

Aimard Gustave

Stronghand: or, The Noble Revenge



Gustave Aimard

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CHAPTER I

AN EXCHANGE OF SHOTS

The country extending between the Sierra de San Saba and the Rio Puerco, or Dirty River, is one of the most mournful and melancholy regions imaginable.

This accursed savannah, on which bleach unrecognized skeletons, which the wind and sun strive to convert into dust, is an immense desert, broadcast with grey rocks, beneath which snakes and wild beasts have, from time immemorial, formed their lurking-place, and which only produces black shrubs and stunted larches that rise from distance to distance above the desert.

White or Indian travellers rarely and most unwillingly venture to cross this frightful solitude, and at the risk of lengthening their journey they prefer making a detour and following the border, where they are certain of finding shade and water – those delights of tropical countries and indispensable necessities for a long trip on the western prairies.

Towards the second half of June – which the Navajo Indians call the "strawberry moon" in their harmonious language – and in the Year of Grace 1843, a horseman suddenly emerged from a thick clump of oaks, sumachs, and mahogany trees, entered the savannah at a gallop, and, instead of following the usual travellers' track, which was distinctly traced on the edge of the sand, he began without any hesitation crossing the desert in a straight line.

This resolution was a mark of great folly, or a proof of extraordinary daring on the part of a solitary man, however brave he might be; or else some imperious reasons compelled him to lay aside all prudence in order to reach his journey's end more speedily.

However, whatever the motives that might determine the traveller, he continued his journey rapidly, and buried himself deeper and deeper in the desert, without seeming to notice the gloomy and desolate aspect the landscape around him constantly assumed.

As this person is destined to play an important part in our story, we will draw his portrait in a few words. He was a man of from twenty-five to thirty years of age – belonging to the pure Mexican race, of average height, and possessed of elegant manners; while his every gesture, graceful though it was, revealed a far from ordinary strength. His face, with its regular features and bright hue, evidenced frankness, bravery, and kindliness; his black eyes, haughty and well open, had a straight and penetrating glance; his well cut mouth, adorned with dazzling white teeth, was half concealed beneath a long brown moustache; his chin, of too marked an outline perhaps, denoted a great firmness of character; in short, his whole appearance aroused interest and attracted sympathy.

As for his dress, it was the Mexico costume in all its picturesque richness. His broad-brimmed Vicuna skin hat, decorated with a double gold and silver *golilla*, was carelessly set on his right ear, and allowed curls of luxurious black hair to fall in disorder on his shoulders. He wore a jacket of green velvet, magnificently embroidered with gold, under which could be seen a worked linen shirt. An Indian handkerchief was fastened round his neck by a diamond ring. His *calzoneras*, also of green velvet, held round his hips by a red silk gold-fringed *faja* were embroidered and slashed like a jacket, while two rows of pearl-set gold buttons ran along the opening that extends from the boot to the knee. His vaquero boots, embroidered with pretty designs in red thread, were fastened to his legs by silk and gold garters, from one of which emerged the admirably carved hilt of a long knife. His zarapé, of Indian fabric and showy colours, was folded on the back of his horse, an animal full of fire, with

fine legs, small head, and flashing eye. It was a true prairie mustang; and its master had decorated it with the coquettish elegance peculiar to Mexican horsemen.

In addition to the knife we referred to, and which the horseman wore in his right boot, he had also a long American rifle laid across his saddle-bow, two six-shot revolvers in his girdle, a machete, or species of straight sabre, which was passed, unsheathed, through an iron ring on his left side; and, lastly, a reata of plaited leather, rolled up and fastened to the saddle.

Thus armed, the man we have just described was able – on the admission that his determined appearance was not deceitful – to make head against several adversaries at once, without any serious disadvantage. This was a consideration not at all to be despised in a country where a traveller ever runs the risk of encountering an enemy, whether man or beast, and, at times both together.

While galloping, the horseman carelessly smoked a husk cigarette, only taking an absent and disdainful glance at the coveys of birds that rose on his approach, or the herds of deer and packs of foxes which fled in terror on hearing the horse's gallop.

The savannah, however, was already beginning to assume a more gloomy tinge; the sun, now level with the ground, only appeared on the horizon as a red unheated ball, and night was soon about to cover the earth with its dense gloom. The horseman drew up the bridle of his steed to check its speed, though not entirely stopping it, and, casting an investigating glance around him, seemed to be seeking a suitable spot for his night halt.

After a few seconds of this search, the traveller's determination was formed. He turned slightly to the left, and proceeded to a half dried up stream that ran along a short distance off, and on whose banks grew a few prickly shrubs and a clump of some dozen larches, forming a precarious shelter against the curiosity of those mysterious denizens of the desert that prowl about in search of prey during the darkness.

On drawing nearer, the traveller perceived to his delight that this spot, perfectly hidden from prying glances, by the conformation of the ground and a few blocks of stone scattered here and there among the trees and shrubs, offered him an almost certain shelter.

The journey had been tiring; and both man and horse felt themselves worn with fatigue. Both, before proceeding further, imperiously required a few hours' rest.

The horseman, as an experienced traveller, first attended to his steed, which he unsaddled and led to drink at the stream; then, after hobbling the animal for fear it might stray and become the prey of wild beasts, he stretched his zarapé on the ground, threw a few handfuls of Indian corn upon it, and when he was assured that his horse, in spite of its fatigue, was eating its provender willingly, he thought about himself.

Mexicans, when travelling, carry behind their saddle two canvas bags, called *alforjas*, intended to convey food, which it is impossible to procure in the desert; and these, with two jars filled with drinking water, form the sole baggage with which they cover enormous distances, and endure privations and fatigue, the mere enumeration of which would terrify Europeans, who are accustomed to enjoy all the conveniences supplied by an advanced stage of civilization.

The horseman opened his alforjas, sat down on the ground with his back against a rock, and, while careful that his weapons were within reach, for fear of being attacked unawares, he began supping philosophically on a piece of tasajo, some maize tortillas, and goat's cheese as hard as a flint, the whole being washed down with the pure water of the stream.

This repast, which was more than frugal, was soon terminated. The horseman, after cleaning his teeth with an elegant gold toothpick, rolled a pajilla, smoked it with that conscientious beatitude peculiar to the Hispano-Americans, and then wrapped himself in his zarapé, shut his eyes, and fell asleep.

Several hours passed; and it is probable that the traveller's sleep would have been prolonged for some time, had not two shots, fired a short distance from him, suddenly aroused him from his lethargy. The general rule on the prairie is, that when you hear a shot, it is rare for it not to have been

preceded by the whistle of a bullet past your ear – in other words, there are ninety-nine reasons in a hundred that the lonely man has been unconsciously converted into the target of an assassin.

The traveller, thus unpleasantly aroused, seized his weapons, concealed himself behind a rock, and waited. Then, as after the expiration of a moment, the attack was not renewed, he rose softly, and carefully looked around him.

Not a sound disturbed the majestic solitude of the desert. But this sudden tranquillity after the two shots, instead of re-assuring the traveller, only augmented his anxiety, by revealing to him the approach of a certain danger, though it was impossible for him to divine the cause or the magnitude.

The night was clear, and, so to speak, transparent; the sky, of a deep blue, was studded with a profusion of sparkling stars, and the moon shed a white and melancholy light, that allowed the country to be surveyed for a long distance.

At all hazards he saddled his horse; then, after concealing it in a rocky cavity, he lay down, placed his ear to the ground, and listened. Then he fancied he could hear a long distance off a sound, at first almost imperceptible, but which rapidly approached; and he soon recognized in it the wild galloping of several horses.

It was a hunt, or a pursuit. But who would dream of hunting in the middle of the night? The Indians would not venture it, while white and half-bred trappers only rarely visited these deserted regions, which they abandoned to the savages and border ruffians; utter villains, who, expelled from the towns and pueblos, have no other shelter than the desert.

Were the galloping horsemen pirates of the prairie, then?

The situation was becoming painful to the traveller when, all at once, the noise ceased, and all became silent.

The traveller rose from the ground.

Suddenly, the shrieks of a woman or girl burst forth on the night, with an expression of terror and agony impossible to depict.

The stranger, leaving his horse in the shelter he had selected for it, dashed forward in the direction whence the cry came, leaping from rock to rock and clearing shrubs, at the risk of hurting himself, with the feverish speed of the brave man who believes himself suddenly called by Providence to save a fellow being in danger.

Still, prudence did not desert him in his hazardous enterprise; and, before risking himself on the plain, he stopped behind a fringe of larch trees, in order to try and find out what was going on, and act in accordance.

This is what he saw: – two men, who from their appearance he at once recognized as belonging to the worst species of prairie runners, were madly pursuing a young girl. But, thanks to her juvenile agility – an agility doubtless doubled by the profound terror the bandits inspired her with – this maiden bounded like a startled fawn across the prairie, leaping ravines, clearing every obstacle, and gaining at each moment a greater advance on her pursuers, who were impeded by their vaquero boots and heavy rifles.

A few minutes later, and the maiden reached the belt of trees behind which the traveller had concealed himself. The latter was about to rush to her assistance, when suddenly one of the bandits raised his rifle and pulled the trigger.

The girl fell, and the horseman seemed to change his mind – for instead of advancing, he drew himself back and stood motionless, with his finger on the trigger, ready to fire.

The pirates rapidly approached, talking together in that medley of English, French, Spanish and Indian which is employed throughout the Far West.

"Hum!" said a hoarse and panting voice; "What a gazelle! At one moment I really thought she would escape us."

"Yes, yes," the other answered, shaking his head and tapping the barrel of his rifle with his right hand; "but I always felt certain of bringing her down when I thought proper."

"Yes, and you did not miss her, *caray!* Although it was a long shot, and your hand must have trembled after such a chase."

"Habit, compadre! Habit!" the bandit answered, with a modest smile.

While talking thus, the two bandits had reached the spot where the body of the girl lay. One of them knelt down, doubtless to assure himself of the death of their victim; while the other, the one who had fired, looked on carelessly, leaning on his rifle.

The traveller then drew himself up, raised his piece, and fired. The bandit, struck in the centre of the breast, sank down like a sack, and did not stir. He was dead.

His companion had started and laid his hand on his *machete*; but not leaving him time to employ it, the traveller rushed on him, and with a powerful blow of the butt end on his head, sent him to join his comrade on the ground, where he rolled, half killed.

The traveller, taking the bandit's reata, then firmly bound his hands and feet; and, easy in mind on this point, he eagerly approached the maiden. The poor girl gave no sign of life, but, for all that, was not dead; her wound, indeed, was slight, as the pirate's bullet had merely grazed her arm. Terror alone had produced her fainting fit.

The stranger carefully bandaged the wound, slightly moistened her lips and temples, and, after a comparatively short period, had the satisfaction of seeing her open her eyes again.

"Oh!" she murmured, in a voice soft and melodious as a bird's song, "Those men – those demons! Oh! Heaven! Protect me!"

"Reassure yourself, Señorita," the traveller answered; "you have nothing further to fear from those villains."

The maiden started at the sound of this strange voice; she fixed her eyes on the stranger without giving him any answer, and made an instinctive movement to rise. She doubtless took the man who had spoken for one of her pursuers. The latter smiled mournfully, and pointed to the two bandits lying on the ground.

"Look, Señorita," he said to her; "you have only a friend here."

At this sight an expression of unbounded gratitude illumined the wounded girl's face, and a sickly smile appeared on her lips; but almost immediately her features grew saddened again. She sprang up, and raising herself on the tips of her small feet, she stretched out her right arm toward a point on the horizon, and exclaimed in a voice broken by terror —

"There, there! Look!"

The stranger turned to the indicated direction. A party of horsemen were coming up at full speed, preceded about a rifle shot distance by another horseman, evidently better mounted than they, and whom they appeared to be pursuing. The stranger then remembered the furious galloping he had heard a few moments previously.

"Oh!" the girl exclaimed, clasping her hands in entreaty, "Save him, Señor! Save him!"

"I will try, Señorita," he replied, gently; "all that a man can do, I swear to do."

"Thank you," she said, offering him her pretty little hand; "you are a noble-hearted man, and Heaven will aid you."

"You must not remain here exposed to the insults of these men, who are evidently the comrades of those from whom you have just escaped."

"That is true," she said; "but what can I do? Where shall I seek shelter?"

"Follow me behind these trees; we have not a moment to lose."

"Come," she said, resolutely. "But you will save him! Will you not?"

"At least I will try. I have only my life to offer the person in whom you take an interest; and believe me, Señorita, I shall not hesitate to make the sacrifice."

The maiden looked down with a blush, and silently followed her guide. They soon reached the thicket in which the stranger had established his quarters for the night.

"Whatever happens," he said, while reloading his rifle, "remain here, Señorita. You are in safety in this hollow rock, where no one will dream of seeking you. For my part, I am going to help your friend."

"Go," she said, as she knelt down on the ground; "while you are fighting I will pray for you – and Heaven will grant my prayer."

"Yes," the stranger answered, mournfully, "God listens gladly to the voice of angels, so let us hope for the best."

He leaped on his horse; and after giving a parting glance at the maiden, who was praying fervently, he dashed at full speed in the direction of the newcomers. There were seven in number – bandits with stern faces and dangerous aspect, who dashed up brandishing their weapons and uttering horrible yells.

The pursued horseman, on seeing a man emerge so unexpectedly from the thicket, and come towards him at full speed, rifle in hand, naturally supposed that assistance was arriving for his foes, and dashed on one side to avoid a man whom he assumed, with some show of reason, to be an adversary the more. But the bandits were not mistaken when they saw the stranger not only let their prey escape, but stop in front of them and cock his rifle.

Two shots were fired at the same moment, one by a bandit the other by the stranger, with the difference, however, that the bandit's shot, being fired haphazard was harmless; while the stranger's, being deliberately aimed, struck exactly in the mass of his serried foes.

A few seconds later, one of them let go his bridle, beat the air with his arms, fell back on his horse, and at length on the ground, tearing with his huge spurs the sides of his steed, which reared, kicked, and started off like an arrow.

A war so frankly declared could not have a sudden termination: four shots succeeding each other with extreme rapidity on either side were a sufficient proof of this. But the stranger's position was growing critical: his rifle was discharged, and he had only his revolvers left.

The revolver, by the way, is a weapon more convenient than useful in a fight, for if you wish to hit your man, you must fire at him almost point blank, otherwise the bullets have a tendency to stray. This is a sufficient explanation why, in spite of the immoderate use the North Americans make of this weapon, the number of murders among them is proportionately limited.

The stranger was, therefore, somewhat embarrassed, and was preparing in his emergency for a hand-to-hand fight, when help he had been far from calculating on suddenly reached him.

The pursued horseman, on hearing the firing, and yet finding no bullets whizzed past him, understood that something unusual was taking place, and that some strange incident must have occurred in his favour. Hence he turned back, and saw one of his enemies fall. Recognising his mistake, he made up his mind at once: though only armed with a *machete*, he wheeled his horse round and bravely drew up alongside his defender.

Then the two men, without exchanging a word, resolutely dashed at the bandits. The contest was short – the success unhoped for. Moreover, the sides were nearly equal, for of the seven pirates only four were now alive.

The attack was so sudden, that the pirates had not time to reload. Two were killed with revolver shots. The third fell with his head severed by a *machete* blow from the horseman, who was burning to take an exemplary vengeance; while the fourth, finding himself alone leaped his horse over the corpses of his comrades, and fled at full speed without attempting to continue longer a combat which could not but be fatal to him.

The two men consequently remained masters of the battlefield.

CHAPTER II

ON THE PRAIRIE

When the last bandit had disappeared in the darkness, the horseman turned to his generous defender, in order to thank him; but the latter was no longer by his side, and he saw him galloping some distance off on the plain.

The horseman knew not to what he should attribute this sudden departure – (for the stranger was following a direction diametrically opposite to that on which the pirate had fled) – till he saw him return, leading another horse by the bridle.

The stranger had thought of the young lady he had so miraculously saved; and on seeing the horses of the killed bandits galloping about, he resolved at once to capture the best of them, in order to enable her to continue her journey more comfortably; and when the animal was lassoed, he returned slowly towards the man to whom he had rendered so great a service.

"Señor," the horseman said, as soon as they met again, "all is not over yet; I have a further service to ask of you."

"Speak, Caballero," the stranger replied, starting at the sound of the voice, which he fancied he recognised. "Speak, I am listening to you."

"A woman, an unhappy girl – my sister, in a word, is lost in this horrible desert. Some of the scoundrels started in pursuit of her, and I know not what may have happened to her. I am in mortal agony, and must rejoin her at all risks; hence do not leave the good action you have so well begun unfinished; help me to find my sister's track, – join with me in seeking her."

"It is useless," the stranger answered, coldly.

"What, useless!" the horseman exclaimed with horror; "Has any misfortune happened to her? Ah! I remember now; I fancied, while I was flying, that I heard several shots. Oh, Heaven, Heaven!" he added, writhing his hands in despair, "My poor sister, my poor Marianita!"

"Reassure yourself, Caballero," the stranger continued in the same cold deliberate accent; "your sister is in safety, temporarily at least, and has nothing to fear. Heaven permitted that I should cross her path."

"Are you stating truth?" he exclaimed, joyfully. "Oh, bless you, Señor, for the happy news! Where is she? Let me see her! Let me press her to my heart. Alas! How shall I ever acquit my debt to you?"

"You owe me nothing," the stranger answered in a rough voice; "it was chance, or God, if you prefer it, that did everything, and I was only the instrument. My conduct would have been the same to any other person; so keep your gratitude – which I do not ask of you. Who knows," he added ironically, "whether you may not some day repent of having contracted any obligations toward me?"

The horseman felt internally pained at the way in which his advances were received by a man who scarce five minutes previously had saved his life. Not knowing to what he should attribute this sudden change of temper, he pretended not to notice anything offensive the words might contain, and said, with exquisite politeness —

"The spot is badly chosen for a lengthened conversation, Caballero. We are still, if not strangers, at least unknown to each other. I trust that ere long all coldness and misunderstanding will cease between us, and make room for perfect confidence."

The other smiled bitterly.

"Come," he said, "your sister is near here, and must be impatient to see you."

The horseman followed him without replying; but asking himself mentally who this singular man could be, who risked his life to defend him, and yet appeared anxious to treat him as an enemy.

All the sounds of the combat had reached the maiden's ear: she had heard them while kneeling on the ground, half dead with terror, and searching her troubled memory in vain for a prayer to address to Heaven.

Then the firing had ceased: a mournful silence again spread over the desert – a silence more terrifying a thousandfold than the terrible sounds of the fight, and she remained crouching in a corner and suffering from nameless agony, alone, far from all human help, not daring to retain a single hope, and fearing at each moment to see a frightful death awaiting her. The poor girl could not have said how long she remained thus crushed beneath the weight of her terror. A person must really have suffered, to know of how many centuries a minute is composed when life or death is awaited.

Suddenly she started: her strong nerves relaxed, a fugitive flush tinged her cheek, she fancied she had heard a few words uttered in a low voice not far from her. Were her enemies again pursuing her? Or was her saviour returning to her side?

She remained anxious and motionless, not daring to make a movement or utter a cry to ask for help; for a movement might reveal her presence, a cry hopelessly ruin her.

But, ere long, the bushes were parted by a powerful hand; and two horsemen appeared at the base of the rock. The maiden stretched out her hands to them with an exclamation of delight; and, too weak to support this last emotion, she fainted.

She had recognised in the men, who arrived side by side, her brother and the stranger to whom she owed her life.

When she regained her senses, she was lying on furs in front of a large fire. The two men were sitting on her right and left; while in the rock cave, three horses were eating their provender of alfalfa.

Somewhat in the shadow a few paces from her, the maiden perceived a mass, whose form it was impossible for her to distinguish at the first glance, but which a more attentive examination enabled her to recognise as a bound man lying on the ground.

The maiden was anxious to speak and thank her liberator; but the shock she had received was so rude, the emotion so powerful, that it was impossible for her to utter a word – so weak did she feel. She could only give him a glance full of all the gratitude she felt, and then fell back into a state of feverish exhaustion and morbid apathy, which almost completely deprived her of the power of thinking and feeling, and which rendered her involuntarily ignorant of all that was going on around her.

"It is well," said the stranger, as he carefully closed a gold mounted flask and concealed it in his bosom. "Now, Caballero, there is nothing more to fear for the Señorita; the draught I have administered to her, by procuring her a calm and healthy sleep, will restore her strength sufficiently for her to be able to continue her journey at sunrise, should it be necessary."

"Caballero," the stranger answered, "you are really performing the part of Providence towards me and my sister, I know not, in truth, how to express to you the lively gratitude I feel for a procedure which is the more generous as I am a perfect stranger to you."

"Do you think so?" he answered sarcastically.

"The more I examine your face, the more convinced I am that I have met you tonight for the first time."

"You would not venture to affirm it?"

"Yes, I would. Your features are too remarkable for me not to remember them if I had seen you before; but I repeat, if you fancy you know me, you are mistaken, and an accidental resemblance to some other person is the cause of your error."

There was a momentary silence, and then the stranger spoke again, with a politeness too affected for the irony it concealed not to be seen —

"Be it so, Caballero," he answered, with a bow; "perhaps I am mistaken. Be good enough, therefore, if you have no objection, to tell me who you are, and by what fortuitous concurrence of circumstances I have been enabled to render you what you are kind enough to call a great service?"

"And it is an immense one, in truth, Caballero," the stranger interrupted with warmth.

"I will not discuss that subject any longer with you, Caballero; I am awaiting your pleasure."

"Señor, I will not abuse your patience for long. My name is Don Ruiz de Moguer, and I reside with my father at a hacienda in the vicinity of Arispe. For reasons too lengthy to explain to you, and which would but slightly interest you, the presence of my sister (who has been at school for some years at the Convent of the Conception at El Rosario) became indispensable at the hacienda. By my father's orders I set out for El Rosario a few months ago, in order to bring my sister back to her family. I was anxious to rejoin my father; and hence, in spite of the observations made to me by persons acquainted with the dangers attending so long a journey through a desert country, I resolved to take no escort, but start for home merely accompanied by two peons, on whose courage and fidelity I could rely."

"My sister who had been separated from her family for several years, was as eager as myself to quit the convent; and hence we soon set out. For the first few days all went well; our journey was performed under the most favourable auspices, and my sister and I laughed at the anxiety and apprehensions of our friends, for we had begun to believe ourselves safe from any dangerous encounter."

"But yesterday at sunset, just as we were preparing our camp for the night, we were suddenly attacked by a party of bandits, who seemed to emerge from the ground in front of us, so unforeseen was their apparition. Our poor brave peons were killed while defending us; and my sister's horse, struck by a bullet in the head, threw her. But the brave girl, far from surrendering to the bandits, who rushed forward to seize her, began flying across the savannah. Then I tried to lead the aggressors off the scent, and induce them to pursue me. You know the rest, Caballero; and had it not been for your providential interference, it would have been all over with us."

There was a silence, which Don Ruiz was the first to break.

"Caballero," he said, "now that you know who I am, tell me the name of my saviour?"

"What good is that?" the stranger answered, sadly. "We have come together for a moment by chance, and shall separate tomorrow never to meet again. Gratitude is a heavy burden. Not knowing who I am, you will soon have forgotten me. Believe me, Señor Don Ruiz, it is better that it should be so. Who knows if you may not regret some day knowing me?"

"It is the second time you have said that, Caballero. Your words breathe a bitterness that pains me. You must have suffered very grievously for your thoughts to be so sad and your heart so disenchanted at an age when the future ordinarily appears so full of promise."

The stranger raised his head, and bent on his questioner a glance that seemed trying to read to the bottom of his soul: the latter continued, however, with some degree of vivacity —

"Oh! Do not mistake the meaning I attach to my words, Caballero. I have no intention to take your confidence by surprise, or encroach on your secrets. Every man's life belongs to himself — his actions concern himself alone; and I recognise no claim to a confidence which I neither expect nor desire. The only thing I ask of you is to tell me your name, that my sister and myself may retain it in our hearts."

"Why insist on so frivolous a matter?"

"I will answer — What reason have you to be so obstinate in remaining unknown?"

"Then you insist on my telling you my name?"

"Oh, Caballero, I have no right to insist; I only ask it."

"Very good," said the stranger, "you shall know my name; but I warn you that it will teach you nothing."

"Pardon me, Caballero," Don Ruiz remarked, with a touch of exquisite delicacy, "this name, repeated by me to my father, will tell him every hour in the day that it is to the man who bears it that he owes the life of his children, and a whole family will bless you."

In spite of himself, the stranger felt affected. By an instinctive movement he offered his hand to the young man, which the latter pressed affectionately. But, as if suddenly reproaching himself for yielding to his feelings, this strange man sharply drew back his hand, and reassuming the expression

of sternness, which had for a moment departed from him, said, with a roughness in his voice that astonished and saddened the young Mexican, "You shall be satisfied."

We have said that Doña Marianita, in looking round her, fancied she saw the body of a man stretched on the ground a few paces from the fire. The maiden was not mistaken; it was really a man she saw, carefully gagged and bound. It was in a word, one of the two bandits who had pursued her so long, and the one whom the stranger had almost killed with a blow of his rifle butt.

After recommending Don Ruiz to be patient by a wave of his hand, the stranger rose, walked straight up to the bandit, threw him on his shoulders, and laid him at the feet of the young Mexican, perhaps rather roughly – for the pirate, in spite of the thorough Indian stoicism he affected, could not suppress a stifled yell of pain.

"Who is this man, and what do you purpose doing with him?" Don Ruiz asked, with some anxiety.

"This scoundrel," the stranger answered, harshly, "was one of the band that attacked you; we are going to try him."

"Try him?" the young gentleman objected; "We?"

"Of course," the stranger said, as he removed the bandit's gag, and unfastened the rope that bound his limbs. "Do you fancy that we are going to trouble ourselves with the scoundrel till we find a prison in which to place him, without counting the fact that, if we were so simple as to do so, the odds are about fifty to one that he would escape from us during the journey, and slip through our fingers like an opossum, to attack us a few hours later at the head of a fresh band of pirates of his own breed. No, no; that would be madness. When the snake is dead, the venom is dead, too; it is better to try him."

"But by what right can we constitute ourselves the judges of this man?"

"By what right?" the stranger exclaimed, in amazement. "The Border law, which says, 'Eye for eye; tooth for tooth.' Lynch law authorizes us to try this bandit, and when the sentence is pronounced, to execute it ourselves."

Don Ruiz reflected for a moment, during which the stranger looked at him aside with the most serious attention.

"That is possible," the young man at length answered; "perhaps you are right in speaking thus. This man is guilty – he is evidently a miserable assassin covered with blood; and, had my sister and myself fallen into his hands, he would not have hesitated to stab us, or blow out our brains."

"Well?" the stranger remarked.

"Well," the young man continued, with generous animation in his voice; "this certainly does not authorize us in taking justice into our own hands; besides, my sister is saved."

"Then it is your opinion –"

"That as we cannot hand this man over to the police, we are bound to set him at liberty, after taking all proper precautions that he cannot injure us."

"You have, doubtless, carefully reflected on the consequences of the deed you advise?"

"My conscience orders me to act as I am doing."

"Your will be done!" and, addressing the bandit, who throughout the conversation had remained gloomy and silent, though his eyes constantly wandered from one to the other of the speakers, he said to him, "Get up!"

The pirate rose.

"Look at me," the stranger continued; "do you recognise me?"

"No," the bandit said.

The stranger seized a lighted brand, and held it up near his face.

"Look at me more carefully, Kidd," he said, in a sharp, imperious voice.

The scoundrel, who had bent forward, drew himself back with a start of fear.

"Stronghand!" he exclaimed, in a voice choked by dread.

"Ah!" the horseman said, with a sardonic smile; "I see that you recognise me now."

"Yes," the bandit muttered. "What are your orders?"

"I have none. You heard all we have been saying, I suppose?"

"All."

"What do you think of it?"

The pirate did not answer.

"Speak, and be frank! I insist."

"Hum!" he said, with a side-glance.

"Will you speak? I tell you I insist."

"Well!" he answered, in a rather humbling voice, but yet with a tinge of irony easy to notice; "I think that when you hold your enemy, you ought to kill him."

"That is really your opinion?"

"Yes."

"What do you say to that?" the stranger asked, turning to Don Ruiz.

"I say," he replied, simply, "that as this man is not my enemy, I cannot and ought not to take any vengeance on him."

"Hence?"

"Hence, justice alone has the right to make him account for his conduct. As for me, I decline."

"And that is truly the expression of your thoughts?"

"On my honour, Caballero. During the fight I should not have felt the slightest hesitation in killing him – for in that case I was defending the life he tried to take; but now that he is a prisoner, and unarmed, I have no longer aught to do with him."

In spite of the mask of indifference the stranger wore on his face, he could not completely hide the joy he experienced at hearing these noble sentiments so simply expressed.

There was a moment's silence, during which the three men seemed questioning each other's faces. At length Stronghand spoke again, and addressed the bandit, who remained motionless, and apparently indifferent to what was being said —

"Go! You are free!" he said, as he cut the last bonds that held him. "But remember, Kidd, that if it has pleased this Caballero to forget your offences, I have not pardoned them. You know me, so do your best to keep out of my way, or you will not escape, so easily as this day, the just punishment you have deserved. Begone!"

"All right, Stronghand, I will remember," the bandit said, with a covert threat.

And at once gliding into the bushes, he disappeared, without taking further leave of the persons who had given him his life.

CHAPTER III

THE BIVOUC

For some moments the bandit's hurried footsteps were audible, and then all became silent once again.

"You wished it," Stronghand then said, looking at Don Ruiz from under his bent brows. "Now, be certain that you have at least one implacable enemy on the prairie; for you are not so simple, I assume, as to believe in the gratitude of such a man?"

"I pity him, if he hates me for the good I have done him in return for the harm he wished to do me, but honour ordered me to let him escape."

"Yours will be a short life, Señor, if you are obstinate in carrying out such philanthropic precepts in our unhappy country."

"My ancestors had a motto to which they never proved false."

"And pray what may that motto be, Caballero?"

"Everything for honour, no matter what may happen," the young man said, simply.

"Yes," Stronghand answered, with a harsh laugh; "the maxim is noble, and Heaven grant it prove of service to you; but," he continued, after looking round him, "the darkness is beginning to grow less thick, the night is on the wane, and within an hour the sun will be up. You know my name, which, as I told you beforehand, has not helped you much."

"You are mistaken, Caballero," Don Ruiz interrupted him, eagerly; "for I have frequently heard the name mentioned, of which you fancied me ignorant."

Stronghand bent a piercing glance on the young man.

"Ah!" he said, with a slight tremor in his voice; "And doubtless, each time you heard that name uttered, it was accompanied by far from flattering epithets, which gave you but a poor opinion of the man who bears it."

"Here again you are mistaken, Señor; it has been uttered in my presence as the name of a brave man, with a powerful heart and vast intellect, whom unknown and secret sorrow has urged to lead a strange life, to fly the society of his fellow men, and to wander constantly about the deserts; but who, under all circumstances, even spite of the examples that daily surrounded him, managed to keep his honour intact and retain a spotless reputation, which even the bandits, with whom the incidents of an adventurous life too often bring him into contact, are forced to admire. That, Señor, is what this name, which you supposed I was ignorant of, recalls to my mind, and the way in which I have ever heard the man who bears it spoken of."

Stronghand smiled bitterly.

"Can the world really be less wicked and unjust than I supposed it?" he muttered, in self-colloquy.

"Do not doubt it," the young man said, eagerly. "God, who has allowed the good and the bad to dwell side by side on this earth, has yet willed that the amount of good should exceed that of bad, so that, sooner or later, each should be requited according to his works and merits."

"Such words," he answered, ironically, "would be more appropriate in the mouth of a priest or missionary, whose hair has been blanched, and back bowed by the weight of the incessant struggles of his apostolic mission, than in that of a young man who has scarce reached the dawn of life, whom no tempest has yet assailed, and who has only tasted the honey of life. But no matter; your intention is good, and I thank you. But we have far more serious matters to attend to than losing our time in philosophical discussions which would not convince either of us."

"I was wrong, Caballero, I allow," Don Ruiz answered; "it does not become me, who am as yet but a child, to make such remarks to you; so, pray pardon me."

"I have nothing to pardon you, Señor," Stronghand replied with a smile; "on the contrary, I thank you. Now let us attend to the most pressing affair – that is to say, what you purpose doing to get out of your present situation."

"I confess to you that I am greatly alarmed," Don Ruiz replied, with a slight tinge of sadness, as he looked at the girl, who was still sleeping. "What has happened to me, the terrible danger I have incurred, and from which I only escaped, thanks to your generous help – "

"Not a word more on that subject," Stronghand interrupted him quickly. "You will disoblige me by pressing it further."

The young man bowed.

"Were I alone," he said, "I should not hesitate to continue my journey. A brave man, and I believe myself one, nearly always succeeds in escaping the perils that threaten him, if he confront them: but I have my sister with me – my sister, whose energy the terrible scene of this night has broken, and who, in the event of a second attack from the pirates of the prairies, would become an easy prey to the villains – the more so because, too weak to save her, I could only die with her."

Stronghand turned away, murmuring to himself compassionately.

"That is true, poor child;" then he said to Don Ruiz, "Still, you must make up your mind."

"Unfortunately I have no choice; there is only one thing to be done: whatever may happen, I shall continue my journey at sunrise, if my sister be in a condition to follow me."

"That need not trouble you. When she awakes, her strength will be sufficiently recovered for her to keep on horseback without excessive fatigue; but from here to Arispe the road is very long."

"I know it: and it is that which frightens me for my poor sister."

"Listen to me. Perhaps there is a way for you to get out of the scrape, and avoid up to a certain point the dangers that threaten you. Two days' journey from here there is a military post, placed like an advanced sentry to watch the frontier, and prevent the incursions of the Indios bravos, and other bandits of every description and colour, who infest these regions. The main point for you is to reach this post, when it will be easy for you to obtain from the Commandant an escort to protect you from any insult for the rest of your journey."

"Yes; but, as you remark, I must reach the post."

"Well?"

"I do not know this country: one of the two peons who accompanied me acted as guide; and now he is dead, it is utterly impossible for me to find my way. I am in the position of a sailor, lost without a compass on an unknown sea."

Stronghand looked at him with surprise mingled with compassion.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, "How improvident is youth! What! Imprudent boy! You dared to risk yourself in the desert, and entrust to a peon your sister's precious life?" But, recollecting himself immediately, he continued, "Pardon me; reproaches are ill suited at this moment; the great thing is to get you out of the danger in which you are."

He let his head fall on his hands, and plunged into serious reflections, while Don Ruiz looked at him with mingled apprehension and hope. The young man did not deceive himself as to his position: the reproaches which Stronghand spared him, he had already made himself, cursing his improvident temerity; for things had reached such a point, that if the man to whom he owed his life, refused to afford him his omnipotent protection, he and his sister were irremediably lost.

Stronghand, after a few minutes, which seemed to last an age, rose, seized his rifle, went up to his horse, saddled it, mounted, and said to Don Ruiz, who followed all his movements with anxious curiosity —

"Wait for me, however long my absence may be; do not stir from here till I return."

Then, without waiting for the young man's answer, he bent lightly over his horse's neck, and started at a gallop. Don Ruiz watched the black outline, as it disappeared in the gloom; he listened to

the horse's footfalls so long as he could hear them, and then turned back and seated himself pensively at the fire, and looked with tearful eyes at his sleeping sister.

"Poor Marianita!" he murmured, with a heart-rending outburst of pity.

He bowed his head on his chest, and with pale and gloomy face awaited the return of Stronghand – a return which, in his heart, he doubted, although, with the obstinacy of desperate men, who try to deceive themselves by making excuses whose falsehood they know, he sought to prove its certainty.

We will take advantage of this delay in our narrative to trace rapidly the portraits of Don Ruiz de Moguer and his sister Marianita. We will begin with the young lady, through politeness.

Doña Mariana – or rather Marianita, as she was generally called at the convent, and by her family – was a charming girl scarce sixteen, graceful in her movements, and with black lustrous eyes. Her hair had the bluish tinge of the raven's wing; her skin, the warm and gilded hues of the sun of her country; her glance, half veiled by her long brown eyelashes, was ardent; her straight nose, with its pink flexible nostrils, was delicious; her laughing mouth, with its bright red lips, gave her face an expression of simple, ignorant candour. Her movements, soft and indolent, had that indescribable languor and serpentine undulation alone possessed in so eminent a degree by the women of Lima and Mexico, those daughters of the sun in whose veins flows the molten lava of the volcanoes, instead of blood. In a word, she was a Spanish girl from head to foot – but Andalusian before all. Hers was an ardent, wild, jealous, passionate, and excessively superstitious nature. But this lovely, splendid statue still wanted the divine spark. Doña Mariana did not know herself; her heart had not yet spoken; she was as yet but a delicious child, whom the fiery breath of love would convert into an adorable woman.

Physically, Don Ruiz was, as a man, the same his sister was a woman. He was a thorough gentleman, and scarce four years older than Doña Mariana. He was tall and well built; but his elegant and aristocratic form denoted great personal strength. His regular features – too regular perhaps, for a man – bore an unmistakable stamp of distinction; his black eye had a frank and confident look; his mouth, which was rather large, but adorned with splendid teeth, and fringed by a fine brown moustache, coquettishly turned up, still retained the joyous, careless smile of youth; his face displayed loyalty, gentleness, and bravery carried to temerity; – in a word, all his features offered the most perfect type of a true-blooded gentleman.

Brother and sister, who, with the exception of a few almost imperceptible variations, had the most perfect physical likeness, also resembled each other morally. Both were equally ignorant of things of the world. With their pure and innocent hearts they loved each other with the holiest of all loves, fraternal affection, and only lived through and for each other.

Hence, Doña Mariana had felt a great delight and great impatience to quit the convent, when Don Ruiz, in obedience to his father's commands, came to fetch her from the Rosario. This impatience obliged Don Ruiz not to consent to wait for an escort on his homeward journey, for fear of vexing his sister. It was an imprudence that caused the misfortunes we have already described, and for which, now they had arrived, Don Ruiz reproached himself bitterly. He cursed the weakness that had made him yield to the whims of a girl, and accused himself of being, through his weakness, the sole cause of the frightful dangers from which she had only escaped by a miracle, and of those no less terrible, which, doubtless, still threatened her on the hundred and odd leagues they had still to go before reaching the hacienda del Toro, where dwelt her father, Don Hernando de Moguer.

Still the hours, which never stop, continued to follow each other slowly. The sun had risen; and, through its presence on the horizon, immediately dissipated the darkness and heated the ground, which was chilled by the abundant and icy dew of morning.

Doña Marianita, aroused by the singing of the thousands of birds concealed beneath the foliage, opened her eyes with a smile. The calm sleep she had enjoyed for several hours restored not only her strength, which was exhausted by the struggles of the previous evening, but also her courage and gaiety. The girl's first glance was for her brother, who, anxious and uneasy, was attentively watching her slumbers, and impatiently awaiting the moment for her to awake.

"Oh, Ruiz," she said, in her melodious voice, and offering her hand and cheek simultaneously to the young man, "what a glorious sleep I have had."

"Really, sister," he exclaimed, kissing her, gladly, "you have slept well."

"That is to say," she continued, with a smile, "that at the convent I never passed so delicious a night, accompanied by such charming dreams; but it is true there were two of you to watch over my slumbers – two kind and devoted hearts, in whom I could trust with perfect confidence."

"Yes, sister; there were two of us."

"What?" she asked in surprise mingled with anxiety. "You were – What do you mean, Ruiz?"

"What I say; nothing else, dear sister."

"But I do not see the caballero to whom we have incurred so great an obligation. Where is he?"

"I cannot tell you, little sister. About two hours ago he mounted his horse and left me, telling me not to stir from here till his return."

"Oh, in that case I am quite easy. His absence alarmed me; but now that I know he will return –"

"Do you believe so?" he interrupted.

"Why should I doubt it?" she continued with some animation in her voice; "Did he not promise to return?"

"Certainly."

"Well! A caballero never breaks his pledged word. He said he would come, and he will come."

"Heaven grant it!" Don Ruiz muttered.

And he shook his head sadly, and gave a profound sigh. The maiden felt herself involuntarily assailed by anxiety. This persistency undoubtedly terrified her.

"Come, Ruiz," she said, turning very pale, "explain yourself. What has happened between this caballero and yourself?"

"Nothing beyond what you know, sister. Still, in spite of the man's promise, I know not why, but I fear. He is a strange, incomprehensible being – at one moment kind, at another cruel – changing his character, and almost his face, momentarily. He frightens and repels, and yet attracts and interests me. I am afraid he will abandon us, and fear that he will return. A secret foreboding seems to warn me that this man will have a great influence over your future and mine. Perhaps it is our misfortune that we have met him."

"I do not understand you, Ruiz. What means this confusion in your ideas? Why this stern and strange judgment of a man whom you do not know, and who has only done you kindness?"

At the moment when Don Ruiz was preparing to answer, the gallop of a horse became audible in the distance.

"Silence, brother!" she exclaimed, with an emotion she could not repress; "Silence, here he comes!"

The young man looked at his sister in amazement.

"How do you know it?" he asked her.

"I have recognised him," she stammered, with a deep blush. "Stay – Look!"

In fact, at this moment the shrubs parted, and Stronghand appeared in the open space. Don Ruiz, though surprised at the singular remark which had escaped his sister, had not time to ask her for an explanation. Without dismounting, Stronghand, after bowing courteously to the young lady, said, hurriedly —

"To horse! – To horse! Make haste! Time presses!"

Don Ruiz at once saddled his own horse and his sister's, and a few minutes later the two young people were riding by the hunter's side.

"Let us start!" the latter continued. "*Cuerpo de Cristo*, Caballero, I warned you that you were doing an imprudent action in liberating that villain. If we do not take care, we shall have him at our heels within an hour."

These words sufficed to give the fugitives wings, and they started at full gallop after the bold wood ranger. An hour elapsed ere a word was exchanged between the three persons; bent over the necks of their steeds they devoured the space – looking back anxiously from time to time, and only thinking how to escape the unknown dangers by which they felt themselves surrounded. About eight o'clock in the morning, Stronghand checked his horse, and made his companions a sign to follow his example.

"Now," he said, "we have nothing more to fear. When we have crossed that wood, which stretches out in front of us like a curtain of verdure, we shall see the Port of San Miguel, whose walls will offer us a certain shelter against the attacks of all the bandits of the desert, were there ten thousand of them."

"Last night I fancy that you spoke to me of a more distant post," Don Ruiz said.

"Yes; for I fancied San Miguel abandoned, if not in ruins. Before I gave you what might prove a fallacious hope, I wished to assure myself of the truth of the case."

"Do you believe that the Commandant will consent to receive us?" the young lady asked.

"Certainly, Señorita, for a thousand reasons. In the first place, the frontier posts are only established for the purpose of watching over the safety of travellers; and then, again, San Miguel is commanded by one of your relations – or, at any rate, an intimate friend of your family."

The young people looked at each other in surprise.

"Do you know this Commandant's name?" Don Ruiz asked.

"I was told it: he is Don Marcos de Niza."

"Oh!" Doña Mariana exclaimed, joyfully; "I should think we do know him: Don Marcos is a cousin of ours."

"In that case, all is for the best," the hunter answered, coldly. "Let us continue our journey; for there is a cloud of dust behind us that forebodes us no good, if it reaches us before we have entered the post."

The young people, without answering, resumed their gallop, crossed the wood, and entered the little fort.

"Look!" Stronghand said to Don Ruiz and his sister, the moment the gate closed upon them. They turned back. A numerous band of horsemen issued from the wood at this moment, and galloped up at full speed, uttering ferocious yells.

"This is the second time you have saved our lives, Caballero," Doña Mariana said to the partizan, with a look of gratitude.

"Why count them, Señorita?" he replied, with a sadness mingled with bitterness. "Do I do so?"

The maiden gave him a look of undefinable meaning, turned her head away with a blush, and silently followed her brother.

The Spaniards, whatever may be the opinion the Utopians of the old world express about their mode of civilization, and the way in which they treated the Indians of America, understood very well how to enhance the prosperity of the countries they had been endowed with by the strong arms of those heroic adventurers who were called Cortez, Pizarro, Bilboa, Alvarado, &c., and whose descendants, if any by chance exist, are now in the most frightful wretchedness, although their ancestors gave a whole world and incalculable riches to their ungrateful country.

When the Spanish rule was established in America, the first care of the conquerors – after driving back the Indians who refused to accept their iron yoke into frightful deserts, where they hoped want would put an end to them – was to secure their frontiers, and prevent those indomitable hordes, impelled by hunger and despair, from entering the newly conquered country and plundering the towns and the haciendas. For this purpose they established along the desert line a cordon of presidios and military posts, which were all connected together, and could, in case of need, assist each other, not so much through their proximity – for they were a great distance apart, and scattered over a great space – but by means of numerous patrols of lanceros, who constantly proceeded from one post to the other.

At present, since the declaration of independence, owing to the neglect of the governments which have succeeded each other in this unhappy country, most of the presidios and forts no longer exist. Some have been burned by the Indians, who became invaders in their turn, and are gradually regaining the territory the Europeans took from them; while others have been abandoned, or so badly kept up, that they are for the most part in ruins. Still, here and there you find a few, which exceptionable circumstances have compelled the inhabitants to repair and defend.

As these forts were built in all the colonies on the same plan, in describing the post of San Miguel, which still exists, and which we have visited, the reader will easily form an idea of the simple and yet effective defence adopted by the Europeans to protect them from the surprises of their implacable and crafty foes.

The post of San Miguel is composed of four square pavilions, connected together by covered ways, the inner walls of which surround a courtyard planted with lemon trees, peach trees, and algarrobas. On this court opens the room intended for travellers, the barracks, &c. The outer walls have only one issue, and are provided with loopholes, which can only be reached by mounting a platform eight feet high and three wide. All the masonry is constructed of *adobes*, or large blocks of earth stamped and baked in the sun.

Twenty feet beyond this wall is another, formed of cactuses, planted very closely together, and having their branches intertwined. This vegetable wall, if we may be allowed the use of the expression, is naturally very thick, and protected by formidable prickles, which render it impenetrable for the half-clad and generally badly-armed Indians. The only entrance to it is a heavy gate, supported by posts securely bedded in the ground. The soldiers, standing at the loopholes of the second wall, fire in perfect shelter, and command the space above the cactuses.

On the approach of the Indians, when the Mexican Moon is at hand – that is to say, the invariable season of their invasions – the sparse dwellers on the border seek refuge inside San Miguel, and there in complete safety wait till their enemies are weary of a siege which can have no result for them, or till they are put to flight by soldiers sent from a town frequently fifty leagues off.

Don Marcos de Niza was a man of about forty, short and plump, but withal active and quick. His regular features displayed a simplicity of character, marked with intelligence and decision. He was one of those educated honest professional officers, of whom the Mexican army unfortunately counts too few in its ranks. Hence, as he thoroughly attended to his duties, and had never tried to secure promotion by intrigue and party manoeuvres, he had remained a captain for ten years past, without hope of promotion, in spite of his qualifications (which were recognised and appreciated by all) and his irreproachable conduct. The post he occupied at this moment as Commandant of the Blockhouse of San Miguel proved the value the Governor of the province set upon him; for the frontier posts, constantly exposed to the attacks of the Redskins, can only be given to sure men, who have long been accustomed to Indian warfare.

CHAPTER IV

THE POST OF SAN MIGUEL

As the dangerous honour of commanding one of the border forts like San Miguel is not at all coveted by the brilliant officers accustomed to clatter their sabres on the stones of the Palace in Mexico, it is generally only given to brave soldiers who have no prospect of promotion left to them.

Informed by a cabo, or corporal, of the names of the guests who thus suddenly arrived, the Captain rose to meet them with open arms and a smile on his lips.

"Oh, oh," he exclaimed, gleefully; "this is a charming surprise! Children, I am delighted to see you."

"Do not thank us, Don Marcos," Doña Mariana answered, smilingly. "We are not paying you a visit, but have come to ask shelter and protection of you."

"You have them already. ¡Rayo de Dios! Are we not relations, and very close ones, too?"

"Without doubt, cousin," Don Ruiz said; "hence, in our misfortune, it is a great happiness for us to come across you."

"Hilloh! You have something serious to tell me," the Captain continued, his face growing gloomy.

"So serious," the young man said, with a bow to the partizan, who stood motionless by his side, "that had it not been for the help of this caballero, in all probability we should be lying dead in the desert."

"Oh, oh; my poor children! Come, dismount and follow me; you must need rest and refreshment after such an alarm. Cabo Hernandez, take charge of the horses."

The corporal took the horses, which he led to the corral; and the young people followed the Captain, after having been kissed and hugged by him several times. Don Marcos pressed the hunter's hand, and made him a sign to follow them.

"There," he said, after introducing his guests into a room modestly furnished with a few butacas; "sit down, children; and when you have rested, we will talk."

Refreshments had been prepared on the table. While the young people enjoyed them, the Captain quitted them, and went with the hunter into another room. So soon as they were alone, the two men became serious, and the joy that illumined the Captain's face was suddenly extinguished.

"Well," he asked Stronghand, after making him a sign to sit down, "what news?"

"Bad," he answered, distinctly.

"I expected it," the officer muttered, with a sad toss of the head; "we must put on our harness again, and push out into the savannah, in order to prove to these bandits that we are able to punish them."

The hunter shook his head several times, but said nothing. The Captain looked at him attentively for some minutes.

"What is the matter, my friend?" he at length asked him, with growing anxiety; "I never saw you so sad and gloomy before."

"The reason is," he answered, "because circumstances have never been so serious."

"Explain yourself, my friend; I confess to you that you are really beginning to alarm me. With the exception of a few insignificant marauders, the borders have never appeared to me more quiet."

"It is a deceitful calm, Don Marcos, which contains the tempest in its bosom – and a terrible tempest, I, assure you."

"And yet our spies are all agreed in assuring us that the Indians are not at all thinking of an expedition."

"It proves that your spies betray you, that's all."

"Possibly so; but still, I should like some proof or sign."

"I ask for nothing better; I am enabled to give you the most positive information."

"Very good; that is the way to speak. I am listening to you."

"Before all, is your garrison strong?"

"I consider it large enough."

"Perhaps so: how many men have you?"

"Sixty or seventy, about."

"That is not enough."

"What! Not enough? The garrisons of blockhouses are never more numerous."

"In a time of peace, it may be so; but under present circumstances, I repeat to you, that they are not enough, and you will soon agree with me on that score. You must send off a courier, without the loss of a moment, to ask for a reinforcement of from one hundred and fifty to two hundred men. Do not deceive yourself, Captain; you will be the first attacked, and the attack will be a rude one. I warn you."

"Thanks for the hint. Still, my good friend, you will permit me not to follow it till you have proved to me that there are urgent reasons for doing so."

"As you please, Captain; you are the commandant of the post, and your responsibility must urge you to prudence. I will therefore abstain from making any farther observations on the subject which only concerns me very indirectly."

"You are annoyed, and wrongly so, my friend; the responsibility to which you refer demands that I should not let myself be led by vague rumours to take measures I might have cause to regret. Give me the explanation I expect of you; and, probably, when I know the imminence of the danger that threatens me, I shall follow your advice."

"I wish for nothing more than to satisfy you; so listen to me. What I have to tell you will not take long."

At this moment the room door opened and Corporal Hernandez appeared. The Captain, annoyed at being thus inopportunately disturbed, turned sharply round and angrily addressed the man

—
"Well Corporal," he said, "what the fiend do you want now?"

"Excuse me, Captain," the poor fellow said, astounded at this rough greeting, "but the Lieutenant sent me."

"Well, what does the Lieutenant want? Speak! But be brief, if that is possible."

"Captain, the sentry has seen a large party of horsemen coming at full gallop towards the fort, and the Lieutenant ordered me to warn you."

"Eh," said the Captain, looking uneasily at the hunter, "were you in the right? and is this troop the vanguard of the enemy you threaten us with?"

"This troop," the hunter answered, with an equivocal smile, "has been following Don Ruiz and myself since the morning. I do not believe that these horsemen are Indians."

"What's the Lieutenant's opinion about these scamps?" the Captain asked the corporal.

"They are too far off yet, and too hidden by the dust they raise, Captain, for it to be possible to recognise them," the non-commissioned officer replied with a bow.

"That is true. We had better, I believe, go and look for ourselves. Will you come?"

"I should think so," the hunter said, as he seized his rifle, which he had deposited in a corner of the room; and they went out.

Don Ruiz and his sister were talking together, while doing ample justice to the refreshment placed at their disposal. On seeing the Captain, the young man rose and walked up to him.

"Cousin," he said to him, with a bow, "I hear that you are on the point of being attacked; and as it is to some extent my cause you are going to defend, for the bandits who threaten you at this moment are allies of those with whom I had a fight last night, pray allow me to fire a shot by your side."

"¡Viva Dios! Most heartily, my dear cousin," the Captain answered, gaily: "although these scoundrels are not worth the trouble. Come along!"

"That's a fine fellow!" the Captain whispered in the hunter's ear.

The latter made no answer. He contented himself with shrugging his shoulders, and turned away.

"Oh," Doña Mariana exclaimed, "Ruiz, what are you going to do? Stay with me, I implore you, brother!"

"Impossible, sister," the young man answered, as he kissed her; "what would our cousin think of me were I to skulk here when fighting was going on?"

"Fear nothing, Niña; I am answerable for your brother," the Captain said with a smile.

The girl sat down again sadly on the butaca from which she had risen, and the four men then left the room, and proceeded to the patio, or court. Here everybody was busy. The Lieutenant, an old experienced soldier, with a grey moustache and face furrowed by sabre cuts, and whose whole life had been spent on the borders, had not lost his time. While, by his order, Corporal Hernandez warned the Captain, he had ordered the "fall-in" to be beaten, had placed the best shots at the loopholes, and made all arrangements to avoid a surprise and give a warm reception to the enemy who advanced so daringly against the fort.

When the Captain set foot in the court, he stopped, embraced at a glance the wise and intelligent arrangements made by his Lieutenant, and a smile of satisfaction spread over his features.

"And now," he said to the hunter, "let us go and see who the enemy is with whom we have to deal."

"It is unnecessary; for I can tell you, Captain," the other replied; "they are the pirates."

"Pirates!" Don Marcos exclaimed in amazement. "What! Those villains would dare –"

"Alone, certainly not," Stronghand quickly interrupted him; "but with the certainty of being supported by the Indians, of whom they are only the vanguard, they will not hesitate to do so. However, unless I am greatly mistaken, their attack will not be serious; and their object is probably to discover in what state of defence the post is. Receive them, then, in such a way as to leave them no doubt on this head, and prove to them that you are perfectly on your guard; and this demonstration will without doubt be sufficient to send them flying."

"You are right," said the Captain. "Viva Dios! They shall have their answer, I promise you."

He then gave the Corporal an order in a low voice; the latter bowed, and went off hurriedly. For some minutes a deep silence prevailed in the fort. The moments that precede a contest bring with them something solemn, which causes the bravest men to reflect, and prepare for the struggle, either by a powerful effort of the will, or by mentally addressing a last and fervent prayer to Heaven.

All at once, horrible yells were heard, mingled with the furious galloping of many horses; and then the enemy appeared, leaning over the necks of their steeds, and brandishing their weapons with an air of defiance. When they came within pistol shot, the word to fire was given from the walls, and a general discharge burst forth like a clap of thunder.

The horsemen fell into confusion, and turned back precipitately and in the greatest disorder, followed by the Mexican bullets, which, directed by strong arms and sure eyes, made great ravages in their ranks at every step. Still, they had not fled so fast but that they could be recognised for what they really were – that is, pirates of the prairies. Half naked for the most part, and without saddles, they brandished their rifles and long lances, and excited their horses by terrific yells.

Two or three individuals, probably chiefs, with their heads covered by a species of turban, were noticeable through their ragged uniforms, doubtless torn off murdered soldiers; their repulsive dirt and ferocious appearance inspired the deepest disgust. No doubt was possible: these wretches were certainly whites and half-breeds. What a difference between these sinister bandits and the Apaches, Comanches, and Arapahoes – those magnificent children of nature, so careful in the choice of their weapons – so noble in their demeanour.

After a rather long race, they stopped to hold counsel, out of range of the firearms. They were at this moment joined by a second band, whose leader began speaking and gesticulating with the utmost excitement, pointing to the fort each moment with his rifle. The two bands, united, might possibly amount to one hundred and fifty horsemen.

After a rather long discussion, the pirates started again, and stopped at the very foot of the walls. Captain Niza, wishing to inflict a severe chastisement on them, had given orders not to fire, but to let them do as they pleased. Hidden by the thick cactus hedge, the bandits had suddenly become invisible; but the Mexicans, confiding in the strength of their position and the solidity of the posts and gates, felt no fear.

Reassured by the silence of the garrison, some thirty pirates, among whom were several of their chiefs, escalated the great gate in turn, and rushed toward the second wall. Unluckily for the success of their plan, the wall was too lofty to be cleared in the same way; hence they scattered. Some sought stones and posts to beat in the second gate; while others tried, though in vain, to open the one they had so easily scaled.

The Mexicans could distinctly hear the pirates in the second *enceinte* explaining to their comrades the difficulty they experienced in penetrating into the fort, and they must force the gate, in order to allow a passage for those who remained outside. The latter then threw their *reatas*, which, caught upon the posts, were tightened by the combined efforts of the men and horses, and seemed on the point of pulling the gate off its hinges; but the posts held firmly, and were not even shaken by this supreme effort.

"What are you waiting for, Captain?" Don Ruiz whispered in the Commandant's ear. "Why do you not kill these vermin?"

"There are not enough yet in the trap," he answered, with a cunning look; "let them come."

In fact, as if the bandits had wished to obey the old soldier, some twenty more clambered over the gale, so that there were fifty of the pirates between the cactus and the stone wall. Encouraged by their numbers, which momentarily increased, they made a general assault. But, all at once, every loophole was lit up by a sinister flash, and the bullets began showering uninterruptedly on the wretches, who, through their own position, found it impossible to answer the plunging fire of the Mexicans. Recognising the fault they had committed, and the trap they had so stupidly entered, the pirates became demoralized, fear seized upon them, and they only thought of flight.

Then they dashed at the outer gate, to clamber over it and reach the plain; there the bullets dashed them down again – suffering from a desperation which was the greater because they had no help to hope for from their friends outside, whom, at the first check, they had heard start off at full speed; and consequently they felt they were lost.

The Mexicans, pitiless in their vengeance, fired incessantly on the wretches, some of whom, by crawling on their hands and knees, succeeded in reaching the foot of the wall below the loopholes – a position in which they could not be attacked, unless the Mexicans exposed themselves, and ran the risk of being killed or wounded. Of fifty bandits who had scaled the gate, fourteen still lived; the others were dead, and not one had succeeded in making his escape.

"Ha! Ha!" said the Captain, rubbing his hands gleefully. "I fancy that the lesson will be useful, though it may have been a trifle rough."

But, on the reiterated entreaties of Don Ruiz, the worthy Commandant, who in his heart was not cruel, consented to ask the survivors if they were willing to surrender, a proposition which the pirates greeted with yells of rage and defiance. These fourteen men, though their rifles were discharged, were not enemies to despise, armed as they were with long and heavy *machetes*, and resolved to die. The Mexicans were acquainted with them, and knew that in a hand-to-hand fight they would prove tough customers.

Still there must be an end to it. At an order from the Captain the gate of the second wall was suddenly opened, and some twenty horsemen charged at full gallop the bandits, who, far from

recoiling, awaited them with a firm foot. The *mêlée* was terrible, but short. Three Mexicans were killed, and five others seriously wounded; but the pirates, after an obstinate resistance, fell never to rise again.

Only one of them – profiting by the disorder and the attention which the soldiers remaining at the loopholes paid to the fight – succeeded by a miracle of resolution and strength in scaling the wall and flying. This pirate, the only one who escaped the massacre, was Kidd. On reaching the plain he stopped for a second, turned to the fort with a gesture of menace and defiance, and, leaping on a riderless horse, went off amid a shower of bullets, not one of which struck him.

CHAPTER V

THE STAY IN THE FOREST

When the fight was over, and order restored at the post, the Captain bade his Lieutenant have the bodies lying on the battlefield picked up and hung by the feet to the trees on the plain, so that they might become the prey of wild beasts, though not until they had been decapitated. The heads were to remain exposed on the walls of the forts, and act as an object of terror to the bandits, who, after this act of summary justice, would not venture to approach the neighbourhood of the post.

Then, when all these orders had been given, the Commandant returned to his residence, where Don Ruiz had already preceded him in order to re-assure his sister as to the result of the fight. Don Marcos was radiant: he had gained a great advantage – at least he thought so – over the border ruffians; he had inflicted on them an exemplary punishment at the expense of an insignificant loss, and supposed that for a long time no one would venture to attack the post entrusted to him.

Unfortunately, the wood ranger was not of the same opinion: each time the Captain smiled and rubbed his hands at the recollection of some episode in the fight, Stronghand shook his head sadly, and frowned anxiously. This was done so frequently, that at last the worthy Commandant was compelled to take notice of it.

"What's the matter with you now?" he asked him, with an air half vexed, half pleased. "You are, on my soul, the most extraordinary man I know. Nothing satisfies you; you are always in a bad temper. Hang it! I do not know how to treat you. Did we not give those scoundrels a remarkable thrashing, eh? Come, answer!"

"I allow it," the hunter replied laconically.

"Hum! It is lucky you allow so much. And yet they fought bravely, I fancy."

"Yes; and it is that which frightens me."

"I do not understand you."

"Was I not giving you important information when we were interrupted by the Cabo Hernandez?"

"That is to say, you were going to give it me."

"Yes; and with your permission, now that we have no fear of being interrupted for a while, I will impart the news to you."

"I ask nothing better; although I suppose that the defeat the pirates have experienced must deprive the news of much of its importance."

"The pirates play but a very small part in what I have to tell you."

"Speak, then! I know that you are too earnest a man to try and amuse yourself at my expense by inspiring me with ridiculous alarm."

"You shall judge for yourself the perils of the situation in which you may find yourself at any moment, if you do not employ the greatest precaution and the most excessive prudence."

The two men seated themselves on butacas, and the Commandant, who was more excited than he wished to show by this startling preamble, made the hunter a sign to commence his revelations.

"About two months ago," the latter began, "I was at the Presidio of San Estevan, whither certain personal matters had called me. This Presidio, which, as you know, is about two days' journey from here, is very important, and serves to some extent in connecting all the posts scattered along the Indian border."

The Captain gave a nod of assent.

"I am," the hunter continued, "on rather intimate terms with Don Gregorio Ochoa, the Colonel commanding the Presidio, and during my last stay at San Estevan I had opportunities for seeing him rather frequently. You know the savageness of my character, and the species of instinctive repulsion

with which anything resembling a town inspires me; hence, I need hardly say, that no sooner was my business ended than I made preparations to depart, and, according to my custom, intended to leave the Presidio at a very early hour. I did not like to go away without saying good-bye to the Colonel and shaking hands with him; so I went to his house for the purpose of taking leave. I found him in a state of extreme agitation, walking up and down, and apparently affected by a violent passion or great anxiety. On seeing me, he uttered an exclamation of delight, and ran up to me, exclaiming – "

"Oh, Stronghand! Where on earth have you been hiding? I have been seeking you everywhere for the last two hours, and have put a dozen soldiers on your heels, who could not possibly find you."

"I looked at the Colonel in surprise."

"You were seeking for me, Don Gregorio? I assure you that I was close to you, and very easy to find."

"It seems not. But here you are – that is the main point; and I care little where you were, or what you were doing. Do you think about making any lengthened stay at San Estevan?"

"No, Colonel," I answered at once, 'my affairs are settled; I intend to start at an early hour tomorrow, and I have just come to say good-bye, and thank you for the hospitality you have shown me during my stay at the Presidio.'

"Good!" he said eagerly, 'that is all for the best but,' he added, recollecting himself, and taking my hand in a kindly way, 'do not suppose that it is my desire to see you depart that makes me speak thus.'

"I am convinced of the contrary," I remarked with a bow."

"He continued, – 'You can, Stronghand, do me a great service, if you will.'"

"I am at your command."

"This is the matter," he said, at once entering on the business. 'For some days past, the most alarming reports have been spreading through the Presidio, though it is impossible to find out their origin.'

"And what may they be?" I asked."

"It is said – (notice, I say it is said, and affirm nothing, as I know nothing positive) – it is said, then, that a general uprising against us is preparing – that the Indians, laying aside for a moment their private hatreds, and forgetting their clannish quarrels to think only of the hereditary hatred they entertain for us, are combining to attempt a general attack on the posts, which they purpose to destroy, in order to devastate our borders more freely. Their object is said to be, not only the destruction of the posts, but also the invasion of several States, such as Sonora and Sinaloa, in which they intend to establish themselves permanently after expelling us."

"The reports are serious," I remarked, 'but nothing has as yet happened to confirm their truth.'

"That is true; but you know that there is always a certain amount of truth in every vague rumour, and it is that truth I should like to know."

"Is no nation mentioned by name among those which are to take up arms?"

"Yes; more particularly the Papayos – that is to say, the grand league of the Apaches, Axuas, Gilenos, Comanches, Mayos, and Opatas. But the more serious thing is, always according to the report, that the white and half-bred marauders on the border are leagued with them, and mean to help them in their expedition against us."

"That is really serious," I answered; 'but, pardon me for questioning you, Colonel; what do you purpose doing to make head against the imminent danger that threatens you?'

"That is exactly why I want you, my friend; and you would do me a real service by assisting me in this affair."

"I am ready to do anything that depends on myself to oblige you."

"I was certain of that answer, my friend. This is the matter, then. You understand that I cannot remain thus surrounded by vague rumours and terrors that have no apparent cause, but still carry trouble into families and cause perturbation in trade. During the last few weeks, especially, various

serious events have given a certain consistency to these rumours – travellers have been murdered, and several valuable waggon trains plundered, almost at the gates of the Presidio. It is time for this state of things to cease, and for us to know definitively the truth or falsehood of the rumours; for this purpose I require a brave, devoted man, thoroughly acquainted with Indian manners and customs, who would consent – "

"I interrupted him quickly."

"I understand what you want, Colonel; seek no further, for I am the man you stand in need of. Tomorrow at sunrise I will start: and within two months I pledge myself to give you the most explicit information, and tell you what you may have to fear, and what truth there is in all that is being said around you."

"The Colonel thanked me warmly, and the next morning I set out on my tour of investigation, as we had arranged."

"Well," the Captain exclaimed, who had followed this long story with ever increasing interest; "and what information have you picked up?"

"This information," the hunter answered, "is of a nature far more serious than even public report had said. The situation is most critical, and not a moment must be lost in preparing for defence. I was going to San Estevan, where Colonel Don Gregorio must be awaiting my return with the utmost impatience, when I thought of seeing whether the Post of San Miguel, which had been so long unoccupied, had received a garrison. That is how chance, my dear Captain, made us meet here when I thought I should see you at the Presidio."

The Captain shook his head thoughtfully. "A month ago," he said, "Don Gregorio ordered me to come here and hold my ground, though he did not inform me of the motives that compelled him so suddenly to place San Miguel in a state of defence."

"Well; now you know the reasons."

"Yes; and I thank you for having told me. But, between ourselves, are matters so serious as you lead me to suppose?"

"A hundred times more so. I have traversed the desert in all directions; I have been present at the meetings of the chiefs – in a word, I know the most private details of the expedition that is preparing."

"*¡Viva Dios!* I will not let myself be surprised – be at your ease about that; but you were right in advising me to ask for help, as my garrison is too weak to resist a well-arranged assault. This morning's attack has made me reflect; so I will immediately – "

"Do not take the trouble," the hunter interrupted him; "I will act as your express."

"What! Are you going to leave us at once?"

"I must, my dear Captain; for I have to give Don Gregorio an account of the mission he confided to me. Reflect what mortal anxiety he must feel at not seeing me return."

"That is true. In spite of the lively pleasure I should feel in keeping you by me, I am compelled to let you go. When do you start?"

"This moment."

"Already?"

"My horse has rested; there are still five or six hours of daylight left, and I will take advantage of them?" He made a movement to leave the room.

"You have not said good-bye to Don Ruiz and his sister," the Captain observed.

The hunter stopped, his brows contracted, and he seemed to be reflecting.

"No," he said, ere long, "it would make me lose precious time. You will make my apologies to them, Captain. Moreover," he added with a bitter smile, "our acquaintance is not sufficiently long, I fancy, for Don Ruiz and his sister to attach any great importance to my movements, so for the last time, good-bye."

"I will not press you," the Captain answered; "do as you please. Still, it would have perhaps been more polite to take leave."

"Nonsense," he said, ironically; "am I not a savage? Why should I employ that refinement of politeness which is only customary among civilized people?"

The Captain contented himself with shrugging his shoulders as an answer, and they went out. Five minutes later the hunter was mounted.

"Do not fail to report to the Colonel," Don Marcos said, "what happened here today; and, above all, ask him for assistance."

"All right, Captain; and do not you go to sleep."

"*Caray*— I shall feel no inclination. So now, good-bye, and good luck!"

"Good-bye, and many thanks."

They exchanged a last shake of the hand, the hunter galloped out into the plain, and the Captain returned to his house, muttering to himself.

"What a strange man! Is he good or bad? Who can say?"

When the supper hour arrived, the two young people, astonished at the hunter's absence, asked after him of the captain. When the latter told them of his departure, they felt grieved and hurt at his having gone without bidding them farewell; and Doña Mariana especially was offended at such unaccountable behaviour on the part of a caballero; for which, in her desire to excuse him, she in vain sought a reason. Still they did not show their feelings, and the evening passed very pleasantly.

At the hour for retiring, Don Ruiz, more than ever eager to rejoin his father, reminded the Captain of the offer of service he had made him, and asked for an escort, in order to continue his journey on the morrow; but Don Marcos answered with a peremptory refusal, that not only would he give no escort, but he insisted on his relations remaining temporarily under his guard.

Don Ruiz naturally asked an explanation of his cousin; which he did not hesitate to give, by telling them of the conversation between himself and the hunter. Don Ruiz and his sister had been too near death to expose themselves again to the hazards of a long journey in the desert alone, and unable to offer any effectual defence against such persons as thought proper to attack them; still the young man, annoyed at this new delay, asked the Captain at what period they might hope to regain their liberty.

"Oh! Your seclusion will not be long," the latter replied with a smile; "so soon as I have received the reinforcements I expect from San Estevan — that is to say, in seven or eight days at the most — I will pick you out an escort, and you can be off."

Don Ruiz, forced to satisfy himself with this promise, thanked him warmly; and the young people made their arrangements to pass the week in the least wearisome way possible. But life is very dull at a frontier post, especially when you are expecting a probable attack from the Indians, and when, consequently, all the gates are kept shut, when sentries are stationed all around, and the only amusement is to look out on the plain through the loopholes.

The Captain, justly alarmed by the news the hunter had given him, had made the best arrangements his limited resources allowed to resist any attack from the Indians, if they appeared before the succour arrived from San Estevan. By his orders all the rancheros and small landowners established within a radius of fifteen leagues had been warned of an approaching invasion, and received an invitation to take shelter within the post.

The majority, recognising the gravity of this communication, hastened to pack up their furniture and most valuable articles; and driving before them their horses and cattle, hurried from all sides at once to the fort, with a precipitation which proved the profound terror the Indians inspired them with. In this way, the interior of San Miguel was soon encumbered with young men and old men, women, and children, and cattle — most of whom, unable to find lodgings in the houses, were forced to bivouac in the yards; which, however, was but a trifling inconvenience to them in a country where it hardly ever rains, and where the nights are not cold enough to render sleeping in the open air unpleasant.

The Captain organized this heterogeneous colony to the best of his ability. The women, children, and old men were sheltered under tents or *jacales* made of branches, to protect them from

the copious morning dew, while all the men capable of bearing arms were exercised, so as in case of attack to assist in the common defence.

But this enormous increase of population required an enormous stock of provisions; and hence the Captain sent out numerous patrols for the purpose of procuring the required corn and cattle. Don Ruiz took advantage of this to make excursions in the vicinity; while his sister, in the company of young girls of her own age, of whom several had entered the fort with their families, tried to forget, or rather cheat, the weariness of their seclusion.

The appearance of the post had completely changed; and, thanks to the Captain's intelligence, ten days after the hunter's departure San Miguel had become a really formidable fortress. Large trenches had been dug, and barricades erected; but, unfortunately, the garrison, though numerous enough to resist a sudden attack, was too weak to sustain a long siege.

One morning, at sunrise, the sentries signalized a thick cloud of dust advancing towards the post with the headlong speed of a whirlwind. The alarm was immediately given; the walls were lined with soldiers; and preparations were made to resist these men, who, though invisible, were supposed to be enemies.

Suddenly, on coming within gunshot, the horsemen halted, the dust dispersed, and the garrison perceived with delight that all these men wore the Mexican uniform. A quarter of an hour later, eighty lanceros, each carrying an infantry man behind him, entered the fort, amid the deafening shouts of the garrison and the farmers who had sought refuge behind the walls. It was the succour requested by the Captain, and sent off from San Estevan by Colonel Don Gregorio.

CHAPTER VI

A GLANCE AT THE PAST

In Spanish America, and especially in Peru and Mexico, all the Creoles of the pure white breed pretend to be descended in a straight line from the first Conquistadors. We have no need to discuss this claim, whose falsehood is visible to any man at all conversant with the sanguinary history of the numberless civil wars – a species of organized massacre – which followed the establishment of the Spaniards in these rich countries.

Still there are in America some families, very few in number it is true, which can justly boast of this glorious origin. Most of these families live on the estates conceded to their ancestors – they only marry among themselves, and only interfere against the grain in the political events of the day. With their eyes turned to the past, which is so full of great memories for them, they have kept up the old traditions of the chivalrous loyalty of the time of Charles V., which are forgotten everywhere else. They maintain the national honour unsullied, and those patriarchal virtues of the old time which they alone still practise with a proud and simple majesty.

The Creoles, half-breeds, and Indians, in spite of the hatred they affect for their old masters, and the principles of so-called republican equality which they profess with such absurd emphasis in the presence of strangers, feel for these families a respect bordering on veneration; for they seem to understand inwardly the superiority of these powerful natures, which no political convulsion has been able to level or even bind, over their own vicious decrepit natures, which have grown old without ever having been young.

A few leagues from Arispe, the old capital of the Intendancy of Sonora, but now greatly fallen, and only a second-class city, there stands like an eagle's nest, on the summit of an abrupt rock, a magnificent showy mansion, whose strong and haughty walls are crowned with *Almenas*, which at the time of the Spanish conquest were only permitted to families of the old and pure nobility, and they alone had the right to have battlements on their houses.

This fortress-palace – which dates from the first days of the conquest, and whose antiquity is written on its walls, which have seen so many bullets flatten, so many arrows break against them, but which time, that grand destroyer of the most solid things, is gradually crumbling away by a continuous effort, under the triple influences of the air, the sun, and rain – has never changed masters since the day of its construction, and the chiefs of the same family, on dying, have ever left it to their descendants.

This family is one of those to which we just now referred, whose origin dates back to the first conquerors, and whose name is Tobar de Moguer – (Moguer was added at a later date, doubtless in memory of the Spanish town whence the chief of the family came.)

In 1541, Don Antonio de Mendoza, Viceroy of New Spain, organized the expedition to Cibola, a mysterious country, visited a few years previously by Alvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, and about which the most marvellous and extraordinary reports were spread, all the better suited to inflame the avarice and unextinguishable thirst for gold by which the Spanish adventurers were devoured.

The expedition, consisting of 300 Spaniards and 800 Indian allies, started from Compostela, the capital of New Galicia, on April 17, 1541, under the orders of Don Francisco Vázquez de Coronado. The officers nominated by the Viceroy were all gentlemen of distinction; among them as standard bearer was Don Pedro de Tobar, whose father, Don Fernando de Tobar, had been Majordomo-Major in the reign of Jane the Mad, mother of the Emperor Charles V.

We will only say a few words about this expedition, the preparations for which were immense; and which would have doubtless furnished better results, and proved to the advantage of all, had the

chief thought less of the immense fortune he left behind in New Spain, and more of the immense responsibility weighing upon him.

After innumerable fatigues, the expedition reached Cibola, which, instead of being the rich and magnificent city they expected to see, was only a wretched insignificant village, built on a rock, and which the Spaniards seized after an hour's fighting. Still, the Indians defended themselves bravely, and several Spaniards were wounded. The General himself, hurled down by a stone, would have been infallibly killed, had it not been for the devotion of Don Pedro de Tobar and another officer, who threw themselves before him, and gave their chief time to rise and withdraw from the fight.

The Spaniards, half discouraged by the extraordinary fatigue they were forced to endure, and the continual deceptions that awaited them at every step, but still urged on by that spirit of adventure which never deserted them, resolved after the capture of Cibola to push further on and try their fortunes once again. Thus they reached, with extreme difficulty, the last country visited by Cabeza de Vaca, to which he had given the name of the Land of Hearts (Tierra de los Corazones) – not, as might be supposed, because the inhabitants had seemed so gentle and amiable, but solely because, at the period of his passing, the only food they offered him had been stags' hearts.

On reaching this place the Spaniards halted. Don Tristán de Arellano, who had taken the command of the army in place of Don Francisco Coronado, who was ailing from the wound received at Cibola, seeing the rich and fertile appearance of this country, resolved to found a town, which he called San Hieronima de los Corazones. This town was, however, almost immediately abandoned by the Spaniards, who carried the various elements further, and started a new town, to which they gave the name of Señora, afterwards corrupted into Sonora, which eventually became the name of the province.

During this long expedition Don Pedro de Tobar distinguished himself on several occasions. At the head of seventeen horsemen, four foot soldiers, and a Franciscan monk of the name of Fray Juan de Padella who in his youth had been a soldier, Don Pedro de Tobar discovered the province of Tutaliaco, which contained several towns, the houses being of several storeys. All these towns, or rather villages, were carried by storm by Don Pedro, and the province was subjugated in a few days.

When, twenty years after, the Viceroy wishing to recompense Don Pedro's services, offered him estates, the latter, who held Señora in pleasant recollection, asked that land should be granted him in this province, which reminded him of the prowess of his youth, and to which he was attached by the very fatigues he had undergone and the dangers he had incurred. During the twenty years that had elapsed since Coronado's expedition, Don Pedro had married the daughter of Don Rodrigo Maldonado, brother-in-law of the Duke of Infantado, and one of his old comrades in arms. As Don Rodrigo had settled in Sonora, Don Pedro, in order to be near him, took up his abode on the site of Cibola, which had long been destroyed and abandoned, and built on the crest of the rock the magnificent Hacienda del Toro, which, as we have said, remained for centuries in the family, with the immense estates dependent on it.

Like all first-class haciendas in Mexico, El Toro was rather a town than a simple habitation, according to the idea formed in Europe of private estates. It comprised all the old territory of Cibola. On all sides its lofty walls, built on the extremity of the rock, hung over the abyss. It contained princely apartments for the owners, a chapel, workshops of every description, storehouses, barracks, quarters for the pious, and corrals for the horses and cattle, with an immense *huerta*, planted with the finest trees and the most fragrant flowers. In a word, it was, and probably still is, one of those gigantic abodes which appear built for Titans, and of which the finest feudal châteaux in the Old World offer but an imperfect idea.

The fact is, that at the time when the conquerors built these vast residences, inhabitants were sparse in these countries, as is indeed the case now. The owners having their elbows at liberty, could take what land they liked, and hence each ultimately became, without creating any surprise, possessors of a territory equal in size to one of our counties.

It was in 1811, twenty-nine years before the period when our story begins, at the dawn of that glorious Mexican revolution the first cry of which had been raised on the night of September 16, 1810, by Hidalgo – at that time a simple parish priest in the wretched town of Dolores, and whose success, sixteen months later, was so compromised by the disastrous battle of Calderón, in which countless bands of fantastic Indians were broken by the discipline of the old Spanish troops – that the most sensible men regarded it as an unimportant insurrection – a fatal error which caused the ruin of the Spanish domination.

But on November 25, 1811, the day on which we begin this narrative, the insurgents had not yet been conquered at Calderón; on the contrary, their first steps had been marked by successes; from all sides Indians came to range themselves beneath their banner, and their army, badly disciplined, it is true, but full of enthusiasm, amounted to 80,000 men. Already master of several important towns, Hidalgo assembled all his forces with the evident design of dealing a great blow, and generalizing the insurrection, which had hitherto been confined to two provinces.

About two in the afternoon, that is to say, the time when in these climes the heat is most oppressive, a horseman, mounted on a magnificent mustang, was following at a gallop the banks of a small stream, half dried up by the torrid heat of the southern sun, and by whose side a few sickly cottonwood trees were withering.

The dust, reduced to impalpable atoms, formed a dense cloud round the horseman, who, plunged into sad and gloomy thought, with pale forehead and brows contracted till they touched, continued his journey without noticing the desolate aspect of the country he was traversing, and the depressing calm that prevailed around him. In fact, an utter silence brooded over this desert: the birds had hidden themselves gasping under the foliage, and no other sound could be heard save the shrill, harsh cry of the grasshoppers, which occupied in countless myriads the calcine grass that bordered the road, or rather the track, the traveller was following.

This rider appeared to be about twenty-five years of age; his features were handsome, his glance proud, and the expression of his face haughty, although marked with kindness and courtesy. He was tall and well built; his gestures, which were pleasing, though not stiff, indicated a man who, through his position in the world, was accustomed to a certain deference, and to win the respect of those who surrounded him. His dress had nothing remarkable about it: it was that usually worn by wealthy Spaniards when travelling; still, a short sword in a silver sheath and with a curiously carved hilt, the only weapon he openly carried, showed him to be a gentleman; besides, his complexion, clearer than that of the Creoles, left no doubt as to his Spanish origin.

This horseman, who had left Arispe at sunrise, had been travelling, up to the moment we join him, without stopping or appearing to notice the stifling heat that made the perspiration run down his cheek – so deep was he in thought. On reaching a spot where the track he was following turned sharply to the left, his horse suddenly stopped. The rider, thus aroused from his reverie, raised his head and looked before him, with grief, almost despair, in his glance.

He was at the foot of the rock on the summit of which stands the Hacienda del Toro in all its gloomy majesty. For some minutes he gazed with an expression of regret and sorrow at these frowning buildings, which doubtless recalled happy memories. He shook his head several times, a sigh escaped from his overburdened chest, and, seemed to form a supreme resolution, he said, in a choking voice, "I will go;" and letting his horse feel the spur, he began slowly scaling the narrow path that led to the summit of the rock and the hacienda gate. A violent contest seemed to be going on in his mind: his flexible face changed each moment, and reflected the various feelings that agitated him; several times his clenched hand drew up the bridle, as if he wished to check his horse and turn back. But each time his will was the more powerful; he constantly overcame the instinctive repugnance that seemed to govern him, and he continued his ascent, with his eyes constantly looking ahead, as if he expected to see someone whose presence he feared come round an angle of the track. But he did not see a soul the whole way.

When he reached the hacienda gate, it was open, and the drawbridge lowered; but though he was evidently expected, there was no one to bid him welcome.

"It must be so," he murmured sadly. "I return to my paternal roof, not as a master, but as a stranger, a fugitive – an accursed man, perhaps."

He crossed the drawbridge, the planks of which re-echoed his horse's footfall, and entered the first courtyard. Here, too, there was no one to greet him. He dismounted; but instead of throwing the bridle on his horse's neck, he held it in his hand and fastened it to a ring in the wall, saying, in a low, concentrated voice – "Wait for me, my poor Bravo; you, too, are regarded as an accursed one: be patient; we shall doubtless soon set out again."

The noble animal as if understanding its master's words and sharing in his grief, turned its delicate, intelligent head toward him, and gave a soft and plaintive whine. The young man after giving a parting glance at his steed, crossed the first yard with a firm and resolute step, and entered a second one considerably larger. At the end of this court two men were standing motionless on the first step of a magnificent marble staircase, apparently leading to the apartments of the master of the hacienda.

On seeing these two men, the young horseman drew himself up; his face assumed a gloomy and ironical expression, and he walked rapidly toward them. They still remained motionless and stiff, with their eyes fixed on him. When he was but a few paces from them, they uncovered by an automatic movement, and bowed ceremoniously.

"The Marquis is waiting for you, Señor Conde," one of them said.

"Very good," the strange visitor answered; "one of you can announce my arrival to his lordship my father, while the other will guide me to the apartment where I am expected."

The two men bowed a second time, and with heads still uncovered, preceded the young man, who followed with a firm and measured tread. On reaching the top of the steps, one of the servants hurried forward, while the second, slightly checking his speed, continued to guide the horseman. When the footsteps of the first man died out in the immense corridors, the face of the second one suddenly lost its indifferent expression, and he turned round, his eyes full of tears.

"Oh, my young master!" he said, in a voice broken by emotion, "What a misfortune! Oh, Heavens! What a misfortune!"

"What?" the young man asked anxiously; "Has anything happened to the marquis? Or is my lady mother ill?"

The old servant shook his head sadly. "No," he answered; "Heaven be blessed! Both are in good health: but why did you leave the paternal mansion, your lordship? Alas! Now the misfortune is irremediable."

A cloud of dissatisfaction flitted across the young man's forehead.

"What has happened so terrible during my absence, Perote?"

"Does not your Excellency know?" the servant asked in amazement.

"How should I know, my friend?" he answered, mildly. "Have you forgotten that I have been absent from the hacienda for two years?"

"That is true, Excellency; – forgive me, I had forgotten it. Alas! Since the misfortune has burst upon us, my poor head has been so bad."

"Recover yourself, my good fellow," the young man said, kindly. "I know how much you love me. You have not forgotten," he added, with a bitter sorrow, "that your wife, poor Juana, nourished me with her milk. I know nothing; am even ignorant why my father ordered me so suddenly to come hither. The servant who handed me the letter was doubtless unable to tell anything, and, indeed, I should not have liked to question him."

"Alas! Excellency," the old servant continued, "I am myself ignorant why you have been summoned to the hacienda; but Hernando, he may know."

"Ah!" said the young man, with a nervous start, "My brother is here, then?"

"Did you not know it?"

"Have I not already told you that I am utterly ignorant of everything connected with this house?"

"Yes, yes, Excellency. Don Hernando is here, and has been here a long time. Heaven guard me from saying anything against my master's son; but perhaps it would have been better had he remained at Guadalajara, for all has greatly changed since his arrival. Take care, Sir, for Don Hernando does not love you."

"What do I care for my brother's hatred?" the young man answered haughtily. "Am I not the elder son?"

"Yes, yes," the old servant repeated, sadly, "you are the elder son; and yet your brother commands here as master. Since his arrival, it seems as if everything belonged to him already."

The young man let his head sink on his chest, and remained for some minutes crushed; but he soon drew himself up, with flashing eye, and gently laid his hand on the old servant's shoulder.

"Perote," he said to him affectionately, "what is the motto of my family?"

"What do you mean, Excellency?" the manservant asked, startled at the singular question his master asked him.

"You do not remember it," the young man continued, with a smile, as he pointed to an escutcheon over a door. "Well; look, what do you read there?"

"What does your Excellency want?"

"Read – read, I tell you."

"You know that motto better than I do, as it was given to one of your ancestors by King Don Ferdinand of Castile himself."

"Yes, Perote, I know it," he replied, in a firm voice; "and since you will not read it, I will repeat it to you. The motto is: 'Everything for honour, no matter what may happen.' That motto dictates my conduct to me; and be assured, Perote, that I will not fail in what it orders me."

"Oh, your Excellency, once again take care. I am only a poor servant of your family, but I saw you born, and I tremble as to what may happen in the coming interview."

"Do not be anxious, my old friend," he answered, with an expression of haughty pride, full of nobleness. "Whatever may happen, I will remember not only what I owe to the memory of my ancestors, but also what I owe to myself; and, without going beyond the limits of that obedience and respect those who gave me birth have a right to, I shall be able to defend myself against the accusations which will doubtless be brought against me."

"Heaven grant, Sir, that you may succeed in dissipating the unjust suspicions so long gathering in the minds of your noble parents, and carefully kept up by the man who, during your lifetime, dares to look with an eye of covetousness on your rich inheritance."

"What do I care for this inheritance?" the young man exclaimed, passionately. "I would gladly abandon it entirely to my brother, if he would cease to rob me of a more precious property, which I esteem a hundred times higher – the love of my father and my mother."

Old Perote only answered with a sigh.

"But," the young man continued, "let us not delay any longer. His lordship must be informed of my arrival; and the slight eagerness I seem to display in proceeding to him and obeying his orders will probably be interpreted to my injury by the man who has for so many years conspired my ruin."

"Yes, you are right: we have delayed too long as it is; come, follow me."

"Where are you taking me?" the young man remarked. "My father's apartments are not situated in this part of the hacienda."

"I am not leading your Excellency to them," he answered, sorrowfully.

"Where to, then?" he asked, stopping in surprise.

"To the Red Room," the old servant remarked in a low voice.

"Oh!" the young man muttered; "Then my condemnation is about to be pronounced."

Perote only answered by a sigh; and his young master, after a moment's hesitation, made him a sign to go on; and he silently followed him, with a slow step that had something almost solemn in it.

CHAPTER VII

THE FAMILY TRIBUNAL

The Hacienda del Toro, like many feudal mansions, contained one room which remained constantly closed, and was only opened on solemn occasions. The head of the family was conveyed there to die, and remained on a bed of state till the day of his funeral: and the wife was confined there. There, too, marriage contracts were signed. In a word, all the great acts of life were performed in this room, which inspired the inhabitants of the hacienda with a respect greatly resembling terror; for on the few occasions on which the Marquises de Tobar found themselves compelled to punish any member of their family, it served as the tribunal where the culprit was tried and sentence pronounced.

This room, situated at the end of the hacienda, was a large hall of oblong shape, paved with alternate large black and white slabs, and lighted by four lofty windows, which only allowed a gloomy and doubtful light to penetrate.

Tapestry, dating from the fourteenth century, and representing with all the simplicity of the age the different episodes of the mournful battle of Xeres – which delivered Spain to the Moors, and in which Don Rodrigo, the last Gothic king, was killed – covered the walls, and imprinted an indescribable character of sepulchral majesty on this cold and mournful hall, which was probably called the "Red Room" from the prevalence of that colour in the tapestry work.

The young Count de Tobar had never entered this room since the day of his birth; and, however far back his thoughts reverted in childhood, he never remembered to have seen it open. Hence, in spite of all his courage, and the firmness with which he had thought it wise to arm himself for this decisive interview with his father, he could not restrain a slight start of fear on learning that his parents were prepared to receive him there.

The folding doors were open, and on reaching the threshold the young man took in the room at a single glance. At one end, on a dais covered with a petate, the Marquis and Marchioness of Tobar were seated, gloomy and silent, beneath a canopy of black velvet with gold fringe and tassels. Candles, lit in tall, many-branched candelabra, in order to overcome the habitual gloom of the room, threw their flickering light on the aged couple, and imparted to their faces an expression of sternness and harshness that probably did not belong to them.

At the foot of the dais, and almost touching it, stood a young man of three or four-and-twenty, with handsome and distinguished features, whose elegant attire contrasted with the simple dress of the aged couple: this gentleman was Don Hernando de Tobar, younger son of the Marquis. A footman, the same who had preceded the Count in order to announce his arrival to his master, took a step forward on perceiving the young man.

"El Señor Conde, Don Rodolfo de Tobar y Moguer," he said, in a loud and marked voice.

"Show in the Count," the Marquis said, in a voice which, though broken, was still powerful.

The manservant discreetly retired, and the door closed upon him. The Count walked up to the foot of the dais: on reaching it, he bowed a second time, then drew himself up, and respectfully awaited till it pleased his father to address him.

So profound a silence prevailed for some minutes in the room, that the hearts of the four persons might have been heard beating in their bosoms. Don Hernando took cunning side-glances at his brother, whom the aged couple examined with a mixture of sadness and severity.

The young Count, as we said, was standing motionless in front of the dais. His posture was full of nobility, without being in any way provocative: with his right foot in front, his hand on his sword guard, and the other holding his hat, whose long feather swept the ground, and his head slightly thrown back, he looked straight before him, without any display of arrogance or disdain. He waited, with a brow rather pale, it is true, owing to the internal emotions he felt; but the expression of his features,

far from being that of a culprit, was, on the contrary, that of a man convinced of his innocence, and who expects to see his conduct approved rather than blamed.

"You have arrived, then, Señor Conde," the Marquis at length said, sharply.

The young man bowed, but did not answer.

"You did not display any great eagerness in obeying my invitation."

"My lord, I only received very late last night the letter you did me the honour to send me," the Count answered, gently. "This morning before sunrise I mounted my horse, and rode twenty leagues without stopping, so anxious was I to obey you."

"Yes," the Marquis said, ironically, "I know that; for you are a most obedient son – in words, if not otherwise."

"Excuse me, my lord," he replied, respectfully, "but I do not understand to what you deign to allude at this moment."

The old gentleman bit his lips angrily. "It is because we probably no longer speak the same language, Señor Conde," he said, drily; "but I will try to make myself better understood."

There was a silence, during which the Marquis seemed to be reflecting.

"You are the elder son of the family, sir," he presently continued, "and, as such, responsible for its honour, which your ancestors handed down to you unsullied. You are aware of this, I presume?"

"I am, my lord."

"Since your birth your sainted mother and myself have striven to place before you only examples of loyalty; during your childhood we took pleasure in training you in all the chivalrous virtues which for a long succession of centuries have been the dearest appanage of the race of worthies from whom you are descended. We continuously kept before your eyes the noble motto of our family, of which it is so justly proud. How is it, then, sir, that, suddenly forgetting what you owe to our care and the lessons you received from us, you suddenly, without your mother's permission or mine, abandoned without any plausible motive the paternal roof, and that, deaf to the remonstrances and tearful entreaties of your mother, and rebellious against my orders, you have so completely separated your life from ours, that, with the exception of the name you continue to bear, you have become a perfect stranger?"

"My lord!" the young man stammered.

"It is not an accusation I bring against you, Don Rodolfo," the Marquis continued, quickly; "but I expect a frank and honourable explanation of your conduct. But, take care; the explanation must be clear and unreserved."

"My lord," the Count answered, throwing up his head proudly, "my heart reproaches me with nothing: my conduct has been ever worthy of the name I have the honour to bear. My object, in obeying your orders so eagerly, has not been to justify myself, as I am not guilty of any fault, but to assure you of my respect and obedience."

An incredulous smile played round Don Hernando's mouth, and the Marquis continued with the same tone of frigid sternness —

"I expected another answer from you, sir. I hoped to find you eagerly seize the opportunity my kindness offered you to justify yourself in my sight."

"My lord," the young man replied, respectfully but firmly, "in order that the justification you demand may be possible, I must know the charges brought against me."

"I will not press this subject for the present, sir; but since, as you say, you profess such great respect for my orders, I wish to give you an immediate opportunity to prove your obedience to me."

"Oh, speak, father!" the Count exclaimed, warmly; "Whatever you may ask of me —"

"Do not be overhasty in pledging yourself, sir," the Marquis coldly interrupted him, "before you know what I am about to ask of you."

"I shall be so happy to prove to you how far from my heart are the intentions attributed to me."

"Be it so, sir. I thank you for those excellent feelings; hence I will not delay in telling you what you must do to reinstate yourself in my good graces."

"Speak, – speak, my lord!"

The old man, cold and impassive, still regarded his son with the same stern look. The Marchioness, restrained by her husband's presence, fixed on the young man's eyes filled with tears, without daring, poor mother, to interfere on his behalf. Don Hernando smiled cunningly aside. As for Don Rodolfo, his father's last words had filled him with fear; and in spite of the pleasure he affected, he trembled inwardly, for he instinctively suspected a snare beneath this pretended kindness.

"My son," the Marquis continued, with a slight tinge of sadness in his voice, "your mother and I are growing old. Years count double at our age, and each step brings us nearer the tomb, which will soon open for us."

"Oh, father!" Don Rodolfo exclaimed.

"Do not interrupt me, my son," the Marquis continued, with a commanding gesture. "You are our firstborn, the hope of our name and race; you are four-and-twenty years of age; you are handsome, well built, instructed by us in all the duties of a gentleman; in short, you are an accomplished cavalier, of whom we have just reason to be proud."

The Marquis paused for a little while. Don Rodolfo felt himself growing more and more pale. His eyes turned wildly to his mother, who sorrowfully bowed her head, in order that his anxious glance might not meet hers. He was beginning to understand what sacrifice his father was about to demand of his filial obedience, and he trembled with terror and despair. The old man continued, in a firm and more marked voice —

"Your mother and I, my son, may be called away soon to appear before the Lord; but as I do not wish to repose in the tomb without having the satisfaction of knowing that our name will not die with us, but be continued in our grandchildren – this desire, which I have several times made known to you, my son, the moment has now arrived to realise; and by marrying, you can secure the tranquillity of the few days still left us to spend on this earth."

"Father – "

"Oh, re-assure yourself, Count," the old gentleman continued, pretending to misunderstand his son's meaning. "I do not intend to force on you one of those marriages in which a couple, united against their wish, only too soon hate one another through the instinctive aversion they feel. No; the wife I intend for you has been chosen by your mother and myself with the greatest care. She is young, lovely, rich, and of a nobility almost equal to ours; – in a word, she combines all the qualities necessary not only to render you happy, but also to revive the brilliancy of our house and impart a fresh lustre to it."

"Father!" Don Rodolfo stammered again.

"My son!" the Marquis continued, with a proud intonation in his voice, as if the name he was about to utter must remove all scruples; "my son, be happy, for you are about to marry Doña Aurelia de la Torre Azul, cousin in the fifth degree to the Marquis del Valle."

"Oh, my son!" the Marchioness added entreatingly "this alliance, which your father so dearly desires, will soothe my last days."

The young man was of livid pallor. He tottered, his eyes wandered hesitatingly around, and his hand, powerfully pressed to his heart, seemed trying to stifle its beating.

"You know my will, sir," the Marquis continued, not appearing to perceive his unhappy son's condition. "I hope that you will soon conform to it: and now, as you must be fatigued after a long ride in the great heat of the day, withdraw to your apartments. Tomorrow, when you have rested, we will consult as to the means of introducing you to your future wife as soon as possible."

After uttering these words, in the same cold and peremptory tone he employed during the whole interview, the Marquis prepared to rise.

By an effort over himself the young count succeeded in repressing the storm that was raging in his heart. Affecting a tranquillity he was far from feeling, he took a step forward, and bowed respectfully to the Marquis.

"Pardon me, my lord," he said, in a voice which emotion involuntarily caused to tremble, "but may I say a few words now?"

The old gentleman frowned.

"Did I not say tomorrow, sir?" he answered drily.

"Yes, my lord," the young man answered, sadly; "but, alas! If you do not consent to listen to me today, tomorrow may be too late."

"Ah!" said the Marquis, biting his lips with a passion that was beginning to break out, "And for what reason, sir?"

"Because, father," the young man said, firmly, "tomorrow I shall have left this house never to reenter it."

The Marquis gave him a thundering look from under his grey eyelashes.

"Ah, ah!" he exclaimed, "Then I was not deceived; what I have been told is really true."

"What have you been told?"

"Do you wish to know?" the old gentleman exclaimed, furiously. "After all, you are right; it is time that this pitiable farce should end."

"Sir, – sir!" the Marchioness said, with deep grief, "remember that he is your son – your firstborn!"

"Silence, madam!" the old man said, harshly; "This rebellious son has played with us long enough; the hour of punishment has pealed, and, by Heaven! It shall be terrible and exemplary."

"In God's name, sir," the Marchioness continued, "do not be inexorable to your child. Let me speak to him; perhaps you are too harsh with him, although you love him. I am his mother; I will convince him, and induce him to carry out your wishes: a mother can find words in her heart to soften her son, and make him understand that he ought not to reject his father's orders."

The old man seemed to hesitate for a moment, but immediately recovered.

"Why should I consent to what you ask, madam?" he replied, with a roughness mingled with pity; "Do you not know that the sole quality, or rather the sole vice, of his race which this rebellious son has retained is obstinacy? You will get nothing from him."

"Oh, permit me to say, sir," the old lady continued, in a suppliant voice, "he is my son as well as yours. In the name of that love and that unswerving obedience you have ever found in me, I beseech you to let me make a final attempt to break his resistance, and lead him penitent to your feet."

"And then, my lord," Don Hernando, who had hitherto remained an apparent stranger to all that was taking place, remarked in a mocking voice, "perhaps we are mistaken; do not condemn my brother without hearing him; he is too good a gentleman, and of too old a family, to have committed the faults of which he is accused."

"That is well, Hernando; I am delighted thus to hear you undertake your brother's defence," said the old lady, smiling through her tears, and deceived by his words.

"Certainly, mother; I love my brother too dearly," the young man said ironically, "to let him be accused without proof. That Rodolfo has seduced the daughter of the principal Cacique of the Opatas and made her his mistress is evident, and known to all the world as true, but it is of very little consequence. But what I will never believe until it is proved to me is, that he has married this creature, any more than I will put faith in the calumnies that represent him not only as one of the intimate friends of the Curate Hidalgo, but also as one of his most active and influential partisans in this province. No; a thousand times No! A gentleman of the name and blood of Tobar knows too well what honour demands to commit such infamy! Acting so would be utter apostasy, and complete forgetfulness of all that a noble Castilian owes to himself, his ancestors, and that honour of which he is only the holder. Come, Rodolfo; come, my brother, raise your head: confound the calumniators: give a solemn denial to those who have dared to sully your reputation! One word from you, but one that proves your perfect innocence, and the storm unjustly aroused against you will be dispersed; my father will open his arms to you, and all will be forgotten."

During this speech, whose deep perfidy the Count recognised, he was suffering from extreme emotion. At the first words his brother uttered, he started as if he felt the sting of a viper; but gradually his anger had made way for contempt in his heart; and it was with a smile of crushing disdain that he listened to the emphatic and mocking conclusion.

"Well, my son," the marquis said, "you see everybody defends you here, while I alone accuse you! What will you answer to prove your innocence to me?"

"Nothing, father!" the young man said, coolly.

"Nothing?" the old gentleman repeated, angrily.

"No, father!" he continued; "because, if I attempted to justify myself, you would not listen to me; and that, supposing you consented to listen to me, you would not comprehend me. Oh! Do not mistake my meaning," he said, on seeing the Marquis about to speak; "you would not understand me, father, not through want of intellect, but through pride. Proud of your name and the privileges it gives, you are accustomed to judge men and things from a peculiar point of view, and understand honour in your own fashion."

"Are there two sorts of honour, then?" the Marquis exclaimed, involuntarily.

"No, father," Don Rodolfo answered, calmly, "there is only one; but there are two ways of comprehending it: and my brother, who a moment back told you without incurring your disapproval that a gentleman had the right to abuse the love of a maiden and make her his mistress, but that the honour of his name would forbid him marrying her, seems to me to have studied the point thoroughly, and is better able than I to discuss it. As you said yourself, father, we must come to an end. Well, be it so. I will not attempt to continue an impossible struggle with you. When I received orders to come to you, I knew I was condemned beforehand, and yet I obediently attended your summons; it was because my resolution was irrevocably formed. What am I reproached with? Having married the daughter of an Indian Cacique? It is true; I avow openly that I have done so: her birth is perhaps as good as mine, but most certainly her heart is greater. What is the next charge – that I am a friend of the Curate Hidalgo, and one of his firmest adherents? That is also true; and I am happy and proud of this friendship: I glory in these aspirations for liberty with which you reproach me as a crime. Descendants of the first conquerors of Mexico, this land, discovered and subjugated by our fathers, has become our country; for the last three centuries we have not been Spaniards, but Mexicans. The hour has at length arrived for us to shake off the yoke of this self-called country, which has so long been battenning on our blood and tears, and enriching itself with our gold. In speaking thus to you, my venerated father, my heart is broken, for Heaven is my witness that I have a profound respect and love for you. I know that I am invoking on my head all the weight of your anger, and that anger will be terrible! But, in my sorrow, one sublime hope is left to me. Faithful to the motto of our ancestors, I have done everything for honour; my conscience is calm; and some day – soon, perhaps – you will forgive me, for you will see that I have not failed in fealty."

"Never!" the Marquis shouted in a voice the more terrible because the constraint he had been forced to place on himself, in order to hear his son's speech to the end, had been so great. "Begone! I no longer know you! You are no longer my son! Begone! – villain! I give you my –"

"Oh!" the Marchioness shrieked, as she threw herself into his arms, "Do not curse him, sir! Do not add that punishment to the one you have inflicted on him. The unhappy boy is already sufficiently punished. No one has the right to curse him; a father less than any other – for in that case it is God who avenges."

The Marquis stood for a moment silent and gloomy, then stretched out his arms to his son, and shook his head sadly.

"Begone!" he said in a hollow voice. "May God watch over you – for henceforth you have no family. Farewell!"

The young man pale and trembling, bent beneath the weight of this sentence; then rose and tottered out of the room without saying a word.

"My son! – My son!" the Marchioness exclaimed in a heart-rending voice.

The implacable old man quickly stopped her at the moment when, half-mad with grief, she was rushing from the dais, and pointed to Don Hernando, who was bowing hypocritically to her.

"You have only one son, madam," he said, in a harsh voice, "and that son is here."

The Marchioness uttered a cry of despair, and, crushed with grief, fell senseless at her husband's feet; who, also overcome in this fearful struggle of pride of race against paternal love, sank into a chair and buried his face in his hands, while a mighty sob escaped from his bosom.

Don Hernando had rushed after his brother, not for the purpose of consoling or bringing him back, but solely not to let the joy be seen which covered his face at this mournful scene, all the fearful incidents in which he had been so long preparing with feline patience.

CHAPTER VIII

THE TWO BROTHERS

After quitting the Red Room, Don Rodolfo, under the weight of the condemnation pronounced against him, with broken heart and burning head had rushed onwards, flying the paternal anger, and resolved to leave the hacienda as quickly as possible, never to return to it. His horse was still in the first yard, where he had tied it up. The young man went up to it, seized the bridle, and placed his foot in the stirrup. At the same moment a hand was laid on his shoulder – Don Rodolfo turned as if seared with a hot iron. His brother was standing before him.

A feverish redness suffused his face; his hands closed, and his eyes flashed lightning; but at once extinguishing the fire of his glance and affecting a forced calmness, he said, in a firm voice —

"What do you want brother?"

"To press your hand before your departure, Rodolfo," the young man said, with a whining voice.

Rodolfo looked at him for a moment with an expression of profound disdain, then unhooking the sword that hung at his side, he handed it to his brother.

"There, Hernando," he said, ironically, "it is only right that, since you will henceforth bear the name and honour of our family, this sword should revert to you. You desired my inheritance, and success has crowned your efforts."

"Brother," the young man stammered.

"I am not reproaching you," Don Rodolfo continued, haughtily. "Enjoy in peace those estates you have torn from me. May Heaven grant that the burden may not appear to you some day too heavy, and that the recollection of the deed you have done may not poison your last years. Henceforth we shall never meet again on this earth. Farewell!" And letting the sword he had offered his brother fall on the ground, he leaped on his horse and went off at full speed, without even giving a parting glance at those walls which had seen his birth, and from which he was now eternally banished. Don Hernando stood for a moment with hanging head and pale face, crushed by the shame and consciousness of the bad action he had not feared to commit. Already remorse was beginning to prey on him. At length, when the galloping of the horse had died away in the distance, he raised his eyes, wiped away the perspiration that inundated his face, and picked up the sword lying at his feet.

"Poor Rodolfo!" he muttered, stifling a sigh; "I am very guilty."

And he slowly returned to the hacienda. Count Don Rodolfo de Moguer kept the word he had given his brother: he never reappeared. Nothing was ever heard of him, and his intimate friends never saw him again after his journey to the hacienda, nor knew what had become of him. The next year, a few Indians who escaped from the massacre at the bridge of Calderón, when Hidalgo was defeated by the Spanish General Calleja, spread the report that Don Rodolfo, who during the whole action kept by Hidalgo's side, was killed in a desperate charge he made into the heart of the Spanish lines, in the hope of restoring the fortunes of the day; but this rumour was not confirmed. In spite of all the measures taken by the Marquis, the young man's body was not found among the dead, and his fate remained a mystery for the family.

In the meanwhile, Don Hernando, by his father's orders, had succeeded to his brother's title, and almost immediately married Doña Aurelia de la Torre Azul, originally destined for Don Rodolfo. The Marquis and Marchioness lived some few years longer. They died a few days after one another, bearing with them a poisoned sting of remorse for having banished their firstborn son from their presence.

But, inflexible up to his dying hour, the Marquis never once made a complaint, and died without mentioning his son's name. However, the Marquis's hopes were realized ere he descended to the grave, for he had the supreme consolation of seeing his family continued in his grandchildren.

At the funeral, a man was noticed in the crowd wrapped up in a wide cloak, and his features concealed by the broad brim of his hat being pulled over them. No one was able to say who this man was, although one old servant declared he had recognised Don Rodolfo. Was it really the banished son who had come for the last time to pay homage to his father and weep on his tomb? The arrival of the stranger was so unexpected, and his departure so sudden, that it was impossible to get at the truth of the statement.

Then, time passed away, important events succeeded each other, and Don Rodolfo, of whom nothing was heard, was considered dead by his family and friends, and then forgotten; and Don Hernando inherited without dispute the title and estates.

The Marquis de Moguer, in spite of the light under which we have shown him to our readers, was not a wicked man, as might be supposed; but as a younger son, with no other hope than the tonsure, devoured by ambition, and freely enjoying life, he internally rebelled against the harsh and unjust law which exiled him from the pleasures of the world, and condemned him to the solitude of the cloister. Assuredly, had his brother frankly accepted his position as firstborn, and consented to undertake its duties, Don Hernando would never have thought for a moment of defrauding him of his rights. But when he saw Don Rodolfo despise the old tradition of his race – forget what he owed to his honour as a gentleman, so far as to marry an Indian girl and make common cause with the partisans of the Revolution, he eagerly seized the opportunity chance so providentially offered him to seize the power lost by his brother, and quietly put himself in his place. He thought that, in acting thus he was not committing a bad action, but almost asserting a right by substituting himself for a man who seemed to care very little for titles and fortune.

Don Hernando, while whitewashing himself in this way, only obeyed that law of justice and injustice which God has placed in the heart of man, and which impels him, when he does any dishonourable deed, to seek excuses in order to prove to himself that he was bound to act as he had done. Still, the Marquis did not dare to confess to himself that the chance by which he profited he had helped by all his power, by envenoming by his speeches and continual insinuations his brother's actions, ruining him gradually in his father's mind, and preparing, long beforehand, the condemnation eventually uttered in the Red Room against the unfortunate Rodolfo.

And yet strange contradiction of the human heart, Don Hernando dearly loved his brother; he pitied him – he would like to hold him back on the verge of the precipice down which he thrust him, as it were. Once master of the estates and head of the family, he would have liked to find his brother again, in order to share with him this badly-acquired fortune, and gain pardon for his usurpation.

Unfortunately these reflections came too late – Don Rodolfo had disappeared without leaving a trace, and hence the Marquis was compelled to restrict himself to sterile regrets. At times, tortured with the ever-present memory of the last scene at the hacienda, he asked himself whether it would not have been better for him to have had a frank explanation with his brother, after which Don Rodolfo, whose simple tastes agreed but badly with the exigencies of a great name, would have amicably renounced in his favour the rights which his position as elder brother gave him.

But now to continue our narrative, which we have too long interrupted.

At the beginning of 1822, on a day of madness which was to be expiated by years of disaster, the definitive separation took place between Spain and Mexico, and the era of *pronunciamientos* set in. After the ephemeral reign of the Emperor Iturbide, Mexico reverted to a republic, or, more correctly, to a military government. Under the pressure of an army of 20,000 soldiers, which had 24,000 officers, the Presidents succeeded each other with headlong speed, burying the nation deeper and deeper in the mire, in which it is now struggling, and which will eventually swallow it up.

By *pronunciamiento* on *pronunciamiento* Mexico had reached the period when this story begins; but her wealth had been swallowed up in the tornado – her commerce was annihilated, her cities were falling in ruins, and New Spain had only retained of her old splendours fugitive recollections and piles of ruins. The Spaniards had suffered greatly during the War of Independence, as had their

partisans, whose property had been burned and plundered by the revolutionists. The fatal decree of 1827, pronouncing the expulsion of the Spaniards, dealt the final and most terrible blow to their fortunes.

The Marquis de Moguer was one of the persons most affected by this measure, although, during the entire War of Independence and the different governments that succeeded each other, he had taken the greatest care not to mix himself up at all in politics, and remained neutral between all parties. This position, which it was difficult and almost impossible to maintain for any length of time, had compelled him to make concessions painful to his pride: unfortunately, his fortune consisted of land and mines, and if he left Mexico he would be a ruined man.

His friends advised him frankly to join the Mexican government, and give up his Spanish nationality. The Marquis, forced by circumstances, followed their advice; and, thanks to the credit some persons enjoyed with the President of the Republic, Don Hernando was not only not disturbed, but authorized to remain in the country, where he was naturalized as a Mexican.

But things had greatly changed with the Marquis. His immense fortune had vanished with the Spanish government. During the ten years of the War of Independence, his estates had lain fallow, and his mines, deserted by the workmen he formerly employed, had gradually become filled with water. They could not be put in working order again except by enormous and most expensive works. The situation was critical, especially for a man reared in luxury and accustomed to sow his money broadcast. He was now compelled to calculate every outlay with the utmost care, if he did not wish to see the hideous spectre of want rise implacable before him.

The pride of the Marquis was broken in this struggle against poverty; his love for his children restored his failing courage, and he bravely resolved to make head against the storm. Like the ruined gentleman who tilled the soil, with their sword by their side, as a proof of their nobility, he openly became hacendero and miner, – that is to say, he cultivated his estates on a large scale, and bred cattle and horses, while trying to pump out the water which had taken possession of his mines. Unfortunately, he was deficient in two important things for the proper execution of his plans: the necessary knowledge to assist the different operations he meditated: and, above all, money, without which nothing was possible. The Marquis was therefore compelled to engage a majordomo, and borrow on mortgage. For the first few years all went well, or appeared to do so. The majordomo, Don José Paredes, to whom we shall have occasion to refer more fully hereafter, was one of those men so valuable in haciendas, whose life is spent on horseback, whose attention nothing escapes, who thoroughly understand the cultivation of the soil, and know what it ought to produce, almost to an arroba.

But if the estates of the Marquis were beginning to regain their value under the skilful direction of the bailiff, it was not the same with the mines. Taking advantage of the convulsions in which Mexico was writhing, the independent Indians, no longer held in subjection by the fear of the powerful military organization of the Spaniards, had crossed the frontiers and regained a certain portion of their territory. They had permanently settled upon it, and would not allow white men to encroach on it. Most of the Marquis's mines being situated in the very country now occupied by the Indians, were consequently lost to him. The others, almost entirely inundated, in spite of the incessant labour bestowed on them, did not yet hold out any hopes of becoming productive again.

What Don Hernando gained on one side he lost on the other; and his position, in spite of his efforts, became worse and worse, and the abyss of debt gradually enlarged. The Marquis saw with terror the moment before him when it would be impossible for him to continue the struggle. Sad and aged by sorrow rather than years, the Marquis no longer dared to regard the future, which daily became more gloomy for him. He watched in mournful resignation the downfall of his house – the decay of his race; seeking in vain, like the man without a compass on the mighty ocean, from what point of the horizon the vessel that would save him from shipwreck would arrive.

But, alas! Days succeeded days without bringing any other change in the position of the Marquis, save greater poverty, and more nearly impending ruin. In proportion as the misfortune came nearer, the Marquis had seen his relations and friends keep aloof from him; all abandoned him, with that selfish indifference which seems a fundamental law of every organized society, when the precept, "Each man for himself," is put in practice, with all the brutal force of the *vae victis*.

Hence Don Hernando resided alone, with his son, at the Hacienda del Toro; for he had lost his wife several years before, and his daughter was being educated in a convent at the town of Rosario; with that noble pride which so admirably becomes men of well-tempered minds, the Marquis had accepted without a murmur the ostracism passed upon him. Far from indulging in useless recriminations with men, the majority of whom had, in other days, received obligations from him, he had made his son a partner in his labours, and, aided by him, redoubled his efforts and his courage.

Some months before the period when our story begins, ill fortune had seemed, not to grow weary of persecuting the Marquis, but desirous of granting him a truce – this is how a gleam of sunshine penetrated the gloomy atmosphere of the hacienda. One morning, a stranger, who appeared to have come a great distance, stopped at the gate, leading a mule loaded with two bales. This man, on reaching the first courtyard, threw the mule's bridle to a peon, with the simple remark, – "For Signor Don Hernando de Moguer – " and, without awaiting an answer, he started down the rocky road at a gallop and was lost in the windings of the path ere the peon had recovered from the surprise caused by the strange visit. The Marquis, at once warned, had the mule unloaded, and the bales conveyed to his study. They each contained twenty-five thousand piastres in gold, or nearly eleven thousand pounds of our money: on a folded paper was written one word – Restitution.

It was in vain that the Marquis ordered the most minute researches; the strange messenger could not be found. Don Hernando was therefore compelled to keep this large sum, which arrived so opportunely to extricate him from a difficult position, for he had a considerable payment to make on the morrow. Still, it was only on the repeated assurances of Don Ruiz and the majordomo, that the money was really his, that he consented to use it.

Cheered by this change of fortune, Don Hernando at length consented that Don Ruiz should go and fetch his sister, and bring her back to the hacienda, where her presence had been long desired; though there had been an obstacle, in the dangers of such a journey.

We will now resume our narrative, begging the reader to forgive this long digression, which was indispensable for the due comprehension of what is about to follow, and lead him to the Hacienda del Toro, a few hours before the arrival of Don Ruiz and his sister; that is to say, about three weeks since we left them at the post of San Miguel.

CHAPTER IX

A NEW CHARACTER

Although, owing to its position on the shores of the Pacific, Sonora enjoys the blessings of the sea breeze, whose moisture at intervals refreshes the heated atmosphere; still, for three hours in the afternoon, the earth incessantly heated by the torrid sunbeams produces a crushing heat. At such times the country assumes a really desolate aspect beneath the cloudless sky, which seems an immense plate of red-hot iron. The birds suddenly cease their songs, and languidly hide themselves beneath the thick foliage of the trees, which bow their proud crests towards the ground. Men and domestic animals hasten to seek shelter in the houses, raising in their hurried progress a white, impalpable, and calcined dust, which enters mouth and nostrils. For some hours Sonora is converted into a vast desert from which every appearance of life and movement has disappeared.

Everybody is asleep, or at least reclining in the most shady rooms, with closed eyes, and with the body abandoned to that species of somnolency which is neither sleeping nor waking, and which from that very fact is filled with such sweet and voluptuous reveries – inhaling at deep draughts the artificial breeze produced by artfully contrived currents of air, and in a word indulging in what is generally called in the torrid zones a siesta.

These are hours full of enjoyment, of those sweet and beneficent influence on body and mind we busy, active Englishmen are ignorant, but which people nearer the sun revel in. The Italians call this state the *dolce far niente*, and the Turks, that essentially sensual race, *keff*.

Like that city in the "Arabian Nights," the inhabitants of which the wicked enchanter suddenly changed into statues by waving his wand, life seemed suddenly arrested at the Hacienda del Toro, for the silence was so profound: peons, vaqueros, craidos, everybody in fact, were enjoying their siesta. It was about three in the afternoon; but that indistinct though significant buzz which announces the awakening of the hour that precedes the resumption of labour was audible. Two gentlemen alone had not yielded to sleep, in spite of the crushing midday heat; but seated in an elegantly furnished *cuarto*, they had spent the hours usually devoted to slumber in conversation. The cause for this deviation from the ordinary custom must have been most serious. The Hispano-American, and especially the Mexican, does not lightly sacrifice those hours of repose during which, according to a Spanish proverb, only dogs and Frenchmen are to be seen in the sun.

Of these two gentlemen, one, Don Hernando de Moguer, is already known to us. Years, while stooping his back, had furrowed some wrinkles on his forehead, and mingled many silver threads with his hair; but the expression of his face, with the exception of a tinge of melancholy spread over his features by lengthened misfortunes, had remained nearly the same, that is to say, gentle and timid, although clever; slightly sarcastic and eminently crafty.

As for the person with whom Don Hernando was conversing at this moment, he deserves a detailed description, physically at least, for the reader will soon be enabled to appreciate his moral character. He was a short, plump man, with a rubicund face and apoplectic look, though hardly forty years of age. Still his hair, which was almost white, his deeply wrinkled forehead, and his grey eyes buried beneath bushy whiskers, gave him a senile appearance, harmonizing but little with the sharp gesticulation and youthful manner he affected. His long, thin, violet nose was bent like a parrot's beak over a wide mouth filled with dazzling white teeth; and his prominent cheekbones, covered with blue veins, completed a strange countenance, the expression of which bore a striking likeness to that of an owl.

This species of nutcracker, with his prominent stomach and short ill-hung limbs, whose whole appearance was most disagreeable, had such a mobility of face as rendered it impossible to read his thoughts on his features, in the event of this fat man's carcass containing a thought. His cold blue eyes

were ever pertinaciously fixed on the person addressing him, and did not reveal the slightest emotion; in short, this man produced at the first contact that invariable antipathy which is felt on the approach of reptiles, and which, after nearer acquaintance, is converted into disgust and contempt.

He was a certain Don Rufino Contreras, one of the richest landowners in Sonora, and a year previously had been elected senator to the Mexican Congress for the province.

At the moment when we enter the *cuarto*, Don Hernando, with arms folded at his back and frowning brow, is walking up and down, while Don Rufino, seated on a *butaca*, with his body thrown back, is following his movements with a crafty smile on his lips while striving to scratch off an invisible spot on his knee. For some minutes, the hacendero continued his walk, and then stopped before Don Rufino, who bent on him a mocking, inquiring glance.

"Then," he said, in a voice whose anxious expression he sought in vain to conceal, "you must positively have the entire sum within a week?"

"Yes," the fat man replied, still smiling.

"Why, if that is the case, did you not warn me sooner?"

"It was through delicacy, my dear sir."

"What – through delicacy?" Don Hernando repeated, with a start of surprise.

"You shall judge for yourself."

"I shall be glad to do so."

"I believe you do me the justice of allowing that I am your friend?"

"You have said you are, at least."

"I fancy I have proved it to you."

"No matter; but let us pass over that."

"Very well. Knowing that you were in a critical position at the moment, I tried to procure the sum by all possible means, as I did not wish to have recourse to you, except in the last extremity. You see, my dear Don Hernando, how delicate and truly friendly my calculations were. Unfortunately, at the present time it is very difficult to get money in, owing to the stagnation of trade produced by the new conflict which threatens to break out between the President of the Republic and the Southern States. It was therefore literally impossible for me to obtain the smallest sum. In such a perplexing position, I leave you to judge what I was obliged to do. The money I must have; you have owed it for a long time, and I applied to you – what else could I do?"

"I do not know. Still, I think you might have sent a peon to warn me, before you left Sonora."

"No, my dear sir, that is exactly what I should not do. I have not come direct to you: in pursuance of the line of conduct I laid down I hoped to collect the required sum on my road, and not be obliged to come all the way to your hacienda."

Don Hernando made no reply. He began his walk again after giving the speaker a glance which would have given him cause for thought, had he noticed it; but the latter gentleman had begun rubbing the invisible spot again with more obstinacy than before. In the meanwhile the sunbeams had become more and more oblique; the hacienda had woke up to its ordinary life; outside the shouts of the vaqueros pricking the oxen or urging on the horses could be heard mingled with the lowing and neighing of the draught cattle. Don Hernando walked up to a window, the shutters of which he threw open, and a refreshing breeze entered the *cuarto*. Don Rufino gave a sigh of relief and sat up in his *butaca*.

"Ouf," he said, with an expression of comfort, "I was very tired; not through the long ride I was compelled to make this morning, so much as through the stifling heat."

Don Hernando started at this insinuation, as if he had been stung by a serpent; he had neglected all the laws of Mexican hospitality; for Don Rufino's visit had so disagreeably surprised him, and made him forget all else before the sudden obligation of satisfying the claims of a merciless creditor. But at Don Rufino's remarks he understood how unusual his conduct must have seemed to a weary traveller, hence he rang a bell, and a peon at once came in.

"Refreshment," he said.

The peon bowed, and left the room.

"You will excuse me, Caballero," the hacendero continued, frankly, "but your visit so surprised me, that at the moment I did not think of offering the refreshment which a tired traveller requires so much. Your room is prepared, rest yourself tonight, and tomorrow we will resume our conversation, and arrive at a solution I trust mutually satisfactory."

"I hope so, my dear sir. Heaven is my witness that it is my greatest desire," Don Rufino answered, as he raised to his lips the glass of orangeade brought by the peon. "Unhappily I fear that, with the best will in the world, we cannot come to a settlement unless – "

"Unless!" Don Hernando sharply interrupted. Don Rufino quietly sipped his orangeade, placed the glass on the table, and said, as he threw himself back on the *butaca*, and rolled a cigarette —

"Unless you pay me in full what you owe me, which, from what you have said, appears to me to be difficult, I confess."

"Ah!" Don Hernando remarked with an air of constraint, "What makes you suppose that?"

"I beg your pardon, my dear sir, I suppose nothing: you told me just now that you were hardly pressed."

"Well, and what conclusion do you derive from that?" the hacendero asked impatiently.

"A very simple thing – that seventy thousand piastres form a rather round sum, and that however rich a man may be, he does not always have it in his hands, especially when he is pressed."

"I can make sacrifices."

"Believe me, I shall be sincerely sorry."

"But can you not wait a few days longer?"

"Impossible, I repeat: let us understand our respective positions, in order to avoid any business misunderstanding, which should always be prevented between honourable gentlemen holding a certain position. I lent you that sum, and only stipulated for small interest, I believe."

"I allow it, Señor, and thank you for it."

"It is not really worth the trouble; I was anxious to oblige you. I did so, and let us say no more about it; but remember that I made one condition which you accepted."

"Yes," Don Hernando said, with an impatient start, "and I was wrong."

"Perhaps so; but that is not the question. This condition which you accepted was to the effect that you should repay me the sum I advanced upon demand."

"Have I said the contrary?"

"Far from it; but now that I want the money, I ask you for it, and that is natural: I have in no way infringed the conditions. You ought to have expected what is happening today, and taken your precautions accordingly."

"Hence, if I ask a month to collect the money you claim?"

"I should be heartbroken, but should refuse; for I want the money, not in a month, but in a week. I can quite put myself in your position, and comprehend how disagreeable the matter must be; but unluckily so it is."

What most hurt Don Hernando was not the recall of the loan, painful as it was to him, so much as the way in which the demand was made; the show of false good nature employed by his creditor, and the insulting pity he displayed. Carried away involuntarily by the rage that filled his heart, he was about to give Don Rufino an answer which would have broken off all friendly relations between them for ever, when a great noise was heard in the hacienda, mingled with shouts of joy and the stamping of horses. Don Hernando eagerly leant out of the window, and at the expiration of a moment turned round to Don Rufino, who was sucking his cigarette with an air of beatitude.

"Here are my children, Caballero," he said; "not a word of this affair before them, I entreat."

"I know too well what I owe you, my dear Señor," the other replied, as he prepared to rise. "With your permission, however, I will withdraw, in order to allow you entire liberty for your family joy."

"No, no!" Don Hernando added, "I had better introduce you at once to my son and daughter."

"As you please, my dear sir. I shall be flattered to form the acquaintance of your charming family."

The door opened, and Don José Parades appeared. The majordomo was a half-breed of about forty years of age, tall and powerfully built, with bow legs and round shoulders that denoted his capacity as a horseman; in fact, the worthy man's life was spent in the saddle, galloping about the country. He took a side-glance at Don Rufino, bowed to his master, and lowering his usual rough tone, said —

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