

Aimard Gustave

The Freebooters: A Story of the Texan War



Gustave Aimard

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PREFACE

Apart from the thrilling interest of Aimard's new story, which I herewith offer to English readers, I think it will be accepted with greater satisfaction, as being an historical record of the last great contest in which the North Americans were engaged. As at the present moment everything is eagerly devoured that may tend to throw light on the impending struggle between North and South, I believe that the story of "THE FREEBOOTERS," which is rigorously true in its details, will enable my readers to form a correct opinion of the character of the Southerners.

The series, of which this volume forms a second link, will be completed in a third volume, to be called "THE WHITE SCALPER," which contains an elaborate account of the liberation of Texas, and the memorable battle of San Jacinto, together with personal adventures of the most extraordinary character.

L. W.
7, DRAYTON TERRACE,
WEST BROMPTON.

CHAPTER I. FRAY ANTONIO

All the wood rangers have noticed, with reference to the immense virgin forests which still cover a considerable extent of the soil of the New World, that, to the man who attempts to penetrate into one of these mysterious retreats which the hand of man has not yet deformed, and which preserve intact the sublime stamp which Deity has imprinted on them, the first steps offer almost insurmountable difficulties, which are gradually smoothed down more and more, and after a little while almost entirely disappear. It is as if Nature had desired to defend by a belt of thorns and spikes the mysterious shades of these aged forests, in which her most secret arcana are carried out.

Many times, during our wanderings in America, we were in a position to appreciate the correctness of the remark we have just made: this singular arrangement of the forests, surrounded, as it were, by a rampart of parasitic plants entangled one in the other, and thrusting in every direction their shoots full of incredible sap, seemed a problem which offered a certain degree of interest from various points of view, and especially from that of science.

It is evident to us that the circulation of the air favours the development of vegetation. The air which circulates freely round a large extent of ground covered with lofty trees, and is driven by the various breezes that agitate the atmosphere, penetrates to a certain depth into the clumps of trees it surrounds, and consequently supplies nourishment to all the parasitical shrubs vegetation presents to it. But, on reaching a certain depth under the covert, the air, less frequently renewed, no longer supplies carbonic acid to all the vegetation that covers the soil, and which, through the absence of that aliment, pines away and dies.

This is so true, that those accidents of soil which permit the air a more active circulation in certain spots, such as the bed of a torrent or a gorge between two eminences, the entrance of which is open to the prevailing wind, favour the development of a more luxuriant vegetation than in flat places.

It is more than probable that Fray Antonio¹ made none of the reflections with which we begin this chapter, while he stepped silently and quietly through the trees, leaving the man who had helped him, and probably saved his life, to struggle as he could with the crowd of Redskins who attacked him, and against whom he would indubitably have great difficulty in defending him.

Fray Antonio was no coward; far from it: in several critical circumstances he had displayed true bravery; but he was a man to whom the existence he led offered enormous advantages and incalculable delights. Life seemed to him good, and he did all in his power to spend it jolly and free from care. Hence, through respect for himself, he was extremely prudent, only facing danger when it was absolutely necessary; but at such times, like all men driven into a corner, he became terrible and really dangerous to those who, in one way or the other, had provoked in him this explosion of passion.

In Mexico, and generally throughout Spanish America, as the clergy are only recruited from the poorest class of the population, their ranks contain men of gross ignorance, and for the most part of more than doubtful morality. The religious orders, which form nearly one-third of the population, living nearly independent of all subjection and control, receive among them people of all sorts, for whom the religious dress they don is a cloak behind which they give way with perfect liberty to their vices, of which the most venial are indubitably indolence, luxury, and intoxication.

Enjoying a great credit with the civilized Indian population, and greatly respected by them, the monks impudently abuse that halo of sanctity which surrounds them, in order to shamefully plunder these poor people under the slightest excuses.

¹ See "Border Rifles," same publishers.

Indeed, blackguardism and demoralisation have attained such a pitch in these unhappy countries, which are old and decrepit without ever having been young, that the conduct of the monks, offensive it may seem in the sight of Europeans, has nothing at all extraordinary for those among whom they live.

Far from us the thought of leading it to be supposed that among the Mexican clergy, and even the monks we have so decried, there are not men worthy of the gown they wear, and convinced of the sanctity of their mission; we have, indeed, known many of that character; but unfortunately they form so insignificant a minority, that they must be regarded as the exception.

Fray Antonio was assuredly no better or worse than the other monks whose gown he wore; but, unluckily for him, for some time past fatality appeared to have vented its spite on him, and mixed him up, despite his firm will, in events, not only opposed to his character but to his habits, which led him into a multitude of tribulations each more disagreeable than the other, and which were beginning to make him consider that life extremely bitter, which he had hitherto found so pleasant.

The atrocious mystification of which John Davis had rendered the poor monk a victim, had especially spread a gloomy haze over his hitherto so gay mind; a sad despondency had seized upon him; and it was with a heavy and uncertain step that he fled through the forest, although, excited by the sounds of combat that still reached his ear, he made haste to get off, through fear of falling into the hands of the Redskins, if they proved the victors.

Night surprised poor Fray Antonio ere he had reached the skirt of this forest, which seemed to him interminable. Naturally anything but hard-working, and not at all used to desert life, the monk found himself greatly embarrassed when he saw the sun disappear on the horizon in a mist of purple and gold, and the darkness almost instantaneously cover the earth. Unarmed, without means of lighting a fire, half-dead with hunger and alarm, the monk took a long glance of despair around him, and fell to the ground, giving vent to a dull groan: he literally did not know to what saint he should appeal.

Still, after a few moments, the instinct of self-preservation gained the mastery over discouragement, and the monk, whose teeth chattered with terror on hearing re-echoed through the forest the lugubrious roaring of the wild beasts, which were beginning to awaken, and greeted in their fashion the longed-for return of gloom – rose with a feverish energy, and suffering from that feverish over-excitement which fear raised to a certain pitch produces, resolved to profit by the fugitive rays that still crossed the glade, to secure himself a shelter for the night.

Opposite to him grew a majestic mahogany tree, whose interlaced branches and dense foliage seemed to offer him a secure retreat against the probable attack of the gloomy denizens of the forest.

Assuredly, under any other circumstances than those in which he found himself, the bare idea of escalading this immense forest would have appeared to the monk the height of folly and mental aberration, owing first to his paunch, and next to his awkwardness, of which he felt intimately convinced.

But it was a critical point: at each instant the situation grew more dangerous; the howling came nearer in a most alarming manner; there was no time to hesitate; and Fray Antonio did not do so. After walking once or twice round the tree, in order to discover the spot which offered him the greatest facility for his ascent, he gave vent to a sigh, embraced the enormous and rugged trunk with his arms and knees, and painfully commenced his attempted climb.

But it was no easy matter, especially for a plump monk, to mount the tree, and Fray Antonio soon perceived this fact at his own expense; for each time that, after extraordinary efforts, he managed to raise himself a few inches from the ground, his strength suddenly failed him, and he fell back on the ground with lacerated hands and torn clothes.

Ten times already had he renewed his efforts, with the desperation produced by despair, without seeing them crowned with success; the perspiration poured down his face; his chest panted; he was in a state to produce pity even in his most obstinate enemy.

"I shall never succeed in mounting it," he muttered sadly; "and if I remain here, I am a lost man, for within an hour I shall be infallibly devoured by some tiger in search of its supper."

This final reflection, which was incontestably true, restored a fresh ardour to the monk, who resolved to make a new and supreme attempt. But this time he wished to take all his precautions; consequently, he began collecting the dead wood round him and piling it at the foot of the tree, so as to form a scaffolding high enough for him to reach, without any great difficulty, a branch sufficiently low for him, while careful to remain awake, to hope to spend the night without fear of being devoured – an alternative for which the worthy monk did not feel the slightest inclination.

Soon, thanks to the vivacity of his movements, Fray Antonio had a considerable heap of wood piled up around him. A smile of satisfaction lit up his wide face, and he breathed again, while wiping away the perspiration that poured down his face.

"This time," he muttered, calculating with a glance the space he had to cover, "if I do not succeed, I shall be preciously clumsy."

In the meanwhile the last gleams of twilight, so useful to the monk, had entirely disappeared; the absence of the stars, which had not yet shown themselves, left a profound obscurity in the sky, which was even more obscure under the covert; all was beginning to be blotted out, only allowing here and there a few clumps of trees to be distinguished, as they designed their gloomy masses in the night, or a few patches of water, the result of the last storm, which studded the forest with paler spots. The evening breeze had risen, and could be heard sighing through the foliage with a sad and melancholy plaintiveness.

The dangerous denizens of the forest had quitted their lurking places, and crushed the dead wood, as they eagerly came on, amid a deafening current of catlike howls. The monk had not an instant to lose, if he did not wish to be attacked on all sides at once by the wild beasts, whom a lengthened fast rendered more terrible still.

After taking a searching glance around him in order to assure himself that no pressing danger threatened him, the monk devotedly crossed himself, fervently recommended himself to Heaven with a sincerity he had probably never evinced before, and then, suddenly making up his mind, began resolutely climbing up the pile of wood. After several unsuccessful attempts, he at last reached the top of this fictitious mount.

He then stopped for a minute to draw breath; indeed, thanks to his ingenious ideas, Fray Antonio was now nearly ten feet from the ground. It is true that any animal could easily have overthrown this obstacle; but for all that, this beginning of success revived the monk's courage, the more so because, on raising his eyes he saw a few paces above him, the blessed branch toward which he had so long extended his arms in vain.

"Come!" he said, hopefully.

He embraced the tree once more, and recommenced his fatiguing clambering. Either through skill or accident Fray Antonio at length managed to seize the branch with both hands, and clung to it with all his strength. The rest was as nothing. The monk assembled by a supreme effort all the vigour his previous attempts had left him, and raising himself by his arms, tried to get astride on the branch. Owing to his energetic perseverances, he had raised his head and shoulders above the branch, when all at once he felt a hand or a claw fasten round his right leg, and squeeze it as in a vice. A shudder of terror ran over the monk's body: his blood stood still in his veins; an icy perspiration beaded on his temples, and his teeth chattered fit to break.

"Mercy!" he exclaimed in a choking voice, "I am dead. Holy virgin, have pity on me."

His strength, paralyzed by terror, deserted him, his hands let loose the protecting branch, and he fell in a lump at the foot of the tree. Fortunately for Fray Antonio, the care he had taken in piling up the dead wood to a considerable extent broke his fall, otherwise it would probably have been mortal: but the shock he experienced was so great that he completely lost his senses. The monk's fainting fit

was long: when he returned to life and opened his eyes again, he took a frightened glance around, and fancied he must be suffering from a horrible nightmare.

He had not stirred from the spot, so to speak: he still found himself by the tree, which he had tried so long to climb up in vain, but he was lying close to an enormous fire, over which half a deer was roasting, and around him were some twenty Indians, crouching on their heels, silently smoking their pipes, while their horses, picketed a few yards off, and ready to mount, were eating their provender.

Fray Antonio had seen Indians several times before, and had stood on such intimate terms, indeed, with them, as to be able to recognize them. His new friends were clothed in their war garb, and from their hair drawn off their foreheads, and their long barbed lances, it was easy to recognize them as Apaches.

The monk's blood ran cold, for the Apaches are notorious for their cruelty and roguery. Poor Fray Antonio had fallen from Charybdis into Scylla; he had only escaped from the jaws of the wild beasts in order to be in all probability martyred by the Redskins. It was a sad prospect which furnished the unlucky monk with ample material for thoughts, each more gloomy than the other, for he had often listened with a shudder to the hunters' stories about the atrocious tortures the Apaches take a delight in inflicting on their prisoners with unexampled barbarity.

Still, the Indians went on smoking silently, and did not appear to perceive that their captive had regained his senses. For his part, the monk hermetically closed his eyes, and anxiously preserved the most perfect tranquillity, in order to leave his dangerous companions, so long as he could, in ignorance of the state in which he was.

At length the Indians left off smoking, and after shaking the ash out of their calumets, passed them again through their girdle; a Redskin removed from the fire the half deer which was perfectly roasted, laid it in abanijo leaves in front of his comrades, and each drawing his scalping knife, prepared for a vigorous attack on the venison, which exhaled an appetizing odour, especially for the nostrils of a man who, during the whole past day, had been condemned to an absolute fast.

At this moment the monk felt a heavy hand laid on his chest, while a voice said to him with a guttural accent, which, however, had nothing menacing about it.

"The father of prayer can open his eyes now, for the venison is smoking, and his share is cut off."

The monk, perceiving that his stratagem was discovered, and excited by the smell of the meat, having made up his mind, opened his eyes, and sat up.

"Och!" the man who had before spoken said, "My father can eat; he must be hungry, and has slept enough."

The monk attempted to smile, but only made a frightful grimace, so alarmed did he feel. As however, he was really hungry as a wolf, he followed the example offered him by the Indians, who had already commenced their meal, and set to work eating the lump of venison which they had the politeness to set before him. The meal did not take long; still it lasted long enough to restore a little courage to the monk, and make him regard his position from a less gloomy side than he had hitherto done.

In truth, the behaviour of the Apaches toward him had nothing hostile about it; on the contrary, they were most attentive in serving him with what he needed, giving him more food so soon as they perceived that he had nothing before him: they had even carried their politeness so far as to give him a few mouthfuls of spirit, an extremely precious liquid, of which they are most greedy, even for their own use, owing to the difficulty they experience in obtaining it.

When he had ended his meal, the monk, who was almost fully reassured as to the amicable temper of his new friends, on seeing them light their pipes, took from his pocket tobacco and an Indian corn leaf, and after rolling a *pajillo* with the skill which the men of Spanish race possess, he conscientiously enjoyed the bluish smoke of his excellent Havana tobacco, *costa abajo*.

A considerable space of time elapsed thus, and not a syllable was exchanged among them. By degrees the ranks of the Redskins thinned: one after the other, at short intervals, rolled themselves

in their blankets, lay down with their feet to the fire, and went to sleep almost immediately. Fray Antonio, crushed by the poignant emotions of the day, and the enormous fatigue he had experienced, would gladly have imitated the Indians, had he dared, for he felt his eyes close involuntarily, and found immense difficulty in contending against the sleep that overpowered him. At last the Indian who hitherto had alone spoken, perceiving his state of somnolency, took pity on him. He rose, fetched a horsecloth, and brought it to the monk.

"My father will wrap himself in this fressada,²" he said, employing the bad Spanish in which he had hitherto spoken; "the nights are cold, and my father needs sleep greatly, he will, therefore, feel warmed with this. Tomorrow, a Chief will smoke the calumet with my father in council. Blue-fox desires to have a serious conversation with the father of prayer of the Palefaces."

Fray Antonio gratefully accepted the horsecloth so graciously offered by the Chief, and without attempting to prolong the conversation, he wrapped himself up carefully, and lay down by the fire so as to absorb the largest amount of caloric possible. Still the Indian's words did not fail to cause the monk a certain degree of anxiety.

"Hum!" he muttered to himself, "That is the reverse of the medal. What can this Pagan have to say to me? He does not mean to ask me to christen him, I suppose? especially as his name appears to be Blue-fox, a nice savage name, that. Well, heaven will not abandon me, and it will be day tomorrow. So now for a snooze."

And with this consolatory reflection the monk closed his eyes: two minutes later he slept as if never going to wake again.

Blue-fox, for it was really into the hands of that Chief the monk had so unexpectedly fallen, remained crouched over the fire the whole night, plunged in gloomy thought, and watching, alone of his comrades, over the common safety: at times, his eyes were fixed with a strange expression on the monk who was fast asleep, and far from suspecting that the Apache Chief was so obstinately engaged with him.

At sunrise Blue-fox was still awake: he had remained the whole night without once changing his position, and sleep had not once weighed down his eyelids.

² "frazada."

CHAPTER II

INDIAN DIPLOMACY

The night passed calm and peaceful. At the moment when the sun appeared on the horizon, saluted by the deafening concert of the birds, hidden beneath the foliage, Blue-fox, who had hitherto remained motionless, extended his right arm in the direction of the monk, who was lying by his side, and gently touched him with his hand. This touch, slight as it was, sufficed, however, to arouse Fray Antonio.

There are moments in life when, although the body reposes, the mind retains all its delicate perceptions and vigilance; the monk was in a similar situation. The gentleness the Apaches displayed towards him on the previous night was so extraordinary, and opposed to their usual habit of treating white men, their inveterate foes, that the monk, despite the coolness which formed the basis of his character, understood that the strange conduct of the men into whose power he had fallen must result from very powerful motives, and that, in spite of the pretended friendship they showed him, he would do well to keep on his guard, in order to be able to make head against the storm, from whatever quarter it might come.

In consequence of this reasoning, while taking advantage of the friendly feeling of the Indians, he craftily watched their movements, only yielded to sleep with great circumspection, and then slept with one eye open, to employ the vulgar expression. Hence at the first signal he was ready to respond to the Indian's summons with a vivacity that brought an equivocal smile upon the latter's stern features. The Redskins are physiognomists by nature; and, in spite of the tranquillity the monk affected, Blue-fox had, from certain signs that never deceive, guessed the secret alarm that internally devoured him.

"Has my brother slept well?" the Indian asked in his hoarse voice; "The Wacondah loves him, has watched over his sleep, and kept Nyang, the genius of evil, away from his dreams."

"I have, indeed, slept well, Chief, and I thank you for the cordial hospitality you have been pleased to grant me."

A smile played round the Indian's lips, as he continued: —

"My father is one of the Chiefs of prayer of his nation, the God of the Palefaces is powerful, He protects those who devote themselves to His service."

As this remark required no answer, the monk contented himself by bowing in the affirmative. Still, his anxiety increased; beneath the Chiefs gentle words he fancied he could hear the hoarse voice of the tiger, which licks its lips ere devouring the booty it holds gasping in its terrible claws.

Fray Antonio had not even the resource of pretending not to understand the dangerous speaker, for the Chief expressed himself in bad Spanish, a language all the Indian tribes understand, and which, despite their repugnance to use it, they still employ in their dealings with the white men.

The morning was magnificent; the trees, with their dew-laden leaves, seemed greener than usual; a slight mist, impregnated with the soft matutinal odours, rose from the ground, and was sucked up by the sunbeams, which with each moment grew warmer. The whole camp was still sunk in sleep; the Chief and the monk were alone awake. After a moment's silence, Blue-fox continued: —

"My father will listen," he said; "a Chief is about to speak; Blue-fox is a Sachem, his tongue is not forked, the words his chest breathes are inspired by the Great Spirit."

"I am listening," Fray Antonio replied.

"Blue-fox is not an Apache, although he wears their costumes, and leads one of their most powerful tribes on the war trail; Blue-fox is a Snake Pawnee, his nation is as numerous as the grains of sand on the borders of the great lake. Many moons ago, Blue-fox left the hunting grounds of his nation, never to return to them, and became an adopted son of the Apaches; why did Blue-fox act thus?"

The Chief interrupted himself. The monk was on the point of answering that he did not know the fact, and cared very little about learning it, but a moment's reflection made him understand the danger of such an answer to a man so irritable as the one he was now talking with.

"The brothers of the Chief were ungrateful to him," he replied with feigned interest, "and the Sachem left them; after shaking off his moccasins at the entrance of their village."

The Chief shook his head in negation.

"No," he answered, "the brothers of Blue-fox loved him, they still weep for his absence; but the Chief was sad, a friend had abandoned him, and took away his heart."

"Ah!" said the monk, not at all understanding.

"Yes," the Indian continued; "Blue-fox could not endure the absence of his friend, and left his brothers to go in search of him."

"Of course you have found the person again, Chief, to whom you devoted yourself?"

"For a long time Blue-fox sought, but did not succeed in obtaining any news of him; but one day he at length saw him again."

"Good, and now you are re-united?"

"My father does not understand," the Indian answered drily.

This was perfectly correct. The monk did not understand a syllable of what it pleased the Chief to tell him – the more so, as this obscure narrative interested him but very slightly; and while the Apache was speaking, he was cudgelling his brains to discover the motives for this confidence. The consequence was that most of the words uttered by the Chief struck his ear, but only produced an empty sound, whose meaning did not reach his mind; but the peremptory accent with which Blue-fox uttered the last sentence, aroused him, and while recalling him to a feeling of his present position, made him comprehend the danger of not seeming to take an interest in the conversation.

"Pardon me, Chief," he eagerly answered; "on the contrary, I perfectly understand; but I am subject to a certain absence of mind completely independent of my will, which I hope you will not feel offended at, for I assure you it is no fault of mine."

"Good, my father is like all the Chiefs of Prayer of the Palefaces, his thoughts are constantly directed to the Wacondah."

"So it is, Chief," the monk exclaimed, delighted at the way in which his apology was accepted; "continue your narrative, I beg, for I am now most anxious to listen to it."

"Wah! My father constantly traverses the prairies of the Palefaces."

"Yes, for the duties of my office oblige me to – "

Blue-fox quickly interrupted him.

"My father knows the pale hunters of these prairies?"

"Nearly all."

"Very good; one of these hunters is the friend so deeply regretted by Blue-fox."

"Who is he?" the monk asked.

The Indian did not seem to hear the question, for he went on —

"Very often the Redskin warrior has been led a short distance from his friend by the incidents of the chase, but never near enough to make himself known."

"That is unfortunate."

"The Chief would like to see his friend, and smoke the calumet of peace with him at the council fire, while conversing about old times, and the period when, as children of the same tribe, they traversed together the hunting grounds of the Sachem's terrible nation."

"Then the hunter is an Indian?"

"No, he is a Paleface; but if his skin is white, the Great Spirit has placed an Indian heart in his bosom."

"But why does not the Chief frankly go and join his friend, if he knows where he is? He would be probably delighted to see him again."

At this insinuation, which he was far from anticipating, the Chief frowned, and a cloud momentarily crossed his face; but the monk was too little of an observer to remark this emotion: he had asked the question, as he would have done any other, unmeaningly, and simply to show the Chief by replying that he was an attentive listener. After a few seconds, the Indian reassumed that apathy which the Redskins rarely put off, and only when taken by surprise, and continued —

"Blue-fox does not go to meet his friend, because the latter is not alone, and has with him enemies of your Chief."

"That is different, and I can understand your prudence."

"Good," the Indian added, with a sardonic smile, "wisdom speaks by the mouth of my rather; he is certainly a Chief of prayer, and his lips distil the purest honey."

Fray Antonio drew himself up, and his alarm was beginning to be dissipated; he saw vaguely that the Redskin wished to ask something of him – in short, that he wanted his help. This thought restored his courage, and he tried to complete the effect he fancied he had produced on his Machiavellian questioner.

"What my brother is unable to do, I can undertake," he said, in an insinuating voice.

The Apache gave him a piercing glance.

"Wah!" he replied, "Then my father knows where to find the Chiefs friend?"

"How should I know it?" the monk objected; "You have not told me his name yet."

"That is true; my father is good, he will forgive me. So he does not yet know who the Pale hunter is?"

"I know him, perhaps, but up to the present I am ignorant whom the Chief alludes to."

"Blue-fox is rich; he has numerous horses; he can assemble round his totem one hundred warriors, and ten times, twenty times more. If my father is willing to serve the Sachem, he will find him grateful."

"I ask nothing better than to be agreeable to you. Chief, if it lies in my power; but you must explain: clearly what I have to do, in order that I may make no mistake."

"Good; the Sachem will explain everything to his father."

"In that way, nothing will be easier."

"Does my father believe so?"

"Well, I do not see what can prevent it."

"Then my father will listen. Among all the Pale hunters, whose moccasins trample the prairie grass in all directions, there is one who is braver and more terrible than the rest; the tigers and jaguars fly at his approach, and the Indian warriors themselves are afraid to cope with him. This hunter is no effeminate Yori; the blood of the Gachupinos does not flow in his veins; he is the son of a colder land, and his ancestors fought for a lengthened period with the Long Knives of the East."

"Good," the monk said; "from what the Chief tells me, I see that this man is a Canadian."

"That is the name given, I think, to the nation of my friend."

"But among all the hunters I am acquainted with, there is only one who is a Canadian."

"Wah!" said the Chief, "Only one?"

"Yes; his name is Tranquil, I think, and he is attached to the Larch-tree hacienda."

"Wah! That is the very man. Does my father know him?"

"Not much, I confess, but still sufficiently to present myself to him."

"Very good."

"Still, I warn you, Chief, that this man, like all his fellows, leads an extremely vagabond life, being here today and gone tomorrow; so that I am in great doubt as to where I should seek him."

"Wah! my father need not trouble himself about that; the Sachem will lead him to the camp of the Tiger killer."

"In that case, very good; I will undertake the rest."

"My father must carefully retain in his heart the words of Blue-fox. The warriors are awaking; they must know nothing. When the hour arrives, the Chief will tell my father what he wants of him."

"As you please, Chief."

The conversation broke off here. The warriors were really awaking, and the camp, so quiet a few moments previously, had now the aspect of a hive, when the bees prepare at sunrise to go in search of their daily crop. At a sign from the Chief, the hachesto, or public crier, mounted a fallen tree, and twice uttered a shrill cry. At this appeal all the warriors, even those still lying on the ground, hastened to range themselves behind the Chief. A deep silence then prevailed for several minutes; all the Indians, with their arms folded on their chest, and their faces turned to the rising sun, awaited what the Sachem was about to do.

The latter took a calabash full of water, which the hachesto handed him, and in which was a spray of wormwood. Then raising his voice, he sprinkled toward the four cardinal points, saying —

"Wacondah, Wacondah! Thou unknown and omnipotent spirit, whose universe is the temple, Master of the life of man, protect thy children!"

"Master of the life of man, protect thy children!" the Apaches repeated in chorus, respectfully bowing.

"Creator of the great sacred Tortoise, whose skill supports the world, keep far from us Nyang, the genius of evil! Deliver our enemies to us, and give us their scalps. Wacondah! Wacondah! Protect thy children!"

"Wacondah! Wacondah! Protect thy children!" the warriors repeated.

The Sachem then bowed to the sun, and then towards the contents of the calabash, saying —

"And thou, sublime star, visible representative of the omnipotent and invincible Creator, continue to pour thy vivifying heat on the hunting grounds of thy Red Sons, and intercede for them with the Master of life. May this clear water I offer thee be grateful. Wacondah! Wacondah! Protect thy children!"

"Wacondah! Wacondah! Protect thy children!" the Apaches repeated, and followed their Chief's example by kneeling reverently. The latter then took a medicine rod from the hachesto, and waved it several times over his head, while shouting in a loud voice —

"Nyang, spirit of evil, rebel against the Master of life; we brave and despise thy power, for the Wacondah protects us!"

All the congregation uttered a loud yell, and rose. When the morning prayer had been said, and the rites performed, each man began attending to his daily duties.

Fray Antonio had witnessed with extreme astonishment this sacred and affecting ceremony, whose details, however, escaped his notice, for the words uttered by the Chief had been in the dialect of his nation, and consequently incomprehensible to the monk. Still, he experienced a certain delight on seeing that these men, whom he regarded as barbarians, were not entirely devoid of better feelings, and religious faith.

The expiring campfires were rekindled, in order to prepare the morning meal, while scouts started in every direction, to assure themselves that the road was free, and no enemy on the watch. The monk, being now completely reassured, and beginning to grow accustomed to his new position, ate with good appetite the provisions offered him, and made no objection to mount the horse the Chief indicated to him, when they prepared to set out on the termination of the meal.

Fray Antonio was beginning to find that the savages, who had been represented to him in such gloomy colours, were not so wicked as they were said to be, and he was almost inclined to believe that they had been calumniated. In truth, their hospitality had never once been in default; on the contrary, they had apparently studied to please him.

They rode on for several hours along tracks marked by the wild beasts, forced, through the narrowness of the paths, to go in Indian file, that is to say, one behind the other; and although the

monk perceived that the Sachem constantly kept by his side, he did not feel at all alarmed by it, remembering the conversation they had in the morning.

A little before midday the band halted on the bank of a small stream, shadowed by lofty trees, where they intended to wait till the great heat had passed over. The monk was not at all vexed at this delay, which enabled him to rest in the cool. During the halt Blue-fox did not once address him, and the monk made no attempt to bring on a conversation, as he much preferred enjoying a siesta.

At about four P.M. the band mounted, and set out again; but this time, instead of going at a walking pace, they galloped. The Indians, by the way, only recognize these two paces; they consider trotting an absurdity, and we confess that we are somewhat of their opinion. The ride was long; the sun had set for more than two hours, and still the Indians galloped. At length, at a signal from their Chief, they halted. Blue-fox then went up to the monk, and drew him a little aside.

"We shall separate here," he said; "it would not be prudent for the Apaches to go further: my father will continue his journey alone."

"I?" the monk said, in surprise; "You are jesting, Chief – I prefer remaining with you."

"That cannot be," the Indian said, in a peremptory voice.

"Where the deuce would you have me go at this hour, and in this darkness?"

"My father will look," the Chief continued, stretching out his arm to the south-west, "does he see that reddish light scarce rising above the horizon?"

Fray Antonio looked attentively in the direction indicated. "Yes," he said, presently, "I do see it."

"Very good; that flame is produced by a campfire of the Palefaces."

"Oh, oh! are you sure of that?"

"Yes; but my father must listen; the Palefaces will receive my father kindly."

"I understand; then I will tell Tranquil that his friend Blue-fox desires to speak with him, point out where he is, and –"

"The magpie is a chattering and brainless bird, which gabbles like an old squaw," the Chief roughly interrupted him; "my father will say nothing."

"Oh!" the monk said, in confusion.

"My father will be careful to do what I order him, if he does not wish his scalp to dry on the lance of a Chief."

Fray Antonio shuddered at this menace.

"I swear it, Chief," he said.

"A man does not swear," the Chief remarked, brutally; "he says yes or no. When my father reaches the camp of the Palefaces, he will not allude to the Apaches; but when the Pale hunters are asleep, my father will leave the camp and come to warn Blue-fox."

"But where shall I find you?" the monk asked, piteously, beginning to perceive that he was destined to act as the spy of the savages in one of their diabolical machinations.

"My father need not trouble himself about that, for I shall manage to find him."

"Very good."

"If my father is faithful, Blue-fox will give him a buffalo skin full of gold dust; if not, he must not hope to escape the Chief; the Apaches are crafty, the scalp of a Chief of prayer will adorn the lance of a Chief; I have spoken."

"You have no further orders to give me?"

"No."

"Good-bye, then."

"Till we meet again," the Apache said, with a grin.

Fray Antonio made no reply, but uttered a deep sigh, and pushed on in the direction of the camp. The nearer he drew to it, the more difficult did it appear to him to accomplish the sinister mission with which the Apache Chief had intrusted him; twice or thrice the idea of flight crossed his

mind, but whither could he go? And then it was probable that the Indians placed but slight confidence in him, and carefully watched him in the gloom.

At length the camp appeared before the monk's startled eyes, as he could not draw back, for the hunters had doubtless perceived him already; he decided on pushing forward, while desperately muttering —

"The Lord have mercy upon me!"

CHAPTER III. DOWN THE PRECIPICE

The romancer has an incontestable advantage over the historian. Not being obliged to restrict himself to historical documents, he bases his work chiefly on tradition, and revels in those incidents of private life disdained by cold and severe history, which is constrained to describe only great events, and is not permitted to descend to the frequently trivial causes which not only prepared, but actually brought them about.

Frequently, after a long journey, the traveller, fatigued by the vast horizons incessantly unrolled before him, and rendered giddy by the sharp air of the elevations along which he has been riding, looks down on the plain, and his eye rests with indescribable pleasure on those modest points in the landscape which at the outset he despised. In the same way the romancer halts at the familiar episodes of the great poem, and listens to the simple stories told him by those who were actors in the scenes merely indicated by history. Such stories complete the dry and stern narrative of great wars, but historians dare not transcribe them.

It is true that in these stories ignorance is nearly always perceptible, and prejudice very frequently; but life is found in them, for if the narrators tell inexactly what happened, they at any rate say frankly how they felt, what they heard and saw themselves, and the errors they sometimes involuntarily make are not falsehoods, but relative truths, which it is the duty of the romancer to classify and put in their proper place.

We have several times visited the narrow defile where the Border Rifles and the Mexicans fought the action we described in a previous volume.³ Bending over the precipice, with our eyes fixed on the yawning abyss beneath us, we heard the narrative of the strange incidents of that battle of giants, and if we had not been certain of the veracity of the narrator, we should certainly have not only doubted but completely denied the possibility of certain facts which are, however, rigorously true, and which we are now about to impart to the reader.

The Border Rifles saw with a shriek of horror the two men, intertwined like serpents, roll together over the precipice; the flashes of the fire, which was beginning to die out for want of nourishment, after devastating the crests of the hills, threw at intervals a lurid light over this scene, and gave it a striking aspect.

The first moment of stupor past, John Davis, mastering with difficulty the emotion that agitated him, sought to restore courage, if not hope, to all these men who were crushed by the terrible catastrophe. John Davis enjoyed, and justly so, a great reputation among the Borderers. All know the close friendship which attached the Americans to their chief: in several serious affairs he had displayed a coolness and intelligence which gained him the respect and admiration of these men: hence they immediately responded to his appeal, by grouping silently round him, for they understood intuitively that there was only one man among them worthy of succeeding the Jaguar, and that he was the North American.

John Davis had guessed the feelings that agitated them, but did not allow it to be seen: his face was pale, his appearance sad: he bent a thoughtful glance on the rude, determined men who, leaning on their rifles, gazed at him mournfully, and seemed already tacitly to recognize the authority with which he was, probably, about to invest himself.

Their expectations were deceived, at least, temporarily. Davis, at this moment, had no intention of making the Borderers elect him as their chief: the fate of his friend entirely absorbed him, and all other considerations disappeared in the presence of the one idea.

³ See Border Rifles, same Publishers.

"Caballeros," he said, in a melancholy tone, "a terrible misfortune has struck us. Under such circumstances, we must summon up all our courage and resignation, for women weep, but men revenge themselves. The death of the Jaguar is not only an immense loss for ourselves, but also for the cause we have sworn to defend, and to which he has already given such great proof of devotion. But, before bewailing our chief, so worthy in every respect of the sorrow which we shall feel for him, we have one duty to accomplish – a duty which, if we neglect it, will cause us piercing remorse at a later date."

"Speak, speak, John Davis, we are ready to do anything you order us," the Borderers exclaimed unanimously.

"I thank you," the American continued, "for the enthusiasm with which you have replied to me: I cannot believe that an intellect so vast, a heart so noble, as that of our beloved Chief can be thus destroyed. God, I feel convinced, would not thus have broken a cause for which we have so long been struggling with such devotion and self-denial. Heaven will have performed a miracle in favour of our Chief, and we shall see him reappear among us safe and sound! But whatsoever may happen, should this last hope be denied us, at any rate, we must not abandon like cowards, without attempting to save him, the man who twenty times braved death for each of us. For my part, I swear by all that is most sacred in the world, that I will not leave this spot till I have assured myself whether the Jaguar be dead or alive."

At these words a buzz of assent ran along his hearers, and John Davis continued, "Who knows whether our unhappy Chief is not lying crushed, but still breathing, at the foot of this accursed abyss, and reproaching us for our cowardly desertion of him?"

The Border Rifles declared, with the most energetic oaths, that they would find their Chief again, dead or alive.

"Good, my friends," the American exclaimed; "if he be unhappily dead, we will place his body in the ground and protect his remains, so dear to us on many accounts, from the insults of wild beasts: but, I repeat to you, one of those presentiments which never deceive, because they come from God, tells me that he is still alive."

"May Heaven hear you, John Davis," the Borderers shouted, "and restore us our Chief."

"I am going to descend the precipice," the American said; "I will inspect its most secret recesses, and before sunrise we shall know what we have to hope or fear."

This proposal of John Davis' was greeted as it deserved, by enthusiastic shouts. When the excitement of the hearers had slightly calmed, the American prepared to carry out his design.

"Permit me a remark," said an old wood ranger.

"Speak, Ruperto, what is it?" Davis answered.

"I have known the spot where we now are for a long time, and have often hunted deer and antelopes here."

"Come to facts, my friend."

"You can act as you please, John Davis, on the information I am about to give you; by turning to the right, after marching for about three miles, you get round the hills, and what appears to us from here a precipice, is, in fact, only a plain, very enclosed, I allow, but easy to traverse on horseback."

"Ah, ah," John said thoughtfully, "and what do you conclude from that, Ruperto?"

"That it would be, perhaps, better to mount and skirt the hills."

"Yes, yes, that is a good idea, and we will take advantage of it; take twenty men with you, Ruperto, and proceed at full speed to the plain you allude to, for we must not throw away any chance; the rest of the band will remain here to watch the environs, while I effect the descent of the barranca."

"You still adhere to your idea, then?"

"More than ever."

"As you please, John Davis, as you please, though you risk your bones on such a black night as this."

"I trust in Heaven, and I hope it will protect me."

"I hope so too for your sake; but I must be off – here's luck."

"Thanks, the same to you."

Red Ruperto then went off, followed by twenty borderers, who spontaneously offered to accompany him, and soon disappeared in the darkness. The descent John Davis was preparing to make, was anything but easy. The American was too experienced a wood ranger not to know, and hence took all proper precautions. He placed in his belt next his knife a wide and strong axe, and fastened round his waist a rope formed of several *reatas*. Three men seized the end of the rope, which they turned round the stem of a tree, so as to let it out without a shock, whenever the American desired it. As a final precaution, he lit a branch of ocote wood, which was to serve as his guide during his perilous descent, for the sky was perfectly black, which rendered the gloom so thick that it was impossible to see anything two paces away. His last measures taken with the coolness that distinguishes men of his race, the North American pressed the hands held out to him, tried once again to restore hope to his comrades by a few hearty words, and kneeling on the brink of the abyss, began slowly descending.

John Davis was a man of tried courage, his life had been one continued struggle, in which he had only triumphed through his strength of will and energy; still, when he began descending into the barranca, he felt chilled to the heart, and could not repress a slight start of terror, which ran over all his limbs like an electric flash. Still, he fought against this emotion, which is nothing but that instinct of self-preservation which duty has placed in the heart of every man, the bravest as the most cowardly, and continued his descent.

Although he was fastened round the waist, it was no easy task to go down this almost perpendicular wall, to which he was compelled to cling like a reptile, clutching at every tuft of grass or shrub he came across, or else he had been carried away by the wind, which blew furiously, and would have crushed him like a nutshell against the sides of the abyss.

The first minutes were the most terrible to the bold adventurer; the feet and hands must grow accustomed to the rude task imposed on them, and they only gradually learn to find, as it were instinctively, their resting places; and this remark, which may appear erroneous to certain persons, who, fortunately for themselves, have never been obliged to try the experiment, will be recognized as rigorously true by all travellers who have been compelled to ascend or descend mountains. After a few minutes, when the mind remains at liberty, the body assumes of its own accord the necessary equilibrium, the feet find secure resting places, and the hands settle unhesitatingly on the grass or roots which offer them the indispensable degree of resistance.

John Davis had hardly gone ten yards down, ere he found himself on a wide ledge covered with thick shrubs; hitherto the descent had been extremely rapid. Lighting himself by the torch, the American traversed in every direction this species of esplanade, which was about a dozen paces in circumference; and, on carefully examining the thick shrubs which covered it, the adventurer perceived that the tops had been broken as if they had received a tremendous blow.

Davis looked around him. He soon concluded that this enormous gap could only have been made by the fall of two bodies: this remark gave him good hope, for at so slight a distance from the mouth of the abyss, the two enemies must have been full of life; the rapidity of their fall must have naturally been arrested by the shrubs; they might have met at various distances similar obstacles, and consequently have undergone several comparatively harmless falls. This hypothesis, erroneous though it was, still might be true.

John Davis continued his descent; the slope became constantly less abrupt, and the adventurer met within his passage, not merely shrubs, but clumps of trees, grouped here and there. Still, as John Davis found no further traces, a fear fell upon him, and painfully contracted his heart; he was afraid lest the shrubs, through their elasticity, might have hurled the two unhappy men into space, instead of letting them follow the slope of the precipice. This thought so powerfully occupied the American's

mind, that a deep discouragement seized upon him, and for some moments he remained without strength or will, crouching sadly on the ground.

But Davis was a man of too stern a character, and endowed with such an energetic will, to give way for any length of time to despair: he soon raised his head, and looked boldly around him.

"I must go on," he said in a firm voice. But, at the moment when he prepared to continue his descent, he suddenly gave a start of surprise, and uttered a cry as he rushed quickly toward a black mass, to which he had hitherto paid but slight attention.

We once again ask our readers' pardon for the improbability of the following detail; but we repeat that we are not explaining, but narrating, confining ourselves to telling the truth, without pretending to discuss the greater or less possibility of facts, which, however extraordinary they may appear, are exactly true.

The white-headed eagle, the most powerful and the best provided of the birds, ordinarily builds its nest on the sides of barrancas, at the top of the loftiest trees, and chiefly those denuded of branches to a considerable height, but they are never found on rocks. This nest, strongly built, is composed of sticks from three to five feet in length, fastened together and covered with Spanish braid, a species of cryptogamic plant of the lichen family, wild grass, and large patches of turf. When the nest is completed, it ordinarily measures from six to seven feet in diameter, and at times the accumulation of materials there is so considerable – for the same nest is frequently occupied for a number of years, and receives augmentations each season – that its depth equals its diameter. As the nest of the white-headed eagle is very heavy, it is generally placed in the centre of a fork formed by the fortuitous meeting of several large branches.

John Davis, by the help of his torch, had just discovered a few yards from him, and almost on a level with the spot where he was standing, an eagle's nest, built on the top of an immense tree, whose trunk descended for a considerable depth in the precipice.

Two human bodies were lying stretched across this nest, and the American only required one glance to assure himself that they were those of the Jaguar and the Mexican Captain. They were perfectly motionless, and still fast locked in each other's arms.

It was not at all an easy undertaking to reach this nest, which was nearly ten yards from the sides of the precipice; but John Davis did not give in on that account; now that he had found the body of his Chief again, he was determined to learn, at all risks, whether he were alive or dead. But what means was he to employ to acquire this certainty? How reach the tree, which oscillated violently with every gust? After ripe reflection, the American recognized the fact that he could never climb the tree alone; he therefore placed his hands funnel-wise to his mouth, and gave the shout agreed on with his comrades. The latter drew up the reata, and after half an hour of unheard of fatigue, Davis found himself again among his comrades.

The Border Rifles crowded round him eagerly to ask the details of his expedition, which he hastened to give them, and which were received with shouts of joy by all. Then happened a thing which proves how great was the affection all these men bore their Chief; without exchanging a word, or coming to any agreement, all procured torches, and, as if obeying the same impulse, began descending the abyss.

Through the multiplicity of torches, which spread abroad sufficient light, and, before all, the skill of these men, accustomed since childhood to run about the forests, and clamber up rocks and precipices in sport, this descent was effected without any further misfortunes to deplore, and the whole band was soon assembled at the spot whence the American had first discovered the nest of the white-headed eagle.

All was in the same state as Davis left it: the two bodies were still motionless, and still intertwined. Were they dead, or only in a faint? Such was the question all persons asked themselves, and no one could answer it. All at once a loud noise was heard, and the bottom of the barranca was

illuminated by a number of torches. Ruperto's party had arrived. Guided by the flashes they saw running along the sides of the precipice, the latter soon discovered the nest, and the truth was revealed to them.

The arrival of Ruperto and his comrades was a great comfort to the Americans, for now nothing would be more easy than to reach the nest. Four powerful adventurers, armed with axes, glided along the side of the precipice to the foot of the tree, which they began felling with hurried strokes, while John Davis, and the men with him, threw their reatas round the top branches of the tree, and gradually drew it towards them. The tree began gracefully bending, and at length lay on the side of the barranca, without receiving any very serious shock.

John Davis immediately entered the nest, and drawing his knife from his belt, bent over the body of the Jaguar, and put the blade to the young man's lips. There was a moment of profound anxiety for these men; their silence was so complete, that the beating of their hearts might be heard. They stood with their eyes obstinately fixed on the American, daring scarcely to breathe, and, as it were, hanging on his lips. At length John rose, and placed the knife near a torch; the blade was slightly tarnished.

"He lives, brothers, he lives!" he shouted.

At these news the Border Rifles broke out into such a howl of joy and happiness, that the nightbirds, startled in their gloomy hiding places, rose on all sides, and began flying heavily backwards and forwards, while uttering discordant and deafening cries. But this was not all: the next point was to get the Jaguar out of the precipice, and let him down into the gorge. We have said that the two bodies were closely intertwined. The adventurers felt but slender sympathy for Captain Melendez, the primary cause of the catastrophe, which had so nearly proved fatal to the Jaguar; hence they were not at all eager to assure themselves whether he were dead or alive; and when the moment arrived to find means for conveying the body of their Chief into the barranca, a very serious and stormy discussion arose on the subject of the Mexican officer. The majority of the adventurers were of opinion that the easiest way of separating the two bodies was by cutting off the Captain's arms, and throwing his body into the abyss, to serve as food for wild beasts. Those who were more excited talked about stabbing him at once, so as to make quite sure that he did not recover. Some even had seized their knives and machetes to carry out this resolution, but John Davis suddenly interfered.

"Stop!" he shouted, eagerly, "the Jaguar lives; he is still your Chief, so leave him to treat this man as he thinks proper. Who knows whether the life of this officer may not be more valuable to us than his death?"

The adventurers were not easily induced to spare the Captain, and adhered for a while to their proposal of stabbing him, after cutting off his arms. Still, owing to the influence he enjoyed with the band, Davis succeeded in making them listen to reason, and they began arranging how to get the bodies down.

CHAPTER IV. TWO ENEMIES

In the great work of creation, God indubitably most profoundly set the seal of his omnipotence in the heart of forests. The ocean, despite its immense extent, offers sailors only a despairing monotony, or sudden upheavals, which fill the mind with a secret and invincible terror. The mountains which stud the globe, and elevate to immense heights their serrated peaks, covered with eternal snow, only inspire terror, and represent to the astonished eyes of the tourist a terrific maze of chaos and travailing nature.

But when you reach the verge of one of those splendid oases of verdure which are called virgin forests, you undergo involuntarily an impression of religious contemplation and gentle melancholy at the sight of these thousand arches of foliage, intertwined like the ceiling of an old Gothic church, in which the moss-clad trunks of centennial oaks represent the clustered columns, rising at one spot only a few feet from the ground, at others soaring to the skies.

Then, animated by the purer air, breathing with the full power of the lungs, attracted and fascinated by the mobile and infinite perspectives that open out on all sides – feeling the movement easier on the soft carpet of soil and dust accumulated by departed ages, the traveller's step grows freer, his glance more piercing, and his hand more firm, and he begins sighing for the hazardous and masculine life of the desert. The further he proceeds beneath these shifting shadows, while life is as noisy all around as a rising tide, the more does the freshness which circulates through the foliage purify the blood, and strengthen the limbs; and he comprehends more and more the irresistible attractions of the forest, and the religious love the wood rangers have for it.

Men habituated to a desert life are never willing to quit it again; for they understand all its voices, have sounded all its mysteries, and to them the forest is a world which they love much as the sailor does the sea. When a glowing sun enlivens the wild and picturesque landscape, when the glistening snow on the far-off peaks stands out like a silver ribbon above the masses of verdure, when the birds twitter among the leaves, the insects buzz on the grass, and the wild beasts in their unknown lairs, add their solemn sounds to the concert; – at such a moment all invites reverie and contemplation, and the wood rangers feel themselves the nearer to God, because they are the further from man.

These bold explorers of the desert are picked men, and powerfully built, kept constantly in movement, and forced each second into a contest with the obstacles that incessantly arise before them. No danger terrifies them, no difficulty arrests them; perils they brave, difficulties they surmount as if in sport; for, hurled by the divine will beyond the pale of common law, their existence is only a succession of strange incidents and feverish adventures, which cause them to live a century in a few moments.

The hesitation of the Border Rifles was short; for these half-savage men, an obstacle to be overcome could only prove a stimulus for their minds, so fertile in resources.

The two wounded men, securely fastened on cross pieces of wood by reatas, were let down in turn to the bottom of the precipice, and laid on the bank of a small stream, which ran noiselessly through this plain, forming the most capricious windings. John Davis, fearing some outbreak on the part of his angry comrades, himself undertook to let the Captain down, in order to be certain that no accident would happen to him.

When the wounded men had been removed from the eagle's nest, which had so miraculously saved them, the adventurers glided along the cliff with singular address and rapidity, and the whole band was soon collected on the bank of the stream. As is frequently the case in a mountainous country, the bottom of the barranca was a rather wide prairie, sheltered between two lofty hills, which enclosed

it on the right and left, thus forming a species of gorge, which, at the spot where the fight took place, was really a gulf of great depth.

John Davis, without losing a moment, lavished on the Jaguar all the attention his state demanded; while Ruperto, though much against the grain, did the same for the Mexican Captain, by the American's peremptory orders.

During the various events we have described, the whole night had slipped away, and the sun rose at the moment the adventurers completed their perilous descent. The country then resumed its real aspect, and what had appeared by the flickering light of the torches a desolate and arid desert, became a charming and smiling landscape.

The sun has enormous power over the human organisation: it not only dispels those sombre phantoms which are produced by the darkness, but also revives the mind and restores to the body its elasticity and vigour, which have been neutralised by the piercing cold of night. With day, hope and joy returned to the heart of the adventurers; a joy rendered more lively still by the sight of the cases hurled over the previous night by the Mexicans, and which, though crushed by their fall, had lost none of their precious contents. Hence, the heroic courage and devotion of the Mexicans had no other result than allowing them to die bravely at their posts, for their sacrifice had not obtained the anticipated result.

The prairie soon assumed a lively aspect, to which it certainly was not accustomed; the adventurers lit fires, erected jacals, and the camp was formed in a few minutes. For a very lengthened period Davis' efforts to bring his friend to life remained sterile; still, the Jaguar had received no wound; he did not seem to have a limb broken; his syncope resulted solely from the moral effect of his horrible fall.

For all that, the American, far from giving in, redoubled his care and attention, and at length, saw his efforts crowned with success. The Jaguar made a weak movement, his lips parted as if he were about to speak, he raised his hand to his brow, gave a deep sigh, and partly opened his eyes, but closed them instantly, probably dazzled by the brilliant sunlight.

"At length he is saved!" the American exclaimed, joyously.

The adventurers surrounded their Chief, anxiously watching his every movement. The young man soon opened his eyes again, and, helped by Davis, managed to sit up. A slight patch of red was visible on his cheekbones, but the rest of his face retained an ashen and cadaverous hue. He looked slowly round him, and the absent expression of his glance gradually changed into a gleam of intelligence. "Drink!" he muttered in a hollow and inarticulate voice.

John Davis uncorked his flask, bent over the wounded man, and placed it to his lips. The latter drank eagerly for two or three minutes, and then stopped with a sigh of relief.

"I fancied I was dead," he said.

"By Heaven!" John Davis remarked, "It was a close shave."

"Is Captain Melendez still alive?"

"Yes."

"What state is he in?"

"No worse than your own."

"All the better."

"Shall we hang him?" Ruperto remarked, still adhering to his notion.

The Jaguar started, frowned, and then shouted with greater strength than he might be supposed to possess —

"On your life, not a hair of his head must fall; you answer for him to me body for body."

And he added in a low voice, unintelligible by the hearers, "I swore it —"

"'Tis a pity," Ruperto went on. "I am certain that hanging a Mexican Captain would have produced an excellent effect through the country."

The Jaguar made a sign.

"All right, all right," the adventurer continued; "if it is not pleasant to you, we will say no more about it. No matter, that is a funny notion of yours."

"Enough," the young man said; "I have given my orders."

So soon as he was alone. Captain Melendez let his head fall on his hands, and tried to re-establish the balance in his mind and arrange his ideas, which the shock he had received had utterly disordered. Still he gradually yielded to a species of lethargy, the natural result of his fall, and soon fell into a deep sleep.

He slept peacefully for several hours, nothing happening to disturb his repose; and when he awoke he found himself quite a new man; the restorative sleep he had enjoyed had completely rested his nervous system, his strength had returned, and it was with an indescribable feeling of joy that he rose and walked a few steps on the prairie. With calmness of mind courage returned, and he was ready to recommence the contest. He noticed, too, with a certain degree of pleasure, that the adventurers left him at perfect liberty, and did not appear to pay any attention to him.

Ruperto returned, but this time he had put off his mocking air, and carried some provisions in a basket. The adventurer offered them to the Captain with rough politeness, in which, however, the desire to be agreeable was perceptible. The Captain readily accepted the food, and ate with an appetite that surprised himself after so serious a fall.

"Well," Ruperto remarked, "did I not tell you that you would be soon cured? It is just the same with the Captain – he is as fresh as a floripondio, and was never better in his life."

"Tell me, my friend," Don Juan answered, "may I be allowed to speak with the Chief?"

"Very easily – the more so, as it seems that he has something to say to you."

"Indeed."

"Yes, and he even ordered me to ask you if you would allow him an interview after dinner."

"Most heartily; I am entirely at his orders; especially," the Captain added, with a smile, "since I am his prisoner."

"That is true; well, eat quietly, and while you are doing so I will convey your message."

Hereupon Ruperto left the Captain, who did not require the invitation to be repeated, but vigorously attacked the provisions placed before him. His meal was soon over, and he had been walking up and down for some time, when he saw the Jaguar approach. The two men bowed ceremoniously, and examined each other for some moments with the greatest attention.

Up to this moment they had hardly seen one another; their interview of the previous evening had taken place in the darkness, and then fought obstinately; but they had found no time to form mutual opinions as they now did with the infallible glance of men who are accustomed to judge in a second, persons with whom they have dealings. The Jaguar was the first to break the silence.

"You will excuse, Caballero," he said, "the rusticity of my reception: banished men have no other palace save the dome of the forests that shelter them."

The Captain bowed.

"I was far from expecting," he said, "so much courtesy from –"

He stopped, not daring to utter the word that rose to his lips, through fear of offending the other.

"From bandits, I suppose, Captain?" the Jaguar replied, with a smile. "Oh, no denial, I know what we are called at Mexico. Yes, Caballero, at the present day we are outlaws, border ruffians, freebooters; tomorrow, perhaps, we shall be heroes and saviours of a people; but so the world goes; but let us leave that. You wished to speak to me, I heard."

"Did you not also evince a desire, Caballero, to have an interview with me?"

"I did, Captain; I have only one question to ask you, though – will you promise me to answer it?"

"On my honour, if it be possible."

The Jaguar reflected for a moment, and then continued —

"You hate me, I suppose?"

"What makes you imagine that?"

"How do I know?" the Jaguar replied, with embarrassment; "a thousand reasons, as, for instance, the obstinacy with which you sought to take my life a few hours ago."

The Captain drew himself up, and his face assumed a stern expression which it had not worn hitherto.

"I pledge you my word to be frank with you, Caballero," he said.

"I thank you beforehand."

"Between yourself and me, personally, no hatred can exist – at any rate, not on my side; I do not know you, I only saw you yesterday for the first time; never, to my cognizance, have you come across my path before, hence I have no reason to hate you. But beside the man there is the soldier; as an officer in the Mexican army – "

"Enough, Captain," the young man sharply interrupted him; "you have told me all I desired to know; political hatreds, however terrible they may be, are not eternal. You do your duty as I believe I do mine – that is to say, as well as you possibly can, and to that I have no objection. Unfortunately, instead of fighting side by side, we are in opposite camps; fatality decrees it so; perhaps, some day these unhappy dissensions will cease, and then, who knows whether we may not be friends?"

"We are so already, Caballero," the Captain said, warmly, as he held out his hand to the Jaguar.

The latter pressed it vigorously.

"Let us each follow the road traced for us," he said; "but if we defend a different cause, let us maintain, when the contest is raging, that esteem and friendship which two loyal enemies ought to feel, who have measured their swords and found them of equal length."

"Agreed," said the Captain.

"One word more," the Jaguar continued. "I must respond to your frankness by equal frankness."

"Speak."

"I presume that the question I asked surprised you?"

"I confess it."

"Well, I will tell you why I asked it."

"What good will that do?"

"I must; between us two henceforth there must be nothing hidden. In spite of the hatred I ought to feel for you, I feel myself attracted to you by a secret sympathy, which I cannot explain, but which urges me to reveal to you a secret on which the happiness of my life depends."

"I do not understand you, Caballero; the language seems strange to me. Explain yourself, in Heaven's name."

A feverish flush suddenly covered the Jaguar's face.

"Listen, Captain, if you only know me today for the first time, your name has been ringing in my ears for many months past."

The officer fixed an inquiring glance on the young man.

"Yes, yes," the latter continued, with increasing animation, "she ever has your name on her lips – she only speaks of you. Only a few days back – but why recall that? Suffice it for you to know that I love her to distraction."

"Carmela?" the Captain muttered.

"Yes," the Jaguar exclaimed, "you love her too!"

"I do," the Captain replied, simply, as he looked on the ground with an air of embarrassment.

There was a lengthened silence between the two men. It was easy to discover that each of them was having an internal fight; at length the Jaguar managed to quell the storm that growled in his heart, and went on, in a firm voice —

"Thanks for your loyal answer, Captain; in loving Carmela you take advantage of your good right, just as I do; let this love, instead of separating, form a stronger link between us. Carmela is worthy of the love of an honourable man; let us each love her, and carry on an open warfare, without

treachery or trickery; all the better for the man she may prefer. She alone must be judge between us; let her follow her heart, for she is too pure and good to deceive herself and make a bad choice."

"Good!" the Captain exclaimed, enthusiastically; "You are a man after my own heart, Jaguar, and whatever may happen, I shall always think with gladness that I have pressed your honest hand, and am worthy of being counted among your friends. Yes, I have a deep and sincere love for Carmela; for a smile from her rosy lips I would joyfully lay down my life; but I swear that I will follow the noble example you give me, and the struggle shall be as honourable on my side as on yours."

"Viva Cristo!" the young man said with frank and simple delight, "I was sure we should end by coming to an understanding."

"To produce that," the Captain remarked, with a smile, "we only needed the opportunity for an explanation."

"Canarios, I trust that it will not be repeated under similar conditions, for it is a perfect miracle that we are still alive."

"I am not at all anxious to repeat the experiment."

"Nor I either, I swear to you. But the sun is rapidly declining on the horizon: I need not tell you that you are free, and at liberty to go wherever you please, if it is not your intention to remain any length of time with us: I have had a horse got ready which you will permit me to offer you."

"I gladly accept it: I do not wish to have any false pride with you, and afoot in these regions, which are quite strange to me, I should feel greatly embarrassed."

"That need not trouble you, for I will give you a guide to accompany you, till you get in the right road."

"A thousand thanks."

"Where do you propose going? Of course, if my question be indiscreet, I do not expect you to answer it."

"I have nothing to hide from you; I intend joining General Rubio as quickly as possible, to whom I must report the accident that has happened to the *conducta de plata*, and the terrible catastrophe of which I have been the victim."

"It is the fortune of war, Captain."

"I do not reproach you; I merely say it was an unfortunate affair."

"Had it been possible to save the *conducta* by courage and devotion, you would have doubtless done it, for you performed your duty worthily."

"I thank you for this praise."

"It will be easy for you to reach General Rubio's camp before sunset."

"Do you think so?"

"I am sure of it, for you are only three leagues at the most from it."

"So near as that? Had I but known it," the Captain said in a tone of regret.

"Yes, but you were ignorant of the fact. But, nonsense, what good is it returning to that, you will take your revenge some day or the other."

"You are right; what is done cannot be undone, so I will be off."

"Already?"

"I must."

"That is true."

The Jaguar made a signal to a borderer standing a short distance off.

"The Captain's horse," he said.

Five minutes later, this borderer, who was no other than Ruperto, reappeared, leading two horses, one of which was a magnificent mustang, with delicate limbs, and flashing eye. The Captain reached the saddle at one leap, and Ruperto was already mounted. The two enemies, henceforth friends, shook hands for the last time, and after an affectionate parting, the Captain let his horse go.

"Mind, no tricks, Ruperto!" the Jaguar said in a peremptory voice to the adventurer.

"All right, all right!" the latter growled in reply.

The horsemen left the prairie. The Jaguar looked after them as long as he could see them, and then returned thoughtfully to the jacal, which served as his tent.

CHAPTER V. GENERAL RUBIO

As the opportunity offers itself, let us say a few words about the military organization of the United States of Mexico, an organization as singular as all the rest of the machinery by means of which the strange government of this eccentric Republic does its work.

A military uniform generally pleases the masses; a soldier's life has something in it so independent of ordinary life, that all nations more or less allow themselves to be carried away and seduced by the glitter of embroidery and epaulettes, the rolling of drums, and the shrill notes of the bugles. Young nations, especially, like to play at soldiering, to make standards flutter, horses curvet, and mighty sabres flash.

The struggle of Mexico with Spain lasted ten years, constant, feverish, and obstinate: it was fertile in terrible events and striking incidents. The Mexicans, held by their oppressors in the most complete subjection, were as simple at the beginning of the revolution as at the period of the conquest: the majority did not know how to load a gun, and none of them had ever had firearms in their hands. Still, excited by the ardent desire for liberty which boiled in their hearts, their progress in military tactics was rapid, and the Spaniards soon learned at their own expense that these wretched guerillas, commanded by priests and curates, who at the outset were only armed with lances and arrows, became at length capable of responding to their platoon fire, dying bravely without yielding an inch, and inflicting terrible defeats upon them. The enthusiasm and hatred of the oppressors had made soldiers of all the men capable of bearing arms.

When the independence was proclaimed and the war ended, the part played by the army was at an end in a country which, without immediate neighbours, had no foreign intervention to apprehend in its internal affairs and had no invasion to fear. The army, therefore, ought to have laid down the arms which had so valiantly achieved the liberty of the country, and returned peaceably home. Such was its duty, and such was expected; but this was a great mistake. The army felt itself strong and feared; hence it wished to keep the place it had assumed, and, impose conditions in its turn.

Having no longer enemies to combat, the Mexican army constituted itself, or its private authority, the arbiter of the destinies of the country it had been called out to defend: in order to secure promotion among the officers, the army made revolutions. Then commenced that era of pronunciamientos, in which Mexico is fatally ensnared, and which is leading it irresistibly to that gulf in which its independence, so dearly acquired, and even its nationality, will be finally wrecked.

From the sub-lieutenant to the general of division, each officer made a stepping stone of a pronunciamiento to gain a step – the lieutenant to become captain; the captain, colonel; the colonel, general; and the general, president of the Mexican Republic. There are generally three to four presidents at once; often enough there are five, or even six; a single president would be regarded as an extraordinary phenomenon – a *rara avis*. We believe that since the proclamation of Independence no single president has governed the country for six consecutive months. The result of this state of things is, that the army has fallen into extreme discredit; and while the profession of arms was honourable at the period of the struggle against the Spaniards, it is exactly the reverse now. The army is, therefore, necessarily recruited from the lowest classes of society, that is to say, from bandits, leperos, and even the villains condemned for robbery or assassination.

All these men, on reaching certain grades, merely change their uniform, while retaining in the new rank where accident places them their vices and low habits; hence young men of good family are not at all inclined to accept an epaulette, and despise a profession regarded with so little honour by the respectable classes of society. In a corps so badly organised, where discipline does not exist, and military education is a nullity, any *esprit de corps* must be unknown, and that is the case. And

yet this army has been good, and it counts magnificent exploits on its books; its soldiers and officers displayed great bravery in the critical phases of the War of Independence.

But at the present day everything is dead, the feeling of duty is despised, and honour – that powerful stimulus to the soldier – is trampled under foot. Duelling, that necessary evil to a certain point to make the soldier respect the cloth he wears, is forbidden under the severest penalties; and if you horsewhip a Mexican officer, or call him a coward or a scoundrel, the only risk you run is of being treacherously assassinated.

It needs a lengthened apprenticeship to become a soldier and obtain the proper spirit; it is only after long and serious study, when he has suffered great privations, and looked death several times in the face, that a man acquires that knowledge and coolness which enable him to sacrifice his life without calculation, and fulfil the duties of a true soldier.

Most of the Mexican generals would blush at their ignorance if they found themselves face to face with the lowest non-commissioned officer of our army; for they know absolutely nothing, and have not the least idea of their art. With Mexican officers all is reduced to this: changing the scarf. The colonel wears a red one, the brigadier-general's is green, and that of the general of division white. It is for the purpose of obtaining the last colour that all the pronunciamientos are made.

Badly clothed, badly fed, and badly paid, the Mexican troops are a scourge to the civilian population, whom they shamelessly and pitilessly squeeze upon the slightest pretext. From what we have written, it is easy to see how an armed corps thus disorganised must be dangerous to everybody, for it knows no restraint, and lives beyond the law which it despises. The present state of Mexico proves the incontestable truth of our assertions.

We have not wished to enter into personalities, but treated the question generally, seeking to show what it is really. There are, we allow, some officers of merit – a few truly honourable men – in this unhappy army; but they are pearls lost in the mud, and the number is so limited, that if we quoted all their names, we should not reach a hundred. This is the more sad, because the further Mexico goes, the nearer it approaches the catastrophe; and, ere long, the evil that undermines this fair country will be incurable, and it will sink for ever – not under the blows of strangers, but assassinated by its own children.

General Don José Maria Rubio was in no way distinguished from the herd of Mexican officers, but he possessed over those who surrounded him the immense advantage of being a soldier of the war of Independence, and in him experience amply compensated for his lack of education. His history was simple, and may be told in a few words.

Son of an evangelista or public writer at Tampico, he had with great difficulty learned a little reading and writing under the auspices of his father; this pretence at education, slight as it was, was destined to be of great utility to him at a later date. The great uprising, of which the celebrated Fray Hidalgo was the promoter, and which inaugurated the revolution, found young José Maria wandering about the neighbourhood of Tampico, where he gained a livelihood by the most heterogeneous trades. The young man – a little bit of a muleteer, a little bit of a fisherman, and a good deal of a smuggler – intoxicated by the smell of gunpowder, and fascinated by the omnipotent influence Hidalgo exercised over all those who approached him, threw his gun over his shoulder, mounted the first horse he came across, and gaily followed the revolutionary band. From that moment his life was only one long succession of combats.

He became in a short time, thanks to his courage, energy, and presence of mind, one of the guerillas most feared by the Spaniards; always the first in attack, the last to retreat. Chief of a cuadrilla composed of picked men, to whom the most daring and wild expeditions appeared but child's play, and favoured by constant good luck, for fortune ever loves the rash, José Maria soon became a terror to the Spaniards, and his mere name inspired them with indescribable terror. After serving in turn under all the heroes of the Mexican war of Independence, and fighting bravely by their side, peace found him a brigadier-general.

General Rubio was not ambitious; he was a brave and honest soldier, who loved his profession passionately, and who needed to render him happy the roll of the drum, the lustre of arms, and military life in its fullest extent. When he fought, the idea never occurred to him that the war would end some day or other; and hence he was quite surprised and perfectly demoralised when peace was made and independence proclaimed.

The worthy General looked round him. Everybody was preparing to retire to the bosom of his family, and enjoy a repose so dearly purchased. Don José Maria might perhaps have desired nothing better than to follow the example; but his family was the army, and he had, or at least was acquainted with, no other. During the ten years' fighting which had just elapsed, the General had completely lost out of sight all the relations he possessed. His father, whose death he learned accidentally, was the sole person whose influence might have brought him to abandon a military career, but the paternal hearth was cold. Nothing attracted him to the province, and he therefore remained under the banner, though not through ambition. We repeat that the worthy soldier did himself justice, and recognised the fact that he had attained a position far superior to any he might ever have dared to desire; but he could not live alone or abandon old friends with whom he had so long suffered, combated – in a word, shared good and evil fortune.

The different Chiefs, who immediately began coveting power, and succeeded each other in the presidential chair, far from fearing the general, whose simple and honest character was known to them, on the contrary sought his friendship, and lavished on him proofs of the most frank and real protection; for they felt convinced that he would never abuse their confidence in him.

At the period when the Texans began agitating and claiming their independence, the Mexican Government, deceived at the outset by the agents appointed to watch that state, sent insufficient forces to re-establish order, and crush the insurgents: but the movement soon assumed such a distinctly revolutionary character, that the President found it urgent to make an effective demonstration. Unfortunately it was too late; the dissatisfaction had spread: it was no longer a question of suppressing a revolt, but stifling a revolution, which is not at all the same thing.

The President of the Mexican Republic then learned at his own cost that, in every human question, there is something more powerful than the brute force of bayonets: it is the idea whose time has come and hour struck. The troops sent to Texas were beaten and driven back on all sides; in short, they were compelled to treat with the insurgents, and withdraw ignominiously.

The government could not, and would not, accept such a dishonouring check inflicted by badly-armed and undisciplined bands, and they resolved to make a last and decisive effort. Numerous troops were massed on the Texan frontiers; and to terrify the insurgents, and finish with them at one blow, a grand military demonstration was made.

But the war then changed its character: the Texans, nearly all North Americans, skilful hunters, indefatigable marchers, and marksmen of proverbial reputation, broke up into small bands, and instead of offering the Mexican troops a front, which would have enabled them to outmanoeuvre and crush them, they began a hedge war, full of tricks and ambushes, after the manner of the Vendéans, the first result of which was to enormously fatigue the soldiers by compelling them to make continual marches and counter-marches, and produced among them discouragement and demoralization, by compelling to fight against a shifting foe, whom they knew to be everywhere, and yet could never seize.

The position became more and more critical. These outlaws, branded with the epithets of bandits, border ruffians, and freebooters, whom they affected to confound with the villains who congregate in these countries, and whom they obstinately treated as such by granting them no quarter, and shooting them without trial wherever they were captured: these men, now disciplined, hardened, and strong in the moral support of their fellow citizens, who applauded their successes, and put up vows for them, had boldly raised the flag of Texan independence, and after several engagements, in

which they decimated the troops sent against them, compelled the latter to recognize them as the avowed defenders of an honourable cause.

Among the numerous generals of the republic, the president at length chose the only man capable of repairing the successive disasters undergone by the government. General Don José Maria Rubio was invested with the supreme command of the troops detached to act against Texas. This choice was most lucky; the general, an honest man and brave soldier, was incapable of selling himself, however great the price offered. Hence there was no reason to fear treachery from him, from which others, less susceptible or more avaricious than he was, had not recoiled. As an old soldier of the war of Independence, and ex-guerilla, Don José Maria was thoroughly conversant with all the tricks, and was the very man to fight with advantage against the foes that awaited him.

Unfortunately, this selection was made very late. Still, the General, while perfectly comprehending the immense responsibility he assumed, accepted without a murmur the rude task imposed on him. Certain men have the incontestable privilege of being born for the positions they occupy; their intellect seems to grow with the situation; made for great things, they ever remain on a level with events, whatever the nature of the latter may be. The General possessed this precious faculty; at the first glance he judged his enemies with that coolness which renders old soldiers so strong, and his plan was formed in a few minutes.

He immediately changed the tactics employed by his predecessors, and adopted a system diametrically opposite. Instead of fatiguing his troops by purposeless marches which had no result, he seized on the strongest positions, scattered his troops through cantonments, where they supported each other, and in case of need could all be assembled under his orders within four-and-twenty hours.

When these precautions were taken, still keeping his forces in hand, he prudently remained on the defensive, and instead of marching forward, watched with indefatigable patience for the opportunity to fall on the enemy suddenly and crush him.

The Texan Chiefs soon comprehended all the danger of these new and skilful tactics. In fact, they had changed parts; instead of being attacked, the insurgents were obliged to become the assailants, which made them lose all the advantages of their position, by compelling them to concentrate their troops, and make a demonstration of strength, contrary to their usual habits of fighting.

To the young officers who murmured at the plan adopted by the general, and made sarcastic remarks on his prudence, the latter replied with a smile that there was no hurry, that war was a game of skill in which the cleverest man won; and that he must not, for the sake of little lustre, let himself be led away to compromise the success of an enterprise which, with a little patience, must lead to certain success. The result proved that the general reasoned correctly, and that his plan was good.

The insurgents, reduced to inactivity by the system the new Chief of the Mexican army adopted, tried several times to attack his entrenchments, and draw him out; but the general contented himself with killing as many of them as he could, and would not move a step forward.

The *conducta de plata* intrusted to Captain Melendez had an immense importance in the eyes of the needy government at the capital; the dollars must at all hazards reach Mexico in safety; the more so, because for some time past the arrival of coin from Texas had become desperately irregular, and threatened to leave off altogether ere long.

General Rubio found himself reluctantly compelled to modify temporarily the line he had traced; he did not doubt that the insurgents, advised of the passage of the *conducta*, would make the greatest efforts to intercept and seize it, for they also suffered from a great want of money, and the millions sent to Mexico were of the utmost importance to them. Hence their plans must be foiled, and the *conducta* saved. For this purpose the General collected a large body of troops, placed himself at their head, and advanced by forced marches to the entrance of the defile, where, from the reports of his spies, he knew that the insurgents were ambuscaded; then, as we have seen, he sent off a sure

man (or whom he supposed to be) to Captain Melendez, to warn him of his approach, and put him on his guard.

We have narrated in the "Border Rifles" what took place, and how truly worthy the General's express was of the confidence placed in him.

The Mexican camp stood in the centre of a beautiful plain, facing the defile through which the conducta must pass, according to the General's instructions. It was evening, and the sun had set for about an hour. Don José Maria, rendered anxious by the Captain's delay, and beginning to suspect a mishap, had sent off scouts in different directions to bring him news, and a prey to an agitation, which each moment that passed augmented, was walking anxiously about his tent, cursing and swearing in a low voice, frowning and stopping every now and then to listen to those thousand noises which arise at night without apparent cause, and pass as if borne on the wings of the Djinns.

General Don José Maria Rubio was still a young man; he was about forty-two, though he seemed older, through the fatigues of a military life, which had left rude marks on his martial and open countenance; he was tall and well-built; his muscular limbs, his wide and projecting chest denoted great vigour; and though his close-shaven hair was beginning to turn grey, his black eye had a brilliancy full of youth and intelligence.

Contrary to the habits of Mexican general officers, who, under all circumstances, make a great display of embroidery, and are gilded and plumed like charlatans, his uniform had a simplicity and severity which added to his military appearance, and gave him that aspect of reflection and majesty which is so befitting the chief of an army.

A sabre and a pair of holster pistols were carelessly thrown across a map on the table in the centre of the room, over which the General frequently bent in his agitated walk. The gallop of a horse, at first distant, but which rapidly drew nearer, was heard. The sentinel outside the tent challenged, "Who goes there?"

The horseman stopped, leapt to the ground, and a moment later the curtain of the tent was thrust aside, and a man appeared.

It was Captain Don Juan Melendez.

"Here you are, at last!" the General exclaimed, as his countenance grew brighter.

But on noticing the impression of sorrow spread over the officer's features, the General, who had walked two steps toward him, stopped, and his face again assumed an anxious look.

"Oh, oh!" he said, "What can have happened? Captain, has any mishap occurred to the conducta?"

The officer bowed his head.

"What is the meaning of this, Caballero?" the General continued, angrily; "Have you suddenly grown dumb?"

The Captain made an effort. "No, General," he answered.

"The conducta! Where is the conducta?" he went on, violently.

"Captured!" Don Juan replied, in a hollow voice.

"Viva Dios!" the General shouted, as he gave him a terrible glance, and stamped his foot: "The conducta captured, and yourself alive to bring me the news?"

"I could not get myself killed."

"I really believe, Heaven pardon me!" the General said, ironically, "that you have not even received a scratch."

"It is true."

The General walked up and down the tent in the utmost agitation. "And your soldiers, Caballero," he went on, a minute later, stopping before the officer, "I suppose they fled at the first shot?"

"My soldiers are dead, General."

"What do you say?"

"I say, General, that my soldiers fell to the last man defending the trust confided to their honour."

"Hum, hum!" the General remarked, "Are they all dead?"

"Yes, General, all lie in a bloody grave; I am the only survivor of fifty brave and devoted men."

There was a second silence. The General knew the Captain too well to doubt his courage and honour. He began to suspect a mystery.

"But I sent you a guide," he at length said.

"Yes, General, and it was that guide who led us into the trap laid by the insurgents."

"A thousand demons! If the scoundrel –"

"He is dead," the Captain interrupted him, "I killed him."

"Good. But there is something about the affair I cannot understand."

"General," the young man exclaimed, with some animation, "though the conducta is lost, the fight was glorious for the Mexican name. Our honour has not suffered; we were crushed by numbers."

"Come, Captain, you are one of those men above suspicion, whom not the slightest stain can affect. If necessary, I would give bail for your loyalty and bravery before the world. Report to me frankly, and without any beating round the bush, all that has happened, and I will believe you; give me the fullest details about this action, in order that I may know whether I have to pity or punish you."

"Listen, then, General. But I swear to you that if after my report the slightest doubt remains in your heart as to my honour and the devotion of my soldiers, I will blow out my brains in your presence."

"Speak first, Caballero, we will see afterwards what your best course should be."

The Captain bowed, and began an exact report of what had taken place.

CHAPTER VI. THE HUNTER'S COUNCIL

We will now return to Tranquil, whom we have too long neglected. The Canadian had left his friends two musket shots from the Texan encampment, intending, were it required, to call in Carmela; but that was not necessary; the young man, though unwillingly, had consented to all the Canadian asked of him, with which the latter was delighted, for without knowing exactly why, he would have been sorry to facilitate an interview between the young people.

Immediately after his conversation with the leader of the Freebooters, the hunter rose, and, in spite of the Jaguar's efforts to retain him, left the camp. He then remounted his horse, and, only half satisfied by his conversation with the Jaguar, returned thoughtfully to the spot where his friends were camping. The latter were awaiting him anxiously, and Carmela especially was suffering from a terrible uneasiness.

It was a strange fact, which women alone can explain, that the maiden, perhaps unconsciously, entertained toward the Jaguar and Captain Melendez feelings which she was afraid to analyze, but which led her to take an equal interest in the fate of those two men, and fear a collision between them, whatever the result might have proved. But for all that, it is certain that if she had been obliged to explain the reason which impelled her to act thus, she would have been unable to answer; and had anybody told her that she loved one or the other, she would have energetically protested; under the honest conviction that she spoke the truth.

Still, she felt herself, perhaps from different motives, irresistibly attracted toward them. She started at their approach; the sound of their voices caused her an internal thrill of happiness; if she remained long without news of them, she grew sad, pensive, and anxious; their presence restored her all her gaiety and birdlike freedom.

Was it friendship, or was it love? Who can answer?

Tranquil found his friends comfortably located in a narrow clearing, near a fire, over which their next meal was cooking. Carmela, a little apart, questioned with an impatient glance the path by which she knew the hunter must arrive. So soon as she perceived him, she uttered a suppressed cry of delight, and made a movement to run and meet him; but she checked herself with a flush, let her head droop, and concealed herself timidly behind a clump of floripondios.

Tranquil peacefully dismounted, took the bridle off his horse, which he sent with a friendly slap on the croup to join its comrades, and then sat down by the side of Loyal Heart.

"Ouf!" he said, "Here I am, back again, and not without difficulty."

"Did you run any dangers?" Loyal Heart asked, eagerly.

"Not at all; on the contrary, the Jaguar received me, as he was bound to do, that is, as a friend; and I have only to complain of his courtesy; besides, we have known each other too long for it to be otherwise."

Carmela had softly come up to the hunter; she suddenly bent her graceful head down to him, and offered him her forehead to kiss.

"Good day, father," she said, demurely, "you have already returned?"

"Already!" Tranquil answered, as he kissed her and laughed, "Hang it, girl, it seems as if my absence did not appear to you long."

"Pardon me, father, I did not mean that," she said, in great confusion.

"What did you mean, then, my child?"

"Oh, nothing."

"Yes you did, you little rogue! But you cannot deceive me, with all your tricks; I am too old a fox to be taken in by a girl."

"You are unkind, father," she answered, with a pout, "you always give a false meaning to what I say."

"Only think of that, señorita! Well, do not be in a passion, I have brought you good news."

"Do you mean it?" she said, clasping her hands joyfully.

"Would you doubt my word?"

"Oh, no, father."

"Very good, so now sit down by my side and listen."

"Speak, speak, father," she exclaimed eagerly, as she took the seat allotted her.

"You seem to take great interest in Captain Melendez, my child?"

"I, father!" she exclaimed with a start of surprise.

"Hang it! I fancy a young lady must feel a lively interest in a person, to take such a step for his sake as you have done."

The maiden became serious.

"Father," she said a moment later with that little, resolute tone spoiled children know so well how to assume; "I could not tell you why I acted as I did; I swear that it was against my will, I was mad; the thought that the Captain and the Jaguar were about to engage in a mortal combat, made me chill at heart; and yet I assure you, now that I am cool, I question myself in vain to discover the reason which urged me to intercede with you to prevent that combat."

The hunter shook his head.

"All that is not clear, Niña," he replied; "I do not at all understand your arguments. Hang it! I am only a poor woodranger, possessing no more learning than I have drawn from the great scenes of nature I constantly have before my eyes, and a woman's heart is to me a closed book, in which I could not decipher a line. Still, girl, believe me, take care, and do not play imprudently with weapons whose strength and mechanism you are ignorant of; though the antelope be so light and active when it is leaping from rock to rock on the verge of precipices, the moment arrives when it grows giddy, its head turns, and it rolls into the abyss – I have often seen similar catastrophes in the forests. Take care, my girl, take care, and believe in the old hunter's experience."

Carmela pensively leant her blushing brow on the Canadian's shoulder, and lifted to him her large blue eyes full of tears.

"I am suffering, father," she murmured sadly.

"Good Heavens! My child, you are suffering, and did not tell me – are you ill?" he exclaimed anxiously; "How imprudent it was of you to be out in the desert by night."

"You are mistaken, father," she replied with a faint smile; "I am not ill, it is not that."

"What is it then?"

"I do not know, but my heart is contracted, my bosom is oppressed. Oh, I am very unhappy!"

And hiding her head in her hands, she burst into tears. Tranquil looked at her for a moment with an astonishment mingled with terror.

"You, unhappy!" he at length exclaimed as he smote his head passionately. "Oh, whatever has been done to her, that she should weep thus!"

There was a silence of some minutes' duration, when the conversation seemed to take a confidential turn. Loyal Heart and Lanzi rose quietly, and soon disappeared in the chaparral. Tranquil and the maiden were hence alone. The hunter was suffering from one of those cold fits of passion which are so terrible because so concentrated; adoring the girl, he fancied in his simple ignorance that it was he who, without suspecting it, through the coarseness and frivolity of his manner, rendered her unhappy, and he accused himself in his heart for not having secured her that calm and pleasant life he had dreamed for her.

"Forgive me, my child," he said to her with emotion; "forgive me for being the involuntary cause of your suffering. You must not be angry with me, for really it is no fault of mine, I have always lived alone in the desert, and never learned how to treat natures so frail as those of women; but henceforth

I will watch myself. You will have no reason to reproach me again. I promise you I will do all you wish, my darling child – well, does that satisfy you?"

By a sudden reaction, the maiden wiped away her tears, and bursting into a joyous laugh, threw her arms round the hunter's neck, and kissed him repeatedly.

"It is you who should pardon me, father," she said in her wheedling voice, "for I seem to take pleasure in tormenting you, who are so kind to me; I did not know what I was saying just now; I am not unhappy, I do not suffer, I am quite happy, and love you dearly, my good father; I only love you."

Tranquil looked at her in alarm; he could not understand these sudden changes of humour, whose cause escaped him.

"Good Heavens!" he exclaimed, clasping his hands in terror; "My daughter is mad!"

At this exclamation, the laughing girl's gaiety was augmented. The silvery sound of her laugh would have made a nightingale die of envy.

"I am not mad, father," she said, "I was so just now when I spoke to you in the way I did, but now the crisis has past; forgive me, and think no more about it."

"Hum!" the hunter muttered, as he raised his eyes to Heaven in great embarrassment; "I desire nothing more, Niña; but I am no further on than I was before, and on my word I understand nothing of what is passing through your mind."

"What matter, so long as I love you, father? All girls are so, and no importance must be attached to their caprices."

"Good, good, it must be so since you say it, little one. But for all that, I suffered terribly, your words rent my heart."

Carmela lovingly kissed him.

"And the Jaguar?" she asked.

"All is arranged; the Captain has nothing to fear from him."

"Oh, the Jaguar has a noble heart; if he has pledged his word, he may be trusted."

"He has given it to me."

"Thanks, father. Well, now that all is arranged according to our wishes – "

"Your wishes?" the hunter interrupted.

"Mine or yours, father – is that not the same thing?"

"That is true, I was wrong – go on."

"Well, I say, call your friends, who are walking about close by, I suppose, and let me eat, for I am dying of hunger."

"Are you?" he said eagerly.

"Indeed, I am; but I was ashamed to tell you."

"In that case you will not have long to wait."

The Canadian whistled; and the two men, who probably only awaited this signal, made their appearance at once. The venison was removed from the fire, laid on a leaf, and all seated themselves comfortably.

"Hilloh!" Tranquil said all at once, "Why, where is Quoniam?"

"He left us shortly after your departure," Loyal Heart made answer "to go to the Larch-tree hacienda, as he told us."

"All right, I did not think of that; I am not anxious about my old comrade, for he will manage to find us again."

Each then began eating with good appetite, and troubled themselves no further about the Negro's absence. It is a noteworthy fact, that men whom the life they lead compels to a continual employment of their physical faculties, whatever may be the circumstances in which they are, or the dangers that surround them – always eat with a good appetite, and sleep soundly, so indispensable for them is the satisfaction of these two material wants, in order that they may successfully resist the incessant incidents of their existence, which is so varied, and full of accidents of every description.

During the hunter's meal, the sun had set, and night invaded the forest. Carmela, exhausted by the various events of this day, retired almost immediately to a light jacal of leaves which Loyal Heart had built for her. The maiden needed to restore order in her ideas, and take a few hours' rest, the privation from which had over-excited her nervous system, and caused the crisis which had fallen on her a few hours previously.

When they were alone, the hunters laid in a stock of dead wood, which would keep the fire in all night then, after throwing on some handfuls of dry branches, they sat down in Indian fashion, that is to say, with their back to the flame, so that their eyes might not be dazzled by the light, and they could distinguish in the gloom the arrival of any unwelcome guest, man or wild beast. When this precaution had been taken, and the rifles laid within hand reach, they lit their pipes and smoked silently.

It is specially at night, when the sounds of day die out to make room for the mysterious rumours of the darkness, that the desert assumes a grand and imposing appearance, which affects the mind, and leads it into those gentle and melancholy reveries which are so full of charm. The purer night air refreshed by the breeze which passes through the branches and gently agitates them; the murmuring of the water among the lilies; the confused buzz of myriads of invisible insects; the silence of the desert interrupted by the melodious and animated sounds; and that busy hum of the great flood of life which comes from God and passes away incessantly to be constantly renewed – all these things plunge the strong-hearted man involuntarily into a religious contemplation, which those to whom the grand scenes of nature are unknown, cannot imagine.

The night was cold and clear; a profusion of light flashed from the millions of stars that studded the dark olive sky, and the moon poured on the earth her silvery rays which imparted a fantastic appearance to objects. – The atmosphere was so pure and transparent that the eye could distinguish, as in bright day, the surrounding landscape. Several hours passed thus, and one of the three men, seduced as they were by the splendour of the night, thought of taking that rest which, however, was so necessary after the fatigues of the day.

"Who will keep watch tonight?" Lanzi at length asked, as he passed the stem of his pipe through his belt; "We are surrounded by people amongst whom it is wise to take precautions."

"That is true," said Loyal Heart; "do you sleep, and I will watch for all."

"One moment," the Canadian said; "if sleep does not too greatly overpower you. Lanzi, we will profit by Carmela's absence to hold a council. The situation in which we are is intolerable for a girl, and we must make up our minds to some course at once. Unluckily, I know not what to do, and your ideas will hardly suffice, I fear, to get me out of my embarrassment."

"I am at your orders, Tranquil," Lanzi answered; "let us hold a council, and I will make up for it by sleeping faster."

"Speak, my friend," said Loyal Heart.

The hunter reflected for a moment, and then continued —

"Life is rough in the desert for delicate natures: we men, accustomed to fatigue, and hardened to privations, not only support it without thinking of it, but even find delight in it."

"That is true," Loyal Heart observed; "but the dangers that men such as we can bear, it would be unjust and cruel to inflict on a woman, – a maiden who has hardly emerged from childhood, and whose life has hitherto passed exempt from care, privations, or fatigue of any description."

"Yes," Lanzi supported him.

"That is the very point," Tranquil continued; "though it will cost me a pang to part with her, Carmela can no longer remain with us."

"It would kill her," said Loyal Heart.

"It would not take long, poor little darling," Lanzi pouted.

"Yes: but to whom can I trust her now that the venta is destroyed?"

"It is a difficult point," Lanzi observed.

"Stay," said Loyal Heart, "are you not tigrero to the Larch-tree hacienda?"

"I am."

"There you have it," the Half-breed exclaimed. "That is a good idea. It would not have occurred to me."

"What idea?" the Canadian asked.

"The master of the hacienda," Loyal Heart continued, "will not refuse to receive Carmela in his house."

The hunter shook his head in denial. "No, no," he said, "if I once asked the favour of him, I feel certain he would consent; but it cannot be."

"Why?"

"Because the owner of the Larch-tree is not the man we need to protect a girl."

"Hum!" Loyal Heart said, "Our situation is growing more complicated, for I know nobody else who would take charge of her."

"Nor I either, and that is what vexes me. Listen!" Loyal Heart suddenly exclaimed, "I do not know. Heaven pardon me, where my head was that I did not think of it at once. Do not be alarmed: I know somebody."

"Speak, speak."

"Come," the half-breed said aside, "this Loyal Heart is really a capital fellow, for he is full of good ideas."

"For reasons too long to tell you at this moment, but which I will confide to you some day," the young man continued, "I am not alone in the desert, for my mother and an old servant of my family live about three hundred miles from where we now are with a tribe of Comanches, whose Chief adopted me a few years back. My mother is kind, she loves me madly, and will be delighted to treat your charming child as a daughter. She will watch over her, and give her those maternal attentions which only a woman can offer, especially when that woman is really a mother, and constantly trembles for the safety of a son to whom she has sacrificed everything. Every month, on the same day, I abandon the chase, mount my mustang, and, traversing the desert with the speed of an arrow, I go and see my mother, with whom I remain for some time among the tribe. This is about the period when I am wont to proceed to the village; so, will you let me guide you there? Coming with me, the Indians will receive you kindly, and my mother will thank you for confiding your daughter to her."

"Loyal Heart," the Canadian answered, with emotion, "your offer is that of an honest, upright man. I accept it as frankly as you make it; by the side of your mother my daughter will be happy, and she will have nothing to fear. Thanks."

"Loyal Heart," the half-breed said, eagerly, "I know not who gave you the name you bear; but, canarios, he was well acquainted with you, I declare."

The two men smiled at Lanzi's outbreak.

"Now, that is settled," he continued, "you want me no longer, I suppose? If so, good night; my eyelids prick as if they were full of thorns."

He wrapped himself carefully in his zarapé, stretched himself on the ground, and a minute later was fast asleep. It is probable that the worthy man wished to make up for lost time, for he saw plainly that he had been of no use in the council.

"When do we start?" the Canadian asked.

"The road is a long one," Loyal Heart answered. "We have more than three hundred miles to ride; Carmela is exhausted by the fatigue she has endured for some time past, and perhaps we should do well to grant her a day or two of rest to regain the requisite strength to endure the new fatigues that await her during the long journey we are about to undertake."

"Yes, you are right; this journey, which would be as nothing to us, is enormous for a girl; let us remain here a couple of days – the camp is good, and the spot well selected. There is nothing to hurry us; it is better to act prudently, in order that we may not have at a later date to regret precipitation, which may prove fatal to her whom we desire so greatly to protect."

"During the time we spend here our horses will regain their fire and vigour, and we can profit by the rest to get some provisions together."

"Well said, brother; that is settled; in two days we will set out, and I hope that Heaven will be so merciful as to permit us to reach our journey's end safe and sound."

"Heaven will not turn against us, brother, you may be sure."

"I am well aware of that," the Canadian answered, with that simple faith which characterised him; "hence you see me quite happy. You cannot imagine how anxious I feel, and what an immense service you have just rendered me."

"Do not speak about that, for are we not sworn friends?"

"No matter, I must thank you once more, my heart is so full that it must overflow; but now that we understand each other thoroughly, go and sleep, my friend; night is drawing on apace, and you must need rest."

"On the contrary, you must lie down, my friend, for do you not remember I said I would keep watch?"

"No, no."

"But you must be tired to death, my friend."

"I? Nonsense; I have a body of iron and nerves of steel; weariness has no effect on me."

"Still, my friend, human strength, however great it may be, has its limits, beyond which it cannot go."

"That is possible, my friend. I will not discuss that question with you, but merely limit myself to saying that joy has robbed me of sleep. I am as wide awake as an opossum, and in vain should I try to close my eyes. No, I require to reflect a little on all this, and I propose doing so, while you, who are naturally calmer, will sleep."

"As you insist on it, I will give way."

"Very good; you are becoming reasonable," Tranquil said, with a smile. "Good night, brother."

"Good night!" Loyal Heart answered.

The young man, in the face of the resolve so clearly made by the Canadian, thought it useless longer to resist, the more so, as he was beginning to feel great inclination for sleep. He, therefore, lay down, and was soon sound asleep. Tranquil had spoken the truth; he required to isolate himself for some hours, in order to go over the events which during the last few days had fallen upon him so unexpectedly, and broken up that placidity of life to which he had grown gently accustomed for some years past.

The hours passed away one after the other, but the hunter, plunged in his reflections, felt no desire for sleep. The stars were beginning to go out, the horizon was crossed by pale bands, the breeze grew sharper and colder; all foreboded, in fact, the approach of dawn, when suddenly a slight noise, resembling that produced by the fracture of a withered branch, smote on the hunter's practised ear, and caused him to start. The Canadian, without stirring, raised his head and listened, while softly placing his hand on the rifle that lay by his side.

CHAPTER VII. AN OLD FRIEND

Tranquil was too old and too crafty a wood ranger to let himself be surprised. With his eyes obstinately fixed on the spot whence the sound that had aroused him came, he tried to pierce the darkness, and distinguish any movement in the chaparral which would permit him to form probable conjectures as to the visitors who were arriving.

For a long period the noise he had heard was not repeated, and the desert had fallen back into silence. But the Canadian did not deceive himself. Up to all Indian tricks, and knowing the unbounded patience of the Redskins, he continued to keep on his guard; still, as he suspected that in the darkness searching glances were fixed on him and spying his slightest movements, Tranquil yawned twice or thrice, as if overcome by sleep, drew back the hand he had laid on his rifle barrel, and pretending to be unable to resist sleep any longer, he let his head sink on his chest with a natural movement.

Nothing stirred. An hour elapsed ere the slightest rumour disturbed the silence of the forest. Still, Tranquil felt confident that he had not deceived himself. The sky grew gradually brighter, the last star had disappeared, the horizon was assuming those fiery red tints which immediately precede the appearance of the sun: the Canadian, weary of this long watching, and not knowing to what he should attribute this inaction on the part of the Redskins, resolved at last to obtain the solution of the enigma. He therefore started suddenly to his feet and took up his rifle.

At the moment he prepared to go on the discovery, a noise of footsteps near him, mingled with the rustling of leaves, and the breaking of dry branches, smote his ear.

"Ah, ah!" the Canadian muttered, "It seems they have made up their mind at last; let us see who these troublesome neighbours are."

At the same instant, a clear feminine voice rose harmoniously and sonorously in the silence. Tranquil stopped with a start of surprise. This voice was singing an Indian melody, of which this was the first verse —

"I confide my heart to thee in the name of the Omnipotent.

I am unhappy, and no one takes pity on me;

Still God is great in my eyes."

"Oh!" the hunter muttered, with a nervous quivering, "I know that song, it is that of the betrothed of the Snake-Pawnees. How is it that these words strike my ear so far from their hunting grounds? Can a detachment of Pawnees be wandering in the neighbourhood? Oh, no! That is impossible. I will see who this singer is who has awaked with the sun."

Without further hesitation, the hunter walked hurriedly toward the thicket, from the centre of which the melody had been audible. But at the moment he was about to enter it, the shrubs were quickly parted, and two Redskins entered the clearing, to the amazement of the Canadian.

On coming within ten paces of the hunter the Indians stopped, and stretched their arms out in front of them, with fingers parted in sign of peace; then, crossing their arms on their chest, they waited. At this manifestation of the peaceful sentiments of the newcomers, the Canadian rested the butt of his rifle on the ground, and examined the Indians with rapid glance.

The first was a man of lofty stature, with intelligent features and open countenance; as far as it was possible to judge the age of an Indian, this man seemed to have passed the middle stage of life. He was dressed in his full warpaint, and the condor plume, fastened above his right ear, indicated that he held the rank of a Sachem in his tribe.

The other Redskin was not a man, but a woman, twenty years of age at the most; she was slim, active, and elegant, and her dress was decorated in accordance with the rules of Indian coquetry: still, her worn features, on which only the fugitive traces of a prematurely vanished beauty were visible,

shewed that, like all Indian squaws, she had been pitilessly compelled to do all those rude household tasks, the whole weight of which the men lay on them, regarding it as beneath their dignity to interfere.

At the sight of these two persons, the hunter involuntarily felt an emotion, for which he could not account; the more he regarded the warrior standing before him, the more he seemed to find again in this martial countenance the distant memory of the features of a man he had formerly known, though it was impossible for him to recall how or where this intimacy had existed; but overcoming his feelings, and comprehending that his lengthened silence must appear extraordinary to the persons who had been waiting so long for him to address to them the compliments of welcome, which Indian etiquette demands, he at length decided on speaking.

"The Sachem can approach without fear and take his seat by the fire of a friend," he said.

"The voice of the Pale hunter rejoices the heart of the Chief," the warrior answered; "his invitation pleases him; he will smoke the calumet of friendship with the Pale hunter."

The Canadian bowed politely; the Sachem gave his squaw a sign to follow him, and he crouched on his heels in front of the fire, where Loyal Heart and Lanzi were still asleep. Tranquil and the warrior then began smoking silently, while the young Indian squaw was busily engaged with the household duties and preparing the morning meal. The two men allowed her to do so, not noticing apparently the trouble she took.

There was a lengthened silence. The hunter was reflecting, while the Indian was apparently completely absorbed by his pipe. At last he shook the ash out of the calumet, thrust the stem through his belt, and turned to his host —

"The Walkon and the Maukawis," he said, "always sing the same song; the man who has heard them during the moons of spring recognizes them in the moons of winter, it is not the same with man; he forgets quickly; his heart does not bound at the recollection of a friend; and if he meet him again after many moons, his eyes do not see him."

"What does the Chief mean?" the Canadian asked, astonished at these words, which seemed to convey a reproach.

"The Wacondah is powerful," the Indian continued; "it is he who dictates the words my breast breathes; the sturdy oak forgets that he has been a frail sapling."

"Explain yourself, Chief," the hunter said, with great agitation; "the sound of your voice causes me singular emotion; your features are not unknown to me; speak, who are you?"

"Singing-bird," the Indian said, addressing the young woman, "you are the *cihuatl* of a Sachem; ask the great Pale hunter why he has forgotten his friend — the man who, in happier times, was his brother?"

"I will obey," she answered, in a melodious voice; "but the Chief is deceived; the great Pale hunter has not forgotten the Wah-rush-a-menec of the Snake Pawnees."

"Oh!" Tranquil exclaimed, warmly, "Are you really Black-deer, my brother? My heart warned me secretly of your presence, and though your features had almost faded from my memory, I expected to find a friend again."

"Wah! is the Paleface speaking the truth?" the Chief said, with an emotion he could not quite conceal; "Has he really retained the memory of his brother, Black-deer?"

"Ah, Chief," the hunter said, sadly; "to doubt any longer would be an insult to me; how could I suppose I should ever meet you here, at so considerable a distance from the wigwams of your nation?"

"That is true?" the Indian remarked, thoughtfully; "my brother will forgive me."

"What!" Tranquil exclaimed, "Is that charming squaw I see there, the Singing-bird, that frail child whom I so often tossed on my knee?"

"Singing-bird is the wife of a Chief," the Indian answered, flattered by the compliment; "at the next fall of the leaves forty-five moons will have passed since Black-deer bought her of her father for two mustangs and a panther skin quiver."

Singing-bird smiled gracefully at the hunter, and went on with her duties.

"Will the Chief permit me to ask him a question?" Tranquil went on.

"My brother can speak, the ears of a friend are open."

"How did the Sachem learn that he would find me here?"

"Black-deer was ignorant of it: he was not seeking the great Pale hunter; the Wacondah has permitted him to find a friend again, and he is grateful."

Tranquil looked at the warrior in surprise. He smiled.

"Black-deer has no secret from his brother," he said, softly; "the Pale hunter will wait; soon he shall know all."

"My brother is free to speak or be silent; I will wait."

The conversation ceased here. The Sachem had wrapped himself in his buffalo robe, and did not appear disposed, to give any further explanation at present. Tranquil, restrained by the duties of hospitality, which in the desert prohibit any interrogation of a guest; imitated the Chiefs reserve; but the silence had lasted but a few minutes, when the hunter felt a light hand laid on his shoulder, while a soft and affectionate voice murmured in his ear: — "Good morning, father."

And a kiss completed the silence.

"Good-morning, little one," the hunter replied, with a smile; "did you sleep well?"

"Splendidly, father."

"And you have rested?"

"I no longer feel fatigued."

"Good; that is how I like to see you, my darling girl."

"Father," the inquisitive maiden said, as she looked around, "have visitors arrived?"

"As you see."

"Strangers?"

"No, old friends, who, I hope, will soon be yours."

"Redskins?" she asked with an instinctive start of terror.

"All of them are not wicked," he answered with a smile: "these are kind." Then, turning to the Indian woman, who had fixed her black velvet looking eyes on Carmela with simple admiration, he called out, "Singing-bird!"

The squaw bounded up like a young antelope. "What does my father want?" she asked, bowing gently.

"Singing-bird," the hunter continued, "this girl is my daughter, Carmela," and taking in his bony hand those of the two women, he clasped them together, adding with emotion, "Love one another like sisters."

"Singing-bird will feel very happy to be loved by the White lily," the Indian squaw replied; "for her heart has already flown towards me."

Carmela, charmed at the name which the squaw with her simple poesy had given her, bent down affectionately to her and kissed her forehead.

"I love you already, sister," she said to her, and holding her by the hand, they went off together twittering like two nightingales. Tranquil looked after them with a tender glance. Black-deer had witnessed this little scene with that Indian phlegm which nothing even disturbs: still, when he found himself alone with the hunter, he bent over to him, and said in a slightly shaking voice, —

"Wah! my brother has not changed: the moons of winter have scattered snow over his scalp, but his heart has remained as good as when it was young."

At this moment the sleeper awoke.

"Hilloh!" Loyal Heart said gaily, as he looked up at the sun, "I have had a long sleep."

"To tell you the truth," Lanzi observed, "I am not an early bird either: but nonsense! I will make up for it. The poor beasts of horses must be thirsty, so I will give them water."

"Very good!" said Tranquil; "By the time you have done that, breakfast will be ready."

Lanzi rose, leaped on his horse, and seizing the lasso of the others, went off in the direction of the stream without asking questions relative to the strangers. On the prairie it is so: a priest is an envoy of God, whose presence must arouse no curiosity. In the meanwhile Loyal Heart had also risen: suddenly his glance fell on the Indian Chief, whose cold eye was fixed on him: the young man suddenly turned pale as a corpse, and hurriedly approached the Chief.

"My mother!" he exclaimed in a voice quivering with emotion, "my mother – "

He could say no more. The Pawnee bowed peacefully to him.

"My brother's mother is still the cherished child of the Wacondah," he answered in a gentle voice; "her heart only suffers from the absence of her son."

"Thanks, Chief," the young man said with a sigh of relief; "forgive this start of terror which I could not overcome, but on perceiving you I feared lest some misfortune had happened."

"A son must love his mother: my brother's feeling is natural; it comes from the Wacondah. When I left the Village of Flowers, the old greyhead, the companion of my brother's mother, wished to start with me."

"Poor ño Eusabio," the young man muttered, "he is so devoted to us."

"The Sachems would not consent; greyhead is necessary to my brother's mother."

"They were right, Chief; I thank them for retaining him. Have you followed my trail from the village?"

"I did."

"Why did you not awake me on your arrival?"

"Loyal Heart was asleep. Black-deer did not wish to trouble his sleep: he waited."

"Good! my brother is a Chief; he acted as he thought advisable."

"Black-deer is intrusted with a message from the Sachems to Loyal Heart. He wishes to smoke the calumet in council with him."

"Are the reasons that have brought my brother here urgent?"

"They are."

"Good! my brother can speak, I am listening."

Tranquil rose, and threw his rifle over his shoulder.

"Where is the hunter going?" the Indian asked.

"While you tell Loyal Heart the message I will take a stroll in the forest."

"The white hunter will remain; the heart of Black-deer has nothing hidden from him. The wisdom of my brother is great; he was brought up by the Redskins; his place is marked out at the council fire."

"But perhaps you have things to tell Loyal Heart which only concern yourselves."

"I have nothing to say which my brother should not hear; my brother will disoblige me by withdrawing."

"I will remain, then, Chief, since such is the case."

While saying these words, the hunter resumed his seat, and said: "Speak, Chief, I am listening."

The methodical Indian drew out his calumet, and, to display the importance of the commission with which he was entrusted, instead of filling it with ordinary tobacco, he placed in it *morhichee*, or sacred tobacco, which he produced from a little parchment bag he took from the pouch all Indians wear when travelling, and which contains their medicine bag, and the few articles indispensable for a long journey. When the calumet was filled, he lit it from a coal he moved from the fire by the aid of a medicine rod, decorated with feathers and bills.

These extraordinary preparations led the hunters to suppose that Black-deer was really the bearer of important news, and they prepared to listen to him with all proper gravity. The Sachem inhaled two or three whiffs of smoke, then passed the calumet to Tranquil, who, after performing the same operation, handed it to Loyal Heart. The calumet went the round thus, until all the tobacco was consumed.

During this ceremony, which is indispensable at every Indian council, the three men remained silent. When the pipe was out, the Chief emptied the ash into the fire, while muttering a few unintelligible words, which, however, were probably an invocation to the Great Spirit; he then thrust the pipe in his girdle, and after reflecting for some moments, rose and began speaking.

"Loyal Heart," he said, "you left the Village of Flowers to follow the hunting path at daybreak of the third sun of the moon of the falling leaves; thirty suns have passed since that period, and we are hardly at the beginning of the moon of the passing game. Well, during so short a period many things have occurred, which demand your immediate presence, in the tribe of which you are one of the adopted sons. The war hatchet, so deeply buried for ten moons between the prairie Comanches and the Buffalo Apaches, has suddenly been dug up in full council, and the Apaches are preparing to follow the war trail, under the orders of the wisest and most experienced Chiefs of the nation. Shall I tell you the new insults the Apaches have dared to offer your Comanche fathers? What good would it be? Your heart is strong, you will obey the orders of your fathers, and fight for them."

Loyal Heart bowed his head in assent.

"No one doubted you," the Chief continued; "still, for a war against the Apaches, the Sachems would not have claimed your help; the Apaches are chattering old women, whom Comanche children can drive off with their dog-whips; but the situation has all at once become complicated, and it is more your presence at the council of the nation than the aid of your arm, though you are a terrible warrior, which your fathers desire. The Long knives of the East and the Yoris have also dug up the hatchet, and both have offered to treat with the Comanches. An alliance with the Palefaces is not very agreeable to Redskins; still, their anxiety is great, as they do not know which side to take, or which party to protect."

Black-deer was silent.

"The situation is, indeed, grave," Loyal Heart answered; "it is even critical."

"The Chiefs, divided in opinion, and not knowing which is the better," Black-deer continued, "sent me off in all haste to find my brother, whose wisdom they are aware of, and promise to follow his advice."

"I am very young," Loyal Heart answered, "to venture to give my advice in such a matter, and settle so arduous a question. The Comanche nation is the queen of the prairies; its Chiefs are all experienced warriors; they will know better than I how to form a decision which will at once protect the interests and honour of the nation."

"My brother is young, but wisdom speaks by his mouth. The Wacondah breathes in his heart the words his lips utter; all the Chiefs feel for him the respect he deserves."

The young man shook his head, as if protesting against such a mark of deference. "Since you insist," he said, "I will speak; but I will not give my opinion till I have heard that of this hunter, who is better acquainted with the desert than I am."

"Wah!" said Black-deer, "the Pale hunter is wise; his advice must be good; a Chief is listening to him."

Thus compelled to explain his views, Tranquil had involuntarily to take part in the discussion; but he did not feel at all inclined to take on himself the responsibility of the heavy burden which Loyal Heart tried to throw off his own shoulders. Still, he was too thoroughly a man of the desert to refuse giving his opinion in council, especially upon so important a question. After reflecting for some moments, he therefore at length decided on speaking.

"The Comanches are the most terrible warriors of the prairie," he said, "no one must try to invade their hunting grounds; if they make war with the Apaches, who are vagabond and cowardly thieves, they are in the right to do so; but for what good object would they interfere in the quarrels of the Palefaces? Whether Yoris or Long knives, the Whites have ever been, at all times, and under all circumstances, the obstinate enemies of the Redskins, killing them wherever they may find them, under the most futile pretexts, and for the most time simply because they are Indians. When the

coyotes are tearing each other asunder on the prairie, do the Indians try to separate them? No. They say, let them fight it out – the more that fall, the fewer thieves and plunderers will there be in the desert. To the Redskins the Palefaces are coyotes thirsting for blood. The Comanches should leave them to devour each other; whichever party triumph, those who have been killed will be so many enemies the fewer for the Indians. This war between the Palefaces has been going on for two years, implacably and obstinately. Up to the present the Comanches have remained neutral; why should they interfere now? However great the advantages offered them may be, they will not be equivalent to a neutrality, which will render them stronger and more dangerous in the sight of the Whites. I have spoken."

"Yes," Loyal Heart said, "you have spoken well, Tranquil. The opinion you have offered is the only one the Comanches ought to follow, an interference on their part would be an act of deplorable folly, which the Sachems would soon regret having committed."

Black-deer had carefully listened to the Canadian's speech, and it appeared to have produced a certain impression on him; he listened in the same way to Loyal Heart, and when the latter had ceased speaking, the Chief remained thoughtful for a while, and then replied —

"I am pleased with the words of my brothers, for they prove to me that I regarded the situation correctly. I gave the council of the Chiefs the same advice my brothers just offered. My brothers have spoken like wise men, I thank them."

"I am ready to support in council," Loyal Heart remarked, "the opinions the white hunter has offered, for they are the only ones which should prevail."

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