely inviting him to say what he wanted.

"My red brother does not know me! Then, is it necessary that I should tell him my name, that he may know with whom he is speaking?" Marksman said, angrily.

"That is useless. I know that my brother is a great white warrior. My ears are open; I await the explanation he will be good enough to give me."

The hunter shrugged his shoulders disdainfully.

"Have the Apaches become cowardly or plundering coyotes, setting out in flocks to hunt on the prairies? Why have they attacked me?"

"My brother knows it."

"No, as I ask it. The Antelope Apaches had a chief – a great warrior – named Red Wolf. That chief was my friend. I had made a treaty with him. But Red Wolf is, doubtlessly, dead; his scalp adorns the lodge of a Comanche, as the young men of his tribe have come to attack me, treacherously, and against the sworn peace, during my sleep."

The Chief frowned, and drew himself up.

"The Paleface, like all his countrymen, has a viper's tongue," he said, rudely; "a skin covers his heart, and the words his chest exhales are so many perfidies. Red Wolf is not dead; his scalp does not adorn the lodge of a Comanche dog; he is still the first chief of the Antelope Apaches. The hunter knows it well, since he is speaking to him at this moment."

"I am glad that my brother has made himself known," the hunter replied, "for I should not have recognized him from his way of acting."

"Yes, there is a traitor between us," the Chief said, drily; "but that traitor is a Paleface, and not an Indian!"

"I wait till my brother explains himself. I do not understand him; a mist has spread over my eyes – my mind is veiled. The words of the Chief, I have no doubt, will dissipate this cloud."

"I hope so! Let the hunter answer with an honest tongue, and no deceit. His voice is a music which for a long time sounded pleasantly in my ears, and rejoiced my heart. I should be glad if his explanation restored me the friend whom I fancied I had lost."

"Let my brother speak. I will answer his questions."

At a sign from Red Wolf, the Apaches had kindled several fires, and formed a temporary camp. In spite of all his cleverness, doubt had entered the heart of the Apache chief, and he wished to prove to the white hunter, whom he feared, that he was acting frankly, and entertained no ill design against him. The Apaches, seeing the good understanding that apparently prevailed between their sachem and the hunter, had hastened to execute the order they received. All traces of the contest disappeared in a moment, and the clearing offered the appearance of a bivouac of peaceful hunters receiving the visit of a friend.

Marksman smiled internally at the success of his plan, and the way in which he managed, by a few words, to give quite a different turn to the position of affairs. Still he was not without anxiety about the explanation the Chief was going to ask of him. He felt he was in a wasps' nest, from which he did not know how he should contrive to emerge, without some providential accident. Redskin invited the hunter to take a seat by his side at the fire, which he declined, however, not being at all certain how matters would end, and wishing to retain a chance of escape in the event of the explanation becoming stormy.

"Is the pale hunter ready to reply?" Red Wolf asked him.

"I am awaiting my brother's good pleasure."

"Good! Let my brother open his ears, then. A Chief is about to speak."

"I am listening."

"Red Wolf is a renowned Chief. His name is feared by the Comanches, who fly before him like timid squaws. One day, at the head of his young men, Red Wolf entered an altopelt (village) of the Comanches. The Buffalo Comanches were hunting on the prairies; their warriors and young men were absent. Red Wolf burned the cabins, and carried off the women prisoners. Is that true?"

"It is true."

"Among the women was one for whom the heart of the Apache chief spoke. That woman was the Cihuatl of the sachem of the Buffalo Comanches. Red Wolf led her to his hut and treated her not as a prisoner, but as a well-beloved sister."

"What did the pale hunter?"

The Chief broke off and looked steadily at Marksman; but the latter did not move a feature.

"I wait till my brother answers me, in order to know with what he reproaches me," he said.

Red Wolf continued, with a certain degree of animation in his voice, —

"The pale hunter, abusing the friendship of the Chief, introduced himself into his village, under the pretext of visiting his red brother. As he was known and beloved by all, he traversed the village as he pleased, sauntered about everywhere, and when he had discovered Eglantine, he carried her off during a dark night, like a traitor and a coward."

At this insult, the hunter pressed the barrel of his rifle with a convulsive movement; but he immediately recovered his coolness.

"The Chief is a great warrior," he said, "he speaks well. The words reach his lips with an abundance that is charming. Unfortunately, he lets himself be led astray by passion, and does not describe matters as they occurred."

"Wah!" the Chief exclaimed, "Red Wolf is an impostor, and his lying tongue ought to be thrown to the dogs."

"I have listened patiently to the Chief's words, it is his turn to hear mine."

"Good! Let my brother speak."

At this moment, a whistle, no louder than a sigh, was audible. The Indians paid no attention to it, but the hunter quivered, his eye flashed, and a smile played round the corner of his lips.

"I will be brief," he said. "It is true that I introduced myself into my brother's village, but frankly and loyally to ask of him, in the name of Mahchsi-Karehde, the great sachem of the Buffalo Comanches, his wife, whom Red Wolf had carried off. I offered for her a rich ransom, composed of four guns, six hides of she-buffalos, and two necklaces of grizzly bears' claws. I acted thus, in the intention of preventing a war between the Buffalo Comanches and the Antelope Apaches. My brother, Red Wolf, instead of accepting my friendly proposals, despised them. I then warned him, that, by will or force, Flying Eagle would recover his wife, treacherously carried off from his village while he was absent. Then I withdrew. What reproach can my brother address to me? Under what circumstances did I behave badly to him? Flying Eagle has got back his wife; he has acted well – he was in the right. Red Wolf has nothing to say to that. Under similar circumstances, he would have done the same. I have spoken. Let my brother answer if his heart proves to him that I was wrong."

"Good!" the Chief answered. "My brother was here with Eglantine a few minutes ago; he will tell me where she is hidden, Red Wolf will capture her again, and there will no longer be a cloud between Red Wolf and his friend."

"The Chief will forget that woman who does not love him and who cannot be his. That will be better, especially as Flying Eagle will never consent to give her up."

"Red Wolf has warriors to support his words," the Indian said, proudly, "Flying Eagle is alone; how will he oppose the will of the sachem?"

Marksman smiled.

"Flying Eagle has numerous friends," he said, "he is at this moment sheltered in the camp of the Palefaces, whose fires Red Wolf can see from here, glistening in the darkness. Let my brother listen. I believe I hear the sound of footsteps in the forest."

The Indian rose with agitation.

At this moment three men entered the clearing. They were Brighteye, Ruperto, and Domingo.

At the sight of them, the Apaches, who were thoroughly acquainted with them, rose tumultuously and uttered a cry of astonishment, almost of terror, while seizing their weapons. The three hunters continued to advance calmly, not caring to trouble themselves about these almost hostile demonstrations.

We will explain in a few words the appearance of the hunters and their interference, which was probably about to change the aspect of affairs.

CHAPTER V

MUTUAL EXPLANATIONS

Brighteye and his two companions, owing to the position they occupied, not only saw all that occurred in the clearing, but also heard, without losing a word, the conversation between Marksman and Red Wolf.

For many long years the two Canadian hunters had been on intimate terms. Many times had they undertaken together some of those daring expeditions which the wood rangers frequently carry out against the Indians. These two men had no secrets from each other; all was in common between them – hatred as well as friendship.

Brighteye was thoroughly acquainted with the events to which Marksman alluded, and, had not certain reasons, we shall learn presently, prevented him, he would have probably aided his friend in rescuing Eglantine from Red Wolf. Still, one point remained obscure on his mind; that was the presence of Marksman in the middle of the Indians, the quarrel which had begun in shouts and yells, and had now apparently terminated with an amicable conversation.

By what strange concourse of events was it that Marksman, the man best acquainted with Indian tricks, whose reputation for skill and courage was universal among the hunters and trappers of the Western Prairies, now found himself in an equivocal position, in the midst of thirty or forty Apaches, the most scoundrelly treacherous and ferocious of all the Indians who wander about the desert? This it was that the worthy hunter could not explain, and which rendered him so thoughtful. At the risk of whatever might happen, he resolved to reveal his presence to his friend by means of a signal arranged between them long ago, in order to warn him that, in case of need, a friend was watching over him. It was then that he gave the whistle, at the sound of which we saw the hunter start. But this signal had a result which Brighteye was far from expecting. The branches of the tree, against the trunk of which the Canadian was leaning, parted, and a man, hanging by his arms, fell suddenly to the ground a couple of yards from him, but so lightly, that his fall did not produce the slightest sound.

At the first glance, Brighteye recognized the man who seemed thus to fall from the sky. Owing to his self-command, he displayed none of the amazement this unforeseen appearance produced in him. The hunter rested the butt of his rifle on the ground, and addressed the Indian politely.

"That is a strange idea of yours, Chief," he said, with a smile, "to go promenading on the trees at this hour of the night."

"Flying Eagle is watching the Apaches," the Indian answered, with a guttural accent. "Did not my brother expect to see me?"

"In the prairie we must expect everything, Chief. Still, I confess that few meetings would be so agreeable to me as yours, especially at this moment."

"My brother is on the trail of the Antelopes?"

"I declare to you, Chief, that an hour ago I did not expect I was so near them. Had I not heard your shots, it is probable that at this moment I should be quietly asleep in my bivouac."

"Yes, my brother heard the rifle of a friend sing, and he has come."

"You have guessed rightly, Chief. But now tell me all about it, for I know nothing."

"Has not my pale brother heard Red Wolf?"

"Of course; but is there nothing else?"

"Nothing. Flying Eagle rescued his wife; the Apaches pursued him, like cowardly coyotes, and this night surprised him at his fire."

"Very good. Is Eglantine in safety?"

"Eglantine is a Comanche woman; she knows not fear."

"I am aware of that – she is a good creature; but that is not the question at this moment. What do you purpose doing?"

"Wait for a favourable moment, then utter my war yell, and fall on these dogs."

"Hum! your project is rather quick. If you will allow me, I will make a slight change."

"Wisdom speaks by the mouth of the pale hunter. Flying Eagle is young: he will obey."

"Good; the more so, because I shall only act for your welfare. But now let me listen, for the conversation seems to me to be taking a turn extremely interesting for us."

The Indian bowed, but made no reply, while Brighteye bent forward, better to hear what was said. After a few minutes the hunter probably considered that it was time for him to interfere, for he turned to the Chief and whispered in his ear, as he had done during the whole of the previous conversation – "Let my brother leave this affair to me; his presence would be more injurious than useful to us. We cannot attempt to fight so large a number of enemies, so prudence demands that we should have recourse to stratagem."

"The Apaches are dogs," the Comanche muttered, angrily.

"I am of your opinion; but, for the present, let us feign not to consider them such. Believe me, we shall soon take our revenge; besides, the advantage will be on our side, as we are cheating them."

Flying Eagle let his head drop.

"Will the Chief promise me not to make a move without a signal from me?" the hunter said, earnestly.

"Flying Eagle is a sachem. He has said that he will obey Greyhead."

"Good. Now look, you will not have long to wait."

After muttering these words, with that mocking accent peculiar to him, the old hunter resolutely thrust the brambles on one side, and walked firmly into the clearing, followed by his two companions. We have already described the emotion produced by this unforeseen arrival.

Flying Eagle returned to his ambush up the tree, from which he had only come down to speak with the hunter, and give him the information he required. Brighteye stopped by Markham's side.

"Friend," he then said, in Spanish, a language which most of the Indians understand, "your order is executed. Flying Eagle and his wife are at this moment in the camp of the Gambusinos."

"Good," Marksman answered, catching his meaning at once; "who are the two men who accompany you?"

"Two hunters the Chief of the Gachupinos sent to accompany me, in spite of my assurances that you were among friends. He will soon arrive himself at the head of thirty horsemen."

"Return to him, and tell him that he has no longer any occasion to trouble himself; or, stay, I will go myself, to prevent any misunderstanding."

These words, spoken without any emphasis, and naturally, by a man whom each of the Indians present had been frequently in a position to appreciate, produced on them an effect impossible to describe.

We have already mentioned several times, in our different works, that the Redskins unite the greatest prudence with the maddest temerity, and never attempt any enterprise without calculating beforehand all the chances of success it may offer. So soon as those chances disappear, to make room for probable ill results, they are not ashamed to recoil, for the very simple reason that with them honour, as we understand it in Europe, only holds a secondary place, and success alone is regarded.

Red Wolf was assuredly a brave man; he had given innumerable proofs of that in many a combat; still, he did not hesitate, in behalf of the general welfare, to sacrifice his secret desires, and in doing so, as we believe, he gave a grand proof of that family feeling, and almost instinctive patriotism, which is one of the strongest points in the Indian character. Clever as he was, the Apache Chief was completely deluded by Brighteye, whose imperturbable coolness and unexpected arrival would have sufficed to lead astray an individual even more intelligent than the man with whom he had to deal. Red Wolf made up his mind at once, without any thought of self.

"Greyhead, my brother, is welcome at my fire," he said; "my heart rejoices at greeting a friend; his companions and himself can take their places round the council fire; the calumet of a Chief is ready to be offered them."

"Red Wolf is a great Chief," Brighteye replied; "I am pleased at the kindly feeling he experiences towards me. I would accept his offer with the greatest pleasure, did not urgent reasons oblige me to rejoin, as soon as possible, my brothers the Palefaces, who are waiting for me at a short distance from the spot where the Antelope Apaches are encamped."

"I hope that no cloud has arisen between Greyhead and his brother, Red Wolf," the Chief remarked, in a cautious tone: "two warriors must esteem each other."

"That is my opinion too, Chief, and that is why I have presented myself so frankly in your camp, when it would have been easy to have had several warriors of my nation to accompany me."

Brighteye knew perfectly well that the Apaches understood Spanish, and consequently nothing he had said to Markham escaped them; but it was to his interest, as well as that of his comrade, to pretend to be ignorant of the fact, and accept as current coin the insidious propositions of the Chief.

"His friends, the Palefaces, are encamped not far from here?" the Chief remarked.

"Yes," Brighteye replied, "at the most from four to five bowshots in a westerly direction."

"Wah! I am vexed at it," the Indian said, "for I would have accompanied my brother to their camp."

"And what prevents your coming with us?" the old hunter said, distinctly. "Would you fear an ill reception by chance?"

"Och! who would dare not to receive Red Wolf with the respect due to him?" the Apache said, haughtily.

"No one, assuredly."

Red Wolf leaned over to a subaltern chief, and whispered a few words in his ear; the man rose, and left the clearing. The hunters saw this movement with anxiety, and exchanged a glance, which said, "Let us keep on our guard." They also fell back a few paces, as if accidentally, and drew nearer together, in order to be ready at the first suspicious sign; for they knew the perfidy of the men among whom they were, and expected anything from them. The Indian sent off by the Chief re-entered the clearing at this moment. He had been absent hardly ten minutes.

"Well?" Red Wolf asked him.

"It is true," the Indian answered, laconically.

The sachem's face was overclouded; he felt certain then that Brighteye had not deceived him; for the man he had sent out of the camp had been ordered by him to assure himself whether the fires of a party of white men could be really seen a short distance off; his emissary's reply proved to him that no treachery could be possible, that he must continue to feign kindly feelings, and separate on proper terms from the troublesome guests, whom he would have liked so much to be rid of in a very different manner. At his order the horses were unhobbled, and the warriors mounted.

"Day is approaching," he said; "the moon has again entered the great mountain. I am about to start with my young men. May the Wacondah protect my pale brothers!"

"Thank you, Chief," Marksman answered. "But will you not come with us?"

"We are not following the same path," the Chief replied drily, as he let his horse go.

"That is probable, accursed dog!" Brighteye growled between his teeth.

The whole band started at full speed, and disappeared in the gloom. Soon the sound of their horses' hoofs could no longer be heard, as they became mingled in the distance with those thousand sounds, coming from no apparent cause, which incessantly trouble the majestic silence of the desert.

The hunters were alone. Like the Augurs of ancient Rome, who could not look at each other without laughing, little was needed for the hunters to burst into a loud burst of delight after the hurried departure of the Apaches. At a signal from Marksman, Flying Eagle and Eglantine came to join the

wood rangers, who had already seated themselves unceremoniously at the fire of which they had so cleverly dispossessed their enemies.

"Hum!" Brighteye said, as he charged his pipe, "I shall laugh for a long time at this trick; it is almost as good as the one I played the Pawnees in 1827, on the Upper Arkansas. I was very young at that time; I had been traversing the prairie for only a few years, and was not, as I now am, accustomed to Indian devilries; I remember that –"

"By what accident did I meet you here, Brighteye?" his friend asked, hastily interrupting him.

Marksman knew that so soon as Brighteye began a story, no power on earth would stop him. The worthy man, during the course of a long and varied career, had seen and done so many extraordinary things, that the slightest event which occurred to him, or of which he was merely a witness, immediately became an excuse for one of his interminable stories. His friends, who knew his weakness, felt no hesitation about interrupting him; still we must do Brighteye the justice of saying that he was never angry with his disturbers; for ten minutes later he would begin another story, which they as mercilessly interrupted in a similar way.

To Marksman's question, he replied, – "We will talk, and I will tell you that." Then, turning to Domingo, he said, – "My friend, I thank you for the assistance you have given us. Return to the camp, and do not forget your promise. Above all, do not omit to narrate all you have seen, to – you know who!"

"That is agreed, old hunter. Don't be uneasy. Good-bye."

"Here's luck."

Domingo threw his rifle over his shoulder, lit his pipe, and walked in the direction of the camp, where he arrived an hour later.

"There," Marksman said, "now I believe nothing will prevent your going ahead."

"Yes; one thing, my friend."

"What is it?"

"The night is nearly spent; it has been fatiguing to everybody. I presume that two or three hours' sleep are necessary, if not indispensable, especially as we are in no hurry."

"Tell me only one thing first, and then I will let you sleep as long as you please."

"What is it?"

"How you happened so fortunately to come to my aid."

"Confound it! That is exactly what I was afraid of. Your question obliges me to enter into details far too long for me to be able to satisfy you at this moment."

"The truth is, my friend, that, in spite of the lively desire I feel to spend a few days with you, I am compelled to leave you at sunrise."

"Nonsense! It is not possible."

"It is, indeed."

"But what is your hurry?"

"I have engaged myself as scout with a caravan, which I have given the meeting at two o'clock tomorrow afternoon, at the Del Rubio ford. That appointment has been made for the last two months. You know that an engagement is sacred with us hunters, and you would not like to make me break my word!"

"Not for the hides of all the buffalos killed every year on the prairie. Towards what part of the Far West will you guide these men?"

"I shall know that tomorrow."

"And with what sort of people have you to do? Are they Spaniards, or Gringos?"

"On my word, I fancy they are Mexicans. Their chief's name, I think, is Don Miguel Ortega, or something like it."

"Hollo!" Brighteye exclaimed, with a start of surprise; "what's that you said?"

"Don Miguel Ortega. I may be mistaken, but I hardly think so."

"That is strange," the old hunter said, as if speaking to himself.

"I do not see anything strange in it; the name appears to me common enough."

"To you, possibly. And you have made an agreement with him?"

"Signed and sealed."

"As scout?"

"Yes, I say, a thousand times."

"Well, comfort yourself, Marksman; we have many a long day to spend together."

"Do you belong to his party?"

"Heaven forbid!"

"Then, I don't understand anything."

Brighteye seemed to be reflecting seriously for a few moments; then he turned to his friend, and said, —

"Listen to me, Marksman! So surely as you are my oldest friend, I do not wish to see you going to the deuce your own road. I must give you certain information, which will be indispensable to you in doing your duty properly. I see that we shall not sleep this night, so listen to me attentively. What you are about to hear is worth the trouble."

Marksman, startled by the old hunter's solemn accent, looked at him anxiously. "Speak!" he said to him.

Brighteye collected his thoughts for a moment, and then took the word, beginning a long history, to which his audience listened with a degree of interest and attention which increased with every moment; for never, till that day, had they heard the narrative of events so strange and extraordinary.

The sun had risen for a long time, but the hunter was still talking.

CHAPTER VI

A DARK HISTORY

Freed from all the observations, more or less pertinent, with which it pleased the prolix hunter to embellish it, the following is the remarkable story the Canadian told his hearers. This narrative is so closely connected with our story, that we are compelled to repeat it in all its details: —

"Few cities offer a more enchanting appearance than Mexico. The ancient capital of the Aztecs lies stretched out, slothful and idle as a Creole maid, half veiled by the thick curtain of lofty willows which border at a distance the canals and roads. Built at exactly equal distance from two oceans, at about 7,500 feet above their level, or at the same height as the hospice of St. Bernard, this city, however, enjoys a delicious tempered climate, between two magnificent mountains – Popocatepetl, or the burning mountain, and Intaczehuatl, or the white woman – whose rugged peaks, covered with eternal snows, are lost in the clouds. The stranger who arrives before Mexico at sunset, by the eastern road – one of the four great ways that lead to the City of the Aztecs, and the only one now remaining isolated in the middle of the waters of Lake Tezcuco, on which it is built – experiences, at the first sight of this city, a strange emotion, for which he cannot account. The Moorish architecture of the edifices; the houses painted of bright colours; the numberless domes of churches and convents which rise above the azoteas, and cover – if we may use the expression – the entire capital with their vast yellow, blue, and red parasols, gilded by the parching rays of the declining sun; the warm and perfumed evening breeze which comes sporting through the leaf-laden branches; all this combines to give Mexico a perfectly Eastern air, which astonishes and seduces at the same time. Mexico, entirely burnt down by Fernando Cortez, was rebuilt by that conqueror after the original plan; all the streets intersect at right angles, and lead to the Plaza Mayor by five principal arteries."

"All Spanish towns in the New World have this in common – that, in all, the Plaza Mayor is built after the same plan. Thus, at Mexico, on one side are the Cathedral and the Sagrario; on the second, the Palace of the President of the Republic, containing the ministerial offices – four in number, barracks, a prison, &c.; on the third side is the Ayuntamiento; while the fourth is occupied by two bazaars – the Parián, and the Portal de los Flores."

"On July 10, 1854, at ten of the night, after a torrid heat, which compelled the inhabitants to shut themselves up in their houses the whole day through, the breeze rose and refreshed the air, and everybody, mounted on the flower-covered azoteas, which make them resemble hanging gardens, hastened to enjoy that serene placidity of American evenings, which seems to rain stars from the azure sky. The streets and square were thronged with promenaders; there was an inextricable throng of foot passengers, horsemen, men, women, Indians and their squaws, where the rags, silk and gold were arranged in the quaintest manner, in the midst of cries, jests, and merry bursts of laughter. In a word, Mexico, like the enchanted city of the Arabian Nights, seemed to have been aroused by the bell of Oración from a centennial sleep – such joy did all faces display, and so happy did all seem to inhale the fresh air."

"At this moment, a non-commissioned officer, who could be easily recognised as such by the vine stick he held in his hand, turned out of the Calle San Francisco, and mingled with the crowd that thronged the Plaza Mayor, giving himself all the airs peculiar to soldiers in all parts of the world. He was a young man, of elegant features, haughty glance, and his slight moustache was coquettishly turned up. After walking round the square two or three times, ogling maidens and elbowing the men, he approached, with the same careless air he had displayed from the beginning, a shop built against one of the portales, in which an old man with a ferret-face and cunning look was shutting up in the drawers of a poor table, stained with a countless number of ink spots, paper, pens, sand, and envelopes – in a word, all the articles requisite for the profession of a public writer – the trade which the little

old man really carried on, as could be seen from a board hung over the door of his shop, on which was written, in white letters on a black ground, —*Juan Battista Leporello, Evangelista*. The sergeant looked for a few seconds through the panes, which were covered with specimens of calligraphy, and then, doubtless satisfied with what he saw, he tapped thrice with his stick on the door."

"A chain was moved in the interior; the soldier heard a key turned in the lock, then the door opened slightly, and the evangelista thrust his head out timidly."

"Ah, 'tis you, Don Annibal! *Dios me ampare*. I did not expect you so soon,' he said, in that cringing tone which some men employ when they feel themselves in the hands of a man stronger than themselves."

"*¡Cuerpo de Cristo!* play the innocent, old coyote,' the sergeant replied roughly, 'who but I would dare to set foot in your accursed den?'"

"The evangelista shrugged his shoulders with a grin, and pushed his silver spectacles with their round glasses up on his forehead."

"Eh, eh,' he said, coughing mysteriously, 'many people have recourse to my good offices, my young Springold.'"

"It is possible,' the soldier answered, thrusting him rudely back, and entering the shop. 'I pity them for falling into the hands of an old bird of prey like you; but it is not that which brings me here.'"

"Perhaps it would be better for both you and me, if your visits had another motive from the one that brings you here!' the evangelista remarked, timidly."

"Truce to your sermons; shut the door, fasten the shutters, so that no one can see us from the street, and let us talk, for we have no time to lose.'"

"The old man made no reply; he at once set about closing the shutters, which at night protected his shop from the assaults of the rateros, with a celerity for which no one would have given him credit; then he sat down by his visitor's side, after carefully bolting the door."

"These two men, seen thus by the light of a smoky candle, offered a striking contrast; one young, handsome, strong, and daring; the other old, broken, and hypocritical: both taking side glances at each other, full of a strange expression, and with an apparent cordiality, which probably hid a deep hatred, talking in a low voice ear to ear, they resembled two demons conspiring the ruin of an angel."

"The soldier was the first to speak, in a tone hardly above his breath, so much did he seem to fear being overheard."

"Look you, Tío Leporello,' he said, 'let us come to an understanding; the half hour has just struck at the Sagrario, so speak; what have you learnt new?'"

"Hum!' the other said, 'not much that is interesting.'"

"The soldier flashed a suspicious glance at him, and appeared to be reflecting."

"That is true,' he said, at the end of a moment, 'I did not think of that; where could my head be?'"

"He drew from the breast pocket of his uniform a purse tolerably well filled, through the meshes of which glistened sundry ounces, and then a long navaja, which he opened and placed on the table near him. The old man trembled at the sight of the sharpened blade, whose blue steel sent forth sinister rays; the soldier opened the purse, and poured forth the pieces in a joyous cascade before him. The evangelista immediately forgot the knife, only to attend to the gold, attracted involuntarily by the tinkling of the metal, as by an irresistible magnet."

"The soldier had done all we have just described with the coolness of a man who knows that he has unfailing arguments in his possession."

"Then,' he said, 'rake up your memory, old demon, if you do not wish my navaja to teach you with whom you have to deal, in case you have forgotten.'"

"The evangelista smiled pleasantly, while looking covetously at the ounces. 'I know too well what I owe you, Don Annibal,' he said, 'not to try to satisfy you by all the means in my power.'"

"A truce to your unnecessary and hypocritical compliments, old ape, and come to facts. Take this first, it will encourage you to be sincere."

"He placed several ounces in his hand, which the evangelista disposed of with such sleight of hand, that it was impossible for the soldier to know where they had gone."

"You are generous, Don Annibal – that will bring you good fortune."

"Go on; I want facts."

"I am coming to them."

"I am listening."

"And the sergeant leaned his elbows on the table, in the position of a man preparing to listen, while the evangelista coughed, spat, and by an old habit of prudence, though alone with the sergeant in his shop, looked round him suspiciously."

"The sounds on the Plaza Mayor had died out one after the other; the crowd had dispersed in every direction, and returned to their houses, and the greatest silence prevailed outside; at this moment eleven o'clock struck slowly from the Cathedral, and the two men started involuntarily at the mournful sounds of the clock; the serenos chanted the hour in their drawling, drunken voice; then all was quiet."

"Will you speak, yes or no?' the soldier suddenly said, with a menacing accent."

"The evangelista bounded on his butaca, as if aroused from sleep, and passed his hand several times over his forehead. 'I am beginning,' he said in a humble voice."

"That is lucky,' the other remarked, coarsely."

"You must know, then – but,' he observed, suddenly interrupting himself, 'must I enter into all the details?'"

"*Demonios!*" the soldier exclaimed, passionately, 'let us have an end of this once for all; you know I want to have the most complete information; *Canarios!* do not play with me like a cat with a mouse; old man, I warn you, that game will be dangerous for you."

"Well, this morning, I had just settled myself in my office; I was arranging my papers and mending my pens, when I heard a discreet tap at the door; I rose and went to open it; it was a young and lovely lady, as far as I could judge, for she was *embossed* in her black mantilla, so as not to be seen."

"Then it was not the woman who has come to you every day for a month?' the soldier interrupted."

"Yes; but as you have doubtlessly remarked, on each of her visits, she is careful to change her dress, in order to prevent my recognizing her; but, in spite of these precautions, I have been too long accustomed to ladies' tricks to allow myself to be deceived, and I recognized her by the first glance that shot from her black eye."

"Very good: go on."

"She stood for a moment before me in silence, playing with her fan, with an air of embarrassment. I offered her a chair politely, pretending not to recognize her, and asking her how I could be of service to her.' 'Oh,' she answered me, with a petulant voice, 'I want a very simple matter.' 'Speak, señorita; if it is connected with my profession, believe me, I shall make a point of obeying you.' 'Should I have come, had it not been so?' she replied; 'but are you a man who can be trusted?' and while saying this, she fixed on me a searching glance. I drew myself up, and replied in my most serious tone, as I laid my hand on my heart – 'An evangelista is a confessor; all secrets die in his breast.' She then drew a paper from the pocket of her *saga*, and turned it about in her fingers, but suddenly began laughing, as she said, 'How foolish I am, I make a mystery of a trifle; besides, at this moment you are only a machine, as you will not understand what you write.' I bowed at all hazards, expecting some diabolical combination, like those she has brought to me every day for a month."

"A truce to reflections,' the sergeant interrupted."

"She gave me the paper,' the evangelista continued, 'and, as was arranged between you and me, I took a sheet of paper, which I laid upon another prepared beforehand, and blackened on one

side, so that the words I wrote on my papers were reproduced by the black page on another – the poor Niña not in the least suspecting it. After all, the letter was not long, only two or three lines; but, may I be sent to purgatory,' he added, crossing himself piously, 'if I understood a syllable of the horrible gibberish I copied: it was doubtlessly Morisco.'"

"Afterwards?"

"I folded up the paper in the shape of a letter, and addressed it."

"Ah, ah!" the soldier said, with interest, 'that is the first time.'"

"Yes, but the information will not be of much use to you."

"Perhaps: – what was the address?"

"Z. p. v. 2, calle S. P. Z."

"Hum!" the soldier said, thoughtfully; 'that is certainly rather vague. What next?"

"Then she went away, after giving me a gold ounce."

"She is generous."

"Pore Niña!" the evangelista said, laying his hooked fingers over his dry eyes, with an air of tenderness."

"Enough of that mummery, which I do not believe. Is that all she said to you?"

"Nearly so,' the other said, with hesitation."

"The sergeant looked at him. 'Is there anything else?' he remarked, as he threw him several gold coins, which the evangelista disposed of at once."

"Almost nothing."

"You had better tell me, Tío Leporello, for, as an evangelista, you know that the reason why letters are written, is generally found in the postscript."

"On leaving my office, the señorita made a sign to a *providencia* which was passing. The carriage stopped, and though the niña spoke in a very low voice, I heard her say to the driver, 'To the convent of the Bernardines.'"

"The sergeant gave an almost imperceptible start."

"Hum!" he said, with an indifferent air, perfectly well assumed; 'that address does not mean much. Now give me the paper.'"

"The evangelista fumbled in his drawer, and drew from it a sheet of white paper, on which a few almost illegible words were written. So soon as the soldier had the paper in his hands he eagerly perused it; it appeared to have a great interest for him, for he turned visibly pale, and a convulsive tremor passed over his limbs; but he recovered himself almost immediately."

"It is well,' he said, as he tore up the paper into imperceptible fragments; 'here's for you.'"

"And he threw a fresh handful of ounces on the table."

"Thanks, caballero,' Tío Leporello exclaimed, as he bounded greedily on the precious metal."

"An ironical smile played round the soldier's lips, and, taking advantage of the old man's position, as he leant over the table to collect the gold, he raised his knife, and buried it to the hilt between the evangelista's shoulders. The blow was dealt so truly, and with such a firm hand, that the old man fell like a log, without uttering a sigh or giving a cry. The soldier regarded him for a moment coldly and apathetically, then, reassured by the immobility of his victim, whom he believed dead, – "

"Come,' he muttered, 'that is all the better; at any rate, he will not speak in that way.'"

"After this philosophical funeral oration, the assassin tranquilly wiped his knife, picked up the gold, put out the candle, opened the door, closed it carefully after him, and walked off with the steady, though somewhat hasty step of a belated traveller hurrying to his home."

"The Plaza Mayor was deserted."

CHAPTER VII

A DARK HISIORY CONTINUED

"Ancient Mexico was traversed by canals, like Venice, or, to speak more correctly, like Dutch towns, for generally in all the streets there was a path between the canal and the houses. At the present day, when all the streets are paved, and the canals have disappeared save in one quarter of the city, it is difficult to understand how Cervantes, in one of his novels, could compare Venice with Mexico; but if the canals are no longer visible, they still exist underground; and in certain low quarters, where they have been converted into drains, they manifest their presence by the foetid odours which they exhale, or by the heaps of filth and stagnant water."

"The sergeant, after so skilfully settling accounts with the hapless evangelista, crossed the Plaza, and entered the Calle de la Monterilla."

"He walked for a long time along the streets with the same quiet step he had adopted on leaving the evangelista's stall. At length, after about twenty minutes' walk through deserted streets and gloomy lanes, whose miserable appearance became with every step more menacing, he stopped before a house of more than suspicious aspect, above the door of which a flaring candle burned behind *un retablo de las animas veneritas*; the windows of the house were lit up, and on the azotea the watchdogs were mournfully baying the moon. The sergeant tapped twice on the door of this sinister abode with his vine stick."

"It was a long time ere he was answered. The shouts and singing suddenly ceased in the inside: at length the soldier heard a heavy step approaching; the door was partly opened – for everywhere in Mexico an iron chain is put up at night – and a drunken voice said harshly, – "

"'¿Quién es? (Who's there?)"

"'Gente de paz,' the sergeant answered."

"'Hum! it is very late to run about the *tuna* and enter the *vilaio*,' the other remarked, apparently reflecting."

"'I do not wish to enter.'"

"'Then what the deuce do you want?'"

"'Pan y sal por los Caballeros errantes,'¹ the sergeant answered, in a tone of authority, and placing himself so that the moonbeams should fall on his face."

"The man fell back, uttering an exclamation of surprise."

"'¡Valga me Dios! señor Don Torribio!' he exclaimed, with an accent of profound respect; 'who could have recognized your Excellency under that wretched dress? Come in! come in! they are waiting impatiently for you.'"

"And the man, who had become as obsequious as he had been insolent a few moments previously, hastened to undo the chain, and threw the door wide open."

"'It is unnecessary, Pepito,' the soldier continued, 'I repeat to you that I shall not come in. How many are there?'"

"'Twenty, Excellency.'"

"'Armed?'"

"'Completely.'"

"'Let them come down directly. I will wait for them here. Go, my son, time presses.'"

"'And you? Excellency,'"

"'You will bring me a hat, an esclavina, my sword and pistols. Come, make haste!'"

¹ Literally "Bread and salt for the knight-errants."

"Pepito did not let the order be repeated. Leaving the door open, he ran off. A few minutes after, some twenty bandits, armed to the teeth, rushed into the street, jostling one another. On coming up to the soldier, they saluted respectfully, and, at a sign from him, remained motionless and silent."

"Pepito had brought the articles demanded by the man whom the evangelista called Don Annibal, himself Don Torribio, and who, probably, had several other names, although we will keep temporarily to the latter."

"Are the horses ready?' Don Torribio asked, as he concealed his uniform under the esclavina, and placed in his girdle a long rapier and a pair of double-barrelled pistols."

"Yes, Excellency,' Pepito answered, hat in hand."

"Good, my son. You will bring them to the spot I told you; but as it is forbidden to go about the streets on horseback by night, you will pay attention to the celadores and serenos."

"All the bandits burst into a laugh at this singular recommendation."

"There,' Don Torribio continued, as he put on a broad brimmed hat, which Pepito had brought him with the other things, 'that is all right; we can now start. Listen to me attentively, Caballeros!'"

"The leperos and other scoundrels who composed the audience, flattered by being treated as caballeros, drew nearer to Don Torribio, in order to hear his instructions. The latter continued, – "

"Twenty men, marching, in a troop, through the streets of the city would, doubtless, arouse the susceptibility and suspicions of the police agents; we must employ the greatest prudence, and, above all, the utmost secrecy in order to succeed in the expedition for which I have collected you. You will, therefore, separate, and go one by one under the walls of the convent of the Bernardines; on arriving there, you will conceal yourselves as well as you can, and not stir without my orders. Above all, no disputes, no quarrelling. You have understood me clearly?"

"Yes, Excellency,' the bandits answered, unanimously."

"Very good. Be off, then, for you must reach the convent in a quarter of an hour."

"The bandits dispersed in every direction with the rapidity of a flock of buzzards. Two minutes later they had disappeared round the corners of the nearest streets. Pepito alone remained."

"And I?' he respectfully asked Don Torribio. 'Do you not wish, Excellency, for me to accompany you? I should be very bored if I remained here alone."

"I should be glad enough to take you with me; but who would get the horses ready if you went with me?"

"That is true. I did not think of it."

"But do not be alarmed, Muchacho, if I succeed as I hope, you shall soon come with me."

"Pepito, completely reassured by this promise, bowed respectfully to the mysterious man, who seemed to be his chief, and re-entered his house, carefully closing the door after him."

"Don Torribio, when left alone, remained for several seconds plunged in deep thought. At length he raised his head, drew his hat over his eyes, carefully wrapped himself in his esclavina, and walked off hurriedly, muttering, 'Shall I succeed?'"

"A question which no one, not even himself, could have answered."

"The convent of the Bernardines stands in one of the handsomest quarters of Mexico, not far from the Paseo de Bernardo, the fashionable promenade. It is a vast edifice, built entirely of hewn stone, which dates from the rebuilding of the city after the conquest, and was founded by Fernando Cortez himself. Its general appearance is imposing and majestic, like all Spanish convents; it is almost a small city within a large one, for it contains all that can be agreeable and useful for life – a church, a hospital, a laundry, a large kitchen garden, and a well-laid out flower garden, which offers pleasant shade, reserved for the exercise of the nuns. There are wide cloisters, decorated with grand pictures by good masters, representing scenes in the life of the Virgin, and of St. Bernard, to whom the convent is dedicated; these cloisters, bordered by circular galleries, out of which the cells of the nuns open, enclose sandy courts, adorned with pieces of water, in which fountains refresh the air at the burning midday hour. The cells are charming retreats, in which nothing that can promote comfort is wanting:

a bed; two butacas covered with prepared Cordovan leather, a *prie Dieu*, a small toilet table, in the drawer of which you are sure to find a looking-glass, and several holy pictures, occupy the principal space. In a corner of the room may be seen, between a guitar and a scourge, a statue of the Virgin, of wood or alabaster, wearing a coronal of white roses, before which a lamp is continually burning. Such is the furniture which, with but few exceptions, you are certain to find in the nuns' cells."

"The convent of the Bernardines contained, at the period when our story is laid, one hundred and fifty nuns, and about sixty novices. In this country of toleration, it is rare to see nuns cloistered. The sisters can go into town, pay and receive visits; the regulations are extremely mild, and, with the exception of the offices, at which they are bound to be present with great punctuality, the nuns, when they have entered their cells, are almost at liberty to do as they please, nobody taking the trouble, or seeming to do so, of watching them."

"We have described the convent cells, which are all alike; but that of the Mother Superior merits a particular description. Nothing could be more luxurious, more religious, and yet more worldly, than its general appearance. It was an immense square room, with large Gothic windows, with small panes set in lead, upon which sacred subjects were painted with admirable finish and admirable touch. The walls were covered with long, stamped, and gilded hangings of Cordovan leather, while valuable pictures, representing the principal events in the life of the patron saint of the convent, were arranged with that symmetry and taste only to be met with in people belonging to the Church. Between the pictures hung a magnificent Virgin, by Raphael, before which was an altar. A silver lamp, full of perfumed oil, hung from the ceiling, and burnt night and day before the altar, which thick damask curtains hid, when thought proper. The furniture consisted of a large Chinese screen, concealing the couch of the abbess, – a simple frame of carved oak, surrounded by white gauze mosquito curtains. A square table, also of oak, on which were a few books and a desk, occupied the centre of the room; in a corner a vast library, containing books on religious subjects, and displaying the rich bindings of rare and precious works through the glass doors, a few butacas and chairs, with twisted feet, were arranged against the wall. Lastly, a silver brazier, filled with olive kernels, stood opposite a superb coffer, the chasing of which was a masterpiece of the Renaissance."

"During the day, the light, filtered through the coloured glass, spread but a gentle and mystic radiance around, which caused the visitor to experience a feeling of respect and devotion, by giving this vast apartment a stern and almost mournful aspect."

"At the moment when we introduce the reader into this cell, that is to say, a few moments prior to the scene we have just described, the abbess was seated in a large straight-backed easy chair, which was surmounted by an abbatial crown, while the cushion of gilt leather was adorned with a double fringe of silk and gold."

"The abbess was a little, plump woman, of about sixty years of age, whose features would have appeared unmeaning, had it not been for the bright and piercing glance that shot, like a jet of lava, from her grey eyes, when a violent emotion agitated her. She held in her hand an open book, and seemed plunged in profound meditation."

"The door of the cell opened gently, and a girl, dressed in the novice's robe, advanced timidly, scarce grazing the floor with her light and hesitating foot. She stopped in front of the easy chair, and waited silently till the abbess raised her eyes to her."

"Ah! it is you, my child," the Mother Superior at length said, noticing the novice's presence; 'come hither.'"

"The latter advanced a few paces nearer."

"Why did you go out this morning without asking my permission?"

"On hearing these words, which the maiden, however, must have expected, she turned pale, and stammered a few unintelligible words."

"The abbess continued, in a stern voice: – "

"Take care, Niña! although you are still a novice, and will not take the veil for several months, like all your companions, you are under my authority – mine alone."

"These words were spoken with an intonation which made the maiden tremble."

"I Holy mother!" she murmured."

"You were the intimate friend, almost the sister, of that young fool whom her resistance to our sovereign will snapped asunder like a reed, and who died this morning."

"Do you really believe that she is dead, mother?" the girl answered timidly, and in a voice interrupted by grief."

"Who doubts it?" the abbess exclaimed, violently, as she half rose in her chair, and fixed a viper's glance on the poor child."

"No one, madam, no one," she said, falling back with terror."

"Were you not, like the other members of the community," the abbess continued, with a terrible accent, 'present at her funeral? Did you not hear the prayers uttered over her coffin?'"

"It is true, my mother!"

"Did you not see her body lowered into the convent vaults, and the tombstone laid over it, which the angel of divine justice can alone raise at the day of judgment? Say, were you not present at this sad and terrible ceremony? Would you dare to assert that this did not take place, and that the wretched creature still lives, whom God suddenly smote in his wrath, that she might serve as a warning to those whom Satan impels to revolt?'"

"Pardon, holy mother, pardon! I saw what you say. I was present at Doña Laura's interment. Alas! doubt is no longer possible; she is really dead!"

"While uttering the last words, the maiden could not restrain her tears, which flowed copiously. The abbess surveyed her with a suspicious air."

"It is well," she said; 'you can retire: but I repeat to you, take care; I know that a spirit of revolt has seized on your heart as well, and I shall watch you.'"

"The maiden bowed humbly to the Mother Superior, and moved as if to obey the order she had received."

"At this moment a terrible disturbance was heard. Cries of terror and threats reechoed in the corridor, and the hurried steps of a tumultuous crowd could be heard rapidly approaching."

"What is the meaning of this?" the abbess asked with terror; 'What is this noise?'"

"She rose in agitation, and walked with tottering step toward the door of the cell, on which repeated blows were being struck."

"Oh, heavens!" the novice murmured, as she turned a suppliant glance toward the statue of the Virgin, which seemed to smile on her; 'Have our liberators at length arrived?'"

"We will return to Don Torribio, whom we left walking with his companions toward the convent."

"As had been arranged between himself and his accomplices, the young man found all the band collected under the convent walls. Along the streets the bandits, not to be disturbed by the serenos, had tied and gagged them and carried them off, as they met them, separately. Thanks to this skilful manoeuvre, they reached their destination without hindrance. Twelve serenos were captured in this way: and, on reaching the convent, Don Torribio gave orders for them to be laid one atop of the other at the foot of the wall."

"Then, drawing from his pocket a velvet mask, he covered his face with it (a precaution imitated by his comrades), and, approaching a wretched hut which stood a short distance off, he stove in the door with his shoulder. The owner rose up, frightened and half dressed, to inquire the meaning of this unusual mode of rapping at his door; but the poor fellow fell back with a cry of terror on perceiving the masked men assembled before his door. Don Torribio, being in a hurry, commenced the conversation by going straight to the subject matter: – '*Buenas noches* Tío Salado. I am delighted to see you in good health,' he said to him."

"The other answered, not knowing exactly what he said, – "

"I thank you, Caballero. You are too kind."

"Make haste! get your cloak, and come with us."

"I?" Salado said, with a start of terror."

"Yourself."

"But how can I be of service to you?"

"I will tell you. I know that you are highly respected at the convent of the Bernardines – in the first place as a pulquero; and, secondly, as *hombre de bien y religioso*."

"Oh! oh! to a certain extent,' the pulquero answered, evasively."

"No false modesty. I know you have the power to get the gates of that house opened when you please; it is for that reason I invite you to accompany us."

"*¡Maria Purísima!* What are you thinking of, Caballero' the poor fellow exclaimed, with terror."

"No remarks! Make haste! or, by Nuestra señora del Carmen, I will burn your rookery."

"A hollow groan issued from Salado's chest; but, after taking one despairing glance at the black masks that surrounded him, he prepared to obey. From the pulquería to the convent was only a few paces – they were soon passed, and Don Torribio turned to his prisoner, who was more dead than alive."

"There, *compadre*,' he said, distinctly, 'we have arrived. It is now your place to get the door opened for us.'"

"In heaven's name,' the pulquero exclaimed, making one last effort at resistance, 'how do you expect me to set about it? You forget that I have no means – "

"Listen,' Don Torribio said, imperiously; 'you understand that I have no time for discussion. You will either introduce us into the convent, and this purse, which contains fifty ounces, is yours; or you refuse, and in that case,' he added, coldly, as he drew a pistol from his girdle, 'I blow out your brains with this.'"

"A cold perspiration bedewed the pulquero's temples. He was too well acquainted with the bandits of his country to insult them for a moment by doubting their words."

"Well!' the other asked, as he cocked the pistol, 'have you reflected?'"

"*Cáspita*, Caballero! Do not play with that thing. I will try."

"Here is the purse to sharpen your wits,' Don Torribio said."

"The pulquero clutched it with a movement of joy, any idea of which it is impossible to give; then he walked slowly towards the convent gate, while cudgelling his brains for some way in which to earn the sum he had received, without running any risk – a problem, we confess, of which it was not easy to find the solution."

CHAPTER VIII

A DARK HISTORY CONCLUDED

"The pulquero at length decided on obedience. Suddenly a luminous thought crossed his brain, and it was with a smile on his lips that he lifted the knocker. At the moment he was going to let it fall, Don Torribio caught his arm."

"What is the matter?' Salado asked."

"Eleven o'clock struck long ago; everybody must be asleep in the convent, so perhaps it would be better to try another plan."

"You are mistaken, Caballero,' the pulquero answered; 'the portress is awake.'"

"Are you sure of it?"

"Caramba!' the other answered, who had formed his plan, and was afraid he would be obliged to return the money, if his employé changed his mind. 'The convent of the Bernardines is open day and night to persons who come for medicines. Leave me to manage it.'"

"Go on, then,' the chief of the band said, letting loose his arm."

"Salado did not allow the permission to be repeated, through fear of a fresh objection, and he hastened to let go the knocker, which resounded on a copper bolt. Don Torribio and his companions were crouching under the wall."

"In a moment the trapdoor was pushed back, and the wrinkled face of the portress appeared."

"Who are you, my brother?' she asked, in a peevish, sleepy voice. 'Why do you come at this late hour to tap at the gates of the convent?'"

"*Ave Maria purísima!*' Salado said, in his most nasal tone."

"*Sin pecado concebida*, my brother, – are you ill?"

"I am a poor sinner, you know, sister; my soul is plunged in affliction."

"Who are you, brother? I really believe that I can recognise your voice; but the night is so dark, that I am unable to distinguish your features."

"And I sincerely trust you will not see them,' Salado said, mentally; then added, in a louder voice, 'I am Señor Templado, and keep a locanda in the Calle Plateros.'"

"Ah! I remember you now, brother."

"I fancy that is biting,' the pulquero muttered."

"What do you desire, brother? Make haste to tell me, in the most holy name of your Saviour!' she said, crossing herself devotedly, a movement imitated by Salado; 'for the air is very cold, and I must continue my orisons, which you have interrupted.'"

"Vulgo mi Dios! sister; my wife and two children are ill; the Reverend Pater Guardian, of the Franciscans, urged me to come and ask you for three bottles of your miraculous water."

"We will observe, parenthetically, that every convent manufactures in Mexico a so-called miraculous water, the receipt of which is carefully kept secret; this water, we were told, cures all maladies – a miracle which we were never in a position to test, for our part. We need hardly say, that this universal panacea is sold at a very high rate, and produces the best part of the community's revenue."

"Maria!' the old woman exclaimed, her eyes sparkling with joy at the pulquero's large order. 'Three bottles!'"

"Yes, sister. I will also ask your permission to rest myself a little; for I have come so quick, and the emotion produced by the illness of my wife and children has so crushed me, that I find it difficult to keep on my legs."

"Poor man!' the portress said, with pity."

"Oh! it would really be an act of charity, my sister."

"Señor Templado, please look around you, to make sure there is no one in the street. We live in such wicked times, that a body cannot take enough precautions."

"There is no one, my sister," the pulquero answered, making the bandits a sign to get ready."

"Then I will open."

"Heaven will reward you, my sister."

"Amen," she said, piously."

"The noise of a key turned in a lock could be heard, then the rumbling of bolts, and the door opened."

"Come in quickly, brother," the nun said."

"But Salado had prudently withdrawn, and yielded his place to Don Torribio. The latter rushed at the portress, not giving her time to look round, seized her by the throat, and squeezed her windpipe as if his hand were a vice."

"One word, sorceress," he said to her, "and I will kill you!"

"Terrified by this sudden attack from a man whose face was covered by a black mask, the old woman fell back senseless."

"Devil take the old witch!" Don Torribio exclaimed, passionately; "Who will guide us now?"

"He tried to restore the portress to her senses, but soon perceiving that he should not succeed, he made a sign to two of his men to tie and gag her securely; then, after recommending them to stand sentry at the door, he seized the bunch of keys entrusted to the nun, and began, followed by his comrades, to find his way into the building inhabited by the sisters. It was not an easy thing to discover, in this immense Thebaïd, the cell occupied by the abbess, for it was that lady alone whom Don Torribio wanted."

"Now, to converse with the abbess, she must first be found, and it was this that embarrassed the bandits, though masters of the place they had seized by stratagem. At the moment, however, when they began to lose all hopes, an incident, produced by their inopportune presence, came to their aid."

"The bandits had spread, like a torrent that had burst its dykes, through the courts and cloisters, not troubling themselves in the least as to the consequences their invasion might have for the convent; and, shouting and cursing like demons, they appeared to wish to leave no nook, however secret it might be, unvisited; but it is true that, in acting thus, they only obeyed the orders of their chief."

"The nuns, accustomed to calmness and silence, were soon aroused by this disturbance, which they, for a moment, believed occasioned by an earthquake; they rushed hurriedly from their beds, and, only half dressed, went, like a flock of frightened doves, to seek shelter in the cell of the abbess."

"The Mother Superior, sharing the error of her nuns, had succeeded in opening her door; and, collecting her flock around her, she walked toward the spot whence the noise came, leaning majestically on her abbatial cross."

"Suddenly she perceived a band of masked demons, yelling, howling, and brandishing weapons of every description. But, before she could utter a cry, Don Torribio rushed toward her. 'No noise!' he said. 'We do not wish to do you any harm; we have come, on the contrary, to repair that which you have done.'"

"Dumb with terror at the sight of so many masked men, the women stood as if petrified."

"What do you want of me?" the Mother Superior stammered, in a trembling voice."

"You shall know," the Chief answered; and, turning to one of his men, he said, 'the sulphur matches.'"

"A bandit silently gave him what he asked for."

"Now listen to me attentively, Señora. Yesterday, a novice belonging to your convent, who some days back refused to take the veil, died suddenly."

"The abbess looked around her with a commanding air, and then addressed the man who was speaking to her."

"I do not know what you mean," she replied boldly."

"Very good! I expected that answer. I will go on; this novice, scarcely sixteen years of age, was Doña Laura de Acevedo del Real del Monte; she belonged to one of the first families in the Republic. This morning, her obsequies were performed, with all the ceremony employed on such occasions, in the church of this convent; her body was then lowered, with great pomp, into the vaults reserved for the burial of the nuns."

"He stopped, and fixed on the Mother Superior eyes that flashed through his mask like lightning."

"I repeat to you that I do not know what you mean,' she replied coldly."

"Ah, very good! Then listen to this, señora, and profit by it; for you have fallen, I swear it, into the hands of men who will show you no mercy, and will be moved neither by your tears nor your airs of grace, if you compel them to proceed to extremities."

"You can do as you please,' the Mother Superior answered, still perfectly collected. 'I am in your hands. I know that for the moment, at least, I have no help to expect from any one; but Heaven will give me strength to suffer martyrdom.'"

"Madam,' Don Torribio said with a grin, 'you are blaspheming, you are wittingly committing a deadly sin; but no matter, that is your business: this is mine. You will at once point out to me the entrance of the vault, and the spot where Doña Laura is reposing. I have sworn to carry off her body from here, no matter at what cost. I will fulfil my oath, whatever may happen. If you consent to what I ask, my companions and myself will retire, taking with us the body of the poor deceased, but not touching a pin of the immense riches the convent contains.'"

"And if I refuse?' she said, angrily."

"If you refuse,' he replied, laying a stress on each word, as if he wished the lady addressed fully to understand them, 'the convent will be sacked, these timid doves will become the prey of the demon.' He added, with a gesture which made the nuns quiver with terror. 'And I will apply to you a certain torture, which I do not doubt will loosen your tongue.'"

"The abbess smiled contemptuously."

"Begin with me,' she said."

"That is my intention. Come,' he added, in a rough voice, 'to work.'"

"Two men stepped forward, and seized the Mother Superior; but she made no attempt to defend herself. She remained motionless, seemingly apathetic; still an almost imperceptible contraction of her eyebrows evidenced the internal emotion she endured."

"Is that your last word, señora?' Don Torribio inquired."

"Do your duty, villains!' she replied, with disdain. 'Try to conquer the will of an old woman.'"

"We are going to do so. Begin!' he ordered."

"The two bandits prepared to obey their chief."

"Stay, in Heaven's name!' a maiden exclaimed, as she rushed bravely before the Mother Superior, and repulsed the bandits."

"It was the novice with whom the abbess was speaking at the moment the convent was invaded. There was a moment of breathless hesitation."

"Be silent, I command you!' the abbess shrieked. 'Let me suffer. God sees us!'"

"It is because He sees us that I will speak,' the maiden answered, peremptorily; 'it is He who has sent these men I do not know, to prevent a great crime. Follow me, Caballeros; you have not a moment to lose; I will lead you to the vaults.'"

"Wretch!' the abbess cried, writhing furiously in the hands of the men who held her. 'Wretch! my wrath will fall on you.'"

"I know it,' the maiden responded, sadly; 'but no personal consideration will prevent my accomplishing a sacred duty.'"

"Gag that old wretch. We must finish our work,' the Chief commanded."

"The order was immediately executed. In spite of her desperate resistance, the Mother Superior was reduced to a state of impotence in a few moments."

"'One of you will guard her,' Don Torribio continued, 'and at the least suspicious sign blow out her brains,' Then, changing his tone, he addressed the novice, 'A thousand thanks, señorita! complete what you have so well begun, and guide us to these terrible vaults.'"

"'Come, Caballeros,' she answered, placing herself at their head."

"The bandits, who had suddenly become quiet, followed her in silence, with marks of the most profound respect. At a peremptory order from Don Torribio, the nuns, now reassured, had dispersed and returned to their cells."

"While crossing the corridor, Don Torribio went up to the girl, and whispered in her ear two or three words, which made her start."

"'Fear nothing,' he added. 'I but wished to prove to you that I knew all. I only desire, señorita, to be your most respectful and devoted friend.'"

"The maiden sighed, but made no reply."

"'What will become of you afterwards? Alone in this convent, exposed defencelessly to the hatred of this fury, who regards nothing as sacred, you will soon take the place of her we are about to deliver. Is it not better to follow her?'"

"'Alas, poor Laura!' she muttered, hoarsely."

"'Will you, who have done so much for her up to the present, abandon her at this supreme moment, when your assistance and support will become more than ever necessary to her? Are you not her foster sister? her dearest friend? What prevents? You! an orphan from your earliest youth, all your affections are concentrated on Laura. Answer me, Doña Luisa, I conjure you!'"

"The maiden gave a start of surprise, almost of terror."

"'You know me!' she said."

"'Have I not already said that I knew all? Come, my child, if not for your own sake, then for hers, accompany her. Do not compel me to leave you here in the hands of terrible enemies, who will inflict frightful tortures on you.'"

"'You wish it?' she stammered sadly."

"'She begs you by my lips.'"

"'Well, be it so; the sacrifice shall be complete. I will follow you, though I know not whether, in doing so, I am acting rightly or wrongly; but, although I do not know you, although a mask conceals your features, I have faith in your words. You seem to have a noble heart, and may heaven grant that I am not committing an error.'"

"'It is the God of goodness and mercy who inspires you with this resolution, poor child.'"

"Doña Luisa let her head sink on her breast as she breathed a sigh that resembled a sob."

"They went onwards, side by side, without exchanging another word. The party had left the cloisters, and were now crossing some unfinished buildings, which did not seem to have been inhabited for many a long year."

"'Where are you leading us, then, Niña?' Don Torribio asked. 'I fancied that in this convent, as in others, the vaults were under the chapel.'"

"The maiden smiled sadly. 'I am not leading you to the vaults,' she answered, in a trembling voice."

"'Where to, then?'"

"'To the *in pace*!'"

"Don Torribio stifled an angry oath."

"'Oh!' he muttered."

"'The coffin that was lowered into the vaults this morning in the sight of all,' Doña Luisa continued, 'really contained the body of my poor Laura; it was impossible to do otherwise, owing to the custom which demands that the dead should be buried in their clothes, and with uncovered faces;

but so soon as the crowd had departed, and the doors of the chapel were closed on the congregation, the Mother Superior had the tombstone removed again, the body brought up, and transferred to the deepest *in pace* of the convent. But here we are,' she said, as she stopped and pointed to a large stone in the paved floor of the apartment in which they were."

"The scene had something mournful and striking about it. In the deserted apartment the masked men were grouped around the maiden dressed in white, and only illumined by the ruddy glare of the torches they waved, bore a strange likeness to those mysterious judges who in old times met in ruins to try kings and emperors."

"Raise the stone,' Don Torribio said, in a hollow voice."

"After a few efforts the stone was raised, leaving open a dark gulf, from which poured a blast of hot and foetid air. Don Torribio took a torch, and bent over the orifice."

"Why,' he said, at the expiration of a moment, 'this vault is deserted.'"

"Yes,' Doña Luisa answered, simply, 'she, whom you seek, is lower.'"

"What! lower?' he cried, with a movement of terror, which he could not control."

"That vault is not deep enough; an accident might cause a discovery; shrieks could be heard from outside. There are two other vaults like this, built above each other. When, through any reason, the abbess has resolved on the disappearance of a nun, and that she shall be cut off for ever from the number of the living, the victim is let down into the last cave, called *Hell!* There all noise dies away; every sob remains unechoed; every complaint is vain. Oh! the Inquisition managed matters well; and it is so short a time since its rule ended in Mexico, that some of its customs have been maintained in the convents. Seek lower, Caballero, seek lower!"

"Don Torribio, at these words, felt a cold perspiration beading at the roots of his hair. He believed himself a prey to a horrible nightmare. Making a supreme effort to subdue the emotion that overpowered him, he went down into the vault by means of a light ladder leaning against one of the walls, and several of his comrades followed him. After some searching, they discovered a stone like the first. Don Torribio plunged a torch into the gulf."

"Empty!' he exclaimed, in horror."

"Lower, I tell you! Look lower,' Doña Luisa cried, in a gloomy voice, who had remained on the edge of the topmost vault."

"What had this adorable creature done to them to endure such martyrdom?' Don Torribio exclaimed, in his despair."

"Avarice and hatred are two terrible counsellors,' the maiden answered; 'but make haste! make haste! every moment that passes is an age for her who is waiting.'"

"Don Torribio, a prey to incredible fury, began seeking the last vault. After a few moments, his exertions were crowned with success. The stone was scarce lifted, ere, paying no attention to the mephitic air which rushed from the opening and almost extinguished his torch, he bent over."

"I see her! I see her!' he said, with a cry more resembling a howl than a human voice."

"And, waiting no longer, without even calculating the height, he leaped into the vault. A few moments later he returned to the hall, bearing in his arms Doña Laura's inanimate body."

"Away, friends, away!' he exclaimed, addressing his companions; 'let us not stay an instant longer in this den of wild beasts with human faces!'"

"At a sign from him, Doña Luisa was lifted in the arms of a sturdy lepero, and all ran off in the direction of the cloisters. They soon reached the cell of the Mother Superior. On seeing them, the abbess made a violent effort to break her bonds, and writhed impotently like a tiger, while flashing, at the men who had foiled her hideous projects, glances full of hatred and rage."

"Wretch!' Don Torribio shouted, as he passed near her, and disdainfully spurned her with his foot; 'be accursed! your chastisement commences, for your victim escapes you.'"

"By one of those efforts which only hatred which has reached its paroxysm can render possible, the abbess succeeded in removing her gag slightly."

"Perhaps!" she yelled, in a voice which sounded like a knell in Don Torribio's ears."

"Overcome by this great effort, she fainted."

"Five minutes after, there was no one in the convent beyond its usual inmates."

CHAPTER IX

BRIGHTEYE AND MARKSMAN

At this point in his narrative Brighteye stopped, and began, with a thoughtful air, filling his Indian pipe with tobacco.

There was a lengthened silence. His auditors, still under the influence of this extraordinary influence, dared not venture any reflections. At length Marksman raised his head. "That story is very dramatic and very gloomy," he said, "but pardon my rude frankness, old and dear comrade, it seems to me to have no reference to what is going on around us, and the events in which we shall, probably, be called upon to be interested spectators, if not actors."

"In truth," Ruperto observed, "what do we wood rangers care for adventures that happen in Mexico, or any other city of the *Tierras Adentro*? We are here in the desert to hunt, trap, and thrash the Redskins. Any other question can affect us but slightly."

Brighteye tossed his head in a significant manner, and laid his pipe mechanically by his side.

"You are mistaken, comrades," he continued; "do you believe, then, that I should have made you waste your time in listening to this long story, if it did not possess an important reality for us?"

"Explain yourself, then, my friend," Marksman observed, "for I honestly confess that, for my part, I have understood nothing of what you have been good enough to tell us."

The old Canadian raised his head, and seemed, for a few moments, to be calculating the sun's height. "It is half past six," he said; "you have still more than sufficient time to reach the ford of the Rubio, where the man is to wait, to whom you have engaged yourself as guide. Listen to me, therefore, for I have not quite finished. Now that I have told you the mystery, you must learn what has come out to clear it up."

"Speak!" Marksman replied, in the tone of a man who is resolved to listen through politeness to a story which he knows cannot interest him.

Brighteye, not seeming to remark his friend's apathetic condescension, went on in the following terms: – "You have remarked that Don Torribio provided for everything with a degree of prudence which must keep off any suspicion, and cover this adventure with an impenetrable veil. Unfortunately for him, the evangelista was not killed. He could not only speak, but show a copy of each of the letters he daily handed to the young man – letters which the latter paid so dearly for, and which, with that prudence innate in the Mexican race, he had previously guarded, to employ, if needed, as a weapon against Don Torribio; or, as was more probable, to avenge himself if he fell a victim to any treachery. This was what happened: – The evangelista, found in a dying state by an early customer, had strength enough to make a regular declaration to the Juez de Lettras, and hand him the letters ere he died. This assassination, taken in connection with the attack on the serenitas by a numerous band, and the invasion of the Convent of the Bernardines, furnished a clue which the police begun following with extreme tenacity; especially as the young lady whose body had been so audaciously carried off had powerful relations, who, for certain reasons known to themselves, would not let this crime pass unpunished, and spent their gold profusely. It was soon learned that the bandits, on leaving the convent, mounted horses brought by their confidants, and started at full speed in the direction of the Presidios. The police even succeeded in discovering one of the men who supplied the horses. This individual, Pepito by name, bought over by the money offered him, rather than frightened by threats, stated that he had sold to Don Torribio Carvajal twenty-five post horses, to be delivered at the Convent of the Bernardines at two o'clock in the morning. As these horses were paid for in advance, he, Pepito, did not trouble himself at all about the singularity of the spot, or of the hour. Don Torribio and his companions had arrived, bearing with them two women, one of whom appeared to have fainted, and immediately galloped off. The trail of the ravishers was then followed to the Presidio de Tubar, where

Don Torribio allowed his party to rest for several days. There he purchased a close palanquin, a field tent, and all the provisions necessary for a lengthened journey in the desert, and one night suddenly disappeared, with all his band, which was augmented by all the adventurers he could pick up at the Presidio, no one being able to say in what direction he had gone. This information, though vague, was sufficient up to a certain point, and the relations of the young lady were continuing their search."

"I fancy I am beginning to see what you want to arrive at," Marksman interrupted him; "but conclude your story; when you have finished, I will make sundry observations, whose justice you will recognize, I am sure."

"I shall be delighted to hear them," Brighteye said, and went on: – "A man who, twenty years ago, did me a rather important service, whom I had not seen since, and whom I should assuredly not have recognized, had he not told me his name – the only thing I had not forgotten – came to me and my partner Ruperto, while we were at the Presidio de Tobar, selling a few panther and tiger skins. This man told me what I have just repeated to you: he added that he was a near relation of the young lady, reminded me of the service he had rendered me – in a word, he affected me so greatly, that I agreed to take vengeance on his enemy. Two days later we took up the trail. For a man like myself, accustomed to follow Indians' signs, it was child's play and I soon led him almost into the Spanish caravan commanded by Don Miguel Ortega."

"The other was called Don Torribio Carvajal."

"Could he not have changed his name?"

"For what good in the desert?"

"In the consciousness that he would be pursued."

"Then the relatives had a great interest in this pursuit?"

"Don José told me he was the young lady's uncle, and felt a paternal tenderness for her."

"But I fancy she is dead, or at least you told me so, if I am not mistaken."

Brighteye scratched his ear. "That is the awkward part of the affair," he said; "it seems she is not dead at all; on the contrary."

"What!" Marksman exclaimed; "she is not dead! That uncle knows it, then; it was by his consent that the poor creature was buried alive! But, if that is the case, there must be some odious machination in the business."

"On my word, if I must confess it, I fear so too," the Canadian said, in a hesitating voice. "Still, this man rendered me a great service. I have no proof in support of my suspicions, and –"

Marksman rose, and stood in front of the old hunter. "Brighteye," he said to him, sternly; "we are fellow countrymen; we love each other like brothers; for many long years we have slept side by side on the prairie, sharing good fortune and ill between us, saving each other's lives a hundred times, either in our struggles with wild beasts, or our fights with the Indians – is it so?"

"It is true, Marksman, it is true, and anyone who said the contrary would lie," the hunter replied with emotion.

"My friend, my brother, a great crime has been committed, or is on the point of being committed. Let us watch – watch carefully; who knows if we may not be the instruments chosen by Providence to unmask the guilty, and cause the innocent to triumph? This Don José, you say, wishes me to join you; well, I accept. Yourself, Ruperto, and I, will go to the ford of the Rubio, and, believe me, my friend, now that I am warned, I will discover the guilty party, whoever he may be."

"I prefer things to be so," the hunter answered, simply. "I confess that the strange position in which I found myself weighed heavily upon me. I am only a poor hunter, and do not at all understand these infamies of the cities."

"You are an honest man, whose heart is just and mind upright. But time is slipping away. Now that we are agreed as to our parts, and understand one another, I believe we shall do well by starting."

"I will go whenever you please."

"One moment. Can you do without Ruperto for a little while?"

"Yes."

"What's the matter?" the latter asked.

"You can do me a service."

"Speak, Marksman, I am waiting."

"No man can foresee the future. Perhaps, in a few days we shall need allies on whom we may be able to count. These allies the Chief here present will give us whenever we ask for them. Accompany him to his village, Ruperto: and, so soon as he has arrived there, leave him, and take up our trail – not positively joining us, but managing so that, if necessary, we should know where to find you."

"I have understood," the hunter said, laconically, as he rose. "All right."

Marksman turned to Flying Eagle, and explained what he wanted of him.

"My brother saved Eglantine," the Chief answered, nobly; "Flying Eagle is a sachem of his tribe. Two hundred warriors will follow the warpath at the first signal from my father. The Comanches are men; the words they utter come from the heart."

"Thanks, Chief," Marksman answered, warmly pressing the hand the Redskin extended to him; "may the Wacondah watch over you during your journey!"

After hastily eating a slice of venison cooked on the ashes, and drinking a draught of pulque – from which, after the custom of his nation, the only one which does not drink strong liquors, the Comanche declined to take a share – the four men separated; Ruperto, Flying Eagle, and Eglantine going into the prairie in a western direction; while Brighteye and Marksman, bending slightly to the left, proceeded in an easterly course, in order to reach the ford of the Rubio, where the latter was expected.

"Hum!" Brighteye observed, as he threw his rifle on to his left arm, and starting with that elastic step peculiar to the wood rangers; "we have some tough work cut out for us."

"Who knows, my friend?" Marksman answered, anxiously. "At any rate, we must discover the truth."

"That is my opinion, too."

"There is one thing I want to know, above all."

"What is it?"

"What Don Miguel's carefully-closed palanquin contains."

"Why, hang it! a woman, of course."

"Who told you so?"

"Nobody; but I presume so."

"Prejudge nothing, my friend; with time, all will be cleared up."

"God grant it!"

"He sees everything, and knows everything, my friend. Believe me, that if it hath pleased Him to set those suspicions growing in our hearts that trouble us now, it is because, as I told you a moment ago, He wishes to make us the instruments of His justice."

"May His will be done!" Brighteye answered, raising his cap piously. "I am ready to obey Him in all that He may order me."

After this mutual exchange of thoughts, the hunters, who till this moment had walked side by side, proceeded in Indian file, in consequence of the difficult nature of the ground. On reaching the tall grass, after emerging from the forest, they stopped a moment to look around.

"It is late," Marksman observed.

"Yes, it is nearly midday. Follow me, we shall soon catch up lost time."

"How so?"

"Instead of walking, would you not be inclined to ride?"

"Yes, if we had horses."

"That is just what I am going to procure."

"You have horses?"

"Last night Ruperto and I left our horses close by here, while going to the meeting Don José had made with us, and in which I was obliged to employ a canoe."

"Eh! eh! those brave beasts turn up at a lucky moment. For my part, I am worn out. I have been walking for many a long day over the prairie, and my legs are beginning to refuse to carry me."

"Come this way, we shall soon see them."

In fact, the hunters had not walked one hundred yards in the direction indicated by Brighteye, ere they found the horses quietly engaged in nibbling the pea vines and young tree shoots. The noble animals, on hearing a whistle, raised their intelligent heads, and hastened toward the hunters with a neigh of pleasure. According to the usual fashion in the prairies, they were saddled, but their *bozal* was hung round their necks. The hunters bridled them, leapt on their backs, and started again.

"Now that we have each a good horse between our legs we are certain of arriving in time," Marksman observed; "hence, it is useless to hurry on, and we can talk at our ease. Tell me, Brighteye, have you seen Don Miguel Ortega yet?"

"Never, I allow."

"Then you do not know him?"

"If I may believe Don José, he is a villain. For my own part, never having had any relations with him, I should be considerably troubled to form any opinion, bad or good, about him."

"With me it is different. I know him."

"Ah!"

"Very well indeed."

"For any length of time?"

"Long enough, I believe, at any rate to enable me to form an opinion about him."

"Ah! Well, what do you think of him?"

"Much good and much bad."

"Hang it? ah!"

"Why are you surprised? Are not all men in the same case?"

"Nearly so, I grant."

"This man is no worse or no better than the rest. This morning, as I foresaw that you were about to speak to me about him, I wished to leave you liberty of action by telling you that I was only slightly acquainted with him; but it is possible that your opinion will soon be greatly modified, and, perhaps, you will regret the support you have hitherto given Don José, as you call him."

"Would you like me to speak candidly, Marksman, now that no one, but He above, can hear us?"

"Do so, my friend. I should not be sorry to know your whole thoughts."

"I am certain that you know a great deal more about the story I told you last night than you pretend to do."

"Perhaps you are right; but what makes you think so?"

"Many things; and in the first place this."

"Go on."

"You are too sensible a man. You have acquired too great an experience of the things of this world, to undertake, without serious cause, the defence of a man who, according to the principles we profess on the prairie, you ought to regard, if not as an enemy, still as one of those men whom it is often disagreeable to come in contact, or have any relations with."

Marksman burst into a laugh. "There is truth in what you say, Brighteye," he at length remarked.

"Is there not?"

"I will not attempt to play at cunning with you; but I have powerful reasons for undertaking the defence of this man, but I cannot tell you them at this moment. It is a secret which does not belong to me, and of which I am only the depositary. I trust you will soon know all; but, till then, rely on my old friendship, and leave me to act in any way."

"Very good! At any rate, I am now beginning to see clearly, and, whatever may happen, you can reckon upon me."

"By Jove! I felt certain we should end by understanding one another; but, silence, and let nothing be seen. We are at the meeting place. Hang it! the Mexicans have not kept us waiting. They have already pitched their camp on the other side of the river."

In fact, a hunter's camp could be seen a short distance off, one side resting on the river, the other on the forest, and presenting perfectly fortified outworks, with the front turned to the prairies, and composed of bales and trees stoutly interlaced.

The two hunters made themselves known to the sentries, and entered without any difficulty. Don Miguel was absent; but the Gambusinos expected him at any moment. The hunters dismounted, hobbled their horses, and sat down quietly by the fire.

Don Stefano Cohecho had left the Gambusinos at daybreak, as he had announced on the previous evening.

CHAPTER X

FRESH CHARACTERS

In order to a right comprehension of ensuing facts, we will take advantage of our privilege as story tellers, to go back a fortnight, and allow the reader to be witness of a scene intimately connected with the most important events of this history, and which took place a few hundred miles from the spot where accident had collected our principal characters.

The Cordillera of the Andes, that immense spine of the American continent, the whole length of which it traverses under different names from north to south, forms, at various elevations, immense *llanos*, on which entire people live at a height at which all vegetation ceases in Europe.

After crossing the Presidio de Tubar, the advanced post of civilization on the extreme limit of the desert, and advancing into the mediano region of the *tierra caliente* for about one hundred and twenty miles, the traveller finds himself suddenly, and without any transition, in front of a virgin forest, which is no less than three hundred and twenty miles deep, by eighty odd miles wide.

The most practised pen is powerless to describe the marvels innumerable inclosed in that inexhaustible network of vegetation called a virgin forest, and the sight, at once strange and peculiar, majestic and imposing, which it offers to the dazzled sight. The most powerful imagination recoils before this prodigious fecundity of elementary nature, continually springing up again from its own destruction with a strength and vigour ever new. The creepers, which run from tree to tree, from branch to branch, plunge, at one moment, into the earth, and then rise once more to the sky, and form, by their interlacing and crossing, an almost insurmountable barrier, as if jealous nature wished to hide from profane eyes the mysterious secrets of these forests, beneath whose shade man's footsteps have only reached at long intervals, and never unpunished. Trees of every age and species grow without order or symmetry, as if sown by chance, like wheat in the furrows. Some, tall and slight, count only a few years; the extremities of their branches are covered by the tall and wide boughs of those whose haughty heads have seen centuries pass over them. Beneath their foliage softly murmur pure and limpid streams, which escape from the fissures of the rocks, and, after a thousand meanderings, are lost in some lake or unknown river, whose bright waters had never reflected aught in their clear mirror save the sublime secrets of the solitude. There may be found, pell-mell and in picturesque confusion, all the magnificent productions of tropical regions: – The acajou; the ebony; the palisander; the stunted mahogany; the black oak; the cork; the maple; the mimosa, with its silvery foliage; and the tamarind, thrusting in every direction their branches, laden with, flowers, fruits, and leaves, which form a dome impenetrable to the sunbeams. From the vast and unexplored depths of these forests emerge, from time to time, inexplicable noises – furious howls, feline miauls, mocking yells, mingled with shrill whistling or the joyous and harmonious song of the birds.

After plunging boldly into the centre of this chaos, and struggling hand to hand with this uncultivated and wild nature, the traveller succeeds, with axe in one hand and torch in the other, in gaining, inch by inch, step by step, a road impossible to describe. At one moment, by crawling like a reptile over the decaying leaves, dead wood, or guano, piled up for centuries; or by leaping from branch to branch, at the tops of the trees, standing, as it were, in the air. But woe to the man who neglects to have his eye constantly open to all that surrounds him, and his ear on the watch: for, in addition to the obstacles caused by nature, he has to fear the venomous stings of the serpents startled in their lairs, and the furious attacks of the wild beasts. He must also carefully watch the course of the rivers and streams he meets with, determine the position of the sun during the day, or guide himself at night by the Southern Cross; for, once astray in a virgin forest, it is impossible to get out of it – it is a maze, from which no Ariadne's web would help to find the issue.

At last the traveller, after he has succeeded in surmounting the dangers we have describe, and a thousand others no less terrible, which we have passed over in silence, emerges on an immense plain, in the centre of which stands an Indian city. That is to say, he finds himself before one of those mysterious cities into which no European has yet penetrated, whose exact position even is unknown, and which, since the conquest, have served as an asylum for the last relics of Aztec civilization.

The fabulous accounts given by some travellers about the incalculable wealth buried in these cities, has inflamed the covetousness and avarice of a great number of adventurers, who, at various periods, have attempted to find the lost road to these queens of the Mexican prairies and savannahs. Others again, only impelled by the irresistible attraction extraordinary enterprises offer to vagabond imaginations, have also, especially during the last fifty years, set out in search of these Indian cities, though up to the present time success has never crowned these various expeditions. Some have returned disenchanted, and half killed by this journey toward the unknown; a considerable number have left their bodies at the foot of precipices or in the quebradas, to serve as food for birds of prey; while others, more unfortunate still, have disappeared without leaving a trace, and no one has ever heard what has become of them.

Owing to events, too long to narrate here, but which we shall describe some day, we have lived, against our will, in one of these impenetrable cities, though, more fortunate than our predecessors, whose whitened bones we saw scattered along the road, we succeeded in escaping from it, through dangers innumerable, all miraculously avoided. The description we are about to give, then, is scrupulously exact, and cannot be doubted, for we write from personal observation.

Quiepaa Tani, the city which presents itself to the traveller's sight after leaving the virgin forest, of which we have given a sketch, extends from east to west, and forms a parallelogram. A wide stream, over which several bridges of incredible lightness and elegance are thrown, runs through its entire length. At each corner of the square an enormous block of rock cut perpendicularly on the side that faces the plains, serves as an almost impregnable fortress; these four citadels are also connected by a wall twenty feet thick, and forty feet high, which, inside the city, forms a slope sixty feet wide at the base. This wall is built of native bricks, made of sandy earth and chopped straw; they are called *adobes*, and are about a yard long. A wide and deep fosse almost doubles the height of the walls. Two gates alone give access to the city. These gates are flanked by towers and pepper boxes, exactly like a mediaeval fortress; and, what adds to the correctness of our comparison, a small bridge, made of planks, extremely narrow and light, and so arranged as to be carried away on the slightest alarm, is the only communication between these gates and the exterior.

The houses are low, and terminate in terraces, connected with each other; they are slight, and built of wicker and canavares covered with cement, in consequence of the earthquakes so frequent in these regions; but they are large, airy, and pierced with numerous windows. None of them are more than one story in height, and the fronts are covered with a varnish of dazzling whiteness.

This strange city, seen from a distance, as it rises in the midst of the tall prairie grass, offers the most singular and seductive sight.

On a fine evening in the month of October, five travellers, whose features or dress it would have been impossible to distinguish, owing to the obscurity, came out of the forest we have described above, stopped for a moment, with marked indecision, on the extreme edge of the wood, and began examining the ground. Before them rose a hillock, which, if no great height, yet cut the horizon at right angles.

After exchanging a few words, two of these persons remained where they were; the other three lay down on their faces, and, crawling on their hands and feet, advanced through the rank grass, which they caused to undulate, and which completely concealed their bodies. On reaching the top of the mound, which they had found such difficulty in scaling, they looked out into the country, and remained struck with astonishment and admiration.

The eminence, at the top of which they were, was perpendicular on the other side, like all the rest of the ground which extended on either side. A magnificent plain lay expanded a hundred feet below them, and in the centre of the plain, at a distance of about a thousand yards from them, stood, proud and imposing, Quiepaa Tani,² the mysterious city, defended by its massive towers and thick walls. The sight of this vast city in the midst of the desert produced on the minds of the three men a feeling of stupor, which they could not explain, and which for a few moments rendered them dumb with surprise. At length one of them rose on his elbow, and addressed his comrades.

"Are my brothers satisfied?" he said, with a guttural accent, which, though he expressed himself in Spanish, proved him to be an Indian. "Has Addick (the Stag) kept his promise?"

"Addick is one of the first warriors of his tribe; his tongue is straight, and the blood flows clearly in his veins," one of the men he addressed, answered.

The Indian smiled silently, without replying; – this smile would have given his companions much matter for thought, had they seen it.

"It seems to me," the one who had not yet spoken said, "that it is very late to enter the city."

"Tomorrow, at sunrise, Addick will lead the two Paleface maidens to Quiepaa Tani," the Indian answered; "the night is too dark."

"The warrior is right," the second speaker remarked, "we must put off the affair till tomorrow."

"Yes, let us return to our friends, whom a longer absence may alarm."

Joining deeds to words, the first speaker turned round, and, exactly following the track his body had left in the grass, he soon found himself, as well as his companions, who imitated all his movements, at the skirt of the forest, into which, after their departure, the two persons they left behind had returned.

The silence which reigns beneath these gloomy roofs of foliage and branches during the day, had been succeeded by the dull sounds of a wild concert, formed by the shrill cries of the night birds, which woke, and prepared to attack the loros, humming birds, and cardinals, belated far from their nests; the roaring of the cougars; the hypocritical miauling of the jaguars and panthers, and the snappish barks of the coyotes, which reechoed, with a mournful sound, from the roofs of the inaccessible caverns and gaping pits which served as lurking places for these dangerous guests.

Returning on the trail they had traced with their axes, the three men soon found themselves near a fire of dead wood, burning in the centre of a small clearing. Two women, or rather girls, were crouching, pensive and sad, by the fire. They counted scarce thirty years between them; they were lovely, and of that creole beauty which the divine pencil of a Raphael has been alone able to reproduce. But at this moment they were pale, seemed fatigued, and their faces reflected a gloomy sorrow; At the sound of the approaching steps they raised their eyes, and a flash of joy illumined their faces like a sunbeam.

The Indian threw some sticks on the fire, which was threatening to go out, while one of the hunters occupied himself with giving their provender to the horses, hobbled a short distance off.

"Well, Don Miguel," one of the ladies said, addressing the hunter who had taken a seat by her side, "shall we soon near the end of our journey?"

"You have arrived, señorita; tomorrow, under the guidance of our friend Addick, you will enter the city, that inviolable asylum, where no one will pursue you."

"Ah!" she continued, looking absently at the Indian's gloomy and apathetic face; "we shall separate tomorrow."

"We must, señorita; the care for your safety demands it."

"Who would dare to seek me in these unknown districts?"

"Hatred dares everything. I implore you, señorita, to put faith in my experience; my devotion to you is unbounded. Though still very young, you have suffered enough, and it is time that a blessed

² Literally, *Quiepaa*, sky, *tani*, mountain, in the Zapotecan language.

sunbeam should brighten your dreary brow, and dispel the clouds which thought and grief have been so long collecting on it."

"Alas!" she said, as she let her head droop, to hide the tears that ran down her cheeks.

"My sister, my friend, my Laura!" the other maiden said, embracing her tenderly, "be courageous to the end. Shall I not be with you? Oh, fear nothing!" she added, with a charming expression. "I will take half your grief on myself, and your burthen will seem less heavy."

"Poor Luisa!" the maiden murmured, as she returned her caresses. "You are unhappy through me. How shall I ever be able to repay your devotion?"

"By loving me, as I love you, cherished angel, and by regaining hope."

"Before a month, I trust," Don Miguel said, "your persecutors will be prevented from troubling you again. I am playing a terrible game with them, in which my head is the stake; but I care little, so long as I save you. On leaving you, permit me to take with me, in my heart, the hope that you will in no way attempt to leave the refuge I have found for you, and that you will patiently await my return."

"Alas, Caballero! you are aware that I live only by a miracle; my relatives, my friends, indeed, all those I loved, have abandoned me, except my Luisa, my foster sister, whose devotion to me has never swerved; and you, whom I do not know, whom I never saw, and who suddenly revealed yourself to me in my tomb, like the angel of divine justice; since that terrible night, when, thanks to you, I emerged from my sepulchre, like Lazarus, you have shown me the kindest and most delicate attentions; you have taken the place of those who betrayed me; you have been to me more than a father."

"Señorita!" said the young man, at once confused and happy at these words.

"I say this to you, Don Miguel," she continued, with a certain feverish animation, "because I am anxious to prove to you that I am not ungrateful. I know not what God, in His wisdom, may do with me; but I tell you, that my last thought, my last prayer will be for you. You wish me to await you; I will obey you. Believe me, I only dispute my life through a certain feeling of anxiety, like the gambler at his last stake," she added, with a heartbreaking smile; "but I understand how much you need liberty of action for the rude game you have undertaken. Hence, you can go in peace; I have faith in you."

"Thanks, señorita; this promise doubles my strength. Oh, now I am certain of success!"

A rude jacal of branches had been prepared for the maidens by the other hunters and the Indian warrior, and they retired to rest.

Although the young man's mind was so full of restless alarms, after a few moments of deep thought he laid himself down by the side of his companions, and soon fell asleep. In the desert nature never surrenders its claims, and the greatest grief rarely succeeds in gaining the victory over the material claims of the human organization.

Scarce had the first sunbeams begun to tinge the sky of an opal hue, ere the hunters opened their eyes. The preparations for starting were soon completed; the moment of separation arrived, and the parting was a sad one. The two hunters had accompanied the maidens to the edge of the forest, in order to remain longer with them.

Doña Luisa, taking advantage of an instant when the road became so narrow that it became almost impossible for two to walk side by side, drew nearer Don Miguel's hunting companion.

"Do me a service," she whispered, hurriedly.

"Speak," he answered, in the same key.

"That Indian inspires me with but slight confidence."

"You are wrong; I know him."

She shook her head petulantly. "That is possible," she said; "but will you do me the service I want of you? – if not, I will ask Don Miguel, though I should have preferred him not knowing it."

"Speak, I tell you."

"Give me a knife and your pistols."

The hunter looked her in the face. "Good!" he said presently. "You are a brave child. Here is what you ask for." And, without anyone noticing it, he gave the objects she wished to obtain from him, adding to them two little pouches, one of gunpowder, the other of bullets.

"No one knows what may happen," he said.

"Thanks," she answered, with a movement of joy she could not master.

This was all that she said; and the weapons disappeared under her clothes, with a speed and resolution which made the hunter smile. Five minutes after, they reached the skirt of the virgin forest.

"Addick," the hunter said laconically; "remember that you will answer to me for these two women."

"Addick has sworn it," the Indian merely replied. They separated; it was impossible to remain longer at the spot where they were, without running the risk of being discovered by the Indians. The maidens and the warrior proceeded toward the city.

"Let us mount the hill," Don Miguel said, "in order to see them for the last time."

"I was going to propose it," the hunter said, simply.

They went, with similar precautions, to the spot they had occupied for a few moments on the previous evening.

In the brilliant beams of the sun, which had gloriously risen, the verdurous landscape had assumed, a truly enchanting aspect. Nature was aroused from her sleep, and a most varied spectacle had been substituted for the gloomy and solitary view of the previous night. From the gates of the city, which were now widely opened, emerged groups of Indians on horseback and on foot, who dispersed in all directions with shouts of joy and shriller bursts of laughter. Numerous canoes traversed the stream, the fields were populated with flocks of vicunas, and horses led by Indians, armed with long goads, who were proceeding toward the city. Women quaintly attired, and bearing on their heads long wicker baskets filled with meat, fruit, and vegetables, walked along conversing together, and accompanying each phrase with that continual, sharp, and metallic laugh, of which the Indian nation possess the secret, and the noise of which resembles very closely that produced by the full of a quantity of pebbles on a copper dish.

The maidens and their guide were soon mixed up in this motley crowd, in the midst of which they disappeared. Don Miguel sighed.

"Let us go," he said in a deep voice.

They returned to the forest. A few moments later, they set out again.

"We must separate," Don Miguel said when they had crossed the forest; "I shall return to Tubar."

"And I am going to try to render a small service to an Indian chief, a friend of mine."

"You are always thinking of others, and never of yourself, my worthy Marksman; you are ever anxious to be of use to someone."

"What would you have, Don Miguel? It seems to be my mission – you know that every man has one."

"Yes!" the young man answered in a hollow voice. "Good-bye!" he added presently, "do not forget our meeting."

"All right! In a fortnight, at the ford of the Rubio; that is settled."

"Forgive me my chariness of speech during the few days we have spent together; the secret is not mine alone, Marksman; I am not at liberty to divulge it, even to so kind a friend as yourself."

"Keep your secret, my friend; I am in no way curious to know it; still, it is understood that we do not know one another."

"Yes; that is very important."

"Then, good-bye."

"Good-bye!"

The two horsemen shook hands, one turned to the right, the other to the left, and they set off at full speed.

CHAPTER XI

THE FORD OF THE RUBIO

The night was gloomy, not a star shone in the sky; the wind blew violently through the heavy boughs of the virgin forest, with that sad and monotonous sighing which resembles the sound of great waters when the tempest menaces; the clouds were low, black, and charged with electricity; they coursed rapidly through the sky, incessantly veiling the wan disk of the moon, whose cold rays only rendered the gloom denser; the atmosphere was oppressive, and those nameless noises, dashed back by the echoes like the rolling of distant thunder, rose from the quebradas and unknown barrancas of the prairies; the beasts howled sadly all the notes of the human register, and the night birds, troubled in their sleep by this strange uneasiness of nature, uttered hoarse and discordant cries.

In the camp of the Gambusinos all was calm; the sentries were watching, leaning on their rifles, and crouching near the expiring fire. In the centre of the camp two men were smoking their Indian pipes, and talking in a low voice. They were Brighteye and Marksman.

At length, Brighteye knocked the ashes out of his pipe, thrust it into his girdle, stifled a yawn, and rose, throwing out his legs and arms to restore the circulation.

"What are you going to do?" Marksman asked him, turning cautiously round.

"Sleep," the hunter answered.

"Sleep!"

"Why not? the night is advanced; we are the only persons watching, I feel convinced; it is more than probable that we shall not see Don Miguel before sunrise. Hum! the best plan for the moment, at least, is to sleep, at any rate, if you have not decided otherwise."

Marksman laid his finger on his lip, as if to recommend silence to his friend.

"The night is advanced," he said, in a low voice; "a terrible storm is rising. Where can Don Miguel be gone? This prolonged absence alarms me more than I can express: he is not the man to leave his friends thus, without some powerful reason, or perhaps –"

The hunter stopped, and shook his head sorrowfully.

"Go on," Brighteye said; "tell me your whole thought."

"Well, I am afraid lest some misfortune has happened to him."

"Oh, oh, do you think so? Still, this Don Miguel, from what I have heard you say, is a man of well-trying courage and uncommon strength."

"All that is true," Marksman replied, with a preoccupied air.

"Well! do you think that such a man, well armed, and acquainted with prairie life, is not able to draw himself out of a difficulty, whatever the danger which threatens him?"

"Yes, if he has to deal with a loyal foe, who stands resolutely before him, and fights with equal weapons."

"What other danger can he fear?"

"Brighteye, Brighteye!" the hunter continued, sadly, "you have lived too long among the Missouri fur traders."

"Which means – ?" the Canadian asked, somewhat piqued.

"Come, my friend, do not feel vexed at my remarks; but it is evident to me, that you have, in a great measure, forgotten prairie habits."

"Hum! that is a serious charge against a hunter, Marksman; and in what, if you please, have I forgotten desert manners?"

"By Jove! in seeming no longer to remember that, in the country where we now are, every weapon is good to get rid of an enemy."

"Eh! I know that as well as you, my friend; I know, too, that the most dangerous weapon is that which is concealed."

"That is to say, treachery."

The Canadian started. "Do you fear treachery, then?" he asked.

"What else can I fear?"

"That is true," the hunter said, with a drooping head; "but," he added, a moment after, "what is to be done?"

"That is the very thing that embarrasses me. Still I cannot remain much longer in this state; the uncertainty is killing me; at all risks I must know what has happened."

"But in what way?"

"I know not, Heaven will inspire me."

"Still, you have an idea?"

"Of course, I have."

"What is it?"

"This – and I count on you to help me in carrying it out."

Brighteye affectionately pressed his friend's hand. "You are right," he said: "now for your idea."

"It is very simple; we will leave the camp directly, and go along the river side."

"Yes, – I would merely draw your attention to the fact, that the storm will soon break out, and the rain is already falling in large drops."

"The greater reason to make haste."

"That is true."

"Then you will accompany me?"

"By Jove! did you doubt it, perchance?"

"I am a goose; forgive me, brother, and thank you."

"Why so? on the contrary, I ought to thank you."

"How so?"

"Why, thanks to you, I am going to take a delightful walk."

Marksman did not answer; the hunters saddled and bridled their horses, and after inspecting their arms with all the care of men who are convinced that they will soon have occasion to use them, they mounted and rode toward the gate of the camp. Two sentries were standing motionless and upright at the gate; they placed themselves before the wood rangers. The latter had no intention of going out unseen, as they had no reason for hiding their departure.

"You are going away?" one of the sentries asked.

"No; we are merely going to make a survey of the country."

"At this hour?"

"Why not?"

"Hang it! I think it pleasanter to sleep in such weather, than ride about the prairie."

"You think wrong, comrade," Marksman answered, in a peremptory tone; "and, in the first place, bear this in mind, I am not accountable for my actions to anyone; if I go out at this hour in the storm which is threatening, I have possibly powerful motives for my conduct; now, will you or no let us pass? Remember, however, that I shall hold you responsible for any delay you occasion in the execution of my plans."

The tone employed by the hunter in addressing them struck the two sentries; they consulted together in a low voice; after which, the man who had hitherto spoken turned to the two hunters, who were quietly awaiting the result of this deliberation. "You can pass," he said; "you are at liberty to go wherever you think proper. I have done my duty in questioning you, and may Heaven grant you are doing yours in going out thus."

"You will soon know. One word more."

"I am listening."

"Our absence will probably be short; if not, we shall return by sunrise; still, pay great attention to this recommendation: should you hear the cry of the jaguar repeated thrice, at equal intervals, mount at full speed, and come, not you alone, but followed by a dozen of your comrades, for, when you hear that cry, a great danger will menace the Cuadrilla. Now, you understand me?"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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