

Reid Mayne

Wood Rangers: The Trappers of Sonora



Томас Майн Рид

**Wood Rangers: The
Trappers of Sonora**

«Public Domain»

Майн Рид Т.

Wood Rangers: The Trappers of Sonora / Т. Майн Рид — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

Chapter One	5
Chapter Two	8
Chapter Three	13
Chapter Four	17
Chapter Five	21
Chapter Six	24
Chapter Seven	28
Chapter Eight	32
Chapter Nine	34
Chapter Ten	38
Chapter Eleven	41
Chapter Twelve	43
Chapter Thirteen	46
Chapter Fourteen	49
Chapter Fifteen	51
Chapter Sixteen	55
Chapter Seventeen	59
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	61

Reid Mayne

Wood Rangers: The Trappers of Sonora

Chapter One

Pepé, The Sleeper

No landscape on the Biscayan coast, presents a more imposing and picturesque aspect than the little village of Elanchovi. Lying within an amphitheatre of cliffs, whose crests rise above the roofs of the houses, the port is protected from the surge of the sea by a handsome little jetty of chiselled stone; while the single street of which the village is composed, commencing at the inner end of the mole, sweeps boldly up against the face of the precipice. On both sides, the houses, disposed in a sort of *echelon*, rise, terrace-like, one above the other; so that viewed from a distance, the street presents the appearance of a gigantic stairway.

In these the common dwellings, there is not much variety of architecture; since the village is almost exclusively inhabited by poor fishermen. There is one building, however, that is conspicuous – so much so as to form the principal feature of the landscape. It is an old chateau – perhaps the only building of this character in Spain – whose slate roofs and gothic turrets and vanes, rising above the highest point of the cliffs, overlook the houses of the village.

This mansion belonged to the noble family of Mediana, and formed part of the grand estates of this ancient house. For a long period, the Counts of Mediana had not inhabited the chateau of Elanchovi, and it had fallen into a state of neglect and partial decay, presenting a somewhat wild and desolate aspect. However, at the beginning of the year 1808, during the troubles of the French invasion, the Count Don Juan, then head of the family, had chosen it as a safe residence for his young wife Doña Luisa, whom he passionately loved.

Here Don Juan passed the first months of his married life – a marriage celebrated under circumstances of sad augury. The younger brother of Don Juan, Don Antonio de Mediana, had also fervently loved the Doña Luisa; until finding her preference for his brother, he had given up his suit in anger, and quitted the country. He had gone, no one knew whither; and though after a time there came back a rumour of his death, it was neither confirmed nor contradicted.

The principal reason why the Count had chosen this wild spot as a residence for his lady was this: – He held a high command in the Spanish army, and he knew that duty would soon call him into the field. The *alcalde* of Elanchovi had been an old servant of the Mediana family, and had been raised to his present rank by their influence. Don Juan, therefore, believed he could rely upon the devotion of this functionary to the interests of his house, and that during his absence Doña Luisa would find security under the magisterial protection. Don Ramon Cohecho was the name of the chief magistrate of Elanchovi.

The Count was not permitted long to enjoy the happiness of his married life. Just as he had anticipated, he soon received orders to join his regiment; and parted from the chateau, leaving his young wife under the special care of an old and respectable domestic – the steward Juan de Dios Canelo. He parted from his home never more to return to it; for in the battle of Burgos, a French bullet suddenly terminated his existence.

It was sad tidings for the Doña Luisa; and thus to the joys of the first days of her married life succeeded the sorrows of a premature widowhood.

It was near the close of the year 1808, when the chateau was the sombre witness of Doña Luisa's grief, that our story commences, and though its scene lies in another land – thousands of leagues from, the Biscayan coast – its history is intimately woven with that of the chateau of Elanchovi.

Under ordinary circumstances, the village of Elanchovi presents a severe and dreary aspect. The silence and solitude that reigns along the summit of the cliffs, contrasted with the continuous roaring of the breakers against their base, inspires the beholder with a sentiment of melancholy. Moreover, the villagers, as already said, being almost exclusively fishermen, and absent during the whole of the day, the place at first sight would appear as if uninhabited. Occasionally when some cloud is to be observed in the sky, the wives of the fishermen may be seen at the door, in their skirts of bright colours, and their hair in long double plaits hanging below their waists. These, after remaining a while to cast anxious glances upon the far horizon, again recross the thresholds of their cottages, leaving the street deserted as before.

At the time of which we are writing – the month of November, 1808 – Elanchovi presented a still more desolate aspect than was its wont. The proximity of the French army had produced a panic among its inhabitants and many of these poor people – forgetting in their terror that they had nothing to lose – had taken to their boats, and sought safety in places more distant from the invaders of whom they were in dread.

Isolated as this little village was on the Biscayan coasts, there was all the more reason why it should have its garrison of *coast-guards*; and such in reality it had. These at the time consisted of a company of soldiers – carabiniers, under the command of a captain Don Lucas Despierto – but the condition of these warriors was not one to be envied, for the Spanish government, although nominally keeping them in its pay, had for a long time neglected to pay them. The consequence was, that these poor fellows had absolutely nothing upon which to live. The seizure of smuggled goods – with which they might have contrived to indemnify themselves – was no longer possible. The contraband trade, under this system, was completely annihilated. The smugglers knew better than to come in contact with *coast-guards* whose performance of their duty was stimulated by such a keen necessity! From the captain himself down to the lowest official, an incessant vigilance was kept up – the result of which was that the fiscal department of the Spanish government was, perhaps, never so faithfully or economically served.

There was one of these coast-guards who affected a complete scepticism in regard to smuggling – he even went so far as to deny that it had ever existed! He was distinguished among his companions by a singular habit – that of always going to sleep upon his post; and this habit, whether feigned or real, had won for him the name of *the Sleeper*. On this account it may be supposed, that he was never placed upon guard where the post was one of importance.

José, or as he was more familiarly styled, *Pepé*, was a young fellow of some twenty-five years – tall, thin, and muscular. His black eyes, deeply set under bushy eyebrows, had all the appearance of eyes that *could* sparkle; besides, his whole countenance possessed the configuration of one who had been born for a life of activity. On the contrary, however – whether from a malady or some other cause – the man appeared as somnolent and immobile as if both his visage and body were carved out of marble. In a word, with all the exterior marks that denote the possession of an active and ardent soul, *Pepé the Sleeper* appeared the most inactive and apathetic of men.

His chagrin was great – or appeared to be so – when, upon the evening of the day in which this narrative commences the captain of the coast-guard sent a messenger to summon him to headquarters.

On receiving the unexpected order, *Pepé* rose from his habitual attitude of recumbence, stretched himself at his leisure, yawned several times, and then obeyed the summons, saying as he went out: “What the devil fancy has the captain got into his head to send for *me*?”

Once, however, on the way and alone, it might have been observed that the somnolent coast-guard walked with an energetic and active step, very unlike his usual gait!

On entering the apartment where the captain awaited him, his apathetic habit returned; and, while rolling a cigarette between his fingers, he appeared to be half asleep. The captain was buried in a profound meditation, and did not at first perceive him.

“*Bueno!* my captain,” said the coast-guard, respectfully saluting his superior, and calling attention to his presence. “I am here.”

“Ah! good! my fine fellow,” began the captain, in a winning voice. “Well, Pepé!” added he more slowly and significantly, “the times are pretty hard with us – are they not?”

“Rather hard, captain.”

“But you, *hombre!*” rejoined Don Lucas, with a laugh, “you don’t appear to suffer much of the misery – you are always asleep I understand?”

“When I sleep, captain, I am not hungry,” replied the coast-guard, endeavouring to stifle a yawn; “then I dream that the government has paid me.”

“Well – at all events you are not its creditor for many hours of the day, since you sleep most of them. But, my fine fellow, it is not about this I desire to talk to you. I wish to give you a proof of my confidence.”

“Ah!” muttered Pepé.

“And a proof of my regard for you,” continued the officer. “The government has its eye open upon all of us; your reputation for apathy begins to be talked about, and you might be discharged one of these days as a useless official. It would be a sad affair if you were to lose your place?”

“Frightful! captain,” replied Pepé, with perfect simplicity of manner; “for if I can scarce keep from dying of hunger in my place, what would be the result were I deprived of it? Frightful!”

“To prevent this misfortune, then,” continued the captain, “I have resolved to furnish to those who calumniate you, a proof of the confidence which may be placed in you, by giving you the post of *Ensenada*— and this very night.”

Pepé involuntarily opened his eyes to their fullest extent.

“That surprises you?” said Don Lucas.

“No,” laconically replied the coast-guard.

The captain was unable to conceal from his inferior a slight confusion, and his voice trembled as he pronounced the interrogation: —

“What! It does not surprise you?”

“No,” repeated Pepé, and then added in a tone of flattery: “The captain Despierto is so well-known for his vigilance and energy, that he may confide the most important post to the very poorest of his sentinels. That is why I am not astonished at the confidence he is good enough to place in me: and now I await the instructions your Honour may be pleased to give.”

Don Lucas, without further parley, proceeded to instruct his sentinel in his duty for the night. The orders were somewhat diffuse – so much so that Pepé had a difficulty in comprehending them – but they were wound up by the captain saying to the coast-guard, as he dismissed him from his presence —

“And above all, my fine fellow, *don’t go to sleep upon your post!*”

“I shall *try* not to do so, captain,” replied Pepé, at the same time saluting his superior, and taking his leave.

“This fellow is worth his weight in gold,” muttered Don Lucas, rubbing his hands together with an air of satisfaction; “he could not have suited my purpose better, if he had been expressly made for it!”

Chapter Two

The Sentinel of La Ensenada

The little bay of Ensenada, thus confided to the vigilance of Pepé the sleeper, was mysteriously shut in among the cliffs, as if nature had designed it expressly for smugglers – especially those Spanish *contrabandistas* who carry on the trade with a cutlass in one hand and a carbine in the other.

On account of its isolation, the post was not without danger, especially on a foggy November night, when the thick vapour suspended in the air not only rendered the sight useless, but hindered the voice that might call for assistance from being heard to any distance.

In the soldier who arrived upon this post, advancing with head erect and light elastic tread, no one could have recognised Pepé the sleeper – Pepé, habitually plunged in a profound state of somnolence – Pepé, of downcast mien and slow dragging gait – and yet it was he. His eyes, habitually half shut, were now sparkling in their sockets, as if even the slightest object could not escape him even in the darkness.

After having carefully examined the ground around his post, and convinced himself that he was entirely alone, he placed his lantern in such a position that its light was thrown along the road leading to the village. Then advancing some ten or twelve paces in the direction of the water, he spread his cloak upon the ground, and lay down upon it – in such an attitude that he could command a view both of the road and the bay.

“Ah, my captain!” soliloquised the coast-guard, as he arranged his cloak around him to the best advantage, “you are a very cunning man, but you have too much faith in people who are always asleep; and devil take me! if I don’t believe that you are interested in my sleeping most soundly on this particular night. Well, *quien sabe?* we shall see.”

For about the period of half an hour Pepé remained alone – delivering himself up to his reflections, and in turns interrogating with his glance the road and the bay. At the end of that time a footstep was heard in the loose sand; and looking along the pathway, the sentinel perceived a dark form approaching the spot. In another moment the form came under the light of the lantern, and was easily recognised as that of Don Lucas, the captain of the coast-guard.

The officer appeared to be searching for something, but presently perceiving the recumbent sentinel, he paused in his steps.

“Pepé!” cried he, in a low mincing voice.

No reply came from Pepé.

“Pepé!” repeated the captain, in a tone a little more elevated.

Still no reply from the sentinel, who remained obstinately silent.

The captain, appearing to be satisfied, ceased calling the name, and shortly after retraced his steps towards the village. In a few seconds his form was lost in the distance.

“Good!” said Pepé, as his superior officer passed out of sight; “just as I expected. A moment ago I was fool enough to doubt it. Now I am sure of it. Some smuggler is going to risk it to-night. Well, I shall manage badly if I don’t come in for a windfall – though it be at the expense of my captain.”

Saying this, the sentinel with one bound rose erect upon his feet.

“Here I am no more Pepé the Sleeper,” continued he stretching himself to his full height.

From this time his eyes were bent continually upon the ocean; but another half hour passed without anything strange showing itself upon the bosom of the water – nothing to break the white line of the horizon where sea and sky appeared to be almost confounded together. Some dark clouds were floating in the heavens, now veiling and now suddenly uncovering the moon, that had just risen. The effect was fine; the horizon was one moment shining like silver, and the next dark as funeral

crape; but through all these changes no object appeared upon the water, to denote the presence of a human being.

For a long while the coast-guard looked so intently through the darkness, that he began to see the sparks flying before his eyes. Fatigued with this sustained attention, he at length shut his eyes altogether, and concentrated all his powers upon the organs of hearing. Just then a sound came sweeping over the water – so slight that it scarce reached him – but the next moment the land-breeze carried it away, and it was heard no more.

Fancying it had only been an illusion, he once more opened his eyes, but in the obscurity he could see nothing. Again he shut them closely and listened as before. This time he listened with more success. A sound regularly cadenced was heard. It was such as would be made by a pair of oars cautiously dipped, and was accompanied by a dull knocking as of the oars working in their thole-pins.

“At last we shall see!” muttered Pepé, with a gasp of satisfaction.

A small black point, almost imperceptible, appeared upon the horizon. Rapidly it increased in size, until it assumed the form and dimensions of a boat with rowers in it, followed by a bright strip of foam.

Pepé threw himself suddenly *à plat ventre*, in fear that he might be seen by those on the water; but from the elevated position which he occupied, he was able to keep his eye upon the boat without losing sight of it for a single instant.

Just then the noises ceased, and the oars were held out of water, motionless, like some sea-bird, with wings extended, choosing a spot upon which to alight. In the next instant the rowing was resumed, and the boat headed directly for the shore of the bay.

“Don’t be afraid!” muttered the coast-guard, affecting to apostrophise the rowers. “Don’t be afraid, my good fellows – come along at your pleasure!”

The rowers, in truth did not appear to be at all apprehensive of danger; and the next moment the keel of the boat was heard grinding upon the sand of the beach.

“*Por Dios!*” muttered the sentinel in a low voice; “not a bale of goods! It is possible after all, they are not smugglers!”

Three men were in the boat, who did not appear to take those precautions which smugglers would have done. They made no particular noise, but, on the other hand, they did not observe any exact silence. Moreover their costume was not that ordinarily worn by the regular *contrabandista*.

“Who the devil can they be?” asked Pepé of himself.

The coast-guard lay concealed behind some tufts of withered grass that formed a border along the crest of the slope. Through these he could observe the movements of the three men in the boat.

At an order from the one who sat in the stern sheets, the other two leaped ashore, as if with the design of reconnoitring the ground. He who issued the order, and who appeared to be the chief of the party, remained seated in the boat.

Pepé was for a moment undecided whether he should permit the two to pass him on the road; but the view of the boat, left in charge of a single man, soon fixed his resolution.

He kept his place, therefore, motionless as ever, scarce allowing himself to breathe, until the two men arrived below him, and only a few feet from the spot where he was lying.

Each was armed with a long Catalonian knife, and Pepé could see that the costume which both wore was that of the Spanish privateers of the time – a sort of mixture of the uniform of the royal navy of Spain, and that of the merchant service; but he could not see their faces, hid as they were under the slouched Basque bonnet.

All at once the two men halted. A piece of rock, detached by the knees of the coast-guard, had glided down the slope and fallen near their feet.

“Did you hear anything?” hastily asked one.

“No; did you?”

“I thought I heard something falling from above there,” replied the first speaker; pointing upward to the spot where Pepé was concealed.

“Bah! it was some mouse running into its hole.”

“If this slope wasn’t so infernally steep, I’d climb up and see,” said the first.

“I tell you we have nothing to fear,” rejoined the second; “the night is as black as a pot of pitch, and besides – the *other*, hasn’t he assured us that he will answer for the man on guard, *who sleeps all day long?*”

“Just for that reason he may not sleep at night. Remain here, I’ll go round and climb up. *Carramba!* if I find this sleepy-head,” he added, holding out his long knife, the blade of which glittered through the darkness, “so much the worse – or, perhaps, so much the better for him – for I shall send him where he may sleep forever.”

“*Mil diablos!*” thought Pepé, “this fellow is a philosopher! By the holy virgin I am long enough here.”

And at this thought, he crept out of the folds of his cloak like a snake out of his skin, and leaving the garment where it lay, crawled rapidly away from the spot.

Until he had got to a considerable distance, he was so cautious not to make any noise, that, to use a Spanish expression, *the very ground itself did not know he was passing over it.*

In this way he advanced, carbine in hand, until he was opposite the point where the boat rested against the beach. There he stopped to recover his breath, – at the same time fixing his eye upon the individual that was alone.

The latter appeared to be buried in a sombre reverie, motionless as a statue, and wrapped in an ample cloak, which served both to conceal his person and protect him from the humidity of the atmosphere. His eyes were turned toward the sea; and for this reason he did not perceive the dark form of the carabinier approaching in the opposite direction.

The latter advanced with stealthy tread – measuring the distance with his eye – until at length he stood within a few paces of the boat.

Just then the stranger made a movement as if to turn his face towards the shore, when Pepé, like a tiger hounding upon its prey, launched himself forward to the side of the boat.

“It is I!” he exclaimed, bringing the muzzle of his carbine on a level with the man’s breast. “Don’t move or you are a dead man!”

“You, who?” asked the astonished stranger, his eyes sparkling with rage, and not even lowering their glance before the threatening attitude of his enemy.

“Why me! Pepé – you know well enough? Pepé, the Sleeper?”

“Curses upon him, if he has betrayed me?” muttered, the stranger, as if speaking to himself.

“If you are speaking of Don Lucas Despierto,” interrupted the carabinier, “I can assure you he is incapable of such a thing; and if I *am here* it is because that he has been only too discreet, señor smuggler.”

“Smuggler!” exclaimed the unknown, in a tone of proud disdain.

“When I say smuggler,” replied Pepé, chuckling at his own perspicuity, “it is only meant as a compliment, for you haven’t an ounce of merchandise in your boat, unless indeed,” continued he, pointing with his foot to a rope ladder, rolled up, and lying in the bottom, “unless that may be a sample! *Santa Virgen!* a strange sample that!”

Face to face with the unknown, the coast-guard could now examine him at his leisure.

He was a young man of about Pepé’s own age, twenty-five. His complexion had the hale tint of one who followed the sea for a profession. Thick dark eyebrows were strongly delineated against a forehead bony and broad, and from a pair of large black eyes shone a sombre fire that denoted a man of implacable passions. His arched mouth was expressive of high disdain; and the wrinkles upon his cheeks, strongly marked notwithstanding his youth, at the slightest movement, gave to his countenance an expression of arrogance and scorn. In his eyes – in his whole bearing – you could

read that ambition or vengeance were the ruling passions of his soul. His fine black curling hair alone tempered the expression of severity that distinguished his physiognomy. With regard to his costume, it was simply that of an officer of the Spanish navy.

A look that would have frightened most men told the impatience with which he endured the examination of the coast-guard.

“An end to this pleasantry!” he cried out, at length. “What do you want, fellow? Speak!”

“Ah! talk of our affairs,” answered Pepé, “that is just what I desire. Well, in the first place, when those two fellows of yours return with my cloak and lantern – which they are cunning enough to make a seizure of – you will give them your commands to keep at a distance. In this way we can talk without being interrupted. Otherwise, with a single shot of this carbine, which will stretch you out dead, I shall also give the alarm. What say you? Nothing? Be it so. That answer will do for want of a better. I go on. You have given to my captain forty *onzas*?” continued the carabinier, with a bold guess, making sure that he named enough.

“Twenty,” replied the stranger, without reflecting.

“I would rather it had been forty,” said Pepé. “Well, one does not pay so high for the mere pleasure of a sentimental promenade along the shore of the Ensenada. My intervention need be no obstruction to it – provided you pay for my neutrality.”

“How?” asked the unknown, evidently desirous of putting an end to the scene.

“Oh, a mere bagatelle – you have given the captain forty *onzas*.”

“Twenty, I tell you.”

“I would rather it had been forty,” coolly repeated the carabinier, “but say twenty, then. Now I don’t wish to be indiscreet – he is a captain, I am nothing more than a poor private. I think it reasonable therefore, that I should have *double* what he has received.”

At this extortionate demand the stranger allowed a bitter oath to escape him, but made no answer.

“I know well,” continued Pepé, “that I am asking too little. If my captain has three times my pay, of course he has three times less need of money than I, and therefore I have the right to *triple* the sum he has received; but as the times are hard, I hold to my original demand – forty *onzas*.”

A terrible struggle betwixt pride and apprehension appeared to be going on in the bosom of the stranger. Despite the coldness of the night the perspiration streamed over his brow and down his cheeks. Some imperious necessity it was that had led him into this place – some strange mystery there must be – since the necessity he was now under tamed down a spirit that appeared untamable. The tone of jeering intrepidity which Pepé held toward him caused him to feel the urgency of a compromise; and at length plunging his hand into his pocket he drew forth a purse, and presented it to the carabinier.

“Take it and go!” he cried, with impatience.

Pepé took the purse, and for a moment held it in his hand as if he would first count its contents.

“Bah!” he exclaimed, after a pause, “I’ll risk it. I accept it for forty *onzas*. And now, señor stranger, I am deaf, dumb, and blind.”

“I count upon it,” coldly rejoined the unknown.

“By the life of my mother!” replied Pepé, “since it’s not an affair of smuggling I don’t mind to lend you a hand – for as a coast-guard, you see, I could not take part in anything contraband – no, never!”

“Very well, then,” rejoined the stranger, with a bitter smile, “you may set your conscience at rest on that score. Guard this boat till my return. I go to join my men. Only whatever happens – whatever you may see – whatever you may hear – be, as you have promised, deaf, dumb, and blind.”

As he uttered these words the stranger sprang out of the boat, and took the road leading to the village. A turning in the path soon hid him from the sight of the coast-guard.

Once left to himself, Pepé, under the light of the moon, counted out the glittering contents of the purse which he had extorted from the stranger.

“If this jewel is not false,” muttered he to himself, “then I don’t care if the government never pays me. Meanwhile, I must begin to-morrow to cry like a poor devil about the back pay. That will have a good effect.”

Chapter Three

The Alcalde and his Clerk

It is not known how long Pepé remained at his post to await the return of the stranger: when the cock was heard to crow, and the aurora appeared in the eastern horizon, the little bay of Ensenada was completely deserted.

Then life began to appear in the village. The dark shadows of the fishermen were seen upon the stair-like street, descending to the mole; and the first beams of the morning lit up their departure. In a few minutes the little flotilla was out of sight; and at the doors of the cottages the women and children only could be seen, appearing and disappearing at intervals.

Among these wretched hovels of the village, there was one dwelling of greater pretensions than the rest. It was that of the alcalde, Don Ramon Cohecho of whom we have already spoken. It alone still kept its doors and windows closed against the morning light.

It was full day, when a young man, wearing a high-crowned beaver hat, – old, greasy and shining, like leather – walked up to the door of the alcalde's mansion. The limbs of this individual were scantily covered with a pair of pantaloons, so tightly fitting as to appear like a second skin to his legs, so short as scarce to touch his ankles, and of such thin stuff as to ill protect the wearer from the sharp air of a November morning. The upper half of this individual was not visible. A little cloak, of coarse shaggy cloth, known as an *esclavina*, covered him up to the very eyes. In the manner in which he so carefully guarded the upper part of his person with this pinched mantle, at the expense of his thighs and legs, an observer might have supposed that he was perfectly content with his pantaloons. Appearances, however, are often deceptive; for in truth the ambition of this youth; whose unsteady glance, miserable aspect, and a certain smell of old papers about him, proclaimed to be *un escribano* – his everyday dream was to have a pair of pantaloons entirely different from his own – in other words, a pair with long ample legs, of good wide waist, and made out of fine broadcloth. Such a pair would render him the most satisfied man in the world.

This young man was the *right hand* of the alcalde – his name Gregorio Cagatinta.

On reaching the door, he gave a modest knock with his horn ink-bottle, which he carried hanging to his button. The door was opened by an old housekeeper.

“Ah! it is you, *Don Gregorio*?” cried the housekeeper, with that superb courtesy so peculiar to the Spaniards – that even two shoeblacks on meeting lavish upon each other the epithet *Don*, as if each were a grand noble.

“Yes, it is I, Doña Nicolasa,” replied Gregorio.

“*Santisima Virgen!* – since it is you, then I must be late, and my master will be waiting for his pantaloons that are not yet aired. Take a seat, Don Gregorio: he will soon be down.”

The chamber into which the notary's clerk had been introduced would have been a large one, had it not been for the singular conglomeration of objects with which it was more than half filled. Nets of all sizes, masts, yards, and rudders of boats, oars, sails of every kind – both square and lateen – woollen shirts worn by sailors or fishermen, and a variety of other marine objects, were placed pellmell in every corner of the room. Notwithstanding, there was space enough left to hold three or four chairs around a large oaken table, upon which last stood a large cork ink-stand, with several goose-quill pens; with some sheets of half dirty paper placed ostentatiously around it to awe the visitors, who might have business with the alcalde.

The presence of this odd assortment of objects, it would have been difficult for a stranger to explain – though there was no mystery about it. The fact is, that besides his official character as first magistrate, the alcalde had another *rôle* which he played, of rather an unofficial character. He was the *pawnbroker* of the place – that is, he lent out money in small sums, charging a *real* for every dollar

by the week – in other words, a simple interest of twenty per cent, by the month, or two hundred and fifty per cent, per annum! His clients being all fishermen, will account for the nautical character of the “pledges” that filled the chamber of audience.

Cagatinta scarce deigned to cast a look at this miscellaneous collection of objects. Had there been a pair of pantaloons among them, it might have been different; for to say the truth, the probity of Don Gregorio was scarce firm enough to have resisted so strong a temptation as this would have been. The notary’s clerk was not exactly of that stuff of which honest men are composed. Nature, even in its crimes, does not leap to grand villainies at once; it proceeds from less to greater; and Cagatinta, though still but young, was yet capable of a little bit of “cribbing.”

Don Ramon was not long in coming out of his sleeping-room. In a little while he showed his jovial face at the door of the audience chamber.

He was a person of portly and robust figure; and it was easily seen that one leg of his ample pantaloons would have been sufficient to have made a pair for the thin limbs and meagre body of the escribano.

“*Por Dios!* Señor alcalde,” said the clerk, after having exchanged with his superior a profusion of matinal salutations, “what a splendid pair of pantaloons you have on!”

From the alcalde’s answer, it was evident that this was not the first time that Cagatinta had made the remark.

“Ah! Gregorio, *amigo!*” replied he, in a tone of good-humour, “you are growing tiresome with your repetitions. Patience, patience, señor escribano! you know that for the services you are to render me – I say nothing of those already rendered – I have promised you my liver-coloured breeches, which have been only a very little used: you have only to gain them.”

“But what services are to gain them, señor alcalde?” inquired the clerk, in a despairing tone.

“Eh – Dios! – who knows what – patience, *amigo!* Something may turn up all at once, that will give you that advantage over me. But come! let us to business – make out the deed of appropriation of the boat of that bad pay, Vicente Perez, who under pretence that he has six brats to feed, can’t reimburse me the twenty dollars I have advanced him.”

Cagatinta drew out from his little portfolio a sheet of stamped paper, and sitting down by the table proceeded to execute the order of the magistrate. He was interrupted by a hurried knocking at the outer door – which had been closed to prevent intrusion.

“Who dare knock in that fashion?” sharply inquired the alcalde.

“*Ave Maria purisima!*” cried a voice from without.

“*Sin pecado concebida!*” replied at the same time the two acolytes within.

And upon this formula, Gregorio hastened to the door, and opened it.

“What on earth can have brought you here at this hour, Don Juan de Dios Canelo?” inquired the alcalde in a tone of surprise, as the old steward of the Countess de Mediana appeared in the doorway, his bald forehead clouded with some profound chagrin.

“Ah, señor alcalde,” replied the old man, “a terrible misfortune has happened last night – a great crime has been committed – the Countess has disappeared, and the young Count along with her!”

“Are you sure of this?” shouted the alcalde.

“Alas – you will only have to go up into the balcony that overlooks the sea, and there you will see in what state the assassins have left the Countess’s chamber.”

“Justice! justice! Señor alcalde! Send out your alguazils over the whole country; find the villains – hang them!”

This voice came from a woman still outside in the street. It was the *femme de chambre* of the Countess, who, to show a devotion which she very little felt, judged it apropos to make a great outcry as she precipitated herself into the chamber of audience.

“Ta-ta-ta, woman! how you go on!” interrupted the alcalde. “Do you think I have a crowd of alguazils? You know very well that in this virtuous village there are only two; and as these would starve if they didn’t follow some trade beside their official one, they are both gone fishing hours ago.”

“Ah, me!” cried the *femme de chambre*, with a hypocritical whine, “my poor mistress! – who then is to help her?”

“Patience, woman, patience!” said the alcalde. “Don’t fear but that justice will be done.”

The chamber-maid did not appear to draw much hope from the assurance, but only redoubled her cries, her excited behaviour strongly contrasting with the quiet manner in which the faithful old steward exhibited the sincerity of his grief.

Meanwhile a crowd of women, old men, and children, had gathered around the alcalde’s door, and by little and little, were invading the sanctuary of the audience chamber itself.

Don Ramon advanced towards Cagatinta, who was rubbing his hands under his *esclavina*, charmed at the idea of the quantity of stamped paper he would now have an opportunity to blacken.

“Now, friend Gregorio,” said the alcalde, in a low voice, “the time has come, when, if you are sharp, you may gain the liver-coloured breeches.”

He said no more; but it was evident that the *escribano* understood him, at least, to a certain extent. The latter turned pale with joy, and kept his eye fixed upon every movement of his patron, determined to seize the first opportunity that presented itself of winning the breeches.

The alcalde reseated himself in his great leathern chair; and commanding silence with a wave of his hand, addressed his auditory in a long and pompous speech, with that profuse grandiloquence of which the Spanish language is so capable.

The substance of his speech was as follows:

“My children! We have just heard from this respectable individual, Don Juan de Dios Canelo, that a great crime has last night been committed; the full knowledge of this villainy cannot fail to arrive at the ears of justice, from which nothing can be kept hid. Not the less are we to thank Don Juan for his official communication; it only remains for him to complete the accusation by giving the names of the guilty persons.”

“But, señor alcalde,” interrupted the steward, “I do not know them, although, as you say, my communication may be official – I can only say that I will do all in my power to assist in finding them.”

“You understand, my children,” continued the alcalde, without taking notice of what the steward had said, “the worthy Canelo by his official communication asks for the punishment of the guilty persons. Justice will not be deaf to his appeal. I may now be permitted, however, to speak to you of my own little affairs, before abandoning myself to the great grief which the disappearance of the Countess and the young Count has caused me.”

Here the alcalde made a sign to Cagatinta, whose whole faculties were keenly bent to discover what service was expected from him, by which he was to gain the object of his ambition – the liver-coloured breeches.

The alcalde continued: —

“You all know, my children, of my attachment to the family of Mediana. You can judge, then, of the grief which this news has given me – news the more incomprehensible, since one neither knows by whom, or for what reason such a crime should be committed. Alas, my children! I lose a powerful protector in the Countess de Mediana; and in me the heart of the old and faithful servant is pierced with anguish, while as a man of business I am equally a sufferer. Yes, my children! In the deceitful security, which I felt no later than yesterday, I was up to the chateau, and had an important interview with the Countess in regard to my rents.”

“To ask time for their payment,” Cagatinta would have added, for the clerk was perfectly acquainted with the alcalde’s affairs. But Don Ramon did not allow him an opportunity of committing this enormous indiscretion, which would forever have deprived him of the promised breeches.

“Patience, worthy Cagatinta!” he exclaimed hastily, so as to prevent the other from speaking, “constrain this thirst for justice that consumes you! – Yes, my children!” he continued, turning to his auditory, “in consequence of this feeling of security, which I have now cause to regret, I placed in the hands of the unfortunate Countess,” – here the voice of Don Ramon quivered – “a sum equivalent to ten years of my rents *in advance*.”

At this unexpected declaration, Cagatinta bounded from his chair as if stung by a wasp; and the blood ran cold in his veins when he perceived the grand blunder he had been so near committing.

“You will understand, then, my children, the terrible situation in which this disappearance of the Countess has placed me, when I tell you that I *took no receipt from the lady*, but this very morning was to have gone up for it.”

This revelation produced a profound sensation among the auditory; and though perhaps not one of them really believed the story, no one dared to give utterance to his incredulity.

“Fortunately,” continued the alcalde, “the word of persons worthy of credit may yet repair the mistake I have committed – fortunately there were witnesses of the payment.”

Here Cagatinta – who like water that had been a long time dammed up and had now found vent – stretched out both his arms, and in a loud voice cried out:

“I can swear to it!”

“He can swear to it,” said the alcalde.

“He can swear to it,” mechanically repeated one or two of the bystanders.

“Yes, my friends!” solemnly added Cagatinta. “I swear to it now, and should have mentioned the matter sooner, but I was prevented by a little uncertainty. I had an idea that it was *fifteen* years of rent, instead of *ten*, that I saw the alcalde hand over to the unfortunate Doña Luisa.”

“No, my worthy friend,” interrupted the alcalde in a tone of moderation, likely to produce an effect upon his auditory. “It was only ten years of rent, which your valuable testimony will hinder me from losing.”

“Yes, señor alcalde,” replied the wily scribe, determined at all hazards to deserve the liver-coloured breeches, “I know it was ten years in advance, but there were also the two years of back rent which you paid – two years of arrears and ten in advance – twelve years in all. *Por Dios!* a large sum it would be to have lost!”

And with this reflection Cagatinta sat down again, fancying, no doubt, that he had fairly won the breeches.

We shall not detail what further passed during the scene in the alcalde’s chamber of audience – where justice was practised as in the times of Gil Blas – long before and long after Gil Blas – for it is not very different in a Spanish law court at the hour in which we are writing.

Enough to say that the scene concluded, most of the dramatis personae, with the alcalde at their head, proceeded to the chateau, to inspect the chamber, and if possible find out some clue to the mysterious disappearance of the Countess.

Chapter Four

The Forsaken Chamber

On arriving at the chateau, the alcalde ordered the door of the Countess's chamber to be burst in – for it was still bolted inside. On entering the apartment a picture of confusion was presented. Drawers empty, others drawn out, but only half sacked of their contents.

All this did not indicate precisely that there had been any violence. A voluntary but hurried departure on the part of the Countess might have left just such traces as were discovered. The bed was still undisturbed, as if she had not lain down upon it. This fact appeared to indicate a foreknowledge, on the part of the lady, of what was to happen – as if she had had the intention of going off, but had made no preparation until the moment of departure. The furniture was all in its place – the window curtains and those of the alcove had not been disarranged, and no traces of a struggle were to be discerned within the chamber, which contained many light fragile objects of furniture that could not fail to have been destroyed by the slightest violence.

The fetid odour of an oil lamp filled the apartment despite the cold air that came in through the open window. It was evident, therefore, that this lamp had been left alight, and had continued to burn until the oil had become exhausted.

It could not be a robbery either. A thousand articles of value, likely enough to have tempted the cupidity of robbers, were left behind both on the tables and in the drawers.

The conclusion then was that neither assassination nor burglary had taken place.

Notwithstanding all these deceptive appearances, the old steward shook his head doubtfully. The signs were sufficient to baffle his reason, which was none of the strongest, but the faithful servant could not bring himself to believe that his noble mistress would take flight in a manner so extraordinary – his good sense revolted at the thought. In his belief some crime had been committed, but how was it to be explained – since the assassin had left no traces of his guilt? The devoted Don Juan looked with a sad eye upon that desolate chamber – upon the dresses of his beloved mistress scattered over the floor; upon the cradle of the young Count, where he had so lately slept, rosy and smiling, under the vigil of his mother.

Suddenly struck with an idea, the steward advanced towards the iron balcony that fronted upon the sea – that where the window had been found open. With inquiring eye he looked to the ground below, which was neither more nor less than the beach of the sea itself. It was at no great depth below; and he could easily have seen from the balcony any traces that might have been there. But there were none. The tide had been in and out again. No trace was left on the sand or pebbles that had the slightest signification in regard to the mysterious event. The wind sighed, the waves murmured as always; but amid the voices of nature none raised itself to proclaim the guilty.

On the fair horizon only were descried the white sails of a ship, gradually passing outwards and fading away into the azure of the sea.

While the old steward watched the disappearance of the ship with a sort of dreamy regard, he sent up a silent prayer that his mistress might still be safe. The others, with the exception of the alcalde and his clerk, stood listening to the mournful howling of the wind against the cliffs, which seemed alternately to weep and sigh as if lamenting the sad event that had just transpired.

As regards the alcalde and his assistant, they were under the same conviction as Don Juan – both believing that a crime had been committed – though they did not care to avow their belief, for reasons known to themselves. The absence of any striking evidence that might lead to the discovery of the delinquents, but more especially the difficulty of finding some interested individual able to pay the expenses of justice (the principal object of criminal prosecutions in Spain), damped the zeal of Don Ramon and the scribe. Both were satisfied to leave things as they stood – the one contented

with having gained the recompense so much coveted – the other with the twelve years of rents which he felt sure of gaining.

“*Valga me Dios!* my children,” said the alcalde, turning toward the witnesses, “I cannot explain what fancy the Countess may have had in going out by the window – for the door of the chamber, bolted inside, leaves no room to doubt that she went that way. Some woman’s caprice, perhaps, which justice has no business to meddle with.”

“Perhaps it was to escape from giving the alcalde his receipt,” suggested one of the bystanders to another, in an undertone of voice.

“But how, Don Juan,” continued the magistrate, addressing himself to the old steward, “how did you know of the Countess’s disappearance, since you could not get into the room?”

“That is simple enough,” replied the old man. “At the hour in which the chamber-maid is accustomed to present herself before the señora, she knocked as usual at the door. No answer was given. She knocked louder, and still received no answer. Growing anxious, she came to me to tell me. I went to the door myself, first knocked and then called; and receiving no reply, I ran round to the garden and got the ladder. This I placed against the balcony, and mounted up in order to see through the window. On reaching the window I found it open, and the chamber in the condition you now see it.”

When the steward had finished this declaration, Cagatinta whispered some words in the ear of the alcalde; but the latter only replied by a shake of the shoulders, and an expression of disdainful incredulity.

“Who knows?” answered the scribe in reply to this dumb show.

“It might be,” muttered Don Ramon, “we shall see presently.”

“I persist, gentlemen,” continued the alcalde, “in my belief that the Countess has gone out by the window; and however singular it may appear, I believe the lady is free to her fancy to go out as she pleases – even though it be by a window.”

Cagatinta, and some others, complimented, with a laugh, this little bit of magisterial facetiousness.

“But, señor alcalde,” spoke out Don Juan, disgusted with this ill-timed pleasantry, “a proof that there has been a forced entry into the chamber is this broken glass of the window, of which you see some pieces still lying on the balcony.”

“This old fool,” muttered the alcalde to himself, “is not going to let me have any breakfast. By this time everything will be cold, and Nicolasa – What do these bits of glass prove?” he continued, raising his voice; “don’t you think that the breeze which was blowing roughly last night might have caused this? The window was hanging open, and the wind clashing it violently against the frame, would readily cause the breaking of a pane?”

“But why is it,” answered Don Juan, “that the broken pane is precisely the one adjacent to the fastening? It must have been knocked out to get the window open.”

“*Carramba!* Señor Don Juan de Dios!” cried the alcalde, in a peevish tone – at the same time biting his gold-headed cane, the emblem of his office – “Is it you or I who have here the right to ask questions? *Carrai!* it appears to me that you make me cut a strange figure!”

Here Cagatinta interposed with a modest air —

“I shall answer our friend Canelo, if you permit me. If the window was open with the design he has stated, it must of course have been done from the outside. The pieces of glass then would have fallen *into* the chamber; but such is not the case – there they lie on the balcony! It has been the wind therefore, as his honour the alcalde has reasonably stated, that has done this business. Unless, indeed,” added he, with a feigned smile, “some trunk carried incautiously past the window might have struck one of the squares. This may have been – since it appears the Countess intends a prolonged absence, judging from the effects – taken with her, as testified by the empty drawers.”

The old steward lowered his head at this proof which seemed completely to falsify his assertion. He did not hear the last observation of Cagatinta, who was cogitating whether he ought not to exact from the alcalde something more than the liver-coloured breeches, as a recompense of this new service he had done him.

While the faithful Don Juan was busy with painful reflections that threw their shadows upon his bald forehead, the alcalde approached and addressed him in a voice so low as not to be heard by the others.

“I have been a little sharp with you, Don Juan – I have not sufficiently taken into account the grief, which you as a loyal servant must feel under such an unexpected stroke. But tell me! independent of the chagrin which this affair has caused you, are you not also affected by some fears about your own future? You are old – weak in consequence – and without resources?”

“It is just because I am old, and know that I have not long to live, that I am so little affected. My grief, however,” added he with an air of pride, “is pure and free from all selfishness. The generosity of Count de Mediana has left me enough to pass the remainder of my days in tranquillity. But I should pass them all the more happily if I could only see avenged the lady of my old master.”

“I approve of your sentiments, Señor Don Juan! you are doubly estimable on account of your sorrow, and as to your *savings*– Notary! Señor Cagatinta!” cried the alcalde, suddenly raising his voice so as to be heard by all present, “Make out a *procès verbal*– that the Señor Don Juan Dios Canelo, here present, will become prosecutor in this case. It cannot be doubted that a crime has been committed; and it is a duty we owe to ourselves as well as to this respectable man, to seek out and punish the authors of it.”

“But, señor alcalde!” interposed the steward, perfectly stupefied with this unexpected declaration, “I did not say – I have no intention to become *prosecutor*.”

“Take care, old man!” cried Don Ramon, in a solemn tone; “if you deny what you have already confided to me, grievous charges may be brought against you. As friend Cagatinta has just this minute observed to me, the ladder by which you scaled the balcony might prove sinister designs. But I know you are incapable of such. Rest contented, then, at being the accuser in place of the accused. Come, gentlemen! our duty calls us outside. Perhaps underneath the balcony we may find some traces of this most mysterious matter.”

So saying, the alcalde left the chamber, followed by the crowd.

Poor Don Juan found himself thus unexpectedly between two horns of a dilemma, the result in either case being the same – that is, the spoliation of the little *pecadillo* he had put away against old age. He shook his head, and with a sublime resignation accepted the voice of iniquity for that of God – consoling himself with the reflection, that this last sacrifice might be of some service to the family whose bread he had so long eaten.

No trace was found under the balcony. As already stated the waves must have obliterated any footmarks or other vestiges that may have been left.

It was believed for a while that an important capture had been made, in the person of a man found lying in a crevice among the rocks. This proved to be Pepé the Sleeper. Suddenly aroused, the coast-guard was asked if he had seen or heard anything? No, was the reply, nothing. But Pepé remembered his full pockets; and fearing that the alcalde might take a fancy to search him, saw that some *ruse* was necessary to put an end to the scene. This he succeeded in doing, by begging the alcalde for a *real* to buy bread with!

What was to be done with this droll fellow? The alcalde felt no inclination to question him farther, but left him to go to sleep again and sleep as long as he pleased.

Any further investigation appeared to Don Ramon to be useless – at least until some order might be received from higher quarters – besides it would be necessary to graduate the expenses of justice to the means of the prosecutor; and with this reflection, the alcalde went home to his breakfast.

In the evening of this eventful day for the village of Elanchovi – when the twilight had fallen upon the water – two persons might have been seen wandering along the beach, but evidently desirous of shunning one another. Both appeared in grief, though their sorrows sprang from a very different cause.

One was a poor old steward, who, while heaving a sigh at the thought that his worldly store was about to be absorbed in the inexorable gulf of justice, at the same time searched for some trace of his lost mistress, praying for her and her child, and calling upon God to take them under his protection.

The other pensive wanderer was Cagatinta, of whom the alcalde had again taken the advantage. Profiting by the confidence of the scribe, Don Ramon had induced the latter to commit his oath to stamped paper; and then instead of the liver-coloured breeches had offered him an old hat in remuneration. This Cagatinta had indignantly refused.

He was now lamenting his vanished dreams of ambition, his silly confidence, and the immorality of false oaths —*not paid for*. Nevertheless, he was meditating whether it would not be more prudent to accept the old hat in lieu of the liver-coloured breeches, alas! so well earned!

Chapter Five

Pepé's Revanche

When Pepé the Sleeper had made himself master of the secret of Captain Despierto – which he had found of such profitable service – he was not aware that the captain had held back another. Nevertheless, the coast-guard felt some kind of remorse of conscience – though he had as yet no idea of the terrible consequences that had resulted. His remorse was simply that he had betrayed his post of sentinel; and he determined that he would make up for it by a more zealous performance of duty whenever an opportunity should offer. To bring about this contingency, he went on the very next night, and requested to be once more placed on the post of Ensenada.

His wish was gratified; and while Don Lucas believed him asleep as usual, Pepé kept wide awake, as on the preceding night.

We shall leave him at his post, while we recount what was taking place off the coast not far from the Ensenada.

The night was as foggy as that which preceded it, when about the hour of ten o'clock a *coaster* was observed gliding in towards the cliffs, and entering among a labyrinth of rocks that lay near the mouth of the bay.

This vessel appeared well guided and well *sailed*. The shape of her hull, her rigging, her sails, denoted her to be a ship-of-war, or at the least a privateer.

The boldness with which she manoeuvred, in the middle of the darkness, told that her pilot must be some one well acquainted with this dangerous coast; and also that her commander had an understanding with some people on the shore.

The sea dashed with fury against both sides of the rocky strait, through which the coaster was making her way, but still she glided safely on. The strait once cleared, a large bay opened before her, in which the sea was more calm, and rippled gently up against a beach of sand and pebble.

The coaster at length succeeded in gaining this bay; and then by a manoeuvre directed by the officer of the watch she hove-to with a celerity that denoted a numerous crew.

Two boats were let down upon the water, and, being instantly filled with men, were rowed off in the direction of the upper end of the bay, where some houses, which could be distinguished by their whiteness, stood scattered along the beach.

To end the mystery, let us say that the little coaster was a French vessel – half-privateer half-smuggler – and had entered the bay with a double design – the disposing of merchandise and the procuring of provisions, of which the crew began to stand in need. Further we shall add, that the pilot was a skilful fisherman of Elanchovi, furnished by Don Lucas Despierto, captain of the coast-guard!

The officer of the watch silently walked the deck – now listening to the waves surging against the sides of the little vessel – now stooping a moment over the light of the binnacle – anon watching the sails that napped loosely upon the yards, now turned contrary to the direction of the wind.

An hour had been passed in this manner, when a brisk fusillade was heard from several points on the shore. Other reports of musketry appeared to respond and shortly after the two boats came hastening back to the coaster.

It was Pepé who had caused all this; Pepé, who, to the great chagrin of his captain, had given warning to the coast-guards. He had been too late, notwithstanding his zeal, for the boats came back laden with sheep and other provisions of every soft.

The last of the men who climbed over the gangway – just as the boats were being hoisted up – was a sailor of gigantic height, of colossal proportions, and Herculean vigour. He was a Canadian by birth. He carried in his arms a young child that was cold and motionless, as if dead. A slight trembling in its limbs, however, proclaimed that there was still life in it.

“What the deuce have you got there, Bois-Rose?” demanded the officer of the watch.

“With your leave, lieutenant, it’s a young child that I found in a boat adrift, half dead with hunger and cold. A woman, quite dead, and bathed in her own blood, still held it in her arms. I had all the trouble in the world to get the boat away from the place where I found it, for those dogs of Spaniards espied it, and took it for one of ours. There was a terrible devil of a coast-guard kept all the while firing at me with as much obstinacy as awkwardness. I should have silenced him with a single shot, had I not been hindered in looking after this poor little creature. But if ever I return – ah!”

“And what do you intend to do with the child?”

“Take care of it, lieutenant, until peace be proclaimed, then return here and find out who it belongs to.”

Unfortunately the only knowledge he was able to obtain about the infant was its name, Fabian, and that the woman who had been assassinated was its mother.

Two years passed during which the French privateer did not return to the coast of Spain. The tenderness of the sailor towards the child he had picked up – which was no other than the young Count Fabian de Mediana – did not cease for an instant, but seemed rather to increase with time. It was a singular and touching spectacle to witness the care, almost motherly, which this rude nurse lavished upon the child, and the constant *ruses* to which he had recourse to procure a supplement to his rations for its nourishment. The sailor had to fight for his own living; but he often indulged in dreams that some day a rich prize would be captured, his share of which would enable him to take better care of his adopted son. Unfortunately he did not take into his calculations the perilous hazards of the life he was leading.

One morning the privateer was compelled to run from an English brig of war of nearly twice her force; and although a swift sailer, the French vessel soon found that she could not escape from her pursuer. She disdained to refuse the combat, and the two vessels commenced cannonading each other.

For several hours a sanguinary conflict was kept up, when the Canadian sailor, dashed with blood, and blackened with powder, ran towards the child and lifting it in his arms, carried it to the gangway. There, in the midst of the tumult, with blood running over the decks, amidst the confusion of cries and the crash of falling masts, he wished to engrave on the child’s memory the circumstance of a separation, of which he had a strong presentiment. In this moment, which should leave even upon the memory of an infant, a souvenir that would never be effaced, he called out to the child, while shielding it with his huge body, “Kneel, my son!”

The child knelt, trembling with affright.

“You see what is going on?”

“I am afraid,” murmured Fabian, “the blood – the noise – ” and saying this he hid himself in the arms of his protector.

“It is well,” replied the Canadian, in a solemn tone. “Never forget, then, that in this moment, a sailor, a man who loved you as his own life, said to you —*kneel and pray for your mother!*”

He was not permitted to finish the speech. At that moment a bullet struck him and his blood spouting over the child, caused it to utter a lamentable cry. The Canadian had just strength left to press the boy to his breast, and to add some words; but in so low a tone that Fabian could only comprehend a single phrase. It was the continuation of what he had been saying – “*Your mother—whom I found—dead beside you.*”

With this speech ended the consciousness of the sailor. He was not dead, however; his wound did not prove fatal.

When he came to his senses again he found himself in the fetid hold of a ship. A terrible thirst devoured him. He called out in a feeble voice, but no one answered him. He perceived that he was a prisoner, and he wept for the loss of his liberty, but still more for that of the adopted son that Providence had given him.

What became of Fabian? That the history of the “Wood-Rangers” will tell us; but before crossing from the prologue of our drama – before crossing from Europe to America – a few events connected with the tragedy of Elanchovi remain to be told.

It was several days after the disappearance of the Countess, before anything was known of her fate. Then some fishermen found the abandoned boat driven up among the rocks and still containing the body of the unfortunate lady. This was some light thrown upon the horrid mystery; but the cause of the assassination long remained unknown, and the author of it long unpunished.

The old steward tied black crape upon the vanes of the chateau, and erected a wooden cross on the spot where the body of his beloved mistress had been found; but, as everything in this human world soon wears out, the sea-breeze had not browned the black crape, nor the waves turned green the wood of the cross, before the tragic event ceased to cause the slightest emotion in the village – ay, even ceased to be talked of.

Chapter Six

Sonora

Sonora, naturally one of the richest provinces of Mexico, is also one of the least known. Vast tracts in this State have never been explored; and others have been seen only by the passing traveller. Nevertheless, Nature has been especially bountiful to this remote territory. In some parts of it the soil, scarce scratched by the plough, will yield two crops in the year; while in other places gold is scattered over the surface, or mixed with the sands, in such quantity as to rival the *placers* of California.

It is true that these advantages are, to some extent neutralised by certain inconveniences. Vast deserts extend between the tracts of fertile soil, which render travelling from one to the other both difficult and dangerous; and, in many parts, of the province the savage aborigines of the country are still masters of the ground. This is especially the case in those districts where the gold is found in *placers*.

Those *placers* are not to be approached by white men, unless when in strong force. The Indians repel all such advances with warlike fury. Not that they care to protect the gold – of whose value they have been hitherto ignorant – but simply from their hereditary hatred of the white race. Nevertheless, attempts are frequently made to reach the desired gold fields. Some that result in complete failure, and some that are more or less successful.

The natural riches of Sonora have given rise to very considerable fortunes, and not a few very large ones, of which the origin was the finding a “nugget” of virgin gold; while others again had for their basis the cultivation of the rich crops which the fertile soil of Sonora can produce.

There is a class of persons in Sonora, who follow no other business than searching for gold *placers* or silver mines, and whose only knowledge consists of a little practical acquaintance with metallurgy. These men are called *gambusinos*. From time to time they make long excursions into the uninhabited portions of the State; where, under great privations, and exposed to a thousand dangers, they hastily and very superficially work some vein of silver, or wash the auriferous sands of some desert-stream, until, tracked and pursued by the Indians, they are compelled to return to their villages. Here they find an audience delighted to listen to their adventures, and to believe the exaggerated accounts which they are certain to give of marvellous treasures lying upon the surface of, the ground, but not to be approached on account of some great danger, Indian or otherwise, by which they are guarded.

These *gambusinos* are to mining industry, what the backwoodsmen are to agriculture and commerce. They are its pioneers. Avarice stimulated by their wonderful stories, and often too by the sight of real treasure brought in from the desert – for the expeditions of the *gambusinos* do not always prove failures – avarice thus tempted, is ready to listen to the voice of some adventurous leader, who preaches a crusade of conquest and exploration. In Sonora, as elsewhere, there are always an abundance of idle men to form the material of an expedition – the sons of ruined families – men who dislike hard work, or indeed any work – and others who have somehow got outside the pale of justice. These join the leader and an expedition is organised.

In general, however, enterprises of this kind are too lightly entered upon, as well as too loosely conducted; and the usual consequence is, that before accomplishing its object the band falls to pieces; many become victims to hunger, thirst, or Indian hostility; and of those who went forth only a few individuals return to tell the tale of suffering and disaster.

This example will, for a while, damp the ardour for such pursuits. But the disaster is soon forgotten; fresh stories of the *gambusinos* produce new dreams of wealth; and another band of adventurers is easily collected.

At the time of which I am writing – that is, in 1830 – just twenty-two years after the tragedy of Elanchovi, one of these expeditions was being organised at Arispe – then the capital of the State of Sonora. The man who was to be the leader of the expedition was not a native of Mexico, but a stranger. He was a Spaniard who had arrived in Sonora but two months before, and who was known by the name, Don Estevan de Arechiza.

No one in Arispe remembered ever to have seen him; and yet he appeared to have been in the country before this time. His knowledge of its topography, as well as its affairs and political personages, was so positive and complete, as to make it evident that Sonora was no stranger to him; and the plan of his expedition appeared to have been conceived and arranged beforehand – even previous to his arrival from Europe.

Beyond doubt, Don Estevan was master of considerable resources. He had his train of paid followers, kept open house, made large bets at the *monté* tables, lent money to friends without appearing to care whether it should ever be returned, and played “grand Seigneur” to perfection.

No one knew from what source he drew the means to carry on such a “war.”

Now and then he was known to absent himself from Arispe for a week or ten days at a time. He was absent on some journey; but no one could tell to what part of the country these journeys were made – for his well-trained servants never said a word about the movements of their master.

Whoever he might be, his courteous manner *à l’Espagnol*, his generosity, and his fine free table, soon gave him a powerful influence in the social world of Arispe; and by this influence he was now organising an expedition, to penetrate to a part of the country which it was supposed no white man had ever yet visited.

As Don Estevan almost always lost at play, and as he also neglected to reclaim the sums of money which he so liberally lent to his acquaintances, it began to be conjectured that he possessed not far from Arispe some rich *placer* of gold from which he drew his resources. The periodical journeys which he made gave colour to this conjecture.

It was also suspected that he knew of some *placer* – still more rich – in the country into which he was about to lead his expedition. What truth there was in the suspicion we shall presently see.

It will easily be understood that with such a reputation, Don Estevan would have very little difficulty in collecting his band of adventurers. Indeed it was said, that already more than fifty determined men from all parts of Sonora had assembled at the *Presidio of Tubac* on the Indian frontier – the place appointed for the rendezvous of the expedition. It was further affirmed that in a few days Don Estevan himself would leave Arispe to place himself at their head.

This rumour, hitherto only conjecture, proved to be correct; for at one of the dinners given by the hospitable Spaniard, he announced to his guests that in three days he intended to start for Tubac.

During the progress of this same dinner, a messenger was introduced into the dining-room, who handed to Don Estevan a letter, an answer to which he awaited.

The Spaniard, begging of his guests to excuse him for a moment, broke the seal and read the letter.

As there was a certain mystery about the habits of their convivial host, the guests were silent for a while – all watching his movements and the play of his features; but the impassible countenance of Don Estevan did not betray a single emotion that was passing his mind, even to the most acute observer around the table. In truth he was a man who well knew how to dissemble his thoughts, and perhaps on that very occasion, more than any other, he required all his self-command.

“It is well,” he said, calmly addressing himself to the messenger. “Take my answer to him who sent you, that I will be punctual to the rendezvous in three days from the present.”

With this answer the messenger took his departure. Don Estevan, turning to his guests, again apologised for his impoliteness; and the dinner for an instant suspended once more progressed with renewed activity.

Nevertheless the Spaniard appeared more thoughtful than before; and his guests did not doubt but that he had received some news of more than ordinary interest.

We shall leave them to their conjectures, and precede Don Estevan to the mysterious rendezvous which had been given him, and the scene of which was to be a small village lying upon the route to the Presidio of Tubac.

The whole country between Arispe and the Presidio in question may be said to be almost uninhabited. Along the route only mean hovels are encountered, with here and there a *hacienda* of greater pretensions. These houses are rarely solitary, but collected in groups at long distances apart. Usually a day's journey lies between them, and, consequently, they are the stopping-places for travellers, who may be on their way towards the frontier. But the travellers are few, and the inhabitants of these miserable hovels pass the greater part of their lives in the middle of a profound solitude. A little patch of Indian corn which they cultivate, – a few head of cattle, which, fed upon the perfumed pastures of the plains, produce beef of an exquisite flavour, – a sky always clear, – and, above all, a wonderful sobriety of living, – enable these dwellers of the desert steppes of Sonora to live, if not in a state of luxury, at least free from all fear of want. What desires need trouble a man who sees a blue sky always over his head, and who finds in the smoke of a cigarette of his own making, a resource against all the cravings of hunger?

At one part of the year, however, these villages of hovels are uninhabited – altogether abandoned by their occupants. This is the *dry season*, during the greater portion of which the cisterns that supply the villages with water become dried up. The cisterns are fed by the rains of heaven, and no other water than this can be found throughout most tracts of the country. When these give out, the settlements have to be abandoned, and remain until the return of the periodical rains.

In a morning of the year 1830, at the distance of about three days' journey from Arispe, a man was seated, or rather half reclining, upon his *serapé* in front of a rude hovel. A few other huts of a similar character were near, scattered here and there over the ground. It was evident, from the profound silence that reigned among these dwellings, and the absence of human forms, or implements of household use, that the *rancheria* was abandoned by its half nomad population. Such in reality was the fact, for it was now the very height of the dry season. Two or three roads branched out from this miserable group of huts, leading off into a thick forest which surrounded it on all sides. They were rather paths than roads, for the tracks which they followed were scarce cleared of the timber that once grew upon them. At the point of junction of these roads the individual alluded to had placed himself; and his attitude of perfect ease told that he was under no apprehension from the profound and awe-inspiring loneliness of the place. The croak of the ravens flitting from tree to tree hoarsely uttered in their flight; the cry of the *chaculucas* as they welcomed the rising sun, were the only sounds that broke the stillness of the scene.

Presently the white fog of the night began to rise upward and disappear under the strength of the sunbeams. Only a few flakes of it still hung over the tops of the mezquite and iron-wood trees that grew thickly around the huts.

Near where the man lay, there might be seen the remains of a large fire. It had been kindled no doubt to protect him from the chill dews of the night; and it now served him to prepare his breakfast. Some small cakes of wheaten meal, with few pieces of *tasajo*, were already placed upon the red embers of the fire; but notwithstanding that these would make but a meagre repast the man appeared eagerly to await the enjoyment of it.

Near at hand, with a frugality equal to that of his master, a horse was browsing upon the tufts of dry yellow grass, that grew thinly over the ground. This horse, with a saddle and bridle lying near, proved the solitary individual to be a traveller. Contrary to the usual custom of the country, the horse had no *lazo*, or fastening of any kind upon him; but was free to wander where he pleased.

The costume of the traveller consisted in a sort of jacket or vest of brick-coloured leather, without buttons or any opening in front, but drawn over the head after the manner of a shirt. Wide

pantaloons of the same material, open from the knee downwards, and fastened at the waist by a scarf of red China crape. Under the pantaloons, and covering the calf of the leg nearly up to the knee, could be seen the *botas* of strong stamped leather, in one of which was stuck a long knife with a horn hilt – thus ready to the hand whether the owner was seated, standing, or on horseback. A large felt hat, banded with a *toquilla* of Venetian pearls, completed a costume sufficiently picturesque, the vivid colours of which were in harmony with that of the *serapé* on which the traveller was reclining. This costume denoted one of those men accustomed to gallop among the thorny jungles that cover the desert steppes of North Mexico; and who in their expeditions, whether against Indian enemies, or for whatever purpose, sleep with indifference under the shadow of a tree, or the open heaven itself, – in the forest, or upon the naked plain.

There was in the features of this traveller a singular mixture of brutal ferocity and careless good-humour. A crooked nose, with thick bushy eyebrows, and black eyes that sparkled from time to time with a malicious fire, gave to his countenance a sinister aspect, and belied the expression of his mouth and lips, that presented rather a pleasant and smiling contour. But the man's features, when viewed as a whole, could not fail to inspire a certain feeling of repulsiveness mingled with fear. A short carbine that lay by his side, together with the long knife, whose haft protruded above the top of his boots, did not in any way tame down the ferocious aspect of his face. On the contrary they proclaimed him one whom it would not be desirable to have for a companion in the desert.

Despite the *nonchalance* of his attitude, it was evident that he awaited some one; but as everything in these countries is on a large scale, so also is the virtue of patience. This outlaw – for everything about him signified that he was one of some sort – this outlaw, we say, having made three days' journey before arriving upon the ground where he now was, thought nothing of a few hours, less or more, spent in expectation. In the desert, he who has travelled a hundred leagues, will consider it a mere bagatelle to wait for a hundred hours: unlike to him who keeps an appointment in the midst of a great city, where a delay of a quarter of an hour will be endured with feverish impatience.

So it was with our solitary traveller; and when the hoof-strokes of a horse were heard at some distance off in the forest, he did nothing more than to make a slight change in the attitude in which he had been reclining; while his steed, also hearing the same sounds, tossed up his head and neighed joyously. The hoof-strokes each moment were heard more distinctly; and it was evident that a horseman was galloping rapidly in the direction of the huts. After a little the strokes became more gentle, and the gallop appeared to be changed to a walk. The rider was approaching with caution.

A few seconds intervened, and then upon one of the roads – that leading to Arispe – the horseman was perceived coming on at a slow and cautious pace.

On perceiving the traveller, still half reclining upon his *serapé*, the horseman drew his rein still tighter and halted, and the two men remained for some seconds regarding each other with a fixed and interrogative glance.

Chapter Seven

Two Honest Gentlemen

The new-comer was a tall man with a dark complexion, and thick black beard, costumed very similarly to the other – in vest and pantaloons of brick-red leather, felt sombrero, sash, and boots. He was mounted upon a strong active horse.

It may appear strange that during the period of mutual examination, each of these two men made a very similar reflection about the other; but it was scarcely strange either, considering that both presented an equally suspicious aspect.

“*Carramba!*” muttered the horseman as he eyed the man on the *serapé*, “if I wasn’t sure that he is the gentleman I have been sent to meet, I should believe that I had chanced upon a very unlucky acquaintance.”

At the same instant he upon the ground said to himself —

“*Por Dios!* if that infernal Seven of Spades had left any dollars in my purse, I should have considered them in danger of being taken out of it just now.”

Despite the nature of his reflection, the horseman did not hesitate any longer, but spurring his horse forward to the edge of the fire, lifted his hat courteously from his head, and saluted him on the ground, at the same time saying interrogatively: —

“No doubt it is the Señor Don Pedro Cuchillo I have the honour to address?”

“The same, cavallero!” replied the other, rising to his feet, and returning the salute with no less politeness than it had been given.

“Cavallero! I have been sent forward to meet you, and announce to you the approach of the Señor Arechiza, who at this time cannot be many leagues distant. My name is Manuel Baraja, your very humble servant.”

“Your honour will dismount?”

The horseman did not wait for the invitation to be repeated, but at once flung himself from the saddle. After unbuckling his enormous spurs, he speedily unsaddled his horse, fastened a long lazo around his neck, and then giving him a smart cut with the short whip which he carried, despatched the animal without further ceremony to share the meagre provender of his companion.

At this movement the *tasajo*, beginning to sputter over the coals, gave out an odour that resembled the smell of a dying lamp. Notwithstanding this, Baraja cast towards it a look of longing.

“It appears to me Señor Cuchillo,” said he, “that you are well provided here. *Carramba!* —*tortillas*, of wheaten meal! *tasajo!* – it is a repast for a prince!”

“Oh, yes,” replied Cuchillo, with a certain air of foppishness, “I treat myself well. It makes me happy to know that the dish is to your liking; I beg to assure you, it is quite at your service.”

“You are very good, and I accept your offer without ceremony. The morning air has sharpened my appetite.”

And saying this, Baraja proceeded to the mastication of the *tasajo* and *tortillas*. After being thus engaged for some time, he once more addressed himself to his host.

“Dare I tell you, Señor Cuchillo, the favourable impression I had of you at first sight?”

“Oh! you shock my modesty, señor. I would rather state the good opinion your first appearance gave me of *you!*”

The two new friends here exchanged a salute, full of affability, and then continued to eat, Baraja harpooning upon the point of his long knife another piece of meat out of the ashes.

“If it please you, Señor Baraja,” said Cuchillo, “we may talk over our business while we are eating. You will find me a host *sans cérémonie.*”

“Just what pleases me.”

“Don Estevan, then, has received the message which I sent him?”

“He has, but what that message was is only known to you and him.”

“No doubt of that,” muttered Cuchillo to himself.

“The Señor Arechiza,” continued the *envoy*, “started for Tubac shortly after receiving your letter. It was my duty to accompany him, but he ordered me to proceed in advance of him with these commands: ‘In the little village of Huerfano you will find a man, by name Cuchillo; you shall say to him that the proposal he makes to me deserves serious attention; and that since the place he has designated as a rendezvous is on the way to Tubac, I will see him on my journey.’ This instruction was given by Don Estevan an hour or so before his departure, but although I have ridden a little faster to execute his orders, he cannot be far behind me.”

“Good! Señor Baraja, good!” exclaimed Cuchillo, evidently pleased with the communication just made, “and if the business which I have with Don Estevan be satisfactorily concluded – which I am in hopes it will be – you are likely to have me for a comrade in this distant expedition. But,” continued he, suddenly changing the subject, “you will, no doubt, be astonished that I have given Don Estevan a rendezvous in such a singular place as this?”

“No,” coolly replied Baraja, “you may have reasons for being partial to solitude. Who does not love it at times?”

A most gracious smile playing upon the countenance of Cuchillo, denoted that his new acquaintance had correctly divined the truth.

“Precisely,” he replied, “the ill-behaviour of a friend towards me, and the malevolent hostility of the alcalde of Arispe have caused me to seek this tranquil retreat. That is just why I have established my headquarters in an abandoned village, where there is not a soul to keep company with.”

“Señor Don Pedro,” replied Baraja, “I have already formed too good an opinion of you not to believe that the fault is entirely upon the side of the alcalde, and especially on the part of your friend.”

“I thank you, Señor Baraja, for your good opinion,” returned Cuchillo, at the same time taking from the cinders a piece of the meat, half burnt, half raw, and munching it down with the most perfect indifference; “I thank you sincerely, and when I tell you the circumstances you may judge for yourself.”

“I shall be glad to hear them,” said the other, easing himself down into a horizontal position; “after a good repast, there is nothing I so much enjoy as a good story.”

After saying this, and lighting his cigarette, Baraja turned upon the broad of his back, and with his eyes fixed upon the blue sky, appeared to enjoy a perfect beatitude.

“The story is neither long nor interesting,” responded Cuchillo; “what happened to me might happen to all the world. I was engaged with this friend in a quiet game of cards, when he pretended that I had *tricked* him. The affair came to words – ”

Here the narrator paused for an instant, to take a drink from his leathern bottle, and then continued —

“My friend had the indelicacy to permit himself to drop down dead in my presence.”

“What at your words?”

“No, with the stab of a knife which I gave him,” coolly replied the outlaw.

“Ah! no doubt your friend was in the wrong, and you received great provocation?”

“The alcalde did not think so. He pestered me in the most absurd manner. I could have forgiven the bitterness of his persecution of me, had it not been that I was myself bitterly roused at the ill-behaviour of my friend, whom up to that time I had highly esteemed.”

“Ah! one has always to suffer from one’s friends,” rejoined Baraja, sending up a puff of smoke from his corn-husk cigarette.

“Well – one thing,” said Cuchillo, “the result of it all is that I have made a vow never to play another card; for the cards, as you see, were the original cause of this ugly affair.”

“A good resolution,” said Baraja, “and just such as I have come to myself. I have promised never to touch another card; they have cost me a fortune – in fact, altogether ruined me.”

“Ruined you? you have been rich then?”

“Alas! I had a splendid estate – a *hacienda de ganados* (cattle farm) with a numerous flock upon it. I had a lawyer for my *intendant*, who took care of the estate while I spent my time in town. But when I came to settle accounts with this fellow I found I had let them run too long. I discovered that half my estate belonged to him!”

“What did you do then?”

“The only thing I could do,” answered Baraja, with the air of a cavalier, “was to stake my remaining half against his on a game, and let the winner take the whole.”

“Did he accept this proposal?”

“After a fashion.”

“What fashion?”

“Why, you see I am too timid when I play in presence of company, and certain to lose. I prefer, therefore, to play in the open air, and in some quiet corner of the woods. There I feel more at my ease; and if I should lose – considering that it was my whole fortune that was at stake – I should not expose my chagrin to the whole world. These were the considerations that prompted me to propose the conditions of our playing alone.”

“And did the lawyer agree to your conditions?”

“Not a bit of it.”

“What a droll fellow he must have been!”

“He would only play in the presence of witnesses.”

“And you were forced to his terms?”

“To my great regret, I was.”

“And of course you lost – being so nervous in presence of company?”

“I lost the second half of my fortune as I had done the first. The only thing I kept back was the horse you see, and even him my ex-intendant insisted upon having as part of the bet. To-day I have no other hope than to make my fortune in this Tubac expedition, and if I should do so I may get back, and settle accounts with the knave. After that game, however, I swore I should never play another card; and, carramba! I have kept my oath.”

“How long since this happened?”

“Five days.”

“The devil! – You deserve credit for keeping your word.”

The two adventurers after having exchanged these confidences, began to talk over their hopes founded on the approaching expedition – of the marvellous sights that they would be likely to see – but more especially of the dangers that might have to be encountered.

“Bah!” said Baraja, speaking of these; “better to die than live wearing a coat out at elbows.”

Cuchillo was of the same opinion.

Meanwhile the sun was growing hotter and hotter. A burning wind began to blow through the trees, and the horses of the two travellers, suffering from thirst, uttered their plaintive neighings. The men themselves sought out the thickest shade to protect them from the fervid rays of the sun, and for a while both observed a complete silence.

Baraja was the first to resume the conversation.

“You may laugh at me, Señor Cuchillo,” said he, fanning himself with his felt hat, “but to say the truth the time appears very long to me when I am not playing.”

“The same with myself,” hastily responded Cuchillo.

“What do you say to our staking, on word of honour, a little of that gold we are going to find?”

“Just what I was thinking myself, but I daren’t propose it to you; – I am quite agreeable.”

Without further parley each of the two thrust a hand into his pocket, and drew forth a pack of cards – with which, notwithstanding the oath they had taken, both were provided.

The play was about to commence, when the sound of a bell, and the clattering of hoofs at a distance, announced the approach, most probably, of the important personage whom Cuchillo awaited.

Chapter Eight

The Senator Tragaduros

The two players suspended operations, and turned their faces in the direction whence came the sounds.

At some distance along the road, a cloud of dust suddenly rising, indicated the approach of a troop of horses.

They were without riders. One only was mounted; and that was ridden by the driver of the troop. In short, it was a *remuda*— such as rich travellers in the north of Mexico usually take along with them for a remount. These horses, on account of the half-wild life they lead upon the vast plains where they are pastured, after a gallop of twenty leagues without carrying a rider, are almost as fresh as if just taken out of the stable. On long routes, each is saddled and mounted at regular intervals; and in this way a journey is performed almost as rapidly as by a mail express, with relays already established.

According to usual custom, a *bell-mare* preceded this drove, which appeared to consist of about thirty horses. It was this bell that had first attracted the attention of the players.

When within a hundred yards or so of the huts, the driver of the *remuda* galloped to the front, and catching the bell-mare, brought her to a stop. The other horses halted on the instant.

Shortly after, five cavaliers appeared through the dust, riding in the direction of the huts. Two were in advance of the other three, who, following at a little distance, were acting as attendants or servants.

The most distinguished looking of the two who rode in advance, was a man of somewhat over medium height. He appeared to have passed the age of forty. A greyish-coloured *sombrero*, with broad brim, screened his face from the fervent sunbeams. He was habited in a pelisse, or *dolman*, of dark blue, richly laced with gold, and almost concealed under a large white kerchief, embroidered with sky-blue silk, and known in Mexico as *pano de sol*. Under the fiery atmosphere, the white colour of this species of scarf, like the *burnous* of the Arabs, serves to moderate the rays of the sun, and for this purpose was it worn by the cavalier in question. Upon his feet were boots of yellow Cordovan leather, and over these, large spurs, the straps of which were stitched with gold and silver wire. These spurs, with their huge five-pointed rowels, and little bells, gave out a silvery clinking that kept time to the march of the horse – sounds most agreeable to the ear of the Mexican *cavallero*.

A *mango*, richly slashed with gold lace, hung over the pommel of the saddle in front of the horseman, half covering with its folds a pair of wide pantaloons, garnished throughout their whole length with buttons of filigree gold. In fine, the saddle, embroidered like the straps of the spurs, completed a costume that, in the eyes of a European, would recall the souvenirs of the middle ages. For all that, the horseman in question did not require a rich dress to give him an air of distinction. There was that in his bearing and physiognomy that denoted a man accustomed to command and perfectly *au fait* to the world.

His companion, much younger, was dressed with far more pretension: but his insignificant figure, though not wanting in a certain degree of elegance, was far from having the aristocratic appearance of him with the embroidered kerchief.

The three servants that followed – with faces blackened by dust and sun, and half savage figures – carried long lances adorned with scarlet pennons, and *lazos* hung coiled from the pommels of their saddles. These strange attendants gave to the group that singular appearance peculiar to a cavalcade of Mexican travellers. Several mules, pack laden, and carrying enormous valises, followed in the rear. These valises contained provisions and the *ménage* necessary for a halt.

On seeing Cuchillo and Baraja, the foremost of the two cavaliers halted, and the troop followed his example.

“Tis the Señor Don Estevan,” said Baraja, in a subdued voice. “This is the man, señor,” he continued, presenting Cuchillo to the cavalier with the *pano de sol*.

Don Estevan – for it was he – fixed upon Cuchillo a piercing glance, that appeared to penetrate to the bottom of his soul, at the same time the look denoted a slight expression of surprise.

“I have the honour to kiss the hands of your excellency,” said Cuchillo. “As you see, it is I who –”

But in spite of his habitual assurance, the outlaw paused, trembling as vague souvenirs began to shape themselves in his memory; for these two men had met before, though not for a very long time.

“Eh! if I don’t deceive myself,” interrupted the Spaniard, in an ironical tone, “the Señor Cuchillo and I are old acquaintances – though formerly I knew him by a different name?”

“So too your excellency, who was then called –”

Arechiza frowned till the hairs of his black moustache seemed to stand on end. The outlaw did not finish his speech. He saw that it was not the time to tell what he knew; but this species of complicity appeared to restore him to his wonted assurance.

Cuchillo was, in truth, one of those gentlemen who have the ill luck to give to whatever name they bear a prompt celebrity; and for this reason he had changed his more than once.

“Señor Senator,” said Arechiza, turning toward his *compagnon de voyage*, “this place does not appear very suitable for our noon siesta?”

“The Señor Tragaduros y Despilfarro, will find the shade of one of these cottages more agreeable,” interposed Cuchillo, who knew the senator of Arispe. He knew, moreover, that the latter had attached himself to the fortunes of Don Estevan, in default of better cause: and in hopes of repairing his own fortune, long since dissipated.

Despite the low state of his finances, however, the Senator had not the less a real influence in the congress of Sonora; and it was this influence which Don Estevan intended using to his own advantage. Hence the companionship that now existed between them.

“I agree with all my heart to your proposal,” answered Tragaduros, “the more so that we have now been nearly five hours in the saddle.”

Two of the servants dismounting, took their masters’ horses by the bridle, while the other two looked after the *cargas* of the mules. The camp-beds were taken from the pack saddles, and carried into two of the houses that appeared the most spacious and proper.

We shall leave the Senator reclining upon his mattress, to enjoy that profound slumber which is the portion of just men and travellers; while we accompany Don Estevan into the hut which he had chosen for himself, and which stood at some distance from that occupied by the legislator.

Chapter Nine

The Compact

After having followed Don Estevan, at the invitation of the latter, inside the hovel, Cuchillo closed behind him the wattle of bamboos that served as a door. He did this with great care – as if he feared that the least noise should be heard without – and then he stood waiting for the Spaniard to initiate the conversation.

The latter had seated himself on the side of his camp-bedstead, and Cuchillo also sat down, using for his seat the skull of a bullock, – which chanced to be in the house. It is the ordinary stool of this part of the country, where the luxury of chairs is still unknown – at least in the houses of the poor.

“I suppose,” said Arechiza, breaking silence, “that you have a thousand reasons why I should know you by no other than your present name. I, with motives very different from yours, no doubt, desire to be here nothing more than *Don Estevan Arechiza*. Now! Señor Cuchillo,” continued the speaker with a certain affectation of mockery; “let us have this grand secret that is to make your fortune and mine!”

“A word first, Señor Don Estevan de Arechiza,” replied Cuchillo, in the same tone; “one word, and then you shall have it.”

“I listen to you; but observe, sir, say nothing of the past – no more perfidy. We are here in a country where there are *trees*, and you know how I punish traitors.”

At this allusion to some past event – no doubt some mysterious souvenir – the face of the outlaw became livid.

“Yes,” replied he, “I remember that it is not your fault that I was not hung to a tree. It may be more prudent not to recall old wrongs – especially as you are no longer in a conquered country, but in one of forests – forests both sombre and dumb.”

There was in this response of the outlaw such an evident air of menace, that, joined with his character and sinister antecedents, it required a firm heart on the part of Don Estevan not to regret having recalled the souvenir. With a cold smile he replied:

“Ha! another time I shall entrust the execution of a traitor in the hands of no human being. I shall perform that office myself,” continued he, fixing upon Cuchillo a glance which caused the latter to lower his head. “As to your threats, reserve them for people of your own kind; and never forget, that between my breast and your dagger there is an insurmountable barrier.”

“Who knows?” muttered Cuchillo, dissembling the anger which was devouring him. Then in a different tone, he continued: “But I am no traitor, Señor Don Estevan; and the proposal I am now about to make to you is frank and loyal.”

“We shall see, then.”

“Know, then, Señor Arechiza, that for several years past I have followed the profession of a *gambusino*, and have rambled over most of this country in the exercise of my calling. I have seen a deposit of gold such as mortal eye perhaps never looked upon!”

“You have seen it, and not possessed yourself of it?”

“Do not mock me, Don Estevan; I am in earnest. I have seen a *placer* so rich that the man who gets it might for a whole year play the game of hell with luck all the while against him, and not be impoverished! So rich as to satisfy the most insatiable avarice; so rich, in fact, as to buy a kingdom!”

At these words, which responded to some hopes and desires already conceived, Don Estevan could not hinder himself from the manifestation of a certain emotion.

“So rich,” continued the outlaw, in an exalted tone, “that I would not hesitate for one instant to give my soul to the devil in exchange for it.”

“The devil is not such a fool as to value so highly a soul which he knows he will get *gratis*. But how did *you* discover this *placer*?”

“Thus, señor. There was a *gambusino* called Marcos Arellanos, who was celebrated throughout the whole province. It was he who discovered this *bonanza* in company with another of the same calling as himself; but just as they were about to gather some of the gold, they were attacked by the Apache Indians. The associate of Marcos Arellanos was killed, and he himself had to run a thousand risks before he succeeded in making his escape.

“It was after he came home again that by chance I met him at Tubac. There he proposed to me to join him, and go back to the *placer*. I accepted his offer, and we started. We arrived safely at the *Golden Valley*, for by that name he called the place. Powers of Heaven!” exclaimed Cuchillo, “it only needed to see those blocks of gold shining in the sun to bring before one’s eyes a thousand dazzling visions!

“Alas! we were only permitted to feast our eyes. The savages were upon us. We were compelled to fly in our turn, and I alone escaped. Poor Marcos! he fell under the horrible war clubs; and I – I have sorely grieved for him! Now, señor, this is the secret of the Golden Valley which I desire to sell to you.”

“To sell to me: – and who is to answer for your fidelity?”

“My own interest. I sell you the secret, but I do not intend to alienate my rights to the *placer*. I have vainly endeavoured to get up an expedition such as yours, for without a strong force it would be of no use going there. It would be certain death to a party of only two or three. With your band, however, it will be easy, and success would be certain. I only ask the tenth part of all the gold that may be gathered, which I would deserve as guide of the expedition; and going as guide I will be at the same time a hostage for my good faith.”

“Is that what I am to understand; you estimate the price of your secret and services a tenth part of the whole?”

“That and two hundred dollars paid down to enable me to equip myself for the expedition.”

“You are more reasonable than I expected, Cuchillo. Very well, then let it be so; the two hundred dollars you shall have, and I promise you the tenth part.”

“Agreed.”

“Agreed, and you have my word upon it. Now, answer me some questions which I wish to put. Is this Golden Valley in that part of the country where I intended to have taken my expedition?”

“It is beyond the Presidio of Tubac; and since your men are to meet there you will not need to make any change in the dispositions you have already taken.”

“Good. And you have seen this Golden Valley you say with your own eyes?”

“I have seen it without the power of touching it. I have seen it grinding my teeth as I looked upon it, like the damned in hell who get a glimpse of Paradise.”

As Cuchillo spoke, his countenance betrayed beyond doubt the anguish he felt, at his cupidity having been balked.

Arechiza knew too well how to read the human physiognomy to doubt the truth of Cuchillo’s report. Two hundred dollars were to him a mere bagatelle; and taking an ebony case from his bed, small but heavy, he drew from it a rouleau of gold pieces and handed them to the gambusino, who immediately put them in his pocket.

There was a little more in the rouleau than had been bargained for. The Spaniard took no notice of this, but forming a cross with his thumb and index finger of his right hand *à la mode Espagnole*, he held it before Cuchillo, directing him to make an oath upon it.

“I swear by the cross,” said the latter, “to speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. At the end of ten days’ journey beyond Tubac, going in a north-western direction, we shall arrive at the foot of a range of mountains. They are easy to recognise – for a thick vapour hangs over them both night and day. A little river traverses this range of hills. It is necessary to ascend it to a

point where another stream runs into it. There in the angle where the two meet, is a steep hill, the summit of which is crowned by the tomb of an Indian chief. I was not near enough to distinguish the strange ornaments that surround this tomb; but at the foot of the hill there is a small lake by the side of a narrow valley in which the water from rain torrents has thrown to the surface immense treasures of gold, this is the *Golden Valley*.”

“The way will be easily found?” inquired Don Estevan.

“But difficult to travel,” replied Cuchillo. “The arid deserts will be no obstacle compared with the danger from the hostility of Indians. This tomb of one of their most celebrated chiefs they hold in superstitious veneration. It is the constant object of their pilgrimages, and it was during one of these visits that we were surprised. Arellanos and myself.”

“And this Arellanos – do you think, he has not revealed this secret to any one besides yourself?”

“You must know,” replied Cuchillo, “that it is a custom of the gambusinos, before starting upon any expedition, to swear before the Holy Evangelists not to reveal the *bonanzas* they may find without the consent of their associates. This oath Arellanos took, and his death of course prevented him from betraying it.”

“You have said that after his return from his first expedition, you met him in Tubac. Was there no woman whom he may perchance have had in his confidence?”

“His wife only – he may have told it to her. But yesterday a vaquero gave me the news that she has lately died. For all that, she may have revealed the secret to her son.”

“Arellanos had a son then?”

“An adopted son – a young man whose father or mother no one knows anything about.”

Don Estevan could not repress an involuntary movement.

“This young fellow is, no doubt, the son of some poor devil of this province?” said the Spaniard, in a careless way.

“No,” replied Cuchillo, “he was born in Europe, and very likely in Spain.”

Arechiza appeared to fall into a reverie, his head bending towards his breast. Some souvenirs were disturbing his spirit.

“This much at least is known,” continued Cuchillo. “The commander of an English brig-of-war brought him to Guaymas. He stated that the child, who spoke both French and Spanish, had been captured in an affair between the brig and a French privateer. A sailor who was either killed in the fight or taken prisoner, was beyond doubt his father. The captain of the English brig, not knowing what to do with him, gave him to Arellanos – who chanced to be in Guaymas at the time – and Arellanos brought him up and has made a man of him – my faith! that he has. Young as the fellow is, there is not such a *rastreador* nor horse-tamer in the province.”

The Spaniard, while apparently not listening to Cuchillo, did not lose a word of what he was saying; but whether he had heard enough, or that the subject was a painful one, he suddenly interrupted the gambusino:

“And don’t you think, if this wonderful tracker and horse-breaker has been told the secret of his adopted father he might not be a dangerous rival to us?”

Cuchillo drew himself up proudly, and replied: —

“I know a man who will yield in nothing – neither at following a trail, nor taming a wild horse – to Tiburcio Arellanos; and yet this secret has been almost worthless in his keeping, since he has just sold it for the tenth part of its value!”

This last argument of Cuchillo’s was sufficiently strong to convince Don Estevan that the Golden Valley was so guarded by these fierce Indians that nothing but a strong party could reach it – in short, that he himself was the only man who could set this force afoot. For a while he remained in his silent reverie. The revelations of Cuchillo in regard to the adopted son of Marcos Arellanos had opened his mind to a new set of ideas which absorbed all others. For certain motives, which

we cannot here explain, he was seeking to divine whether this Tiburcio Arellanos was not the young Fabian de Mediana!

Cuchillo on his part was reflecting on certain antecedents relative to the gambusino Arellanos and his adopted son; but for powerful reasons he did not mention his reflections to Don Estevan. There are reasons, however, why the reader should now be informed of their nature.

The outlaw, as we have said, frequently changed his name. It was by one of these aliases used up so quickly, that he had been passing, when at the Presidio Tubac he made the acquaintance of the unfortunate Arellanos. When the latter was about starting out on his second and fatal journey – before parting with his wife and the young man whom he loved as well as if he had been his own son – he confided to his wife the object of his new expedition; and also the full particulars of the route he intended to take. Cuchillo was nevertheless ignorant of this revelation. But the knowledge which the outlaw carefully concealed, was that he himself after having reached the Golden Valley guided by Arellanos, murdered his companion, in hope of having all the treasure to himself. It was true enough that the Indians appeared afterwards, and it was with difficulty that the assassin could save his own scalp. We shall now leave him to tell his own story as to how he made the acquaintance of young Arellanos, and it will be seen that this story is a mere deception practised upon Don Estevan.

“Nevertheless,” resumed Cuchillo in breaking the silence, “I was determined to free my mind from all doubt upon the subject. On my return to Arispe I repaired to the dwelling of the widow of Arellanos to inform her of the death of poor Marcos. But with the exception of the great grief which the news caused her, I observed nothing particular – nothing that could give me the least suspicion that I am not the sole possessor of the secret of the Golden Valley.”

“One easily believes what he wishes to believe,” remarked Arechiza.

“Hear me, Señor Don Estevan! There are two things on which I pride myself. One is, that I have a conscience easily alarmed; the other, that I am gifted with a perspicuity not easily deluded.”

The Spaniard made no further objections. He was satisfied, not with the outlaw’s conscience, but his perspicuity.

With regard to Tiburcio Arellanos, we need hardly state what the reader has no doubt already divined – that this young man was in reality no other than Fabian, the last descendant of the Counts of Mediana. Cuchillo has already related how the English brig brought him to Guaymas. Left without a guide to enable him to discover his family – disinherited of his rich patrimonial estates – an orphan knowing nothing of his parents, here he was in a strange land, the possessor of nothing more than a horse and a hut of bamboos.

Chapter Ten

The Afternoon Ride

When Cuchillo, after the interview just described, came forth from the hovel, the sun was no longer in the vertex of the heavens, but had commenced his downward course to the western horizon. The earth, burned up and dry as tinder, gave forth a thin vapoury mist, that here and there hung over the surface in condensed masses, giving that appearance known as the *mirage*. Limpid lakes presented themselves to the eye, where not a drop of water was known to exist – as if nature, to preserve a perfect harmony, offered these to the imagination in compensation for the absence of the precious fluid itself. Far off in the forest, could be heard at intervals the crackling of branches under the burning rays of the sun – just as if the woods were on fire. But the trees were beginning to open their leaves to the southern breeze that freshened as the hours passed on, and they appeared impatiently to await the twilight, when the night-dews would once more freshen their foliage.

Cuchillo gave a whistle, at which well-known signal his horse came galloping up to him. The poor beast appeared to suffer terribly from the thirst. His master, moved with pity, poured into a bowl a few drops of water from his skin bottle; and although it was scarce enough to moisten the animal's lips, it seemed to bring back the vigour of his spirit.

Cuchillo having saddled and bridled his horse, and buckled on a pair of huge spurs, called one of the attendants of Don Estevan. To this man he gave orders to have the pack of mules harnessed, as well as to collect the *remuda* to be sent on in advance – in order that the sleeping quarters for the night should be ready upon their arrival. The place where the travellers were to rest that night – as Cuchillo informed the domestic – was to be at the cistern known as *La Poza*.

“But *La Poza* is not on the route to Tubac!” objected the servant; “it lies out of the way and on the road leading to the *Hacienda del Venado*.”

“*You* have nothing to do with the route,” peremptorily answered Cuchillo, “your master intends spending some days at the *Hacienda del Venado*. Therefore do as I have ordered you.”

The *Hacienda del Venado* was the most important estate between Arispe and the Indian frontier, and its proprietor had the reputation of being the most hospitable man in the whole province. It was, therefore, without repugnance that the attendants of Don Estevan heard this news from Cuchillo – since, although their route of march would be extended in making the *détour* by the *Hacienda del Venado*, they knew they would enjoy several days of pleasant repose at this hospitable mansion.

The man to whom Cuchillo had given his orders, immediately saddled his horse and set off to collect the *remuda*. He soon discovered the horses browsing in the woods near at hand, and collected, as usual, around the bell-mare.

As he approached, the troop bounded off in affright – just as wild horses would have done; but the active horseman was too quick for them, for already the running noose of his lazo was around the neck of one of them. The horse, perceiving that he was caught, and knowing well the lazo – whose power he had often felt – yielded without resistance, and permitted himself to be led quietly away. The *capitansa* (bell-mare) knew the signal and followed the horse of the servant, with all the others trooping at her heels.

Two of the freshest of the drove were left behind, for Don Estevan and the Senator. These would be enough to serve them as far as *La Poza* – the place of their intended night halt – which was only a few hours distant. The other horses, guided by the bell-mare, were taken on in advance, and the drove soon disappeared behind the cloud of dust thrown up by their hoofs.

Shortly after, the Senator made his appearance at the door of the hut where he had taken his siesta – a necessity almost imperious in these hot climates. At the same time, Don Estevan presented

himself in the open air. The atmosphere, though a little fresher than when they had gone inside, was still sufficiently stifling to be disagreeable.

“Carramba!” cried the Senator, after inhaling a few mouthfuls of it, “it is fire, *not* air, one has to breathe here. If these hovels were not a complete nest of snakes and scorpions, I should prefer staying in them until night, rather than launch myself into this dreadful furnace.”

After this doleful speech the Senator climbed reluctantly into his saddle, and he and Don Estevan took the route, riding side by side, as in the morning. Behind, at a few paces distance, followed Cuchillo and Baraja, and after these the little *recua* of mules with the other domestics.

For the first hour of their march the shade of the trees rendered the heat supportable, but soon the forest ended, and the road debouched upon the open plains that appeared interminable.

It is hardly possible to conceive a more dreary prospect than that presented by those arid plains of Northern Mexico – naked, white, and almost destitute of vegetation. Here and there at long distances on the route, may be seen a tall pole which denotes the presence of some artificial well-cistern; but as you draw near, the leathern buckets, by which the water is to be raised, show by their stiff contracted outlines that for a long time they have held no water, and that the well is dried up – a sad fortune for the traveller whose evil star has guided him into these deserts during the dry season, especially if at the end of his day’s journey he reckons on a supply from these treacherous depositaries. If his canteen is not well filled, or if he is by any chance detained upon his route, his story is likely to be that of hundreds who have perished of thirst upon these plains, between a heaven and an earth that are equally un pitying.

“Is it true, then, Don Estevan,” inquired the Senator, as he wiped the perspiration from his brow, “that you have been through this country before?”

“Certainly,” replied Don Estevan; “and it is just because I have been here before that I am here now. But what brought me here formerly, and why I now return, is a secret I shall tell you presently. Let me say that it is a secret sufficient to turn a man’s brain, provided he is not one with a bold, firm heart. Are you that man, señor Senator?” added the Spaniard, fixing his eyes upon his companion, with a calm regard.

The Senator made no reply, farther than by giving a slight shiver that was perceptible through his frame, and which denoted that he felt some apprehension as to the rôle he might be called upon to play.

The Spaniard did not fail to observe his uneasiness, as he resumed:

“Meanwhile, señor, let me ask you, are you decided to follow my advice, and restore your fortunes by some rich matrimonial alliance which I shall arrange for you?”

“Without doubt I am,” replied the Senator, “though I can’t see what interest that can be to you, Señor Don Estevan.”

“That is my affair and my secret. I am not one of those who sell the skin of the bear before the animal is caught. It is enough for you to know, Don Vicente Tragaduros y Despilfarro, that I have a hundred thousand dollars at your disposal the moment you say the word – it only remains for you to hear my conditions, and subscribe to them.”

“I don’t say no,” replied the Senator, “but I candidly avow that for the life of me I cannot think of any one possessing such an inheritance as you mention – not one in the whole province.”

“Do you know the daughter of the rich landowner Augusta Peña – at whose hacienda, please God, we shall sleep to-morrow night?”

“Oh!” exclaimed the Senator, “the proprietor of the Hacienda del Venado? I have heard of her —*her* dowry should be a million if report speaks true; but what folly it would be for me to pretend – ”

“Bah!” interrupted the Spaniard. “It is a fortress that well besieged may capitulate like any other.”

“It is said that the daughter of Peña is pretty.”

“Beautiful.”

“You know her, then?” said the Senator, regarding his companion with an astonished look. “Perhaps,” he added, “it is to the hacienda of Venado that you make those periodical and mysterious journeys, so much talked about at Arispe?”

“Precisely so.”

“Ah! I understand you,” said the Senator, turning a sly look upon his companion, “it was the beautiful eyes of the daughter that attracted you, the – ?”

“You are mistaken. It was the father, who was simply the banker from whom, from time to time, I drew the funds necessary for my expenses at Arispe.”

“Is that also the object of our present journey?”

“Partly,” replied the Spaniard, “but not altogether – there is another object, which I will communicate to you hereafter.”

“Well, señor,” answered the Senator, “you are a mystery to me from head to foot; but I abandon myself blindly to your guidance.”

“You do well,” said Don Estevan, “and in all likelihood your sun, for a while eclipsed, will shine out again with more than its former splendour.”

Chapter Eleven

An Unfortunate Traveller

It was now near sunset; the travellers were still about two leagues from La Poza, and the desert plains were nearly passed. Some *mezquite* trees appeared in front thinly covering the calcareous soil, but the twilight sun began to render less visible the objects here and there scattered over the plain.

All at once the horse of Don Estevan came to a stand, and showed signs of affright. The steed of the Senator acted in a similar fashion, though neither of the two horsemen could perceive the cause of this strange behaviour.

“It is the body of some dead mule?” suggested the Mexican.

Don Estevan spurred his horse forward, despite the repugnance of the animal to advance; and a few paces further on, behind a clump of wild aloe plants, he perceived the body of a horse stretched out upon the sand. Such a sight in these dry plains is by no means uncommon; and the travellers would not have given a moment’s thought to it, but for the fact that the horse in question appeared to be saddled and bridled. This circumstance indicated some extraordinary occurrence.

Cuchillo had meanwhile ridden forward to the spot.

“Ah!” said he, after glancing a moment at the dead horse, “the poor devil who has ridden him has met with a double accident: he has not only lost his horse, but also his water-bottle. See!”

The guide pointed to an object lying upon the ground by the shoulder of the fallen horse, and still attached by a strap to the saddle. It was a leathern water-bottle apparently broken and empty. In fact, its position proved that the horse, enfeebled by the heat and thirst, had fallen suddenly to the earth, and the bottle, hardened by the sun, and coming in contact with the animal’s shoulder, had got crushed either by the fall, or in the struggle that succeeded it. A large fracture was visible in the side of the vessel, through which the water had escaped to the very last drop.

“We are likely enough by and by to stumble upon his owner:” suggested Cuchillo, while he examined the trappings of the dead horse, to see if there might be anything worth picking up. “*Por Dios!*” he continued, “this reminds me that I have the very devil’s thirst myself,” and as he said this, he raised his own bottle to his head, and swallowed some gulps from it.

The tracks of a man upon the sandy surface, indicated that the traveller had continued his route on foot; but the footmarks showed also, that he must have tottered rather than walked. They were unequally distant from each other, and wanted that distinctness of shape, that would have been exhibited by the footsteps of a man standing properly on his legs.

These points did not escape the keen eyes of Cuchillo, who was one of those individuals who could read such dumb signs with an unfailling certainty.

“Beyond a doubt,” said he, taking another gulp from his bottle, “the traveller cannot be far off.”

His conjecture proved correct. A few moments after, the body of a man was seen by the side of the path, lying upon the ground, and perfectly motionless. As if this individual had intended that his countenance should be hidden from the eyes of any one passing, a broad palm-leaf hat covered the whole of his face.

The costume of this traveller in distress, betrayed a certain degree of poverty. Besides the hat already mentioned, which appeared old and battered, a rusty-coloured Indian shirt, somewhat torn, and a pair of pantaloons of nankeen, with common filigree buttons, appeared to be his only garments. At least they were all that could be noticed in the obscure twilight.

“Benito,” said Don Estevan, calling to one of his servants, “knock off with the butt of your lance the hat that covers this man’s face – perhaps he is only asleep?”

Benito obeyed the order, and tossed aside the hat without dismounting; but the man stretched on the ground did not appear to know what had been done – at least he made not the slightest movement.

When the hat was removed, however, the darkness, which had suddenly increased, rendered it impossible to distinguish his features.

“Although it is not exactly your speciality, Señor Cuchillo,” said Don Estevan, addressing himself to the outlaw, “if you will do an act of humanity in trying to save the life of this poor devil, you shall have half an ounce of gold if you succeed.”

“Cospita! Señor Don Estevan,” cried Cuchillo, “you surely mistake my character. I am the most humane of mortals – that is,” continued he in an undertone, “when it is my interest to be so. You may ride forward then; and it will not be my fault, if I don’t bring this poor fellow safe to our halting-place at La Poza.”

In saying these words Cuchillo dismounted, and laying his hands upon the neck of his horse, cried out:

“Now, good Tordilla, don’t budge an inch from this spot till I call for you.”

The animal, pawing the sand, and champing his bit, appeared to comprehend the words of his master, and remained in the place where he had been left.

“Shall we leave one of the servants to assist you?” inquired the Senator, as they were riding off.

“No, thank you, Señor Don Vicente,” responded Cuchillo, fearing that if any one was left he might expect some share in the promised *demi-onza*; “it will not be necessary.”

And the cavalcade riding off, left the outlaw alone with the recumbent body.

Chapter Twelve

Tiburcio Arellanos

Cuchillo approaching the body, bent down to examine the features, and see if there were any signs of life. At the first glance of that face the outlaw trembled.

“Tiburcio Arellanos, as I live!” he involuntarily muttered.

It was, in truth, the adopted son of his victim whom he saw before him.

“Yes – there is no mistake – it is he! *Santa Virgen!* if not dead he’s not far off it,” continued he, observing the mortal paleness of the young man’s countenance.

A hellish thought at this moment arose in the mind of the outlaw. Perhaps the only man in all the world who shared with him that secret, which he himself had purchased by the crime of murder, was there before him – completely in his power. It only needed to finish him, if not already dead, and to report that he could not be saved. He was in the middle of the desert, under the shadow of night, where no eye could see, and no hand could hinder; why then should he not make his secret secure against every contingency of the future?

All the ferocious instincts of the villain were re-awakened; mechanically he drew the long knife from his boot, and held its point over the heart of the unconscious Tiburcio.

At that moment, a slight quivering of the limbs told that the latter still lived. The outlaw raised his arm, but still hesitated to strike the blow.

“It was just thus,” reflected he, “that I stabbed the man he called his father – just in the same way, as he slept beside me, in full confidence of security. I see him now contesting with me for the life of this young fellow more than half gone. I feel at this moment the weight of his body upon my shoulders, just as I felt it when I carried him down to the river.”

And the murderer, at these thoughts, in the middle of the darkness and solitude, cast around him a look that betrayed the terror with which the souvenir still inspired him.

That terror saved the life of Tiburcio; for the knife was thrust back into its singular scabbard, and the villain, seating himself beside the recumbent form, thrust his hand under the vest of the young man, and held it over his heart to try whether it was still beating.

In this attitude he remained for a short while – until satisfied that Tiburcio was yet alive. Then a bright thought seemed to startle him; for a voice had spoken to him from within, stronger than the voice of conscience. It was that of personal interest. Cuchillo knew the rare qualities of Tiburcio – his talents as a *rastreador*, or tracker – his daring prowess in Indian warfare; and after some consideration, he resolved to enrol him in the expedition of Don Estevan, to which he would no doubt prove of great value.

“That will be the best plan,” said the outlaw, speaking in soliloquy. “What would his life be worth to me now? – Nothing; and if I wish to have it hereafter – why, then there will be no lack of opportunities. He cannot be otherwise than grateful for what I am going to do for him. But let me see how matters stand – of course it is thirst that is killing him – how lucky I have kept a little water in my canteen!”

He now opened the mouth of the dying man, and holding the neck of the leathern bottle to his lips, poured some drops down his throat. The water produced an almost instantaneous reanimation, and the young man opened his eyes, but soon closed them again.

“That shows he is coming round,” muttered Cuchillo.

Twice or thrice he repeated the operation, each time doubling the dose of water. Finally, at the end of half an hour or so, Tiburcio was sufficiently recovered to be able to raise himself up, and to answer the questions put to him by the man who was, in reality, the preserver of his life.

Tiburcio Arellanos was still but a young man; but the sort of life he had led – solitary, and dependent on his own resources – had given to his judgment a precocious maturity. He therefore observed a degree of prudence in recounting to Cuchillo the death of his adopted mother, to which subject the outlaw had guided the conversation.

“During the twenty-four hours that I passed by the death-bed of my mother,” said Tiburcio, “I quite forgot to attend to my horse; and after all was over I closed the door of the cottage, where I never wished to return, and I set out upon this journey. The poor animal, so long neglected, became feeble on the second day, and fell dead under me: and, to my misfortune, my water-bottle was broken in the fall, and the water spilled upon the sand. I remained on the spot till thirst brought on fever, and then I strayed away; and after wandering about, I know not how long, I fell, as my horse had done, expecting never more to rise.”

“I comprehend all that,” responded Cuchillo. “Well! it is astonishing how people will regret the death of parents, who do not leave them the slightest inheritance!”

Tiburcio could have told him, that on her death-bed his adopted mother had left him a royal, as well as a terrible legacy – the secret of the Golden Valley, and the vengeance of the murder of Marcos Arellanos. Both had been, confided to him – the golden secret upon the especial conditions that Tiburcio would, if necessary, spend the whole of his life in searching for the assassin.

Tiburcio appeared to take no notice of Cuchillo’s last reflection, and perhaps his discretion proved the saving of his life: for had the outlaw been made sure that he was in possession of the secret of the Golden Valley, it is not likely he would have made any further efforts to save him, but the reverse.

“And is that a fact,” continued Cuchillo, interrogatively, “that with the exception of a hut which you have abandoned, a horse which has dropped dead between your legs, and the garments you carry on your back, that Arellanos and his widow have left you nothing?”

“Nothing but the memory of their goodness to me, and a reverence for their name.”

“Poor Arellanos! I was very sorry for him,” said Cuchillo, whose hypocrisy had here committed him to an unguarded act of imprudence.

“You knew him then?” hastily inquired Tiburcio, with some show of surprise. “He never spoke to me of you!”

Cuchillo saw that he had made a mistake, and hastened to reply.

“No, I didn’t know him personally. I have only heard him much spoken of as a most worthy man, and a famous gambusino. That is why I was sorry on hearing of his death. Was it not I who first apprised his widow of the unfortunate occurrence, having myself heard of it by chance?”

Notwithstanding the natural tone in which Cuchillo delivered this speech, he was one of those persons of such a sinister countenance, that Tiburcio could not help a certain feeling of suspicion while regarding it. But by little and little the feeling gave way, and the young man’s thoughts taking another turn, he remained for some moments buried in a silent reverie. It was merely the result of his feebleness, though Cuchillo, ever ready to suspect evil, interpreted his silence as arising from a different cause.

Just then the horse of Cuchillo began to show evident signs of terror, and the instant after, with his hair standing on end, he came galloping up to his master as if to seek protection. It was the hour when the desert appears in all its nocturnal majesty. The howling of the jackals could be heard in the distance; but all at once a voice rising far above all the rest appeared to give them a signal to be silent. It was the voice of the American lion.

“Do you hear it?” inquired Cuchillo of his companion.

A howl equally loud, but of a different tone, was heard on the opposite side. “It is the puma and jaguar about to battle for the body of your horse, friend Tiburcio, and whichever one is conquered may take a fancy to revenge himself on us. Suppose you mount behind me, and let us be off?”

Tiburcio followed the advice; and notwithstanding the double load, the horse of Cuchillo galloped off like an arrow, impelled to such swift course by the growling of the fierce animals, that for a long time could be heard, as if they were following in the rear.

Chapter Thirteen

A Stumbling Horse

Far along the route these sounds accompanied the two riders – that is, the wailing of the jackals, mingled with the more fearful utterance of the great feline denizens of the desert. All at once, however, these noises became stilled, as a sound of a far different nature indicated the presence of some human being interfering in this scene of the desert. It was the crack of a gun, but with that quick sharp report that distinguishes the detonation of the rifle.

“A shot!” exclaimed Tiburcio. “But who can be amusing himself by hunting at this time of night, and in the middle of such a desert?”

“Very likely one of those American trappers we see now and then at Arispe, where they come to sell their beaver skins. These fellows think as little of a puma or a jaguar as they do of a jackal.”

No other noise was afterwards heard to break the imposing silence of the night. The stars were shining brightly in the blue heaven, and the breeze, that had now become much cooler, scarce made the slightest rustling as it passed through the branches of the iron-wood trees.

“Where are you taking me?” asked Tiburcio, after an interval of silence.

“To La Poza, where I have some companions who are to pass the night there. To-morrow, if you like, on to the hacienda of Venado.”

“To the hacienda of Venado! that is just where I was going.”

Had it been daylight, Cuchillo might have seen a blush suddenly redden the cheeks of the young man as he pronounced these words; for it was an affair of the heart, that in spite of all the efforts he had made to resist it, was attracting him to the hacienda de Venado. The object of his interest was no other than the daughter of the *haciendado* himself – the young heiress already spoken of.

“For what purpose were you going there?” inquired Cuchillo, in a careless tone.

This simple question was nevertheless difficult to be answered. His companion was not the man to whom the young gambusino could give his confidence. He hesitated before making reply.

“I am without resources,” said he at length, “and I go to ask Don Augustin Peña if he will accept me in the capacity of one of his *vaqueros*.”

“Tis a poor business you wish to undertake, *amigo*. To expose your life forever for such paltry pay as you will get – to keep watch at night and run about all the day; exposed to the burning heat of the sun, and by night to the cold – for this is the lot of a *vaquero*.”

“What can I do?” replied Tiburcio. “Besides, it is just the sort of life I have been accustomed to; have I not always been exposed to privations and the solitude of the desert plains? These torn calzoneras and well-worn jacket are all that are left me – since I have now no longer my poor horse. Better turn *vaquero* than be a beggar!”

“He knows nothing of the secret then,” reflected Cuchillo, “since he is meditating on an employment of this nature.” Then raising his voice: – “You are in truth, then, a complete orphan, *amigo*; and have no one to mourn for you if you were to die – except myself. Have you by chance heard anything of this grand expedition that is being organised at Tubac?”

“No.”

“Become one of it then. To an expedition of this kind a resolute young fellow like you would be a valuable acquisition; and upon your part, an expert gambusino, such as I fancy you must be – from the school in which you have been taught – might make his fortune at a single stroke.”

If he parry this thrust, muttered the outlaw to himself, it will be proof positive that he knows nothing about it.

Cuchillo was thus pursuing his investigation with a twofold object, sounding Tiburcio about the secret, while at the same time trying to attach him to the expedition by the hope of gain. But cunning as was the outlaw, he had to do with a party that was no simpleton. Tiburcio prudently remained silent.

“Although between ourselves,” continued Cuchillo, “I can tell you that I have never been beyond Tubac, yet I am to be one of the guides of this expedition. Now what say you?”

“I have my reasons,” replied Tiburcio, “not to engage in it without reflection. I therefore demand of you twenty-four hours to think it over, and then you shall have my answer.”

The expedition, of which this was the first news Tiburcio had heard, might, in fact, ruin or favour his own projects – hence the uncertainty he felt, and which he contrived so cleverly to conceal by his discreet reserve.

“Very well,” rejoined Cuchillo, “the thing will keep that long.”

And with this the conversation was discontinued.

Cuchillo, joyed at being disembarassed of his apprehension about the secret, began carelessly whistling while he spurred forward his horse. The greatest harmony continued between these two men, who, though they knew it not, had each a motive of the deadliest hatred one against the other. Suddenly, as they were thus riding along, the horse that carried them stumbled upon the left fore-leg, and almost came to the ground. On the instant Tiburcio leaped down, and with eyes flashing fire, cried out in a threatening tone to his astonished companion.

“You say you have never been beyond Tubac? where did you get this horse, Cuchillo?”

“What business of yours, where I got him?” answered the outlaw, surprised by a question to which his conscience gave an alarming significance, “and what has my horse to do with the interrogatory you have so discourteously put to me?”

“By the soul of Arellanos! I will know; or, if not – ”

Cuchillo gave the spur to his horse, causing him to bound to one side – while at the same time he attempted to unbuckle the straps that fastened his carbine to the saddle; but Tiburcio sprang after, seized his hand, and held it while he repeated the question: —

“How long have you owned this horse?”

“There, now! what curiosity!” answered Cuchillo, with a forced smile, “still, since you are so eager to know – it is – it is about six weeks since I became his master; you may have seen me with him, perhaps?”

In truth it was the first time Tiburcio had seen Cuchillo with this horse – that, notwithstanding his bad habits of stumbling, was otherwise an excellent animal, and was only used by his master on grand occasions. For this very reason Tiburcio had not seen him before.

The ready lie of the outlaw dissipated, no doubt, certain suspicions that had arisen in the mind of the young man, for the latter let go the horseman’s wrist, which up to this time he had held in his firm grasp.

“Pardon me!” said he, “for this rudeness; but allow me to ask you another question?”

“Ask it!” said Cuchillo, “since we are friends; in fact, among friends, one question less or more can make no difference.”

“Who sold you this horse six weeks ago?”

“Por Dios, his owner, of course – a stranger, whom I did not know, but who had just arrived from a long journey.”

Cuchillo repeated these words in a slow and drawling manner, as if to gain time for some hidden purpose.

“A stranger?” repeated Tiburcio; “pardon me! one more question?”

“Has the horse been stolen from *you*?” asked the outlaw in an ironical tone.

“No – but let us think no more of my folly – pardon me, señor!”

“I pardon you,” answered Cuchillo, in a tone of magnanimity, “the more so,” added he mentally, “that you will not go much further, you son of a hound!”

Tiburcio, unsuspecting, was no longer on his guard, and the outlaw, profiting by the darkness, had already detached his carbine from the saddle. In another moment, beyond doubt, he would have carried into execution his demoniac purpose, had it not been for the appearance of a horseman, who was coming at full gallop along the road. Besides the horse which he rode, the horseman led behind him another, saddled and bridled. He was evidently a messenger from Don Estevan.

“Ah! is it you, Señor Cuchillo?” he cried out, as he rode up.

“The devil!” grumbled the outlaw, at this ill-timed interruption. “Ah! is it you, Señor Benito?” he inquired, suddenly changing his tone.

“Yes. Well, have you saved the man? Don Estevan has sent me back to you with a gourd of fresh water, and a horse to bring him on.”

“He is there,” replied Cuchillo, pointing to Tiburcio, who stood at a little distance, “thanks to me he is sound and safe – until I have a chance of being once more alone with him,” he muttered, in a tone not intended to be heard.

“Well, gentlemen,” remarked the servant, “we had better go on – the camping place is not far from here – we can soon reach it.”

Tiburcio leaped into the empty saddle, and the three galloped silently toward the place where the travellers had halted – the servant thinking only of reaching it as soon as possible, and going to rest – Cuchillo mentally cursing the interruption that had forced him to adjourn his project of vengeance – and Tiburcio vainly endeavouring to drive out of his mind the suspicion which this curious incident had aroused.

In this occupation the three rode on for about a quarter of an hour, until the gleam of fires ahead discovered the halting-place of the travellers at La Poza. Soon afterwards their camp itself was reached.

Chapter Fourteen

La Poza

The place known by the name “La Poza” was the only one, within a circle of many leagues, where at this time of the year water could be found. There was here a natural cistern or well – partly nourished by a spring, and partly by rain from the skies. It was hollowed at the bottom of a little crater-shaped valley, only a few paces in circumference, the sloping side’s of which served to conduct to the well the rain-water that fell around.

The ridges inclosing the little valley were crowned with trees of thick frondage, which, nourished by the evaporation of the water, appeared green and vigorous, and protected the cistern from the burning rays of the sun. The green grass that grew around, the cool shadow of the trees, and the freshness of the air, rendered the well of La Poza, in the middle of the desert, a delicious little oasis. Besides serving as excellent resting-place for travellers, it was a favourite resort of hunters, who used it as a stalking-ground for animals – elks and deer – as well as jaguars and other fierce beasts that in great numbers came to the well to drink.

At a short distance from the cistern of La Poza commenced a tract of thick forest through which ran the path leading to the Hacienda del Venado. Nearer to the edge of the little valley, upon the side of this path, the travellers had kindled an enormous fire, partly to defend themselves from the cold night air, and partly to frighten off any jaguars or pumas that might be in the neighbourhood of the water.

Not far from this fire the servants had placed the camp-beds of the Senator and Don Estevan; and while a large saddle of mutton was being roasted for supper, a skin bottle of wine was cooling in the fresh water with which the trough had been filled.

After a painful day’s march, it was an attractive spectacle which this scene presented to the eyes of the travellers.

“*Mine!* your halting-place, Tiburcio,” said Cuchillo, as they rode into the camp, and speaking in a tone of pretended friendliness in order to conceal the real rancour which he felt. “Dismount here, while I go and report your arrival to our chief. It is Don Estevan de Arechiza himself under whose orders we are enrolled; so, too, may you be, if you desire it; and between ourselves, *amigo*, it is the best thing you can do.”

Cuchillo fearing that his victim might escape him, now wished more than ever that he should join the expedition. He pointed out Don Estevan and the Senator seated on their camp-beds, and visible in the light of the great fire, while Tiburcio was not yet seen by them. Cuchillo himself advanced toward Don Estevan.

“I am desirous, Señor Don Estevan,” said he, addressing himself to the Spaniard, “to say two words to your honour, with the permission of his excellency the Senator.”

Don Estevan arose from his seat and made a sign to Cuchillo to accompany him into one of the dark alleys of the forest, the same by which the path entered that led to the hacienda.

“You could hardly guess, Señor Don Estevan, who is the man your generosity has saved – for I have brought him with me safe and sound, as you see?”

Without making answer, Don Estevan took from his purse the piece of gold he had promised, and handed it to Cuchillo.

“It is the young Tiburcio Arellanos to whom you have given life,” continued the outlaw. “As for me I only followed the dictates of my heart; but it may be that we have both done a very foolish action.”

“Why that?” asked the Spaniard. “This young man will be easily watched so long as he is near us; and I presume he is decided to be one of our expedition?”

“He has asked twenty-four hours to reflect upon it.”

“Do you think he knows anything of – ”

“I have my fears,” replied Cuchillo, in a melancholy tone, little regarding the lie he was telling, and the purpose of which was to render the Spaniard suspicious of the man he had himself vowed to kill. “In any case,” continued he, with a significant smile, “we have saved his life, and that will serve as *tit for tat*.”

“What do you mean to say?”

“Only that my conscience assures me it will be perfectly tranquil if – if – Carramba!” added he, brusquely – “if I should send this young fellow to be broiled with his mother in the other world.”

“God forbid that!” exclaimed the Spaniard, in a lively tone. “What need? Admit that he knows all: I shall be in command of a hundred men, and he altogether alone. What harm can the fellow do us. I have no uneasiness about him. I am satisfied, and so must you be.”

“Oh! I am satisfied if you are,” growled Cuchillo, like a dog whose master had hindered him from biting some one, “quite satisfied,” he continued, “but perhaps hereafter – ”

“I shall see this young man,” said the Spaniard, interrupting him, and advancing in the direction where Tiburcio stood, while Cuchillo followed, talking to himself:

“What the devil possessed him to ask how long I had owned my horse? Let me see! the animal stumbled, I remember, and it was just then he dismounted and threatened me. I can’t understand it, but I suspect what I do not understand.”

When Arechiza and Cuchillo reached the camp, an excitement was observed among the horses, that gathered around the *capitansa*, at a short distance from the fire, and to all appearance in a state of extreme terror, were uttering a wild and continuous neighing. Some danger yet afar, but which the animals’ instincts enabled them to perceive, was the cause of this sudden *stampede*.

“It is some jaguar they have scented,” suggested one of the domestics.

“Bah!” replied another, “the jaguars attack only young foals – they wouldn’t dare to assault a strong vigorous horse.”

“Do you think so?” demanded the first speaker. “Ask Benito here, who, himself, lost a valuable animal taken by the jaguars.”

Benito, hearing this reference to himself, advanced towards the two speakers.

“One day,” he began, “or rather, one night just like this, I chanced to be at a distance from the Hacienda del Venado, where I was a *vaquero* at the time. I was in search of a strayed horse, and not finding him, had made up my mind to pass the night at the spring of *Ojo da Agua*. I tied my horse at a good distance off – where there was better grass – and I was sleeping, as a man sleeps after riding twenty leagues, when I was suddenly awakened by all the howlings and growlings of the devils. The moon shone so clear you might have fancied it daylight. All at once my horse came galloping toward me with the lazo hanging round his neck, which he had broken at the risk of hanging himself.

“‘Here then,’ said I, ‘I shall now have two horses to go in search of instead of one.’

“I had scarce made this reflection, when I observed, under the light of the moon, a superb jaguar bounding after my horse. He scarce appeared to touch the ground, and each leap carried him forward twenty feet or more.

“I saw that my poor steed was lost. I listened with anxiety, but for a while heard nothing. At the end of a quarter of an hour, however, a terrible roar – ”

The speaker paused, and stood trembling.

“*Virgen Santa!*” cried he, “that’s it!” as the fearful cry of a jaguar at that moment echoed through the camp, succeeded by a deathlike stillness, as if both men and animals had been alike terrified into silence.

Chapter Fifteen

Nocturnal Visitors

The sudden shock occasioned by the perception of a peril so proximate and imminent paralysed every tongue. Even the ex-herdsman himself was silent, and appeared to reflect what had best be done to avoid the danger.

At this instant the voice of Don Estevan broke the temporary silence that reigned within the camp.

“Get your weapons ready!” shouted he.

“It is useless, master,” rejoined the old vaquero, whose experience among jaguars gave a certain authority to his words, “the best thing to be done, is to keep the fire ablaze.”

And saying this, he flung an armful of fagots upon it, which, being as dry as tinder, at once caught flame – so as to illumine a large circle around the camp.

“If they are not choking with thirst,” said Benito, “these demons of darkness will not dare come within the circle of the fire. But, indeed, they are often choking with thirst, and then – ”

“Then!” interrupted one of the domestics, in a tone of anxiety.

“Then,” continued the herdsman, “then they don’t regard either light or fire; and if we are not determined to defend the water against their approach, we had better get out of their way altogether. These animals are always more thirsty than hungry.”

“How when they have drunk?” asked Baraja, whose countenance, under the light of the fire, betrayed considerable uneasiness.

“Why, then they seek to appease their hunger.”

At this moment a second cry from the jaguar was heard, but farther off than the first. This was some relief to the auditory of Benito, who, relying upon his theory, was satisfied that the animal was not yet at the extreme point of suffering from thirst. All of them preserved silence – the only sounds heard being the crackling of the dry sticks with which Baraja kept the fire profusely supplied.

“Gently there, Baraja! gently!” called out the vaquero, “if you consume our stock of firewood in that fashion, you will soon make an end of it, and, *por Dios! amigo*, you will have to go to the woods for a fresh supply.”

“There! hold your hand,” continued he, after a pause, “and try to make the fagots last as long as possible, else we may get in darkness and at the mercy of the tiger. He is sure to come back again in an hour or two, and far thirstier than before.”

If Benito had desired to frighten his companions, he could not have succeeded better. The eyes of one and all of them were anxiously bent upon the heap of dried sticks that still remained by the fire, and which appeared scarcely sufficient to last for another hour. But there was something so earnest in the tone of the ex-herdsman, despite the jesting way in which he spoke, that told he was serious in what he had said.

Of course, Don Estevan had postponed the interview with Tiburcio; and the young man, still ignorant that it was to Don Estevan he really owed his life, did not think of approaching to offer him thanks. Moreover, he saw that the moment would be ill-timed to exchange compliments of courtesy with the chief of the expedition, and for this reason he remained standing where Cuchillo had left him.

Nevertheless Don Estevan could not hinder himself from casting an occasional glance in the direction where the young man stood – though through the obscurity he could make no exact observation of his features.

The silence continued. Don Estevan and the Senator remained seated on their camp-beds, carbine in hand, while Benito, surrounded by the other domestics, formed a group by the side of the fire. The horses had all approached within a few feet of their masters, where they stood trembling

and breathing loudly from their spread nostrils. Their behaviour indicated an instinct on their part that the danger was not yet over.

Several minutes passed, in which no human voice broke the silence. In the midst of greatest perils there is something consolatory in the sound of a man's voice – something which makes the danger appear less; and as if struck by this idea, some one asked Benito to continue the narrative of his adventures.

"I have told you then," resumed the ex-herdsman, "that I saw the tiger springing after my horse, and that in the chase both disappeared from my sight. The moment after, the horse came galloping back; but I knew that it was his last gallop, as soon as by the light of the moon I saw the terrible rider that he carried. The jaguar was upon his back, flattened over his shoulders, with the neck of the poor horse fast between his jaws.

"They had not gone a dozen paces before I heard a crackling sound – as if some bone had been crushed – and on the instant I saw the horse stumble and fall. Both tiger and horse rolled over and over in a short but terrible struggle, and then my poor steed lay motionless.

"For safety I stole away from the dangerous proximity; but returning after daylight, I found only the half-stripped skeleton of a horse that had carried me for many a long year.

"And now, amigo," continued the ex-herdsman, turning to the man who had first spoken, "do you still think that the jaguar attacks only foals?"

No one made reply, but Benito's audience turned their glances outward from the fire, fearing that in the circle around they might see shining the eyes of one of these formidable animals.

Another interval of silence succeeded to the narrative of the vaquero. This was broken by the young man Tiburcio, who, used to the wild life of the plains and forests, was very little frightened by the presence of the jaguars.

"If you have a horse," said he, "you need not much fear the jaguar; he is sure to take your horse first. Here, we have twenty horses and only one tiger."

"The young man reasons well," rejoined Baraja, reassured by the observation of Tiburcio.

"Twenty horses for one tiger – yes," replied Benito; "but suppose the horses don't choose to remain here. Supposing, what is likely enough to happen, we have an *estampeda*– the horses will be off. Now the jaguar knows very well he cannot overcome a horse unless he does so in the first bound or two. I will not follow the horses then, but will stay by the water, and of course by us as well. Besides, the jaguars that hunt by these springs are likely enough to have tasted human flesh before now; and if so, they will not, as the young man affirms, prefer the flesh of a horse."

"Very consoling, that," interrupted Cuchillo.

Benito appeared to be a man fond of the most frightful suggestions, for not contented with what he had already said, he continued —

"If there be but one jaguar, then he will be satisfied with one of us, but in case he should chance to be accompanied by his female, then —"

"Then what, by all the devils?" demanded Cuchillo.

"Why, then – but I don't wish to frighten you."

"May thunder strike you! Speak out," cried Baraja, suffering at the suspense.

"Why, in that case," coolly added Benito, "the tiger would undoubtedly show his gallantry to his female by killing a pair of us."

"Carramba!" fervently exclaimed Baraja. "I pray the Lord that this tiger may be a bachelor," and as he said this he flung a fresh armful of fagots on the fire.

"Gently, amigo! gently," interrupted the ex-herdsman, lifting off some of the sticks again. "We have yet at least six hours of night, and these fagots will scarce serve to keep up the light for one. Gently, I say! We have still three chances of safety: the first that the jaguar may not be thirsty; the second, that he may content himself with one of our horses; and the third, that he may, as you have wished it, be a *bachelor* tiger."

There was no response, and another interval of silence succeeded. During this it was some consolation to the travellers to see the moon, which now, rising above the horizon, lit up the plains with her white beams, and flung her silvery effulgence over the trees. From the direction of the woods came the mournful notes of the great horned owl, and the sound of flapping wings, caused by the vampire bat, as it glided through the aisles of the forest. No other sounds appeared to indicate the presence of living thing except those made by the horses or the travellers themselves.

“Do you think,” said Baraja, addressing himself to Benito, “that the jaguar is likely to return again? I have known these animals howl at night around my hut, and then go off altogether.”

“Yes,” replied Benito, “that may be when their drinking place is left free to them. Here we have intercepted their approach to the water. Besides, here are both men and horses – both food and drink in one place; it is not likely they have gone away from a spot that promises to furnish them with both. No, I warrant you, they are still in the neighbourhood.”

At this moment the cry of the jaguar was heard once more, proving the correctness of Benito’s judgment.

“There!” cried he, “just as I said; the beast is nearer too – no doubt his thirst is increasing – the more so that he is hindered from approaching the spring. Ha! do you hear that?”

This exclamation was caused by another roar of the jaguar, but evidently not the one that had been already frightening the travellers – for this cry came from the opposite side of the camp.

“Ave Maria!” screamed Baraja, in anguish, “the tiger has a wife!”

“You speak true,” said Benito, “there are two of them, and they must be a male and female, since two male jaguars never hunt in company.”

“*Carrai!*” exclaimed Cuchillo, “may the devil take me if ever I passed a night in the company of such a man as this old herdsman. He would frighten the hair off one’s head if he could.”

“After all,” said Baraja, “I think there can’t be much danger, so long as we have got the horses between us and these terrible brutes.”

Unhappily, this chance of safety was not to exist much longer, for just then the jaguars recommenced their growling, both of them nearer than ever. The effect upon the horses was now exhibited in a complete *estampeda*, – for these animals, seeing they could no longer rely upon their masters for protection, preferred trusting to their heels, and one and all of them broke away in a wild gallop.

As this last chance of security was gone, the old vaquero, leaving the fire, approached the spot where Don Estevan and the Senator were seated, and thus addressed them: —

“Gentlemen,” said he, “prudence requires that you will not remain so far from the rest of us. As you perceive there is danger on both sides, it will be best that we should all keep close together, and as near the fire as possible.”

The affrighted look of the Senator offered a striking contrast to the countenance of Don Estevan, which still preserved its calm rigidity.

“It is good advice this faithful servant gives us,” said Tragaduros, rising to do as Benito had suggested.

“Come, Benito,” said Don Estevan, “these are nothing but hunter’s stories you have been telling, and you wish to frighten these novices? Is it not so?”

“As I live, Señor Don Estevan, ’tis the truth!”

“There is a real danger, then?”

“Certain there is, my master!”

“Very well, in that case I shall remain where I am.”

“Are you in earnest?” asked the frightened Tragaduros.

“Quite so – the duty of a leader is to protect his followers,” said the Spaniard, proudly, “and that is what I mean to do. If the danger is only from the right and left as it appears to be – I shall guard the right here. There are two bullets in my gun, and with these and a sure eye, what care I for

a jaguar? You, Señor Don Vicente, can take your stand on the left of the fire, and watch that side. If it appears prudent to you to keep near the men, do so.”

This compromise appeared to the taste of Tragaduros, who had no idea of exposing the person of a man who was to be the future proprietor of a million of dollars dowry. He lost no time, therefore, in crossing over to the fire, and although he made a feint to keep watch on the opposite side from that guarded by Don Estevan, he took care to remain within a few feet of the group of attendants.

These dispositions had scarce been completed, when a formidable dialogue was struck up between the two fierce beasts that were approaching on opposite sides of the camp. Now they would utter a hoarse roaring, then a series of screams and yells, succeeded by a shrill mewing that resembled the caterwauling of cats – only louder and more terrific in its effect. Though Benito and Tiburcio knew that all these noises were caused by a single pair of tigers, the others imagined that not less than a dozen must be engaged in the frightful chorus.

The gun of the Senator shook in his hand – Baraja commended his soul to all the saints in the Spanish calendar – Cuchillo clutched his carbine, as if he would crush it between his fingers – while the chief himself coolly awaited the dénouement of the drama.

Chapter Sixteen

The Tiger Hunters

By the light of the fire Don Estevan could be seen walking in the direction whence proceeded the cries of the jaguar that was approaching on the right. He appeared calm as if going out in search of a deer. Tiburcio, at the aspect of the Spanish chief, felt within him that exultation of spirit which danger produces in certain energetic natures; but his dagger was the only weapon he possessed.

He cast a glance at the double-barrelled gun which the Senator held in his hand, and of which the latter was likely to make a use more fatal to his companions than to the jaguar.

On his part the Senator cast an envious look upon the safe position which Tiburcio occupied – in the centre of the group formed by Benito and his companions. Tiburcio read the meaning of this look.

“Señor Senator,” said he, “it is not proper that you should expose your life thus – a life valuable to the state. You have relatives – a noble family; as for me, if I should be killed, there is no one to care for me.”

“The fact is,” said the Senator, “if others set upon my life one half the value I put upon it myself, my death would cause a great deal of unhappiness.”

“Well, señor, suppose we change places? You give me your gun, and permit me to place my body in front of you as a rampart against the claws of the jaguars.”

This proposal was made at the moment when the two cavernous voices of the ferocious beasts were heard loudly answering to one another. Under the impression produced by the terrible dialogue, Tiburcio’s offer was hastily accepted. The Senator took his place; while the young man, with sparkling eyes and firm step, advanced several paces in the direction of the forest whence came theories of the jaguar. There he halted to receive the attack that appeared inevitable.

Don Estevan and he appeared motionless as a pair of statues. The unequal reflection of the fire gleamed upon these two men – whom chance had thus strangely united – neither of whom might yield to the other in pride or courage.

The moment was becoming critical. The two jaguars were about to find enemies worthy of them.

The fire, now burnt down, threw out only a pale light, scarce strong enough to illumine the group that stood near its edge.

At this moment an incident occurred which was likely to cause a change in the situation of affairs. In the midst of an interval of silence – in which the very stillness itself increased the apprehension of the travellers – was heard the long lugubrious whine of a prairie wolf. Melancholy as was this sound, it was sweet in comparison with the cries of the more formidable animals, the jaguars.

“The prairie wolf to howl in the presence of the tiger!” muttered the ex-herdsman. “Carramba! there’s something strange about that.”

“But I have heard it said,” rejoined Tiburcio, “that it is the habit of the prairie wolf to follow the jaguar when the latter is in search of prey?”

“That is true enough,” replied Benito, “but the wolf never howls so near the tiger, till after the tiger has taken his prey and is busy devouring it. Then his howl is a humble prayer for the other to leave him something.

“This is strange,” continued the vaquero, as the prairie wolf was heard to utter another long whine. “Hark! another! – yes – another prairie wolf and on the opposite side too!”

In fact, another plaintive whine, exactly resembling the first, both in strength and cadence, was heard from a point directly opposite.

“I repeat it,” said Benito, “prairie wolves would never dare to betray themselves thus. I am greatly mistaken if it be not creatures of a different species that make this howling, and who don’t care a straw for the jaguars.”

“What creatures?” demanded Tiburcio.

“Human creatures!” answered the ex-herdsman. “American hunters from the north.”

“Trappers do you mean?”

“Precisely. There are no people in these parts likely to be so fearless of the jaguar, and I am pretty sure that what appears to be the call of the prairie wolf is nothing else than a signal uttered by a brace of trappers. They are in pursuit of the jaguars; they have separated, and by these signals they acquaint one another of their whereabouts.”

Meanwhile the trappers, if such they were, appeared to advance with considerable precaution; for although the party by the fire listened attentively, not the slightest noise could be heard – neither the cracking of a branch, nor the rustling of a leaf.

“Hilloa! you by the fire there!” all at once broke out from the midst of the darkness a loud rough voice, “we are approaching you. Don’t be afraid; and don’t fire your guns!”

The voice had a foreign accent, which partly confirmed the truth of the vaquero’s conjecture, and the appearance of the speaker himself proved it to a certainty.

We shall not stay to describe the singular aspect of the new arrival – further than to say that he was a man of herculean stature, and accoutred in the most *bizarre* fashion. He appeared a sort of giant armed with a rifle – proportioned to his size – that is, having a barrel of thick heavy metal nearly six feet in length.

As he approached the group his sharp eye soon took in the different individuals that composed it, and rested with a satisfied look on the form of Tiburcio.

“The devil take that fire of yours!” he said abruptly, but in a tone of good-humour. “It has frightened away from us two of the most beautiful jaguars that ever roamed about these deserts.”

“Frightened them away!” exclaimed Baraja. “*Carramba!* I hope that may be true!”

“Will you allow me to put the fire out?” inquired the new-comer.

“Put out the fire – our only safeguard!” cried the astonished Senator.

“Your only safeguard!” repeated the trapper, equally astonished, as he pointed with his finger around him. “What! eight men wanting a fire for a safeguard against two poor tigers! You are surely making game of me!”

“Who are you, sir?” demanded Don Estevan, in a haughty tone.

“A hunter – as you see.”

“Hunter, of what?”

“My comrade and I trap the beaver, hunt the wolf, the tiger – or an Indian, if need be.”

“Heaven has sent you then to deliver us from these fierce animals,” said Cuchillo, showing himself in front.

“Not very likely,” replied the trapper, whose first impression of the outlaw was evidently an unfavourable one. “Heaven I fancy had nothing to do with it. My comrade and I at about two leagues from here chanced upon a panther and two jaguars, quarrelling over the body of a dead horse.”

“I re was mine,” interrupted Tiburcio.

“Yours, young man!” continued the trapper, in a tone of rude cordiality. “Well, I am glad to see you here, for we thought that the owner of the horse might be no longer among the living. The panther we killed, but the two jaguars made off, and we tracked them hither to the spring, which your fire now hinders them from approaching. Therefore, if you wish to be rid of these beasts, the sooner you put out the fire the better; and you will see how soon we shall disembarass you of their presence.”

“And your comrade?” asked Don Estevan, struck with the idea of making a brace of valuable recruits. “Where is he?”

“He’ll be here presently; but to the work, else we must leave you to get out of your scrape as you best can.”

There was a certain authority in the tone and words of the trapper – a cool assurance that produced conviction – and upon his drawing near to put out the fire, Don Estevan did not offer to hinder him, but tacitly permitted him to have his way.

In a few seconds the burnt fagots were scattered about over the grass, and the cinders quenched by a few buckets of water drawn from the trough. This done the trapper uttered an imitation of the voice of the coyote; and before its echoes had died away, his companion stepped forward upon the ground.

Although the second trapper was by no means a man of low stature, alongside his companion he appeared only a pigmy. He was not less strangely accoutred, but in the absence of the firelight his costume was not sufficiently visible for its style to be distinguished. Of him and his dress we shall hereafter speak more particularly.

“At last your devilish fire is out,” said he, as he came up, “for the want of wood, no doubt, which none of you dared to go fetch.”

“No, that is not the reason,” hastily replied the first trapper; “I got leave from these gentlemen to put it out – so that we may have an opportunity to rid them of the presence of the tigers.”

“Hum!” murmured the Senator; “I fear we have done wrong in letting the fire be put out. Suppose you miss them?”

“Miss them! *Por Dios!* how?” cried the second trapper. “*Caspita!* If I had not been afraid to frighten off one of the beasts, I could have killed the other long ago. Several times I had him at the muzzle of my carbine, when the signal of my comrade hindered me from firing. Miss them indeed!”

“Never mind!” interrupted the great trapper; “we shall end the matter, I have no doubt, by convincing this gentleman.”

“You already knew, then, that we were here?” said Baraja.

“Of course. We have been two hours involuntarily playing the spy upon you. Ah! I know a part of the country where travellers that take no more precautions than you would soon find their heads stripped of the skin. But come, Dormilon! to our work!”

“What if the jaguars come our way?” suggested the Senator, apprehensively.

“No fear of that,” replied the trapper. “Their first care will be to satisfy their thirst, which your fire has hindered them from doing. You will hear them howling with joy, as soon as they perceive that the fire is gone out. It was the light shining upon the water that frightened them more than the presence of men. All they want now is to get a drink.”

“But how do you intend to act?” inquired Don Estevan.

“How do we intend to act?” repeated the second trapper. “That is simple enough. We shall place ourselves in the cistern – the jaguars will come forward to its brink; and then, if we are only favoured by a blink of the moon, I’ll answer for it that in the twinkling of an eye the brutes will neither feel hunger nor thirst.”

“Ah, this appears very simple!” cried Cuchillo, who was in reality astonished at the simplicity of the plan.

“Simple as bidding ‘good-bye’ to you,” humorously responded one of the trappers. “Listen there! – what did I tell you?”

Two loud roars, as if from a brazen trumpet, were heard at the moment. They appeared to proceed from the same point, proving that the jaguars had joined company; and, moreover, proclaimed the joy which the fierce creatures felt at the darkness being restored. This was further evident from their repeated sniffing of the air, like horses who afar off scent with delight the fresh emanations of the water.

At this the two trappers, leaving the party by the fire, betook themselves to the cistern. The moon, for a moment shining out, glanced upon the barrels of their long rifles; but the next moment they had disappeared behind the ridge that surrounded the spring.

No doubt it is a grand pleasure to witness the spectacle of a bull-fight, as the huge bull dashes into the ring, and, pierced by the tormenting *bandrilleros*, with a crest erect, and eyes flashing fire, bounds over the arena. But, if the spectators were not separated from the actors by an impassable barrier, the sight would have in it less of enjoyment than of terror. The combats between men and tigers – which the Romans used to enjoy – must have been a still more exciting spectacle; but who can doubt that, if the iron railing which separated the audience from the combatants had been removed, scarce one of the former would have remained in the circus to witness the sanguinary struggle?

Only a short space – not wider than a jaguar could have passed over in a single leap – here separated the spectators from the actors in the drama about to be enacted. Supposing, then, that one of the actors should fail in performing his part, and the spectators have to take his place? Here was a situation, exceptional, and fertile in emotions, which most of the travellers felt keenly at the moment.

Meanwhile the trappers had descended into the little crater-like valley of the spring, and there placed themselves in readiness, rifle in hand, to await the approach of their terrible adversaries. They were both upon their knees, back to back, in order that they could keep at the same time under view the whole circumference of the circle. Both had placed their knives in readiness, in case that, by any chance, they should either miss their aim, or – what would be almost as unlucky – only wound the enemy; for they well knew that a wounded jaguar is a more dangerous adversary than one that escapes altogether from the touch of the bullet.

Fortunately the moon had again appeared; but being yet low down in the sky, her beams were not thrown into the bottom of the valley – and therefore the trappers themselves were still under the shadow. This circumstance was in their favour.

Notwithstanding the perilous position in which they had thus voluntarily placed themselves, neither made the slightest movement; and the long barrels of their rifles stood forth in front of them, as motionless as bronze cannon set in battery.

They well knew, in case either should miss with their firearms, that a hand-to-hand struggle with the ferocious tigers would be the result; a combat of knives and claws – a combat to the death. Yes; at the bottom of that little valley it would be necessary for them to conquer or die. They knew this without exhibiting the slightest show of fear.

Chapter Seventeen

Unexpected Recognitions

It was not long before the spectators, who awaited this terrible conflict, perceived the jaguars advancing toward the crest of the ridge. All at once, however, the two made an abrupt pause, uttering a loud roar that seemed to express disappointment. They had just scented the presence of the two men within the cistern – from which the animals were now only a few paces distant.

For a moment both male and female stood together, stretching their bodies out to their full length, and lashing their flanks with their long sinewy tails. Then, uttering another prolonged roar, they bounded simultaneously forward, passing, at a single leap, over a space of full twenty feet. A second spring brought them upon the crest of the ridge, upon which they had scarce rested an instant, before the quick sharp crack of a rifle, followed by a yell of agony, told that one of them had fallen to the hunter's bullet.

The second jaguar appeared for the moment to have escaped, but not to have retreated. He was seen to launch himself into the bottom of the little valley; and then was heard a confusion of noises – human voices mingling with the howls of the fierce brute, and the sound of a struggle, as if jaguar and hunters were rolling over one another. A second report now struck upon the ear, followed as before by the expiring yell of the tiger, and then succeeded a profound silence, which told that the wild scene was at an end.

The great trapper was now perceived scrambling up to the ridge – towards which the whole of the travellers had advanced to meet him.

“See!” he said, addressing himself to his admiring auditory, “see what a brace of Kentucky rifles and a good knife can do in the hands of those who know how to manage them!”

The darkness, however, hindered the spectators from making out the tableau which was exhibited at the bottom of the little valley.

A few minutes afterwards the moon lighted up the scene, and then could be observed the dead bodies of the two tigers, stretched along the ground by the water's edge, while the other trapper upon his knees was engaged in bathing with cold water a long scar, which he had received from the claws of the last killed jaguar, and which extended from behind his ear nearly down to his waist. Fortunately this ugly-looking wound was no more than skin-deep, and therefore not very dangerous.

“What signify the sharpest claws compared with the scratch of a knife!” cried he, pointing to the nearest of the jaguars, whose upturned belly exhibited a huge cut of more than a foot in length, and through which the entrails of the animal protruded.

“Can any of you tell us,” continued he, without thinking further about his wound, “if there is a hacienda in this neighbourhood where one might sell these two beautiful jaguar skins, as well as the hide of a panther we've got?”

“Certainly,” replied Benito, “there is the Hacienda del Venado, where we are going. There you may get not only five dollars apiece for the skins, but also the bounty of ten dollars more.”

“What say you, Canadian?” inquired the trapper, addressing his great comrade. “Will that do?”

“Certainly,” replied the Canadian, “forty-five dollars is not to be sneezed at; and when we have had a short nap we shall make tracks for the hacienda. We shall be likely to get there before these gentlemen, whose horses have taken a fancy to have a bit of a gallop, and I guess it will be some time before they lay hands on them again.”

“Don't be uneasy about us!” rejoined the ex-herdsman. “It's not the first time I've seen a horse drove *stampdoed*, nor the first time I've collected them again. I've not quite forgotten my old business, and as soon as it is daylight, with the permission of the Señor Don Estevan, I shall go in search of them.”

No one made any opposition to the rekindling of the fire, for the night had grown cooler, and it was not yet midnight. The domestics, no longer afraid of going out into the woods, collected fresh fagots – enough to last till morning – and the preparations for supper, which had been interrupted by the approach of the jaguars, were now continued with renewed zeal.

The blaze soon flared up bright and joyous as ever – the broiling mutton sent forth its delicious odour, sharpening to a keen edge the appetites of the travellers as they stood around the fire.

Don Estevan and the Senator now called before them the two intrepid hunters, who had rendered them a service that fully deserved their thanks.

“Come hither, brave hunters!” said the Senator, “you, whose daring behaviour has been of such service to us. A slice of roast mutton and a cup of Catalonian wine will not be out of place, after the rude struggle you have sustained.”

“Ugh!” said the eldest of the trappers, in presenting his athletic form in front of the fire, “throwing a couple of poor tigers is no great feat. If it had been an affair of a dozen Comanches, or Pawnees, that would have been different. Howsomever, a chunk of roast mutton is welcome after a fight, as well as before one, and we’re ready for it with your permission. Come along, comrade! Here’s some chawing for you!”

“And you, young man,” continued Don Estevan, addressing himself to Tiburcio, who stood at some distance apart, “you will also partake of our hospitality?”

Tiburcio by a sign accepted the invitation, and approached the fire. For the first time his countenance came fairly under the light; and as it did so, the eyes of the Spaniard seemed to devour him with their regard. In truth the physiognomy of Tiburcio Arellanos was of no ordinary character, and would have merited observation from one less interested in examining it than was Don Estevan Arechiza.

An aquiline nose, black eyes with thick dark eyebrows and long lashes, and olive complexion – that appeared almost white in contrast with the jetty blackness of his beard – but above all, the extreme contraction of a thin upper lip, indicated the countenance of a man of quick resolves and fiery passions. A shade of tranquil melancholy over these features to some extent tempered their half-fierce expression.

The hair was of a chestnut brown colour, and hung in luxuriant curls over a forehead large and of noble outline. Broad shoulders and well-developed limbs denoted a man of European vigour, whose personal strength would be equal, if occasion required it, to the execution of those passionate designs nourished under the tropical skies of Spanish America.

Tiburcio Arellanos was in truth the type of a noble and ancient race, transplanted into a country still less than half civilised.

“The very form and bearing of Don Juan de Mediana!” muttered Don Estevan to himself, more than half convinced that the young man before his eyes was the son of him whose name he had pronounced. No one could have read his suspicions, hidden under the mask of perfect calmness.

There was one other man in that group who was struck by the aspect of Tiburcio. This was the big trapper, who on first sight of the young man’s face under the light of the fire started and closed his eyes, as if lightning had flashed before them. He was about to rush forward, when a second look seemed to convince him he had made a mistake; and smiling at his having done so, he kept his place. His eyes then wandered around the group of faces that encircled the fire, with that scrutinising glance, that showed a capacity for reading the characters of men in their looks.

Having finished this scrutiny, he called out to his companion, who had not yet got forward: —

“Come along, partner; or people will say you are ashamed to show yourself. Prove to these gentlemen that you know how to enjoy life like other folk.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.