Reid Mayne

The Headless Horseman: A Strange Tale of Texas

Mayne Reid

The Headless Horseman: A Strange Tale of Texas

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=23151363
The Headless Horseman: A Strange Tale of Texas:

Содержание

Reid Mayne
The Headless Horseman: A Strange Tale of Texas

Prologue

The stag of Texas, reclining in midnight lair, is startled from his slumbers by the hoofstroke of a horse.

He does not forsake his covert, nor yet rise to his feet. His domain is shared by the wild steeds of the savannah, given to nocturnal straying. He only uprears his head; and, with antlers o'ertopping the tall grass, listens for a repetition of the sound.

Again is the hoofstroke heard, but with altered intonation. There is a ring of metal – the clinking of steel against stone.

The sound, significant to the ear of the stag, causes a quick change in his air and attitude. Springing clear of his couch, and bounding a score of yards across the prairie, he pauses to look back upon the disturber of his dreams.

In the clear moonlight of a southern sky, he recognises the most ruthless of his enemies – man. One is approaching upon horseback.

Yielding to instinctive dread, he is about to resume his flight: when something in the appearance of the horseman – some

unnatural seeming – holds him transfixed to the spot.

With haunches in quivering contact with the sward, and frontlet faced to the rear, he continues to gaze – his large brown eyes straining upon the intruder in a mingled expression of fear and bewilderment.

What has challenged the stag to such protracted scrutiny?

The horse is perfect in all its parts – a splendid steed, saddled, bridled, and otherwise completely caparisoned. In it there appears nothing amiss – nothing to produce either wonder or alarm. But the man – the rider? Ah! About him there *is* something to cause both – something weird – something *wanting*!

By heavens! it is the head!

Even the unreasoning animal can perceive this; and, after gazing a moment with wildered eyes – wondering what abnormal monster thus mocks its cervine intelligence – terror-stricken it continues its retreat; nor again pauses, till it has plunged through the waters of the Leona, and placed the current of the stream between itself and the ghastly intruder.

Heedless of the affrighted deer – either of its presence, or precipitate flight – the Headless Horseman rides on.

He, too, is going in the direction of the river. Unlike the stag, he does not seem pressed for time; but advances in a slow, tranquil pace: so silent as to seem ceremonious.

Apparently absorbed in solemn thought, he gives free rein to his steed: permitting the animal, at intervals, to snatch a mouthful

of the herbage growing by the way. Nor does he, by voice or gesture, urge it impatiently onward, when the howl-bark of the prairie-wolf causes it to fling its head on high, and stand snorting in its tracks.

He appears to be under the influence of some all-absorbing emotion, from which no common incident can awake him. There is no speech – not a whisper – to betray its nature. The startled stag, his own horse, the wolf, and the midnight moon, are the sole witnesses of his silent abstraction.

His shoulders shrouded under a *serapé*, one edge of which, flirted up by the wind, displays a portion of his figure: his limbs encased in "water-guards" of jaguar-skin: thus sufficiently sheltered against the dews of the night, or the showers of a tropical sky, he rides on – silent as the stars shining above, unconcerned as the cicada that chirrups in the grass beneath, or the prairie breeze playing with the drapery of his dress.

Something at length appears to rouse from his reverie, and stimulate him to greater speed – his steed, at the same time. The latter, tossing up its head, gives utterance to a joyous neigh; and, with outstretched neck, and spread nostrils, advances in a gait gradually increasing to a canter. The proximity of the river explains the altered pace.

The horse halts not again, till the crystal current is surging against his flanks, and the legs of his rider are submerged knee-deep under the surface.

The animal eagerly assuages its thirst; crosses to the opposite

side; and, with vigorous stride, ascends the sloping bank.

Upon the crest occurs a pause: as if the rider tarried till his steed should shake the water from its flanks. There is a rattling of saddle-flaps, and stirrup-leathers, resembling thunder, amidst a cloud of vapour, white as the spray of a cataract.

Out of this self-constituted *nimbus*, the Headless Horseman emerges; and moves onward, as before.

Apparently pricked by the spur, and guided by the rein, of his rider, the horse no longer strays from the track; but steps briskly forward, as if upon a path already trodden.

A treeless savannah stretches before – selvedged by the sky. Outlined against the azure is seen the imperfect centaurean shape gradually dissolving in the distance, till it becomes lost to view, under the mystic gloaming of the moonlight!

Chapter One.
The Burnt Prairie

On the great plain of Texas, about a hundred miles southward from the old Spanish town of San Antonio de Bejar, the noonday sun is shedding his beams from a sky of cerulean brightness. Under the golden light appears a group of objects, but little in unison with the landscape around them: since they betoken the presence of human beings, in a spot where there is no sign of human habitation.

The objects in question are easily identified – even at a great distance. They are waggons; each covered with its ribbed and rounded tilt of snow-white "Osnaburgh."

There are ten of them – scarce enough to constitute a "caravan" of traders, nor yet a "government train." They are more likely the individual property of an emigrant; who has landed upon the coast, and is wending his way to one of the late-formed settlements on the Leona.

Slowly crawling across the savannah, it could scarce be told that they are in motion; but for their relative-position, in long serried line, indicating the order of march.

The dark bodies between each two declare that the teams are attached; and that they are making progress is proved, by the retreating antelope, scared from its noonday *siesta*, and the long-

shanked curlew, rising with a screech from the sward – both bird and beast wondering at the string of strange *behemoths*, thus invading their wilderness domain.

Elsewhere upon the prairie, no movement may be detected – either of bird or quadruped. It is the time of day when all tropical life becomes torpid, or seeks repose in the shade; man alone, stimulated by the love of gain, or the promptings of ambition, disregarding the laws of nature, and defying the fervour of the sun.

So seems it with the owner of the tilted train; who, despite the relaxing influence of the fierce mid-day heat, keeps moving on.

That he is an emigrant – and not one of the ordinary class – is evidenced in a variety of ways. The ten large waggons of Pittsburgh build, each hauled by eight able-bodied mules; their miscellaneous contents: plenteous provisions, articles of costly furniture, even of *luxe*, live stock in the shape of coloured women and children; the groups of black and yellow bondsmen, walking alongside, or straggling foot-sore in the rear; the light travelling carriage in the lead, drawn by a span of sleek-coated Kentucky mules, and driven by a black Jehu, sweltering in a suit of livery; all bespeak, not a poor Northern-States settler in search of a new home, but a rich Southerner who has already purchased one, and is on his way to take possession of it.

And this is the exact story of the train. It is the property of a planter who has landed at Indianola, on the Gulf of Matagorda; and is now travelling overland —*en route* for his destination.

In the *cortège* that accompanies it, riding habitually at its head, is the planter himself – Woodley Poindexter – a tall thin man of fifty, with a slightly sallowish complexion, and aspect proudly severe. He is simply though not inexpensively clad: in a loosely fitting frock of alpaca cloth, a waistcoat of black satin, and trousers of nankin. A shirt of finest linen shows its plaits through the opening of his vest – its collar embraced by a piece of black ribbon; while the shoe, resting in his stirrup, is of finest tanned leather. His features are shaded by a broad-brimmed Leghorn hat.

Two horsemen are riding alongside – one on his right, the other on the left – a stripling scarce twenty, and a young man six or seven years older. The former is his son – a youth, whose open cheerful countenance contrasts, not only with the severe aspect of his father, but with the somewhat sinister features on the other side, and which belong to his cousin.

The youth is dressed in a French blouse of sky-coloured "cottonade," with trousers of the same material; a most appropriate costume for a southern climate, and which, with the Panama hat upon his head, is equally becoming.

The cousin, an ex-officer of volunteers, affects a military undress of dark blue cloth, with a forage cap to correspond.

There is another horseman riding near, who, only on account of having a white skin – not white for all that – is entitled to description. His coarser features, and cheaper habiliments; the keel-coloured "cowhide" clutched in his right hand, and flirted

with such evident skill, proclaim him the overseer – and whipper up – of the swarthy pedestrians composing the *entourage* of the train.

The travelling carriage, which is a "carriole" – a sort of cross between a Jersey waggon and a barouche – has two occupants. One is a young lady of the whitest skin; the other a girl of the blackest. The former is the daughter of Woodley Poindexter – his only daughter. She of the sable complexion is the young lady's handmaid.

The emigrating party is from the "coast" of the Mississippi – from Louisiana. The planter is not himself a native of this State – in other words a *Creole*; but the type is exhibited in the countenance of his son – still more in that fair face, seen occasionally through the curtains of the carriole, and whose delicate features declare descent from one of those endorsed damsels —*filles à la casette*– who, more than a hundred years ago, came across the Atlantic provided with proofs of their virtue – in the *casket*!

A grand sugar planter of the South is Woodley Poindexter; one of the highest and haughtiest of his class; one of the most profuse in aristocratic hospitalities: hence the necessity of forsaking his Mississippian home, and transferring himself and his "penates," – with only a remnant of his "niggers," – to the wilds of south-western Texas.

The sun is upon the meridian line, and almost in the zenith. The travellers tread upon their own shadows. Enervated by

the excessive heat, the white horsemen sit silently in their saddles. Even the dusky pedestrians, less sensible to its influence, have ceased their garrulous "gumbo;" and, in straggling groups, shamble listlessly along in the rear of the waggons.

The silence – solemn as that of a funereal procession – is interrupted only at intervals by the pistol-like crack of a whip, or the loud "wo-ha," delivered in deep baritone from the thick lips of some sable teamster.

Slowly the train moves on, as if groping its way. There is no regular road. The route is indicated by the wheel-marks of some vehicles that have passed before – barely conspicuous, by having crushed the culms of the shot grass.

Notwithstanding the slow progress, the teams are doing their best. The planter believes himself within less than twenty miles of the end of his journey. He hopes to reach it before night: hence the march continued through the mid-day heat.

Unexpectedly the drivers are directed to pull up, by a sign from the overseer; who has been riding a hundred yards in the advance, and who is seen to make a sudden stop – as if some obstruction had presented itself.

He comes trotting back towards the train. His gestures tell of something amiss. What is it?

There has been much talk about Indians – of a probability of their being encountered in this quarter.

Can it be the red-skinned marauders? Scarcely: the gestures of the overseer do not betray actual alarm.

"What is it, Mr Sansom?" asked the planter, as the man rode up.

"The grass air burnt. The prairy's been afire."

"*Been* on fire! Is it on fire *now*?" hurriedly inquired the owner of the waggons, with an apprehensive glance towards the travelling carriage. "Where? I see no smoke!"

"No, sir – no," stammered the overseer, becoming conscious that he had caused unnecessary alarm; "I didn't say it air afire now: only thet it hez been, an the hul ground air as black as the ten o' spades."

"Ta – tat! what of that? I suppose we can travel over a black prairie, as safely as a green one?

"What nonsense of you, Josh Sansom, to raise such a row about nothing – frightening people out of their senses! Ho! there, you niggers! Lay the leather to your teams, and let the train proceed. Whip up! – whip up!"

"But, Captain Calhoun," protested the overseer, in response to the gentleman who had reproached him in such chaste terms; "how air we to find the way?"

"Find the way! What are you raving about? We haven't lost it – have we?"

"I'm afeerd we hev, though. The wheel-tracks ain't no longer to be seen. They're burnt out, along wi' the grass."

"What matters that? I reckon we can cross a piece of scorched prairie, without wheel-marks to guide us? We'll find them again on the other side."

"Ye-es," naïvely responded the overseer, who, although a "down-easter," had been far enough west to have learnt something of frontier life; "if theer air any other side. I kedn't see it out o' the seddle – ne'er a sign o' it."

"Whip up, niggers! whip up!" shouted Calhoun, without heeding the remark; and spurring onwards, as a sign that the order was to be obeyed.

The teams are again set in motion; and, after advancing to the edge of the burnt tract, without instructions from any one, are once more brought to a stand.

The white men on horseback draw together for a consultation. There is need: as all are satisfied by a single glance directed to the ground before them.

Far as the eye can reach the country is of one uniform colour – black as Erebus. There is nothing green – not a blade of grass – not a reed nor weed!

It is after the summer solstice. The ripened culms of the *gramineae*, and the stalks of the prairie flowers, have alike crumbled into dust under the devastating breath of fire.

In front – on the right and left – to the utmost verge of vision extends the scene of desolation. Over it the cerulean sky is changed to a darker blue; the sun, though clear of clouds, seems to scowl rather than shine – as if reciprocating the frown of the earth.

The overseer has made a correct report – there is no trail visible. The action of the fire, as it raged among the ripe grass,

has eliminated the impression of the wheels hitherto indicating the route. “What are we to do?”

The planter himself put this inquiry, in a tone that told of a vacillating spirit.

“Do, uncle Woodley! What else but keep straight on? The river must be on the other side? If we don’t hit the crossing, to a half mile or so, we can go up, or down the bank – as the case may require.”

“But, Cassius: if we should lose our way?”

“We can’t. There’s but a patch of this, I suppose? If we do go a little astray, we must come out somewhere – on one side, or the other.”

“Well, nephew, you know best: I shall be guided by you.”

“No fear, uncle. I’ve made my way out of a worse fix than this. Drive on, niggers! Keep straight after *me*.”

The ex-officer of volunteers, casting a conceited glance towards the travelling carriage – through the curtains of which appears a fair face, slightly shadowed with anxiety – gives the spur to his horse; and with confident air trots onward.

A chorus of whipcracks is succeeded by the trampling of fourscore mules, mingled with the clanking of wheels against their hubs. The waggon-train is once more in motion.

The mules step out with greater rapidity. The sable surface, strange to their eyes, excites them to brisker action – causing them to raise the hoof, as soon as it touches the turf. The younger animals show fear – snorting, as they advance.

In time their apprehensions become allayed; and, taking the cue from their older associates, they move on steadily as before.

A mile or more is made, apparently in a direct line from the point of starting. Then there is a halt. The self-appointed guide has ordered it. He has reined up his horse; and is sitting in the saddle with less show of confidence. He appears to be puzzled about the direction.

The landscape – if such it may be called – has assumed a change; though not for the better. It is still sable as ever, to the verge of the horizon. But the surface is no longer a plain: it *rolls*. There are ridges – gentle undulations – with valleys between. They are not entirely treeless – though nothing that may be termed a tree is in sight. There have been such, before the fire —*algarobias, mezquites*, and others of the acacia family – standing solitary, or in copses. Their light pinnate foliage has disappeared like flax before the flame. Their existence is only evidenced by charred trunks, and blackened boughs.

"You've lost the way, nephew?" said the planter, riding rapidly up.

"No uncle – not yet. I've only stopped to have a look. It must lie in this direction – down that valley. Let them drive on. We're going all right – I'll answer for it."

Once more in motion – adown the slope – then along the valley – then up the acclivity of another ridge – and then there is a second stoppage upon its crest.

"You've lost the way, Cash?" said the planter, coming up and

repeating his former observation.

"Damned if I don't believe I have, uncle!" responded the nephew, in a tone of not very respectful mistrust. "Anyhow; who the devil could find his way out of an ashpit like this? No, no!" he continued, reluctant to betray his embarrassment as the carriole came up. "I see now. We're all right yet. The river must be in this direction. Come on!"

On goes the guide, evidently irresolute. On follow the sable teamsters, who, despite their stolidity, do not fail to note some signs of vacillation. They can tell that they are no longer advancing in a direct line; but circuitously among the copses, and across the glades that stretch between.

All are gratified by a shout from the conductor, announcing recovered confidence. In response there is a universal explosion of whipcord, with joyous exclamations.

Once more they are stretching their teams along a travelled road – where a half-score of wheeled vehicles must have passed before them. And not long before: the wheel-tracks are of recent impress – the hoof-prints of the animals fresh as if made within the hour. A train of waggons, not unlike their own, must have passed over the burnt prairie!

Like themselves, it could only be going towards the Leona: perhaps some government convoy on its way to Fort Inge? In that case they have only to keep in the same track. The Fort is on the line of their march – but a short distance beyond the point where their journey is to terminate.

Nothing could be more opportune. The guide, hitherto perplexed – though without acknowledging it – is at once relieved of all anxiety; and with a fresh exhibition of conceit, orders the route to be resumed.

For a mile or more the waggon-tracks are followed – not in a direct line, but bending about among the skeleton copses. The countenance of Cassius Calhoun, for a while wearing a confident look, gradually becomes clouded. It assumes the profoundest expression of despondency, on discovering that the four-and-forty wheel-tracks he is following, have been made by ten Pittsburgh waggons, and a carriole – the same that are now following him, and in whose company he has been travelling *all the way from the Gulf of Matagorda*!

Chapter Two.
The Trail of the Lazo

Beyond doubt, the waggons of Woodley Poindexter were going over ground already traced by the tiring of their wheels.

"Our own tracks!" muttered Calhoun on making the discovery, adding a fierce oath as he reined up.

"Our own tracks! What mean you, Cassius? You don't say we've been travelling – "

"On our own tracks. I do, uncle; that very thing. We must have made a complete circumbendibus of it. See! here's the hind hoof of my own horse, with half a shoe off; and there's the foot of the niggers. Besides, I can tell the ground. That's the very hill we went down as we left our last stopping place. Hang the crooked luck! We've made a couple of miles for nothing."

Embarrassment is no longer the only expression upon the face of the speaker. It has deepened to chagrin, with an admixture of shame. It is through him that the train is without a regular guide. One, engaged at Indianola, had piloted them to their last camping place. There, in consequence of some dispute, due to the surly temper of the ex-captain of volunteers, the man had demanded his dismissal, and gone back.

For this – as also for an ill-timed display of confidence in his power to conduct the march – is the planter's nephew now

suffering under a sense of shame. He feels it keenly as the carriole comes up, and bright eyes become witnesses of his discomfiture.

Poindexter does not repeat his inquiry. That the road is lost is a fact evident to all. Even the barefooted or "broganned" pedestrians have recognised their long-heeled footprints, and become aware that they are for the second time treading upon the same ground.

There is a general halt, succeeded by an animated conversation among the white men. The situation is serious: the planter himself believes it to be so. He cannot that day reach the end of his journey – a thing upon which he had set his mind.

That is the very least misfortune that can befall them. There are others possible, and probable. There are perils upon the burnt plain. They may be compelled to spend the night upon it, with no water for their animals. Perhaps a second day and night – or longer – who can tell how long?

How are they to find their way? The sun is beginning to descend; though still too high in heaven to indicate his line of declination. By waiting a while they may discover the quarters of the compass.

But to what purpose? The knowledge of east, west, north, and south can avail nothing now: they have lost their *line of march*.

Calhoun has become cautious. He no longer volunteers to point out the path. He hesitates to repeat his pioneering experiments – after such manifest and shameful failure.

A ten minutes' discussion terminates in nothing. No one can

suggest a feasible plan of proceeding. No one knows how to escape from the embrace of that dark desert, which appears to cloud not only the sun and sky, but the countenances of all who enter within its limits.

A flock of black vultures is seen flying afar off. They come nearer, and nearer. Some alight upon the ground – others hover above the heads of the strayed travellers. Is there a boding in the behaviour of the birds?

Another ten minutes is spent in the midst of moral and physical gloom. Then, as if by a benignant mandate from heaven, does cheerfulness re-assume its sway. The cause? A horseman riding in the direction of the train!

An unexpected sight: who could have looked for human being in such a place? All eyes simultaneously sparkle with joy; as if, in the approach of the horseman, they beheld the advent of a saviour!

"He's coming this way, is he not?" inquired the planter, scarce confident in his failing sight.

"Yes, father; straight as he can ride," replied Henry, lifting the hat from his head, and waving it on high: the action accompanied by a shout intended to attract the horseman.

The signal was superfluous. The stranger had already sighted the halted waggons; and, riding towards them at a gallop, was soon within speaking distance.

He did not draw bridle, until he had passed the train; and arrived upon the spot occupied by the planter and his party.

"A Mexican!" whispered Henry, drawing his deduction from the habiliments of the horseman.

"So much the better," replied Poindexter, in the same tone of voice; "he'll be all the more likely to know the road."

"Not a bit of Mexican about him," muttered Calhoun, "excepting the rig. I'll soon see. *Buenos dias, cavallero! Esta V. Mexicano*?" (Good day, sir! are you a Mexican?)

"No, indeed," replied the stranger, with a protesting smile. "Anything but that. I can speak to you in Spanish, if you prefer it; but I dare say you will understand me better in English: which, I presume, is your native tongue?"

Calhoun, suspecting that he had spoken indifferent Spanish, or indifferently pronounced it, refrains from making rejoinder.

"*American*, sir," replied Poindexter, his national pride feeling slightly piqued. Then, as if fearing to offend the man from whom he intended asking a favour, he added: "Yes, sir; we are all Americans – from the *Southern States*."

"That I can perceive by your following." An expression of contempt – scarce perceptible – showed itself upon the countenance of the speaker, as his eye rested upon the groups of black bondsmen. "I can perceive, too," he added, "that you are strangers to prairie travelling. You have lost your way?"

"We have, sir; and have very little prospect of recovering it, unless we may count upon your kindness to direct us."

"Not much kindness in that. By the merest chance I came upon your trail, as I was crossing the prairie. I saw you were going

astray; and have ridden this way to set you right."

"It is very good of you. We shall be most thankful, sir. My name is Poindexter – Woodley Poindexter, of Louisiana. I have purchased a property on the Leona river, near Fort Inge. We were in hopes of reaching it before nightfall. Can we do so?"

"There is nothing to hinder you: if you follow the instructions I shall give."

On saying this, the stranger rode a few paces apart; and appeared to scrutinise the country – as if to determine the direction which the travellers should take.

Poised conspicuously upon the crest of the ridge, horse and man presented a picture worthy of skilful delineation.

A steed, such as might have been ridden by an Arab sheik – blood-bay in colour – broad in counter – with limbs clean as culms of cane, and hips of elliptical outline, continued into a magnificent tail sweeping rearward like a rainbow: on his back a rider – a young man of not more than five-and-twenty – of noble form and features; habited in the picturesque costume of a Mexican *ranchero*– spencer jacket of velveteen —*calzoneros* laced along the seams —*calzoncillos* of snow-white lawn —*botas* of buff leather, heavily spurred at the heels – around the waist a scarf of scarlet crape; and on his head a hat of black glaze, banded with gold bullion. Picture to yourself a horseman thus habited; seated in a deep tree-saddle, of Moorish shape and Mexican manufacture, with housings of leather stamped in antique patterns, such as were worn by the caparisoned steeds

of the Conquistadores; picture to yourself such a *cavallero*, and you will have before your mind's eye a counterpart of him, upon whom the planter and his people were gazing.

Through the curtains of the travelling carriage he was regarded with glances that spoke of a singular sentiment. For the first time in her life, Louise Poindexter looked upon that – hitherto known only to her imagination – a man of heroic mould. Proud might he have been, could he have guessed the interest which his presence was exciting in the breast of the young Creole.

He could not, and did not. He was not even aware of her existence. He had only glanced at the dust-bedaubed vehicle in passing – as one might look upon the rude incrustation of an oyster, without suspecting that a precious pearl may lie gleaming inside.

"By my faith!" he declared, facing round to the owner of the waggons, "I can discover no landmarks for you to steer by. For all that, I can find the way myself. You will have to cross the Leona five miles below the Fort; and, as I have to go by the crossing myself, *you* can follow the tracks of my horse. Good day, gentlemen!"

Thus abruptly bidding adieu, he pressed the spur against the side of his steed; and started off at a gallop.

An unexpected – almost uncourteous departure! So thought the planter and his people.

They had no time to make observations upon it, before the stranger was seen returning towards them!

In ten seconds he was again in their presence – all listening to learn what had brought him back.

"I fear the tracks of my horse may prove of little service to you. The *mustangs* have been this way, since the fire. They have made hoof-marks by the thousand. Mine are shod; but, as you are not accustomed to trailing, you may not be able to distinguish them – the more so, that in these dry ashes all horse-tracks are so nearly alike."

"What are we to do?" despairingly asked the planter.

"I am sorry, Mr Poindexter, I cannot stay to conduct you, I am riding express, with a despatch for the Fort. If you *should* lose my trail, keep the sun on your right shoulders: so that your shadows may fall to the left, at an angle of about fifteen degrees to your line of march. Go straight forward for about five miles. You will then come in sight of the top of a tall tree – a *cypress*. You will know it by its leaves being *in the red*. Head direct for this tree. It stands on the bank of the river; and close by is the crossing."

The young horseman, once more drawing up his reins, was about to ride off; when something caused him to linger. It was a pair of dark lustrous eyes – observed by him for the first time – glancing through the curtains of the travelling carriage.

Their owner was in shadow; but there was light enough to show that they were set in a countenance of surpassing loveliness. He perceived, moreover, that they were turned upon himself – fixed, as he fancied, in an expression that betokened interest – almost tenderness!

He returned it with an involuntary glance of admiration, which he made but an awkward attempt to conceal. Lest it might be mistaken for rudeness, he suddenly faced round; and once more addressed himself to the planter – who had just finished thanking him for his civility.

"I am but ill deserving thanks," was his rejoinder, "thus to leave you with a chance of losing your way. But, as I've told you, my time is measured."

The despatch-bearer consulted his watch – as though not a little reluctant to travel alone.

"You are very kind, sir," said Poindexter; "but with the directions you have given us, I think we shall be able to manage. The sun will surely show us – "

"No: now I look at the sky, it will not. There are clouds looming up on the north. In an hour, the sun may be obscured – at all events, before you can get within sight of the cypress. It will not do. Stay!" he continued, after a reflective pause, "I have a better plan still: *follow the trail of my lazo*!"

While speaking, he had lifted the coiled rope from his saddlebow, and flung the loose end to the earth – the other being secured to a ring in the pommel. Then raising his hat in graceful salutation – more than half directed towards the travelling carriage – he gave the spur to his steed; and once more bounded off over the prairie.

The lazo, lengthening out, tightened over the hips of his horse; and, dragging a dozen yards behind, left a line upon the cinereous

surface – as if some slender serpent had been making its passage across the plain.

"An exceedingly curious fellow!" remarked the planter, as they stood gazing after the horseman, fast becoming hidden behind a cloud of sable dust. "I ought to have asked him his name?"

"An exceedingly conceited fellow, I should say," muttered Calhoun; who had not failed to notice the glance sent by the stranger in the direction of the carriole, nor that which had challenged it. "As to his name, I don't think it matters much. It mightn't be his own he would give you. Texas is full of such swells, who take new names when they get here – by way of improvement, if for no better reason."

"Come, cousin Cash," protested young Poindexter; "you are unjust to the stranger. He appears to be educated – in fact, a gentleman – worthy of bearing the best of names, I should say."

"A gentleman! Deuced unlikely: rigged out in that fanfaron fashion. I never saw a man yet, that took to a Mexican dress, who wasn't a *Jack*. He's one, I'll be bound."

During this brief conversation, the fair occupant of the carriole was seen to bend forward; and direct a look of evident interest, after the form of the horseman fast receding from her view.

To this, perhaps, might have been traced the acrimony observable in the speech of Calhoun.

"What is it, Loo?" he inquired, riding close up to the carriage,

and speaking in a voice not loud enough to be heard by the others. "You appear impatient to go forward? Perhaps you'd like to ride off along with that swaggering fellow? It isn't too late: I'll lend you my horse."

The young girl threw herself back upon the seat – evidently displeased, both by the speech and the tone in which it was delivered. But her displeasure, instead of expressing itself in a frown, or in the shape of an indignant rejoinder, was concealed under a guise far more galling to him who had caused it. A clear ringing laugh was the only reply vouchsafed to him.

"So, so! I thought there must be something – by the way you behaved yourself in his presence. You looked as if you would have relished a *tête-à-tête* with this showy despatch-bearer. Taken with his stylish dress, I suppose? Fine feathers make fine birds. His are borrowed. I may strip them off some day, along with a little of the skin that's under them."

"For shame, Cassius! your words are a scandal!"

"'Tis you should think of scandal, Loo! To let your thoughts turn on a common scamp – a masquerading fellow like that! No doubt the letter carrier, employed by the officers at the Fort!"

"A letter carrier, you think? Oh, how I should like to get love letters by such a postman!"

"You had better hasten on, and tell him so. My horse is at your service."

"Ha! ha! ha! What a simpleton you show yourself! Suppose, for jesting's sake, I *did* have a fancy to overtake this prairie

postman! It couldn't be done upon that dull steed of yours: not a bit of it! At the rate he is going, he and his blood-bay will be out of sight before you could change saddles for me. Oh, no! he's not to be overtaken by me, however much I might like it; and perhaps I *might like it*!"

"Don't let your father hear you talk in that way."

"Don't let him hear *you* talk in that way," retorted the young lady, for the first time speaking in a serious strain. "Though you *are* my cousin, and papa may think you the pink of perfection, I don't – not I! I never told you I did – did I?" A frown, evidently called forth by some unsatisfactory reflection, was the only reply to this tantalising interrogative.

"You *are* my cousin," she continued, in a tone that contrasted strangely with the levity she had already exhibited, "but you are nothing more – nothing more – Captain Cassius Calhoun! You have no claim to be my counsellor. There is but one from whom I am in duty bound to take advice, or bear reproach. I therefore beg of you, Master Cash, that you will not again presume to repeat such sentiments – as those you have just favoured me with. I shall remain mistress of my own thoughts – and actions, too – till I have found a master who can control them. It is not you!"

Having delivered this speech, with eyes flashing – half angrily, half contemptuously – upon her cousin, the young Creole once more threw herself back upon the cushions of the carriole.

The closing curtains admonished the ex-officer, that further conversation was not desired.

Quailing under the lash of indignant innocence, he was only too happy to hear the loud “gee-on” of the teamsters, as the waggons commenced moving over the sombre surface – not more sombre than his own thoughts.

Chapter Three.
The Prairie Finger-Post

The travellers felt no further uneasiness about the route. The snake-like trail was continuous; and so plain that a child might have followed it.

It did not run in a right line, but meandering among the thickets; at times turning out of the way, in places where the ground was clear of timber. This had evidently been done with an intent to avoid obstruction to the waggons: since at each of these windings the travellers could perceive that there were breaks, or other inequalities, in the surface.

"How very thoughtful of the young fellow!" remarked Poindexter. "I really feel regret at not having asked for his name. If he belong to the Fort, we shall see him again."

"No doubt of it," assented his son. "I hope we shall."

His daughter, reclining in shadow, overheard the conjectural speech, as well as the rejoinder. She said nothing; but her glance towards Henry seemed to declare that her heart fondly echoed the hope.

Cheered by the prospect of soon terminating a toilsome journey – as also by the pleasant anticipation of beholding, before sunset, his new purchase – the planter was in one of his happiest moods. His aristocratic bosom was moved by an

unusual amount of condescension, to all around him. He chatted familiarly with his overseer; stopped to crack a joke with "Uncle" Scipio, hobbling along on blistered heels; and encouraged "Aunt" Chloe in the transport of her piccaninny.

"Marvellous!" might the observer exclaim – misled by such exceptional interludes, so pathetically described by the scribblers in Lucifer's pay – "what a fine patriarchal institution is slavery, after all! After all we have said and done to abolish it! A waste of sympathy – sheer philanthropic folly to attempt the destruction of this ancient edifice – worthy corner-stone to a 'chivalric' nation! Oh, ye abolition fanatics! why do ye clamour against it? Know ye not that some must suffer – must work and starve – that others may enjoy the luxury of idleness? That some must be slaves, that others may be free?"

Such arguments – at which a world might weep – have been of late but too often urged. Woe to the man who speaks, and the nation that gives ear to them!

The planter's high spirits were shared by his party, Calhoun alone excepted. They were reflected in the faces of his black bondsmen, who regarded him as the source, and dispenser, of their happiness, or misery – omnipotent – next to God. They loved him less than God, and feared him more; though he was by no means a bad master – that is, *by comparison*. He did not absolutely take delight in torturing them. He liked to see them well fed and clad – their epidermis shining with the exudation of its own oil. These signs bespoke the importance of their

proprietor – himself. He was satisfied to let them off with an occasional "cow-hiding" – salutary, he would assure you; and in all his "stock" there was not one black skin marked with the mutilations of vengeance – a proud boast for a Mississippian slave-owner, and more than most could truthfully lay claim to.

In the presence of such an exemplary owner, no wonder that the cheerfulness was universal – or that the slaves should partake of their master's joy, and give way to their garrulity.

It was not destined that this joyfulness should continue to the end of their journey. It was after a time interrupted – not suddenly, nor by any fault on the part of those indulging in it, but by causes and circumstances over which they had not the slightest control.

As the stranger had predicted: the sun ceased to be visible, before the cypress came in sight.

There was nothing in this to cause apprehension. The line of the lazo was conspicuous as ever; and they needed no guidance from the sun: only that his cloud-eclipse produced a corresponding effect upon their spirits.

"One might suppose it close upon nightfall," observed the planter, drawing out his gold repeater, and glancing at its dial; "and yet it's only three o'clock! Lucky the young fellow has left us such a sure guide. But for him, we might have floundered among these ashes till sundown; perhaps have been compelled to sleep upon them."

"A black bed it would be," jokingly rejoined Henry, with

the design of rendering the conversation more cheerful. “Ugh! I should have such ugly dreams, were I to sleep upon it.”

“And I, too,” added his sister, protruding her pretty face through the curtains, and taking a survey of the surrounding scene: “I’m sure I should dream of Tartarus, and Pluto, and Proserpine, and – ”

“Hya! hya! hya!” grinned the black Jehu, on the box – enrolled in the plantation books as *Pluto Poindexter*– “De young missa dream ’bout *me* in de mids’ ob dis brack praira! Golly! dat am a good joke – berry! Hya! hya! hya!”

“Don’t be too sure, all of ye,” said the surly nephew, at this moment coming up, and taking part in the conversation – “don’t be too sure that you won’t have to make your beds upon it yet. I hope it may be no worse.”

“What mean you, Cash?” inquired the uncle.

“I mean, uncle, that that fellow’s been misleading us. I won’t say it for certain; but it looks ugly. We’ve come more than five miles – six, I should say – and where’s the tree? I’ve examined the horizon, with a pair of as good eyes as most have got, I reckon; and there isn’t such a thing in sight.”

“But why should the stranger have deceived us?”

“Ah – why? That’s just it. There may be more reasons than one.”

“Give us one, then!” challenged a silvery voice from the carriole. “We’re all ears to hear it!”

“You’re all ears to take in everything that’s told you by a

stranger," sneeringly replied Calhoun. "I suppose if I gave my reason, you'd be so charitable as to call it a false alarm!"

"That depends on its character, Master Cassius. I think you might venture to try us. We scarcely expect a false alarm from a soldier, as well as traveller, of your experience."

Calhoun felt the taunt; and would probably have withheld the communication he had intended to make, but for Poindexter himself.

"Come, Cassius, explain yourself!" demanded the planter, in a tone of respectful authority. "You have said enough to excite something more than curiosity. For what reason should the young fellow be leading us astray?"

"Well, uncle," answered the ex-officer, retreating a little from his original accusation, "I haven't said for certain that he *is*; only that it looks like it."

"In what way?"

"Well, one don't know what may happen. Travelling parties as strong, and stronger than we, have been attacked on these plains, and plundered of every thing – murdered."

"Mercy!" exclaimed Louise, in a tone of terror, more affected than real.

"By Indians," replied Poindexter.

"Ah – Indians, indeed! Sometimes it may be; and sometimes, too, they may be whites who play at that game – not all Mexican whites, neither. It only needs a bit of brown paint; a horsehair wig, with half a dozen feathers stuck into it; that, and plenty

of hullabalooing. If we were to be robbed by a party of *white* Indians, it wouldn't be the first time the thing's been done. We as good as half deserve it – for our greenness, in trusting too much to a stranger."

"Good heavens, nephew! this is a serious accusation. Do you mean to say that the despatch-rider – if he be one – is leading us into – into an ambuscade?"

"No, uncle; I don't say that. I only say that such things have been done; and it's possible he *may*."

"But not *probable*," emphatically interposed the voice from the carriole, in a tone tauntingly quizzical.

"No!" exclaimed the stripling Henry, who, although riding a few paces ahead, had overheard the conversation. "Your suspicions are unjust, cousin Cassius. I pronounce them a calumny. What's more, I can prove them so. Look there!"

The youth had reined up his horse, and was pointing to an object placed conspicuously by the side of the path; which, before speaking, he had closely scrutinised. It was a tall plant of the *columnar cactus*, whose green succulent stem had escaped scathing by the fire.

It was not to the plant itself that Henry Poindexter directed the attention of his companions; but to a small white disc, of the form of a parallelogram, impaled upon one of its spines. No one accustomed to the usages of civilised life could mistake the "card." It was one.

"Hear what's written upon it!" continued the young man,

riding nearer, and reading aloud the directions pencilled upon the bit of pasteboard.

"The cypress in sight!"

"Where?" inquired Poindexter.

"There's a hand," rejoined Henry, "with a finger pointing – no doubt in the direction of the tree."

All eyes were instantly turned towards the quarter of the compass, indicated by the cipher on the card.

Had the sun been shining, the cypress might have been seen at the first glance. As it was, the sky – late of cerulean hue – was now of a leaden grey; and no straining of the eyes could detect anything along the horizon resembling the top of a tree.

"There's nothing of the kind," asserted Calhoun, with restored confidence, at the same time returning to his unworthy accusation. "It's only a dodge – another link in the chain of tricks the scamp is playing us."

"You mistake, cousin Cassius," replied that same voice that had so often contradicted him. "Look through this lorgnette! If you haven't lost the sight of those superior eyes of yours, you'll see something *very like a tree*– a tall tree – and a cypress, too, if ever there was one in the swamps of Louisiana."

Calhoun disdained to take the opera glass from the hands of his cousin. He knew it would convict him: for he could not suppose she was telling an untruth.

Poindexter availed himself of its aid; and, adjusting the focus to his failing sight, was enabled to distinguish the red-leafed

cypress, topping up over the edge of the prairie.

"It's true," he said: "the tree is there. The young fellow is honest: you've been wronging him, Cash. I didn't think it likely he should have taken such a queer plan to make fools of us. He there! Mr Sansom! Direct your teamsters to drive on!"

Calhoun, not caring to continue the conversation, nor yet remain longer in company, spitefully spurred his horse, and trotted off over the prairie.

"Let me look at that card, Henry?" said Louise, speaking to her brother in a restrained voice. "I'm curious to see the cipher that has been of such service to us. Bring it away, brother: it can be of no further use where it is – now that we have sighted the tree."

Henry, without the slightest suspicion of his sister's motive for making the request, yielded obedience to it.

Releasing the piece of pasteboard from its impalement, he "chucked" it into her lap.

"*Maurice Gerald*!" muttered the young Creole, after deciphering the name upon the card. "Maurice Gerald!" she repeated, in apostrophic thought, as she deposited the piece of pasteboard in her bosom. "Whoever you are – whence you have come – whither you are going – what you may be —*Henceforth there is a fate between us*! I feel it – I know it – sure as there's a sky above! Oh! how that sky lowers! Am I to take it as a type of this still untraced destiny?"

Chapter Four.
The Black Norther

For some seconds, after surrendering herself to the Sybilline thoughts thus expressed, the young lady sate in silence – her white hands clasped across her temples, as if her whole soul was absorbed in an attempt, either to explain the past, or penetrate the future.

Her reverie – whatever might be its cause – was not of long duration. She was awakened from it, on hearing exclamations without – mingled with words that declared some object of apprehension.

She recognised her brother's voice, speaking in tones that betokened alarm.

"Look, father! don't you see them?"

"Where, Henry – where?"

"Yonder – behind the waggons. You see them now?"

"I do – though I can't say what they are. They look like – like – " Poindexter was puzzled for a simile – "I really don't know what."

"Waterspouts?" suggested the ex-captain, who, at sight of the strange objects, had condescended to rejoin the party around the carriole. "Surely it can't be that? It's too far from the sea. I never heard of their occurring on the prairies."

"They are in motion, whatever they be," said Henry. "See! they keep closing, and then going apart. But for that, one might mistake them for huge obelisks of black marble!"

"Giants, or ghouls!" jokingly suggested Calhoun; "ogres from some other world, who've taken a fancy to have a promenade on this abominable prairie!"

The ex-officer was only humorous with an effort. As well as the others, he was under the influence of an uneasy feeling.

And no wonder. Against the northern horizon had suddenly become upreared a number of ink-coloured columns – half a score of them – unlike anything ever seen before. They were not of regular columnar form, nor fixed in any way; but constantly changing size, shape, and place – now steadfast for a time – now gliding over the charred surface like giants upon skates – anon, bending and balancing towards one another in the most fantastic figurings!

It required no great effort of imagination, to fancy the Titans of old, resuscitated on the prairies of Texas, leading a measure after some wild carousal in the company of Bacchus!

In the proximity of phenomena never observed before – unearthly in their aspect – unknown to every individual of the party – it was but natural these should be inspired with alarm.

And such was the fact. A sense of danger pervaded every bosom. All were impressed with a belief: that they were in the presence of some *peril of the prairies.*

A general halt had been made on first observing the strange

objects: the negroes on foot, as well as the teamsters, giving utterance to shouts of terror. The animals – mules as well as horses, had come instinctively to a stand – the latter neighing and trembling – the former filling the air with their shrill screams.

These were not the only sounds. From the sable towers could be heard a hoarse swishing noise, that resembled the sough of a waterfall – at intervals breaking into reverberations like the roll of musketry, or the detonations of distant thunder!

These noises were gradually growing louder and more distinct. The danger, whatever it might be, was drawing nearer!

Consternation became depicted on the countenances of the travellers, Calhoun's forming no exception. The ex-officer no longer pretended levity. The eyes of all were turned towards the lowering sky, and the band of black columns that appeared coming on to crush them!

At this crisis a shout, reaching their ears from the opposite side, was a source of relief – despite the unmistakable accent of alarm in which it was uttered.

Turning, they beheld a horseman in full gallop – riding direct towards them.

The horse was black as coal: the rider of like hue, even to the skin of his face. For all that he was recognised: as the stranger, upon the trail of whose lazo they had been travelling.

The perceptions of woman are quicker than those of man: the young lady within the carriole was the first to identify him. "Onward!" he cried, as soon as within speaking distance. "On –

on! as fast as you can drive!"

"What is it?" demanded the planter, in bewildered alarm. "Is there a danger?"

"There is. I did not anticipate it, as I passed you. It was only after reaching the river, I saw the sure signs of it."

"Of what, sir?"

"The *norther*."

"You mean the storm of that name?"

"I do."

"I never heard of its being dangerous," interposed Calhoun, "except to vessels at sea. It's precious cold, I know; but – "

"You'll find it worse than cold, sir," interrupted the young horseman, "if you're not quick in getting out of its way. Mr Poindexter," he continued, turning to the planter, and speaking with impatient emphasis, "I tell you, that you and your party are in peril. A norther is not always to be dreaded; but this one – look yonder! You see those black pillars?"

"We've been wondering – didn't know what to make of them."

"They're nothing – only the precursors of the storm. Look beyond! Don't you see a coal-black cloud spreading over the sky? That's what you have to dread. I don't wish to cause you unnecessary alarm: but I tell you, there's death in yonder shadow! It's in motion, and coming this way. You have no chance to escape it, except by speed. If you do not make haste, it will be too late. In ten minutes' time you may be enveloped, and then – quick, sir, I entreat you! Order your drivers to hurry forward as

fast as they can! The sky – heaven itself – commands you!"

The planter did not think of refusing compliance, with an appeal urged in such energetic terms. The order was given for the teams to be set in motion, and driven at top speed.

Terror, that inspired the animals equally with their drivers, rendered superfluous the use of the whip.

The travelling carriage, with the mounted men, moved in front, as before. The stranger alone threw himself in the rear – as if to act as a guard against the threatening danger.

At intervals he was observed to rein up his horse, and look back: each time by his glances betraying increased apprehension.

Perceiving it, the planter approached, and accosted him with the inquiry:

"Is there still a danger?"

"I am sorry to answer you in the affirmative," said he: "I had hopes that the wind might be the other way."

"Wind, sir? There is none – that I can perceive."

"Not here. Yonder it is blowing a hurricane, and this way too – direct. By heavens! it is nearing us rapidly! I doubt if we shall be able to clear the burnt track."

"What is to be done?" exclaimed the planter, terrified by the announcement.

"Are your mules doing their best?"

"They are: they could not be driven faster."

"I fear we shall *be too late, then*!"

As the speaker gave utterance to this gloomy conjecture, he

reined round once more; and sate regarding the cloud columns – as if calculating the rate at which they were advancing.

The lines, contracting around his lips, told of something more than dissatisfaction.

"Yes: too late!" he exclaimed, suddenly terminating his scrutiny. "They are moving faster than we – far faster. There is no hope of our escaping them!"

"Good God, sir! is the danger so great? Can we do nothing to avoid it?"

The stranger did not make immediate reply. For some seconds he remained silent, as if reflecting – his glance no longer turned towards the sky, but wandering among the waggons.

"Is there no chance of escape?" urged the planter, with the impatience of a man in presence of a great peril.

"There is!" joyfully responded the horseman, as if some hopeful thought had at length suggested itself. "There *is a chance*. I did not think of it before. We cannot shun the storm – the danger we may. Quick, Mr Poindexter! Order your men to muffle the mules – the horses too – otherwise the animals will be blinded, and go mad. Blankets – cloaks – anything will do. When that's done, let all seek shelter within the waggons. Let the tilts be closed at the ends. I shall myself look to the travelling carriage."

Having delivered this chapter of instructions – which Poindexter, assisted by the overseer, hastened to direct the execution of – the young horseman galloped towards the front.

"Madame!" said he, reining up alongside the carriole, and

speaking with as much suavity as the circumstances would admit of, "you must close the curtains all round. Your coachman will have to get inside; and you, gentlemen!" he continued, addressing himself to Henry and Calhoun – "and you, sir;" to Poindexter, who had just come up. "There will be room for all. Inside, I beseech you! Lose no time. In a few seconds the storm will be upon us!"

"And you, sir?" inquired the planter, with a show of interest in the man who was making such exertions to secure them against some yet unascertained danger. "What of yourself?"

"Don't waste a moment upon me. I know what's coming. It isn't the first time I have encountered it. In – in, I entreat you! You haven't a second to spare. Listen to that shriek! Quick, or the dust-cloud will be around us!"

The planter and his son sprang together to the ground; and retreated into the travelling carriage.

Calhoun, refusing to dismount, remained stiffly seated in his saddle. Why should *he* skulk from a visionary danger, that did not deter a man in Mexican garb?

The latter turned away; as he did so, directing the overseer to get inside the nearest waggon – a direction which was obeyed with alacrity – and, for the first time, the stranger was left free to take care of himself.

Quickly unfolding his *serapé*– hitherto strapped across the cantle of his saddle – he flung it over the head of his horse. Then, drawing the edges back, he fastened it, bag-fashion, around the

animal's neck. With equal alertness he undid his scarf of China crape; and stretched it around his sombrero – fixing it in such a way, that one edge was held under the bullion band, while the other dropped down over the brim – thus forming a silken visor for his face.

Before finally closing it, he turned once more towards the carriole; and, to his surprise, saw Calhoun still in the saddle. Humanity triumphed over a feeling of incipient aversion.

"Once again, sir, I adjure you to get inside! If you do not you'll have cause to repent it. Within ten minutes' time, you may be a dead man!"

The positive emphasis with which the caution was delivered produced its effect. In the presence of mortal foeman, Cassius Calhoun was no coward. But there was an enemy approaching that was not mortal – not in any way understood. It was already making itself manifest, in tones that resembled thunder – in shadows that mocked the darkness of midnight. Who would not have felt fear at the approach of a destroyer so declaring itself?

The ex-officer was unable to resist the united warnings of earth and heaven; and, slipping out of his saddle with a show of reluctance – intended to save appearances – he clambered into the carriage, and ensconced himself behind the closely-drawn curtains.

To describe what followed is beyond the power of the pen. No eye beheld the spectacle: for none dared look upon it. Even had this been possible, nothing could have been seen. In five minutes

after the muffling of the mules, the train was enveloped in worse than Cimmerian darkness.

The opening scene can alone be depicted: for that only was observed by the travellers. One of the sable columns, moving in the advance, broke as it came in collision with the waggon-tilts. Down came a shower of black dust, as if the sky had commenced raining gunpowder! It was a foretaste of what was to follow.

There was a short interval of open atmosphere – hot as the inside of an oven. Then succeeded puffs, and whirling gusts, of wind – cold as if projected from caves of ice, and accompanied by a noise as though all the trumpets of Aeolus were announcing the advent of the Storm-King!

In another instant the *norther* was around them; and the waggon train, halted on a subtropical plain, was enveloped in an atmosphere, akin to that which congeals the icebergs of the Arctic Ocean!

Nothing more was seen – nothing heard, save the whistling of the wind, or its hoarse roaring, as it thundered against the tilts of the waggons. The mules having instinctively turned stern towards it, stood silent in their traces; and the voices of the travellers, in solemn converse inside, could not be distinguished amid the howling of the hurricane.

Every aperture had been closed: for it was soon discovered, that to show a face from under the sheltering canvas was to court suffocation. The air was surcharged with ashes, lifted aloft from the burnt plain, and reduced, by the whirling of the wind, to an

impalpable but poisonous powder.

For over an hour did the atmosphere carry this cinereous cloud; during which period lasted the imprisonment of the travellers.

At length a voice, speaking close by the curtains of the carriole, announced their release.

"You can come forth!" said the stranger, the crape scarf thrown back above the brim of his hat. "You will still have the storm to contend against. It will last to the end of your journey; and, perhaps, for three days longer. But you have nothing further to fear. The ashes are all swept off. They've gone before you; and you're not likely to overtake them this side the Rio Grande."

"Sir!" said the planter, hastily descending the steps of the carriage, "we have to thank you for – for – "

"Our lives, father!" cried Henry, supplying the proper words. "I hope, sir, you will favour us with your name?"

"*Maurice Gerald*!" returned the stranger; "though, at the Fort, you will find me better known as *Maurice the mustanger*."

"A mustanger!" scornfully muttered Calhoun, but only loud enough to be heard by Louise.

"Only a mustanger!" reflected the aristocratic Poindexter, the fervour of his gratitude becoming sensibly chilled.

"For guide, you will no longer need either myself, or my lazo," said the hunter of wild horses. "The cypress is in sight: keep straight towards it. After crossing, you will see the flag over the Fort. You may yet reach your journey's end before night. I have

no time to tarry; and must say adieu."

Satan himself, astride a Tartarean steed, could not have looked more like the devil than did Maurice the Mustanger, as he separated for the second time from the planter and his party. But neither his ashy envelope, nor the announcement of his humble calling, did aught to damage him in the estimation of one, whose thoughts were already predisposed in his favour – Louise Poindexter.

On hearing him declare his name – by presumption already known to her – she but more tenderly cherished the bit of cardboard, chafing against her snow-white bosom; at the same time muttering in soft pensive soliloquy, heard only by herself: —

"Maurice the mustanger! despite your sooty covering – despite your modest pretence – you have touched the heart of a Creole maiden. *Mon Dieu—mon Dieu! He is too like Lucifer for me to despise him*!"

Chapter Five.
The Home of the Horse-Hunter

Where the *Rio de Nueces* (River of Nuts) collects its waters from a hundred tributary streams – lining the map like the limbs of a grand genealogical tree – you may look upon a land of surpassing fairness. Its surface is "rolling prairie," interspersed with clumps of post-oak and pecân, here and there along the banks of the watercourses uniting into continuous groves.

In some places these timbered tracts assume the aspect of the true *chapparal*– a thicket, rather than a forest – its principal growth being various kinds of acacia, associated with copaiva and creosote trees, with wild aloes, with eccentric shapes of cereus, cactus, and arborescent yucca.

These spinous forms of vegetation, though repulsive to the eye of the agriculturist – as proving the utter sterility of the soil – present an attractive aspect to the botanist, or the lover of Nature; especially when the cereus unfolds its huge wax-like blossoms, or the *Fouquiera splendens* overtops the surrounding shrubbery with its spike of resplendent flowers, like a red flag hanging unfolded along its staff.

The whole region, however, is not of this character. There are stretches of greater fertility; where a black calcareous earth gives nourishment to trees of taller growth, and more luxuriant

foliage. The "wild China" – a true *sapindal*– the pecân, the elm, the hackberry, and the oak of several species – with here and there a cypress or Cottonwood – form the components of many a sylvan scene, which, from the blending of their leaves of various shades of green, and the ever changing contour of their clumps, deserves to be denominated fair.

The streams of this region are of crystal purity – their waters tinted only by the reflection of sapphire skies. Its sun, moon, and stars are scarcely ever concealed behind a cloud. The demon of disease has not found his way into this salubrious spot: no epidemic can dwell within its borders.

Despite these advantages, civilised man has not yet made it his home. Its paths are trodden only by the red-skinned rovers of the prairie – Lipano or Comanche – and these only when mounted, and upon the *maraud* towards the settlements of the Lower Nueces, or Leona.

It may be on this account – though it would almost seem as if they were actuated by a love of the beautiful and picturesque – that the true children of Nature, the wild animals, have selected this spot as their favourite habitat and home. In no part of Texas does the stag bound up so often before you; and nowhere is the timid antelope so frequently seen. The rabbit, and his gigantic cousin, the mule-rabbit, are scarcely ever out of sight; while the polecat, the opossum, and the curious peccary, are encountered at frequent intervals.

Birds, too, of beautiful forms and colours, enliven the

landscape. The quail whirrs up from the path; the king vulture wheels in the ambient air; the wild turkey, of gigantic stature, suns his resplendent gorget by the side of the pecân copse, and the singular tailor-bird – known among the rude Rangers as the "bird of paradise" – flouts his long scissors-like tail among the feathery fronds of the acacia.

Beautiful butterflies spread their wide wings in flapping flight; or, perched upon some gay corolla, look as if they formed part of the flower. Huge bees (*Meliponae*), clad in velvet liveries, buzz amid the blossoming bushes, disputing possession with hawkmoths and humming-birds not much larger than themselves.

They are not all innocent, the denizens of this lovely land. Here the rattlesnake attains to larger dimensions than in any other part of North America, and shares the covert with the more dangerous *moccasin*. Here, too, the tarantula inflicts its venomous sting; the scorpion poisons with its bite; and the centipede, by simply crawling over the skin, causes a fever that may prove fatal!

Along the wooded banks of the streams may be encountered the spotted ocelot, the puma, and their more powerful congener, the jaguar; the last of these *felidae* being here upon the northern limit of its geographical range.

Along the edges of the chapparal skulks the gaunt Texan wolf – solitarily and in silence; while a kindred and more cowardly species, the *coyoté*, may be observed, far out upon the open plain,

hunting in packs.

Sharing the same range with these, the most truculent of quadrupeds, may be seen the noblest and most beautiful of animals – perhaps nobler and more beautiful than man – certainly the most distinguished of man's companions – the horse!

Here – independent of man's caprice, his jaw unchecked by bit or curb, his back unscathed by pack or saddle – he roams unrestrained; giving way to all the wildness of his nature.

But even in this, his favourite haunt, he is not always left alone. Man presumes to be his pursuer and tamer: for here was he sought, captured, and conquered, by *Maurice the Mustanger*.

On the banks of the *Alamo*– one of the most sparkling streamlets that pay tribute to the Nueces – stood a dwelling, unpretentious as any to be found within the limits of Texas, and certainly as picturesque.

Its walls were composed of split trunk of the arborescent yucca, set stockade-fashion in the ground; while its roof was a thatch furnished by the long bayonet-shaped loaves of the same gigantic lily.

The interstices between the uprights, instead of being "chinked" with clay – as is common in the cabins of Western Texas – were covered by a sheeting of horse-skins; attached, not by iron tacks, but with the sharp spines that terminate the leaves of the *pita* plant.

On the bluffs, that on both sides overlooked the rivulet – and which were but the termination of the escarpment of the

higher plain – grew in abundance the material out of which the hut had been constructed: tree yuccas and *magueys*, amidst other rugged types of sterile vegetation; whereas the fertile valley below was covered with a growth of heavy timber – consisting chiefly of red-mulberry, post-oak, and pecân, that formed a forest of several leagues in length. The timbered tract was, in fact, conterminous with the bottom lands; the tops of the trees scarce rising to a level with the escarpment of the cliff.

It was not continuous. Along the edge of the streamlet were breaks – forming little meads, or savannahs, covered with that most nutritious of grasses, known among Mexicans as *grama*.

In the concavity of one of these, of semicircular shape – which served as a natural lawn – stood the primitive dwelling above described; the streamlet representing the chord; while the curve was traced by the trunks of the trees, that resembled a series of columns supporting the roof of some sylvan coliseum.

The structure was in shadow, a little retired among the trees; as if the site had been chosen with a view to concealment. It could have been seen but by one passing along the bank of the stream; and then only with the observer directly in front of it. Its rude style of architecture, and russet hue, contributed still further to its *inconspicuousness*.

The house was a mere cabin – not larger than a marquee tent – with only a single aperture, the door – if we except the flue of a slender clay chimney, erected at one end against the upright posts. The doorway had a door, a light framework of wood, with

a horse-skin stretched over it, and hung upon hinges cut from the same hide.

In the rear was an open shed, thatched with yucca leaves, and supported by half a dozen posts. Around this was a small enclosure, obtained by tying cross poles to the trunks of the adjacent trees.

A still more extensive enclosure, containing within its circumference more than an acre of the timbered tract, and fenced in a similar manner, extended rearward from the cabin, terminating against the bluff. Its turf tracked and torn by numerous hoof-prints – in some places trampled into a hard surface – told of its use: a "corral" for wild horses —*mustangs*.

This was made still more manifest by the presence of a dozen or more of these animals within the enclosure; whose glaring eyeballs, and excited actions, gave evidence of their recent capture, and how ill they brooked the imprisonment of that shadowy paddock.

The interior of the hut was not without some show of neatness and comfort. The sheeting of mustang-skins that covered the walls, with the hairy side turned inward, presented no mean appearance. The smooth shining coats of all colours – black, bay, snow-white, sorrel, and skewbald – offered to the eye a surface pleasantly variegated; and there had evidently been some taste displayed in their arrangement.

The furniture was of the scantiest kind. It consisted of a counterfeit camp bedstead, formed by stretching a horse-hide

over a framework of trestles; a couple of stools – diminutive specimens on the same model; and a rude table, shaped out of hewn slabs of the yucca-tree. Something like a second sleeping place appeared in a remote corner – a "shakedown," or "spread," of the universal mustang-skin.

What was least to be expected in such a place, was a shelf containing about a score of books, with pens, ink, and *papéterie*; also a newspaper lying upon the slab table.

Further proofs of civilisation, if not refinement, presented themselves in the shape of a large leathern portmanteau, a double-barrelled gun, with "Westley Richards" upon the breech; a drinking cup of chased silver, a huntsman's horn, and a dog-call.

Upon the floor were a few culinary utensils, mostly of tin; while in one corner stood a demijohn, covered with wicker, and evidently containing something stronger than the water of the Alamo.

Other "chattels" in the cabin were perhaps more in keeping with the place. There was a high-peaked Mexican saddle; a bridle, with headstall of plaited horsehair, and reins to correspond; two or three spare *serapés*, and some odds and ends of raw-hide rope.

Such was the structure of the mustanger's dwelling – such its surroundings – such its interior and contents, with the exception of its living occupants – two in number.

On one of the stools standing in the centre of the floor was

seated a man, who could not be the mustanger himself. In no way did he present the semblance of a proprietor. On the contrary, the air of the servitor – the mien of habitual obedience – was impressed upon him beyond the chance of misconstruction.

Rude as was the cabin that sheltered him, no one entering under its roof would have mistaken him for its master.

Not that he appeared ill clad or fed, or in any way stinted in his requirements. He was a round plump specimen, with a shock of carrot-coloured hair and a bright ruddy skin, habited in a suit of stout stuff – half corduroy, half cotton-velvet. The corduroy was in the shape of a pair of knee-breeches, with gaiters to correspond; the velveteen, once bottle green, now faded to a brownish hue, exhibited itself in a sort of shooting coat, with ample pockets in the breast and skirts.

A "wide-awake" hat, cocked over a pair of eyes equally deserving the appellation, completed the costume of the individual in question – if we except a shirt of coarse calico, a red cotton kerchief loosely knotted around his neck, and a pair of Irish *brogues* upon his feet.

It needed neither the brogues, nor the corduroy breeches, to proclaim his nationality. His lips, nose, eyes, air, and attitude, were all unmistakably Milesian.

Had there been any ambiguity about this, it would have been dispelled as he opened his mouth for the emission of speech; and this he at intervals did, in an accent that could only have been acquired in the shire of Galway. As he was the sole human

occupant of the cabin, it might be supposed that he spoke only in soliloquy. Not so, however. Couched upon a piece of horse-skin, in front of the fire, with snout half buried among the ashes, was a canine companion, whose appearance bespoke a countryman – a huge Irish staghound, that looked as if he too understood the speech of Connemara.

Whether he did so or not, it was addressed to him, as if he was expected to comprehend every word.

"Och, Tara, me jewel!" exclaimed he in the corduroys, fraternally interrogating the hound; "hadn't yez weesh now to be back in Ballyballagh? Wadn't yez loike to be wance more in the coortyard av the owld castle, friskin' over the clane stones, an bein' tripe-fed till there wasn't a rib to be seen in your sides – so different from what they are now – when I kyan count ivery wan av them? Sowl! it's meself that ud loike to be there, anyhow! But there's no knowin' when the young masther 'll go back, an take us along wid him. Niver mind, Tara! He's goin' to the Sittlements soon, ye owld dog; an he's promised to take us thare; that's some consolashun. Be japers! it's over three months since I've been to the Fort, meself. Maybe I'll find some owld acquaintance among them Irish sodgers that's come lately; an be me sowl, av I do, won't there be a dhrap betwane us – won't there, Tara?"

The staghound, raising his head at hearing the mention of his name, gave a slight sniff, as if saying "Yes" in answer to the droll interrogatory.

"I'd like a dhrap now," continued the speaker, casting a

covetous glance towards the wickered jar; “mightily I wud that same; but the dimmyjan is too near bein’ empty, an the young masther might miss it. Besides, it wudn’t be raal honest av me to take it widout lave – wud it, Tara?”

The dog again raised his head above the ashes, and sneezed as before.

“Why, that was *yis*, the last time ye spoke! Div yez mane is for the same now? Till me, Tara!”

Once more the hound gave utterance to the sound – that appeared to be caused either by a slight touch of influenza, or the ashes having entered his nostrils.

“‘Yis’ again? In trath that’s just fwhat the dumb craythers manes! Don’t timpt me, ye owld thief! No – no; I won’t touch the whisky. I’ll only draw the cork out av the dimmyjan, an take a smell at it. Shure the masther won’t know anything about that; an if he did, he wudn’t mind it! Smellin’ kyant do the pothyeen any harm.”

During the concluding portion of this utterance, the speaker had forsaken his seat, and approached the corner where stood the jar.

Notwithstanding the professed innocence of his intent, there was a stealthiness about his movements, that seemed to argue either a want of confidence in his own integrity, or in his power to resist temptation.

He stood for a short while listening – his eyes turned towards the open doorway; and then, taking up the demijohn, he drew out

the stopper, and held the neck to his nose.

For some seconds he remained in this attitude: giving out no other sign than an occasional "sniff," similar to that uttered by the hound, and which he had been fain to interpret as an affirmative answer to his interrogatory. It expressed the enjoyment he was deriving from the *bouquet* of the potent spirit.

But this only satisfied him for a very short time; and gradually the bottom of the jar was seen going upwards, while the reverse end descended in like ratio in the direction of his protruding lips.

"Be japers!" he exclaimed, once more glancing stealthily towards the door, "flesh and blood cudn't stand the smell av that bewtiful whisky, widout tastin' it. Trath! I'll chance it – jist the smallest thrifle to wet the tap av my tongue. Maybe it'll burn the skin av it; but no matther – here goes!"

Without further ado the neck of the demijohn was brought in contact with his lips; but instead of the "smallest thrifle" to wet the top of his tongue, the "gluck – gluck" of the escaping fluid told that he was administering a copious saturation to the whole lining of his larynx, and something more.

After half a dozen "smacks" of the mouth, with other exclamations denoting supreme satisfaction, he hastily restored the stopper; returned the demijohn to its place; and glided back to his seat upon the stool.

"Tara, ye owld thief!" said he, addressing himself once more to his canine companion, "it was you that timpted me! No matther, man: the masther 'll niver miss it; besides, he's goin'

soon to the Fort, an can lay in a fresh supply."

For a time the pilferer remained silent; either reflecting on the act he had committed, or enjoying the effects which the "potheen" had produced upon his spirits.

His silence was of short duration; and was terminated by a soliloquy.

"I wondher," muttered he, "fwhat makes Masther Maurice so anxious to get back to the Sittlements. He says he'll go wheniver he catches that spotty mustang he has seen lately. Sowl! isn't he bad afther that baste! I suppose it must be somethin' beyant the common – the more be token, as he has chased the craythers three times widout bein' able to throw his rope over it – an mounted on the blood-bay, too. He sez he won't give it up, till he gets howlt of it. Trath! I hope it'll be grupped soon, or wez may stay here till the marnin' av doomsday. Hush! fwhat's that?"

Tara springing up from his couch of skin, and rushing out with a low growl, had caused the exclamation.

"Phelim!" hailed a voice from the outside. "Phelim!"

"It's the masther," muttered Phelim, as he jumped from his stool, and followed the dog through the doorway.

Chapter Six.
The Spotted Mustang

Phelim was not mistaken as to the voice that had hailed him. It was that of his master, Maurice Gerald.

On getting outside, he saw the mustanger at a short distance from the door, and advancing towards it.

As the servant should have expected, his master was mounted upon his horse – no longer of a reddish colour, but appearing almost black. The animal's coat was darkened with sweat; its counter and flanks speckled with foam.

The blood-bay was not alone. At the end of the lazo – drawn taut from the saddle tree – was a companion, or, to speak more accurately, a captive. With a leathern thong looped around its under jaw, and firmly embracing the bars of its mouth, kept in place by another passing over its neck immediately behind the ears, was the captive secured.

It was a mustang of peculiar appearance, as regarded its markings; which were of a kind rarely seen – even among the largest "gangs" that roam over the prairie pastures, where colours of the most eccentric patterns are not uncommon.

That of the animal in question was a ground of dark chocolate in places approaching to black – with white spots distributed over it, as regularly as the contrary colours upon the skin of the jaguar.

As if to give effect to this pleasing arrangement of hues, the creature was of perfect shape – broad chested, full in the flank, and clean limbed – with a hoof showing half a score of concentric rings, and a head that might have been taken as a type of equine beauty. It was of large size for a mustang, though much smaller than the ordinary English horse; even smaller than the blood-bay – himself a mustang – that had assisted in its capture.

The beautiful captive was a mare – one of a *manada* that frequented the plains near the source of the Alamo; and where, for the third time, the mustanger had unsuccessfully chased it.

In his case the proverb had proved untrue. In the third time he had not found the "charm"; though it favoured him in the fourth. By the fascination of a long rope, with a running noose at its end, he had secured the creature that, for some reason known only to himself, he so ardently wished to possess.

Phelim had never seen his master return from a horse-hunting excursion in such a state of excitement; even when coming back – as he often did – with half a dozen mustangs led loosely at the end of his lazo.

But never before at the end of that implement had Phelim beheld such a beauty as the spotted mare. She was a thing to excite the admiration of one less a connoisseur in horse-flesh than the *ci-devant* stable-boy of Castle Ballagh.

"Hooch – hoop – hoora!" cried he, as he set eyes upon the captive, at the same time tossing his hat high into the air. "Thanks to the Howly Vargin, an Saint Pathrick to boot, Masther Maurice,

yez have cotched the spotty at last! It's a mare, be japers! Och! the purthy craythe r! I don't wondher yez hiv been so bad about gettin' howlt av her. Sowl! if yez had her in Ballinasloe Fair, yez might ask your own price, and get it too, widout givin' sixpence av luckpenny. Oh! the purty craythe r! Where will yez hiv her phut, masther? Into the corral, wid the others?"

"No, she might get kicked among them. We shall tie her in the shed. Castro must pass his night outside among the trees. If he's got any gallantry in him he won't mind that. Did you ever see anything so beautiful as she is, Phelim – I mean in the way of horseflesh?"

"Niver, Masther Maurice; niver, in all me life! An' I've seen some nice bits av blood about Ballyballagh. Oh, the purty craythe r! she looks as if a body cud ate her; and yit, in trath, she looks like she wud ate you. Yez haven't given her the schoolin' lesson, have yez?"

"No, Phelim: I don't want to break her just yet – not till I have time, and can do it properly. It would never do to spoil such perfection as that. I shall tame her, after we've taken her to the Settlements."

"Yez be goin' there, masther Maurice? When?"

"To-morrow. We shall start by daybreak, so as to make only one day between here and the Fort."

"Sowl! I'm glad to hear it. Not on me own account, but yours, Masther Maurice. Maybe yez don't know that the whisky's on the idge of bein' out? From the rattle av the jar, I don't think

there's more than three naggins left. Them sutlers at the Fort aren't honest. They chate ye in the mizyure; besides watherin' the whisky, so that it won't bear a dhrap more out av the strame hare. Trath! a gallon av Innishowen wud last ayqual to three av this Amerikin *rotgut*, as the Yankees themselves christen it."

"Never mind about the whisky, Phelim – I suppose there's enough to last us for this night, and fill our flasks for the journey of to-morrow. Look alive, old Ballyballagh! Let us stable the spotted mare; and then I shall have time to talk about a fresh supply of 'potheen,' which I know you like better than anything else – except yourself!"

"And you, Masther Maurice!" retorted the Galwegian, with a comical twinkle of the eye, that caused his master to leap laughingly out of the saddle.

The spotted mare was soon stabled in the shed, Castro being temporarily attached to a tree; where Phelim proceeded to groom him after the most approved prairie fashion.

The mustanger threw himself on his horse-skin couch, wearied with the work of the day. The capture of the "yegua pinta" had cost him a long and arduous chase – such as he had never ridden before in pursuit of a mustang.

There was a motive that had urged him on, unknown to Phelim – unknown to Castro who carried him – unknown to living creature, save himself.

Notwithstanding that he had spent several days in the saddle – the last three in constant pursuit of the spotted mare – despite

the weariness thus occasioned, he was unable to obtain repose. At intervals he rose to his feet, and paced the floor of his hut, as if stirred by some exciting emotion.

For several nights he had slept uneasily – at intervals tossing upon his *catré*– till not only his henchman Phelim, but his hound Tara, wondered what could be the meaning of his *unrest*.

The former might have attributed it to his desire to possess the spotted mare; had he not known that his master's feverish feeling antedated his knowledge of the existence of this peculiar quadruped.

It was several days after his last return from the Fort that the "yegua pinta" had first presented herself to the eye of the mustanger. That therefore could not be the cause of his altered demeanour.

His success in having secured the animal, instead of tranquillising his spirit, seemed to have produced the contrary effect. At least, so thought Phelim: who – with the freedom of that relationship known as "foster-brother" – had at length determined on questioning his master as to the cause of his inquietude. As the latter lay shifting from side to side, he was saluted with the interrogatory —

"Masther Maurice, fwhat, in the name of the Howly Vargin, is the matther wid ye?"

"Nothing, Phelim – nothing, *mabohil*! What makes you think there is?"

"*Alannah*! How kyan I help thinkin' it! Yez kyant get a wink

av sleep; niver since ye returned the last time from the Sittlement. Och! yez hiv seen somethin' there that kapes ye awake? Shure now, it isn't wan av them Mixikin girls —*mowchachas*, as they call them? No, I won't believe it. You wudn't be wan av the owld Geralds to care for such trash as them."

"Nonsense, my good fellow! There's nothing the matter with me. It's all your own imagination."

"Trath, masther, yez arr mistaken. If there's anything asthray wid me imaginashun, fhwat is it that's gone wrong wid your own? That is, whin yez arr aslape – which aren't often av late."

"When I'm asleep! What do you mean, Phelim?"

"What div I mane? Fwhy, that wheniver yez close your eyes an think yez are sleepin', ye begin palaverin', as if a preast was confessin' ye!"

"Ah! Is that so? What have you heard me say?"

"Not much, masther, that I cud make sinse out av. Yez be always tryin' to pronounce a big name that appares to have no indin', though it begins wid a *point*!"

"A name! What name?"

"Sowl! I kyan't till ye exakly. It's too long for me to remimber, seein' that my edicashun was intirely neglicted. But there's another name that yez phut before it; an that I kyan tell ye. It's a wuman's name, though it's not common in the owld counthry. It's Looaze that ye say, Masther Maurice; an then comes *the point*."

"Ah!" interrupted the young Irishman, evidently not caring to converse longer on the subject. "Some name I may have heard

– somewhere, accidentally. One does have such strange ideas in dreams!"

"Trath! yez spake the truth there; for in your drames, masther, ye talk about a purty girl lookin' out av a carriage wid curtains to it, an tellin' her to close them agaynst some danger that yez are going to save her from."

"I wonder what puts such nonsense into my head?"

"I wondher meself," rejoined Phelim, fixing his eyes upon his young master with a stealthy but scrutinising look. "Shure," he continued, "if I may make bowld to axe the quistyun – shure, Masther Maurice, yez haven't been makin' a Judy Fitzsummon's mother av yerself, an fallin' in love wid wan of these Yankee weemen out hare? Och an-an-ee! that wud be a misforthune; an thwat wud she say – the purty colleen wid the goodlen hair an blue eyes, that lives not twinty miles from Ballyballagh?"

"Poh, poh! Phelim! you're taking leave of your senses, I fear."

"Trath, masther, I aren't; but I know somethin' I wud like to take lave av."

"What is that? Not me, I hope?"

"You, *alannah*? Niver! It's Tixas I mane. I'd like to take lave of that; an you goin' along wid me back to the owld sad. Arrah, now, fhwat's the use av yer stayin' here, wastin' the best part av yer days in doin' nothin'? Shure yez don't make more than a bare livin' by the horse-catchin'; an if yez did, what mathers it? Yer owld aunt at Castle Ballagh can't howld out much longer; an when she's did, the bewtiful demane 'll be yours, spite av the dhirty

way she's thratin' ye. Shure the property's got a tail to it; an not a mother's son av them can kape ye out av it!"

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the young Irishman: "you're quite a lawyer, Phelim. What a first-rate attorney you'd have made! But come! You forget that I haven't tasted food since morning. What have you got in the larder?"

"Trath! there's no great stock, masther. Yez haven't laid in anythin' for the three days yez hiv been afther spotty. There's only the cowld venison an the corn-bread. If yez like I'll phut the venison in the pat, an make a hash av it."

"Yes, do so. I can wait."

"Won't yez wait betther afther tastin' a dhrap av the craythe r?"

"True – let me have it."

"Will yez take it nate, or with a little wather? Trath! it won't carry much av that same."

"A glass of grog – draw the water fresh from the stream."

Phelim took hold of the silver drinking-cup, and was about stepping outside, when a growl from Tara, accompanied by a start, and followed by a rush across the floor, caused the servitor to approach the door with a certain degree of caution.

The barking of the dog soon subsided into a series of joyful whimperings, which told that he had been gratified by the sight of some old acquaintance.

"It's owld Zeb Stump," said Phelim, first peeping out, and then stepping boldly forth – with the double design of greeting the new-comer, and executing the order he had received from his

master.

The individual, who had thus freely presented himself in front of the mustanger's cabin, was as unlike either of its occupants, as one from the other.

He stood fall six feet high, in a pair of tall boots, fabricated out of tanned alligator skin; into the ample tops of which were thrust the bottoms of his pantaloons – the latter being of woollen homespun, that had been dyed with "dog-wood ooze," but was now of a simple dirt colour. A deerskin under shirt, without any other, covered his breast and shoulders; over which was a "blanket coat," that had once been green, long since gone to a greenish yellow, with most of the wool worn off.

There was no other garment to be seen: a slouch felt hat, of greyish colour, badly battered, completing the simple, and somewhat scant, collection of his wardrobe.

He was equipped in the style of a backwoods hunter, of the true Daniel Boone breed: bullet-pouch, and large crescent-shaped powder-horn, both suspended by shoulder-straps, hanging under the right arm; a waist-belt of thick leather keeping his coat closed and sustaining a skin sheath, from which protruded the rough stag-horn handle of a long-bladed knife.

He did not affect either mocassins, leggings, nor the caped and fringed tunic shirt of dressed deerskin worn by most Texan hunters. There was no embroidery upon his coarse clothing, no carving upon his accoutrements or weapons, nothing in his *tout ensemble* intended as ornamental. Everything was plain almost

to rudeness: as if dictated by a spirit that despised “fanfaron.”

Even the rifle, his reliable weapon – the chief tool of his trade – looked like a rounded bar of iron, with a piece of brown unpolished wood at the end, forming its stock; stock and barrel, when the butt rested on the ground, reaching up to the level of his shoulder.

The individual thus clothed and equipped was apparently about fifty years of age, with a complexion inclining to dark, and features that, at first sight, exhibited a grave aspect.

On close scrutiny, however, could be detected an underlying stratum of quiet humour; and in the twinkle of a small greyish eye there was evidence that its owner could keenly relish a joke, or, at times, perpetrate one.

The Irishman had pronounced his name: it was Zebulon Stump, or “Old Zeb Stump,” as he was better known to the very limited circle of his acquaintances.

“Kaintuck, by birth an raisin’,” – as he would have described himself, if asked the country of his nativity – he had passed the early part of his life among the primeval forests of the Lower Mississippi – his sole calling that of a hunter; and now, at a later period, he was performing the same *métier* in the wilds of south-western Texas.

The behaviour of the staghound, as it bounded before him, exhibiting a series of canine welcomes, told of a friendly acquaintance between Zeb Stump and Maurice the mustanger.

“Evenin’!” laconically saluted Zeb, as his tall figure shadowed

the cabin door.

"Good evening', Mr Stump!" rejoined the owner of the hut, rising to receive him. "Step inside, and take a seat!"

The hunter accepted the invitation; and, making a single stride across the floor, after some awkward manoeuvring, succeeded in planting himself on the stool lately occupied by Phelim. The lowness of the seat brought his knees upon a level with his chin, the tall rifle rising like a pikestaff several feet above his head.

"Durn stools, anyhow!" muttered he, evidently dissatisfied with the posture; "an' churs, too, for thet matter. I likes to plant my starn upon a log: thur ye've got somethin' under ye as ain't like to guv way."

"Try that," said his host, pointing to the leathern portmanteau in the corner: "you'll find it a firmer seat."

Old Zeb, adopting the suggestion, unfolded the zigzag of his colossal carcase, and transferred it to the trunk.

"On foot, Mr Stump, as usual?"

"No: I got my old critter out thur, tied to a saplin'. I wa'n't a huntin'."

"You never hunt on horseback, I believe?"

"I shed be a greenhorn if I dud. Anybody as goes huntin' a hossback must be a durnation fool!"

"But it's the universal fashion in Texas!"

"Univarsal or no, it air a fool's fashion – a durned lazy fool's fashion! I kill more meat in one day afut, then I ked in a hul week wi' a hoss atween my legs. I don't misdoubt that a hoss air

the best thing for you – bein' as yur game's entire different. But when ye go arter baar, or deer, or turkey eyther, ye won't see much o' them, trampin' about through the timmer a hossback, an scarrin' everythin' es hes got ears 'ithin the circuit o' a mile. As for hosses, I shodn't be bothered wi' ne'er a one no how, ef twa'n't for packin' the meat: thet's why I keep my ole maar."

"She's outside, you say? Let Phelim take her round to the shed. You'll stay all night?"

"I kim for that purpiss. But ye needn't trouble about the maar: she air hitched safe enuf. I'll let her out on the laryitt, afore I take to grass."

"You'll have something to eat? Phelim was just getting supper ready. I'm sorry I can't offer you anything very dainty – some hash of venison."

"Nothin' better 'n good deermeat, 'ceptin it be baar; but I like both done over the coals. Maybe I can help ye to some'at thet'll make a roast. Mister Pheelum, ef ye don't mind steppin' to whar my critter air hitched, ye'll find a gobbler hangin' over the horn o' the seddle. I shot the bird as I war comin' up the crik."

"Oh, that is rare good fortune! Our larder has got very low – quite out, in truth. I've been so occupied, for the last three days, in chasing a very curious mustang, that I never thought of taking my gun with me. Phelim and I, and Tara, too, had got to the edge of starvation."

"Whet sort o' a mustang?" inquired the hunter, in a tone that betrayed interest, and without appearing to notice the final

remark.

"A mare; with white spots on a dark chocolate ground – a splendid creature!"

"Durn it, young fellur! thet air's the very bizness thet's brung me over to ye."

"Indeed!"

"I've seed that mustang – maar, ye say it air, though I kedn't tell, as she'd niver let me 'ithin hef a mile o' her. I've seed her several times out on the purayra, an I jest wanted ye to go arter her. I'll tell ye why. I've been to the Leeona settlements since I seed you last, and since I seed her too. Wal, theer hev kum thur a man as I knowed on the Mississippi. He air a rich planter, as used to keep up the tallest kind o' doin's, 'specially in the feestin' way. Many's the jeint o' deermeat, and many's the turkey-gobbler this hyur coon hes surplied for his table. His name air Peintdexter."

"Poindexter?"

"Thet air the name – one o' the best known on the Mississippi from Orleens to Saint Looey. He war rich then; an, I reck'n, ain't poor now – seein' as he's brought about a hunderd niggers along wi' him. Beside, thur's a nephew o' hisn, by name Calhoun. He's got the dollars, an nothin' to do wi' 'em but lend 'em to his uncle – the which, for a sartin reezun, I think he *will*. Now, young fellur, I'll tell ye why I wanted to see *you*. Thet 'ere planter hev got a darter, as air dead bent upon hossflesh. She used to ride the skittishest kind o' cattle in Loozeyanner, whar they lived. She heern me tellin' the old 'un 'bout the spotted mustang; and nothin'

would content her thur and then, till he promised he'd offer a big price for catchin' the critter. He sayed he'd give a kupple o' hunderd dollars for the anymal, ef 'twur anythin like what I sayed it wur. In coorse, I knowed thet 'ud send all the mustangers in the settlement straight custrut arter it; so, sayin' nuthin' to nobody, I kim over hyur, fast as my ole maar 'ud fetch me. You grup thet 'ere spotty, an Zeb Stump 'll go yur bail ye'll grab them two hunderd dollars."

"Will you step this way, Mr Stump?" said the young Irishman, rising from his stool, and proceeding in the direction of the door.

The hunter followed, not without showing some surprise at the abrupt invitation.

Maurice conducted his visitor round to the rear of the cabin; and, pointing into the shed, inquired —

"Does that look anything like the mustang you've been speaking of?"

"Dog-gone my cats, ef 'taint the eyedenticul same! Grupped already! Two hunderd dollars, easy as slidin' down a barked saplin'! Young fellur, yur in luck: two hunderd, slick sure! – and durn me, ef the anymal ain't worth every cent o' the money! Geehosofat! what a putty beest it air! Won't Miss Peintdexter be pleezed! It'll turn that young critter 'most crazy!"

Chapter Seven.
Nocturnal Annoyances

The unexpected discovery, that his purpose had been already anticipated by the capture of the spotted mustang, raised the spirits of the old hunter to a high pitch of excitement.

They were further elevated by a portion of the contents of the demijohn, which held out beyond Phelim's expectations: giving all hands an appetising "nip" before attacking the roast turkey, with another go each to wash it down, and several more to accompany the post-cenal pipe.

While this was being indulged in, a conversation was carried on; the themes being those that all prairie men delight to talk about: Indian and hunter lore.

As Zeb Stump was a sort of living encyclopaedia of the latter, he was allowed to do most of the talking; and he did it in such a fashion as to draw many a wondering ejaculation, from the tongue of the astonished Galwegian.

Long before midnight, however, the conversation was brought to a close. Perhaps the empty demijohn was, as much as anything else, the monitor that urged their retiring to rest; though there was another and more creditable reason. On the morrow, the mustanger intended to start for the Settlements; and it was necessary that all should be astir at an early hour, to make

preparation for the journey. The wild horses, as yet but slightly tamed, had to be strung together, to secure against their escaping by the way; and many other matters required attending to previous to departure.

The hunter had already tethered out his "ole maar" – as he designated the sorry specimen of horseflesh he was occasionally accustomed to bestride – and had brought back with him an old yellowish blanket, which was all he ever used for a bed.

"You may take my bedstead," said his courteous host; "I can lay myself on a skin along the floor."

"No," responded the guest; "none o' yer shelves for Zeb Stump to sleep on. I prefer the solid groun'. I kin sleep sounder on it; an bus-sides, thur's no fear o' fallin' over."

"If you prefer it, then, take the floor. Here's the best place. I'll spread a hide for you."

"Young fellur, don't you do anythin' o' the sort; ye'll only be wastin' yur time. This child don't sleep on no floors. His bed air the green grass o' the purayra."

"What! you're not going to sleep outside?" inquired the mustanger in some surprise – seeing that his guest, with the old blanket over his arm, was making for the door.

"I ain't agoin' to do anythin' else."

"Why, the night is freezing cold – almost as chilly as a norther!"

"Durn that! It air better to stan' a leetle chillishness, than a feelin' o' suffercation – which last I wud sartintly hev to go

through ef I slep inside o' a house."

"Surely you are jesting, Mr Stump?"

"Young fellur!" emphatically rejoined the hunter, without making direct reply to the question. "It air now nigh all o' six yeer since Zeb Stump hev stretched his ole karkiss under a roof. I oncest used to hev a sort o' a house in the hollow o' a sycamore-tree. That wur on the Massissippi, when my ole ooman wur alive, an I kep up the 'stablishment to 'commerdate her. Arter she went under, I moved into Loozeyanny; an then arterward kim out hyur. Since then the blue sky o' Texas hev been my only kiver, eyther wakin' or sleepin'."

"If you prefer to lie outside – "

"I prefar it," laconically rejoined the hunter, at the same time stalking over the threshold, and gliding out upon the little lawn that lay between the cabin and the creek.

His old blanket was not the only thing he carried along with him. Beside it, hanging over his arm, could be seen some six or seven yards of a horsehair rope. It was a piece of a *cabriesto*– usually employed for tethering horses – though it was not for this purpose it was now to be used.

Having carefully scrutinised the grass within a circumference of several feet in diameter – which a shining moon enabled him to do – he laid the rope with like care around the spot examined, shaping it into a sort of irregular ellipse.

Stepping inside this, and wrapping the old blanket around him, he quietly let himself down into a recumbent position. In an

instant after he appeared to be asleep.

And he was asleep, as his strong breathing testified: for Zeb Stump, with a hale constitution and a quiet conscience, had only to summon sleep, and it came.

He was not permitted long to indulge his repose without interruption. A pair of wondering eyes had watched his every movement – the eyes of Phelim O'Neal.

"Mother av Mozis!" muttered the Galwegian; "fwhat can be the manin' av the owld chap's surroundin' himself wid the rope?"

The Irishman's curiosity for a while struggled with his courtesy, but at length overcame it; and just as the slumberer delivered his third snore, he stole towards him, shook him out of his sleep, and propounded a question based upon the one he had already put to himself.

"Durn ye for a Irish donkey!" exclaimed Stump, in evident displeasure at being disturbed; "ye made me think it war mornin'! What do I put the rope roun' me for? What else wud it be for, but to keep off the varmints!"

"What varmints, Misther Stump? Snakes, div yez mane?"

"Snakes in coorse. Durn ye, go to your bed!"

Notwithstanding the sharp rebuke, Phelim returned to the cabin apparently in high glee. If there was anything in Texas, "barrin' an above the Indyins themselves," as he used to say, "that kept him from slapin', it was them vinamous sarpints. He hadn't had a good night's rest, iver since he'd been in the counthry for thinkin' av the ugly vipers, or dhramin' about thim. What a pity

Saint Pathrick hadn't paid Tixas a visit before goin' to grace!"

Phelim in his remote residence, isolated as he had been from all intercourse, had never before witnessed the trick of the *cabriesto*.

He was not slow to avail himself of the knowledge thus acquired. Returning to the cabin, and creeping stealthily inside – as if not wishing to wake his master, already asleep – he was seen to take a *cabriesto* from its peg; and then going forth again, he carried the long rope around the stockade walls – paying it out as he proceeded.

Having completed the circumvallation, he re-entered the hut; as he stepped over the threshold, muttering to himself —

"Sowl! Phalim O'Nale, you'll slape sound for this night, spite ov all the snakes in Tixas!"

For some minutes after Phelim's soliloquy, a profound stillness reigned around the hut of the mustanger. There was like silence inside; for the countryman of Saint Patrick, no longer apprehensive on the score of reptile intruders, had fallen asleep, almost on the moment of his sinking down upon his spread horse-skin.

For a while it seemed as if everybody was in the enjoyment of perfect repose, Tara and the captive steeds included. The only sound heard was that made by Zeb Stump's "maar," close by cropping the sweet *grama* grass.

Presently, however, it might have been perceived that the old hunter was himself stirring. Instead of lying still in the recumbent

attitude to which he had consigned himself, he could be seen shifting from side to side, as if some feverish thought was keeping him awake.

After repeating this movement some half-score of times, he at length raised himself into a sitting posture, and looked discontentedly around.

"Dod-rot his ignorance and imperence – the Irish cuss!" were the words that came hissing through his teeth. "He's spoilt my night's rest, durn him! 'Twould sarve him 'bout right to drag him out, an giv him a duckin' in the crik. Dog-goned ef I don't feel 'clined torst doin' it; only I don't like to displeeze the other Irish, who air a somebody. Possible I don't git a wink o' sleep till mornin'."

Having delivered himself of this peevish soliloquy, the hunter once more drew the blanket around his body, and returned to the horizontal position.

Not to sleep, however; as was testified by the tossing and fidgeting that followed – terminated by his again raising himself into a sitting posture.

A soliloquy, very similar to his former one, once more proceeded from his lips; this time the threat of ducking Phelim in the creek being expressed with a more emphatic accent of determination.

He appeared to be wavering, as to whether he should carry the design into execution, when an object coming under his eye gave a new turn to his thoughts.

On the ground, not twenty feet from where he sate, a long thin body was seen gliding over the grass. Its serpent shape, and smooth lubricated skin – reflecting the silvery light of the moon – rendered the reptile easy of identification.

"Snake!" mutteringly exclaimed he, as his eye rested upon the reptilian form. "Wonder what sort it air, slickerin' aboout hyur at this time o' the night? It air too large for a *rattle*; though thur air some in these parts most as big as it. But it air too clur i' the colour, an thin about the belly, for ole rattle-tail! No; 'tain't one o' them. Hah – now I ree-cog-nise the varmint! It air a *chicken*, out on the sarch arter eggs, I reck'n! Durn the thing! it air comin' torst me, straight as it kin crawl!"

The tone in which the speaker delivered himself told that he was in no fear of the reptile – even after discovering that it was making approach. He knew that the snake would not cross the *cabriesto*; but on touching it would turn away: as if the horsehair rope was a line of living fire. Secure within his magic circle, he could have looked tranquilly at the intruder, though it had been the most poisonous of prairie serpents.

But it was not. On the contrary, it was one of the most innocuous – harmless as the "chicken," from which the species takes its trivial title – at the same time that it is one of the largest in the list of North-American *reptilia*.

The expression on Zeb's face, as he sat regarding it, was simply one of curiosity, and not very keen. To a hunter in the constant habit of couching himself upon the grass, there was nothing in

the sight either strange or terrifying; not even when the creature came close up to the *cabriesto*, and, with head slightly elevated, rubbed its snout against the rope!

After that there was less reason to be afraid; for the snake, on doing so, instantly turned round and commenced retreating over the sward.

For a second or two the hunter watched it moving away, without making any movement himself. He seemed undecided as to whether he should follow and destroy it, or leave it to go as it had come – unscathed. Had it been a rattlesnake, "copperhead," or "mocassin," he would have acted up to the curse delivered in the garden of Eden, and planted the heel of his heavy alligator-skin boot upon its head. But a harmless chicken-snake did not come within the limits of Zeb Stump's antipathy: as was evidenced by some words muttered by him as it slowly receded from the spot.

"Poor crawlin' critter; let it go! It ain't no enemy o' mine; though it do suck a turkey's egg now an then, an in coorse scarcities the breed o' the birds. Thet air only its nater, an no reezun why I shed be angry wi' it. But thur's a durned good reezun why I shed be wi' thet Irish – the dog-goned, stinkin' fool, to ha' woke me es he dud! I feel dod-rotted like sarvin' him out, ef I ked only think o' some way as wudn't diskermode the young fellur. Stay! By Geehosofat, I've got the idee – the very thing – sure es my name air Zeb Stump!"

On giving utterance to the last words, the hunter – whose

countenance had suddenly assumed an expression of quizzical cheerfulness – sprang to his feet; and, with bent body, hastened in pursuit of the retreating reptile.

A few strides brought him alongside of it; when he pounced upon it with all his ten digits extended.

In another moment its long glittering body was uplifted from the ground, and writhing in his grasp.

"Now, Mister Pheelum," exclaimed he, as if apostrophising the serpent, "ef I don't gi'e yur Irish soul a scare thet 'll keep ye awake till mornin', I don't know buzzart from turkey. Hyur goes to purvide ye wi' a bedfellur!"

On saying this, he advanced towards the hut; and, silently skulking under its shadow, released the serpent from his gripe – letting it fall within the circle of the *cabriesto*, with which Phelim had so craftily surrounded his sleeping-place.

Then returning to his grassy couch, and once more pulling the old blanket over his shoulders, he muttered —

"The varmint won't come out acrost the rope – thet air sartin; an it ain't agoin' to leave a yurd o' the groun' 'ithout explorin' for a place to git clur – thet's eequally sartin. Ef it don't crawl over thet Irish greenhorn 'ithin the hef o' an hour, then ole Zeb Stump air a greenhorn hisself. Hi! what's thet? Dog-goned of 'taint on him arready!"

If the hunter had any further reflections to give tongue to, they could not have been heard: for at that moment there arose a confusion of noises that must have startled every living creature

on the Alamo, and for miles up and down the stream.

It was a human voice that had given the cue – or rather, a human howl, such as could proceed only from the throat of a Galwegian. Phelim O'Neal was the originator of the infernal *fracas*.

His voice, however, was soon drowned by a chorus of barkings, snortings, and neighings, that continued without interruption for a period of several minutes.

"What is it?" demanded his master, as he leaped from the *catré*, and groped his way towards his terrified servitor. "What the devil has got into you, Phelim? Have you seen a ghost?"

"Oh, masther! – by Jaysus! worse than that: I've been murdhered by a snake. It's bit me all over the body. Blessed Saint Pathrick! I'm a poor lost sinner! I'll be shure to die!"

"Bitten you, you say – where?" asked Maurice, hastily striking a light, and proceeding to examine the skin of his henchman, assisted by the old hunter – who had by this time arrived within the cabin.

"I see no sign of bite," continued the mustanger, after having turned Phelim round and round, and closely scrutinised his epidermis.

"Ne'er a scratch," laconically interpolated Stump.

"Sowl! then, if I'm not bit, so much the better; but it crawled all over me. I can feel it now, as cowld as charity, on me skin."

"Was there a snake at all?" demanded Maurice, inclined to doubt the statement of his follower. "You've been dreaming of

one, Phelim – nothing more."

"Not a bit of a dhrame, masther: it was a raal sarpint. Be me sowl, I'm shure of it!"

"I reck'n thur's been snake," drily remarked the hunter. "Let's see if we kin track it up. Kewrious it air, too. Thur's a hair rope all roun' the house. Wonder how the varmint could ha' crossed thet? Thur – thur it is!"

The hunter, as he spoke, pointed to a corner of the cabin, where the serpent was seen spirally coiled.

"Only a chicken!" he continued: "no more harm in it than in a suckin' dove. It kedn't ha' bit ye, Mister Pheelum; but we'll put it past bitin', anyhow."

Saying this, the hunter seized the snake in his hands; and, raising it aloft, brought it down upon the floor of the cabin with a "thwank" that almost deprived it of the power of motion.

"Thru now, Mister Pheelum!" he exclaimed, giving it the finishing touch with the heel of his heavy boot, "ye may go back to yur bed agin, an sleep 'ithout fear o' bein' disturbed till the mornin' – leastwise, by snakes."

Kicking the defunct reptile before him, Zeb Stump strode out of the hut, gleefully chuckling to himself, as, for the third time, he extended his colossal carcase along the sward.

Chapter Eight.
The Crawl of the Alacran

The killing of the snake appeared to be the cue for a general return to quiescence. The howlings of the hound ceased with those of the henchman. The mustangs once more stood silent under the shadowy trees.

Inside the cabin the only noise heard was an occasional shuffling, when Phelim, no longer feeling confidence in the protection of his *cabriesto*, turned restlessly on his horseskin.

Outside also there was but one sound, to disturb the stillness though its intonation was in striking contrast with that heard within. It might have been likened to a cross between the grunt of an alligator and the croaking of a bull-frog; but proceeding, as it did, from the nostrils of Zeb Stump, it could only be the snore of the slumbering hunter. Its sonorous fulness proved him to be soundly asleep.

He was – had been, almost from the moment of re-establishing himself within the circle of his *cabriesto*. The *revanche* obtained over his late disturber had acted as a settler to his nerves; and once more was he enjoying the relaxation of perfect repose.

For nearly an hour did this contrasting duet continue, varied only by an occasional *recitative* in the hoot of the great horned owl, or a *cantata penserosa* in the lugubrious wail of the prairie

wolf.

At the end of this interval, however, the chorus recommenced, breaking out abruptly as before, and as before led by the vociferous voice of the Connemara man.

"Meliah murdher!" cried he, his first exclamation not only startling the host of the hut, but the guest so soundly sleeping outside. "Howly Mother! Vargin av unpurticted innocence! Save me – save me!"

"Save you from what?" demanded his master, once more springing from his couch and hastening to strike a light. "What is it, you confounded fellow?"

"Another snake, yer hanner! Och! be me sowl! a far wickeder sarpent than the wan Misther Stump killed. It's bit me all over the breast. I feel the place burnin' where it crawled across me, just as if the horse-shoer at Ballyballagh had scorched me wid a rid-hot iron!"

"Durn ye for a stinkin' skunk!" shouted Zeb Stump, with his blanket about his shoulder, quite filling the doorway. "Ye've twicest spiled my night's sleep, ye Irish fool! 'Scuse me, Mister Gerald! Thur air fools in all countries, I reck'n, 'Merican as well as Irish – but this hyur follerer o' yourn air the durndest o' the kind iver I kim acrost. Dog-goned if I see how we air to get any sleep the night, 'less we drownd *him* in the crik fust!"

"Och! Misther Stump dear, don't talk that way. I sware to yez both there's another snake. I'm shure it's in the kyabin yit. It's only a minute since I feeled it creepin' over me."

"You must ha' been dreemin?" rejoined the hunter, in a more complacent tone, and speaking half interrogatively. "I tell ye no snake in Texas will cross a hosshair rope. The tother 'un must ha' been inside the house afore ye laid the laryitt roun' it. 'Taint likely there keel ha' been two on 'em. We kin soon settle that by sarchin'."

"Oh, murdher! Luk hare!" cried the Galwegian, pulling off his shirt and laying bare his breast. "Thare's the riptoile's track, right acrass over me ribs! Didn't I tell yez there was another snake? O blissed Mother, what will become av me? It feels like a strake av fire!"

"Snake!" exclaimed Stump, stepping up to the affrighted Irishman, and holding the candle close to his skin. "Snake i'deed! By the 'tarnal airthquake, it air no snake! It air wuss than that!"

"Worse than a snake?" shouted Phelim in dismay. "Worse, yez say, Misther Stump? Div yez mane that it's dangerous?"

"Wal, it mout be, an it moutn't. Thet ere 'll depend on whether I kin find somethin' 'bout hyur, an find it soon. Ef I don't, then, Mister Pheelum, I won't answer – "

"Oh, Misther Stump, don't say thare's danger!"

"What is it?" demanded Maurice, as his eyes rested upon a reddish line running diagonally across the breast of his follower, and which looked as if traced by the point of a hot spindle. "What is it, anyhow?" he repeated with increasing anxiety, as he observed the serious look with which the hunter regarded the strange marking. "I never saw the like before. Is it something to

be alarmed about?"

"All o' thet, Mister Gerald," replied Stump, motioning Maurice outside the hut, and speaking to him in a whisper, so as not to be overheard by Phelim.

"But what is it?" eagerly asked the mustanger. "*It air the crawl o' the pisen centipede*."

"The poison centipede! Has it bitten him?"

"No, I hardly think it hez. But it don't need thet. The *crawl* o' itself air enuf to kill him!"

"Merciful Heaven! you don't mean that?"

"I do, Mister Gerald. I've seed more 'an one good fellur go under wi' that same sort o' a stripe acrost his skin. If thur ain't somethin' done, an thet soon, he'll fust get into a ragin' fever, an then he'll go out o' his senses, jest as if the bite o' a mad dog had gin him the hydrophoby. It air no use frightenin' him howsomdever, till I sees what I kin do. Thur's a yarb, or rayther it air a plant, as grows in these parts. Ef I kin find it handy, there'll be no defeequilty in curin' o' him. But as the cussed lack wud hev it, the moon hez sneaked out o' sight; an I kin only get the yarb by gropin'. I know there air plenty o' it up on the bluff; an ef you'll go back inside, an keep the fellur quiet, I'll see what kin be done. I won't be gone but a minute."

The whispered colloquy, and the fact of the speakers having gone outside to carry it on, instead of tranquillising the fears of Phelim, had by this time augmented them to an extreme degree: and just as the old hunter, bent upon his herborising errand,

disappeared in the darkness, he came rushing forth from the hut, howling more piteously than ever.

It was some time before his master could get him tranquillised, and then only by assuring him – on a faith not very firm – that there was not the slightest danger.

A few seconds after this had been accomplished, Zeb Stump reappeared in the doorway, with a countenance that produced a pleasant change in the feelings of those inside. His confident air and attitude proclaimed, as plainly as words could have done, that he had discovered that of which he had gone in search – the "yarb." In his right hand he held a number of oval shaped objects of dark green colour – all of them bristling with sharp spines, set over the surface in equidistant clusters. Maurice recognised the leaves of a plant well known to him – the *oregano* cactus.

"Don't be skeeart, Mister Pheelum!" said the old hunter, in a consolatory tone, as he stepped across the threshold. "Thur's nothin' to fear now. I hev got the bolsum as 'll draw the burnin' out o' yur blood, quicker 'an flame ud scorch a feather. Stop yur yellin', man! Ye've rousted every bird an beast, an creepin' thing too, I reckon, out o' thar slumbers, for more an twenty mile up an down the crik. Ef you go on at that grist much longer, ye'll bring the Kumanchees out o' thur mountains, an that 'ud be wuss mayhap than the crawl o' this hunderd-legged critter. Mister Gerald, you git riddy a bandige, whiles I purpares the powltiss."

Drawing his knife from its sheath, the hunter first lopped off the spines; and then, removing the outside skin, he split the thick

succulent leaves of the cactus into slices of about an eighth of an inch in thickness. These he spread contiguously upon a strip of clean cotton stuff already prepared by the mustanger; and then, with the ability of a hunter, laid the "powltiss," as he termed it, along the inflamed line, which he declared to have been made by the claws of the centipede, but which in reality was caused by the injection of venom from its poison-charged mandibles, a thousand times inserted into the flesh of the sleeper!

The application of the *oregano* was almost instantaneous in its effect. The acrid juice of the plant, producing a counter poison, killed that which had been secreted by the animal; and the patient, relieved from further apprehension, and soothed by the sweet confidence of security – stronger from reaction – soon fell off into a profound and restorative slumber.

After searching for the centipede and failing to find it – for this hideous reptile, known in Mexico as the *alacran*, unlike the rattlesnake, has no fear of crossing a *cabriesto*– the improvised physician strode silently out of the cabin; and, once more committing himself to his grassy couch, slept undisturbed till the morning.

At the earliest hour of daybreak all three were astir – Phelim having recovered both from his fright and his fever. Having made their matutinal meal upon the *débris* of the roast turkey, they hastened to take their departure from the hut. The quondam stable-boy of Ballyballagh, assisted by the Texan hunter, prepared the wild steeds for transport across the plains

– by stringing them securely together – while Maurice looked after his own horse and the spotted mare. More especially did he expend his time upon the beautiful captive – carefully combing out her mane and tail, and removing from her glossy coat the stains that told of the severe chase she had cost him before her proud neck yielded to the constraint of his lazo.

"Durn it, man!" exclaimed Zeb, as, with some surprise, he stood watching the movements of the mustanger, "ye needn't ha' been hef so purtickler! Wudley Pointdexter ain't the man as 'll go back from a barg'in. Ye'll git the two hunderd dollars, sure as my name air Zeblun Stump; an dog-gone my cats, ef the maar ain't worth every red cent o' the money!"

Maurice heard the remarks without making reply; but the half suppressed smile playing around his lips told that the Kentuckian had altogether misconstrued the motive for his assiduous grooming.

In less than an hour after, the mustanger was on the march, mounted on his blood-bay, and leading the spotted mare at the end of his lazo; while the captive *cavallada*, under the guidance of the Galwegian groom, went trooping at a brisk pace over the plain.

Zeb Stump, astride his "ole maar," could only keep up by a constant hammering with his heels; and Tara, picking his steps through the spinous *mezquite* grass, trotted listlessly in the rear.

The hut, with its skin-door closed against animal intruders, was left to take care of itself; its silent solitude, for a time, to be

disturbed only by the hooting of the horned owl, the scream of the cougar, or the howl-bark of the hungering coyoté.

Chapter Nine.
The Frontier Fort

The "star-spangled banner" suspended above Fort Inge, as it flouts forth from its tall staff, flings its fitful shadow over a scene of strange and original interest.

It is a picture of pure frontier life – which perhaps only the pencil of the younger Vernet could truthfully portray – half military, half civilian – half savage, half civilised – mottled with figures of men whose complexions, costumes, and callings, proclaim them appertaining to the extremes of both, and every possible gradation between.

Even the *mise-en-scène*– the Fort itself – is of this *miscegenous* character. That star-spangled banner waves not over bastions and battlements; it flings no shadow over casemate or covered way, fosse, scarpment, or glacis – scarce anything that appertains to a fortress. A rude stockade, constructed out of trunks of *algarobia*, enclosing shed-stabling for two hundred horses; outside this a half-score of buildings of the plainest architectural style – some of them mere huts of "wattle and daub" —*jacalés*– the biggest a barrack; behind it the hospital, the stores of the commissary, and quartermaster; on one side the guardhouse; and on the other, more pretentiously placed, the messroom and officers' quarters; all plain in their appearance – plastered and whitewashed with

the lime plentifully found on the Leona – all neat and clean, as becomes a cantonment of troops wearing the uniform of a great civilised nation. Such is Fort Inge.

At a short distance off another group of houses meets the eye – nearly, if not quite, as imposing as the cluster above described bearing the name of "The Fort." They are just outside the shadow of the flag, though under its protection – for to it are they indebted for their origin and existence. They are the germ of the village that universally springs up in the proximity of an American military post – in all probability, and at no very remote period, to become a town – perhaps a great city.

At present their occupants are a sutler, whose store contains "knick-knacks" not classed among commissariat rations; an hotel-keeper whose bar-room, with white sanded floor and shelves sparkling with prismatic glass, tempts the idler to step in; a brace of gamblers whose rival tables of *faro* and *monté* extract from the pockets of the soldiers most part of their pay; a score of dark-eyed señoritas of questionable reputation; a like number of hunters, teamsters, *mustangers*, and nondescripts – such as constitute in all countries the hangers-on of a military cantonment, or the followers of a camp.

The houses in the occupancy of this motley corporation have been "sited" with some design. Perhaps they are the property of a single speculator. They stand around a "square," where, instead of lamp-posts or statues, may be seen the decaying trunk of a cypress, or the bushy form of a hackberry rising out of a *tapis*

of trodden grass.

The Leona – at this point a mere rivulet – glides past in the rear both of fort and village. To the front extends a level plain, green as verdure can make it – in the distance darkened by a bordering of woods, in which post-oaks and pecâns, live oaks and elms, struggle for existence with spinous plants of cactus and anona; with scores of creepers, climbers, and parasites almost unknown to the botanist. To the south and east along the banks of the stream, you see scattered houses: the homesteads of plantations; some of them rude and of recent construction, with a few of more pretentious style, and evidently of older origin. One of these last particularly attracts the attention: a structure of superior size – with flat roof, surmounted by a crenelled parapet – whose white walls show conspicuously against the green background of forest with which it is half encircled. It is the hacienda of *Casa del Corvo*.

Turning your eye northward, you behold a curious isolated eminence – a gigantic cone of rocks – rising several hundred feet above the level of the plain; and beyond, in dim distance, a waving horizontal line indicating the outlines of the Guadalupe mountains – the outstanding spurs of that elevated and almost untrodden plateau, the *Llano Estacado*.

Look aloft! You behold a sky, half sapphire, half turquoise; by day, showing no other spot than the orb of its golden god; by night, studded with stars that appear clipped from clear steel, and a moon whose well-defined disc outshines the effulgence of

silver.

Look below – at that hour when moon and stars have disappeared, and the land-wind arrives from Matagorda Bay, laden with the fragrance of flowers; when it strikes the starry flag, unfolding it to the eye of the morn – then look below, and behold the picture that should have been painted by the pencil of Vernet – too varied and vivid, too plentiful in shapes, costumes, and colouring, to be sketched by the pen.

In the tableau you distinguish soldiers in uniform – the light blue of the United States infantry, the darker cloth of the dragoons, and the almost invisible green of the mounted riflemen.

You will see but few in full uniform – only the officer of the day, the captain of the guard, and the guard itself.

Their comrades off duty lounge about the barracks, or within the stockade enclosure, in red flannel shirts, slouch hats, and boots innocent of blacking.

They mingle with men whose costumes make no pretence to a military character: tall hunters in tunics of dressed deerskin, with leggings to correspond – herdsmen and mustangers, habited *à la Mexicaine*– Mexicans themselves, in wide *calzoneros*, *serapés* on their shoulders, *botas* on their legs, huge spurs upon their heels, and glazed *sombreros* set jauntily on their crowns. They palaver with Indians on a friendly visit to the Fort, for trade or treaty; whose tents stand at some distance, and from whose shoulders hang blankets of red, and green, and blue – giving them

a picturesque, even classical, appearance, in spite of the hideous paint with which they have bedaubed their skins, and the dirt that renders sticky their long black hair, lengthened by tresses taken from the tails of their horses.

Picture to the eye of your imagination this jumble of mixed nationalities – in their varied costumes of race, condition, and calling; jot in here and there a black-skinned scion of Ethiopia, the body servant of some officer, or the emissary of a planter from the adjacent settlements; imagine them standing in gossiping groups, or stalking over the level plain, amidst some half-dozen halted waggons; a couple of six-pounders upon their carriages, with caissons close by; a square tent or two, with its surmounting fly – occupied by some eccentric officer who prefers sleeping under canvas; a stack of bayoneted rifles belonging to the soldiers on guard, – imagine all these component parts, and you will have before your mind's eye a truthful picture of a military fort upon the frontier of Texas, and the extreme selvedge of civilisation.

About a week after the arrival of the Louisiana planter at his new home, three officers were seen standing upon the parade ground in front of Fort Inge, with their eyes turned towards the hacienda of Casa del Corvo.

They were all young men: the oldest not over thirty years of age. His shoulder-straps with the double bar proclaimed him a captain; the second, with a single cross bar, was a first lieutenant; while the youngest of the two, with an empty chevron, was either

a second lieutenant or "brevet."

They were off duty; engaged in conversation – their theme, the "new people" in Casa del Corvo – by which was meant the Louisiana planter and his family.

"A sort of housewarming it's to be," said the infantry captain, alluding to an invitation that had reached the Fort, extending to all the commissioned officers of the garrison. "Dinner first, and dancing afterwards – a regular field day, where I suppose we shall see paraded the aristocracy and beauty of the settlement."

"Aristocracy?" laughingly rejoined the lieutenant of dragoons. "Not much of that here, I fancy; and of beauty still less."

"You mistake, Hancock. There are both upon the banks of the Leona. Some good States families have strayed out this way. We'll meet them at Poindexter's party, no doubt. On the question of aristocracy, the host himself, if you'll pardon a poor joke, is himself a host. He has enough of it to inoculate all the company that may be present; and as for beauty, I'll back his daughter against anything this side the Sabine. The commissary's niece will be no longer belle about here."

"Oh, indeed!" drawled the lieutenant of rifles, in a tone that told of his being chafed by this representation. "Miss Poindexter must be deuced good-looking, then."

"She's all that, I tell you, if she be anything like what she was when I last saw her, which was at a Bayou Lafourche ball. There were half a dozen young Creoles there, who came nigh crossing swords about her."

"A coquette, I suppose?" insinuated the rifleman.

"Nothing of the kind, Crossman. Quite the contrary, I assure you. She's a girl of spirit, though – likely enough to snub any fellow who might try to be too familiar. She's not without some of the father's pride. It's a family trait of the Poindexters."

"Just the girl I should cotton to," jocosely remarked the young dragoon. "And if she's as good-looking as you say, Captain Sloman, I shall certainly go in for her. Unlike Crossman here, I'm clear of all entanglements of the heart. Thank the Lord for it!"

"Well, Mr Hancock," rejoined the infantry officer, a gentleman of sober inclinings, "I'm not given to betting; but I'd lay a big wager you won't say that, after you have seen Louise Poindexter – that is, if you speak your mind."

"Pshaw, Sloman! don't you be alarmed about me. I've been too often under the fire of bright eyes to have any fear of them."

"None so bright as hers."

"Deuce take it! you make a fellow fall in love with this lady without having set eyes upon her. She must be something extraordinary – incomparable."

"She was both, when I last saw her."

"How long ago was that?"

"The Lafourche ball? Let me see – about eighteen months. Just after we got back from Mexico. She was then 'coming out' as society styles it: —

"A new star in the firmament, to light and glory born!"

"Eighteen months is a long time," sagely remarked Crossman

– "a long time for an unmarried maiden – especially among Creoles, where they often get spliced at twelve, instead of 'sweet sixteen.' Her beauty may have lost some of its bloom?"

"I believe not a bit. I should have called to see; only I knew they were in the middle of their 'plenishing,' and mightn't desire to be visited. But the major has been to Casa del Corvo, and brought back such a report about Miss Poindexter's beauty as almost got him into a scrape with the lady commanding the post."

"Upon my soul, Captain Sloman!" asseverated the lieutenant of dragoons, "you've excited my curiosity to such a degree, I feel already half in love with Louise Poindexter!"

"Before you get altogether into it," rejoined the officer of infantry, in a serious tone, "let me recommend a little caution. There's a *bête noir* in the background."

"A brother, I suppose? That is the individual usually so regarded."

"There is a brother, but it's not he. A free noble young fellow he is – the only Poindexter I ever knew not eaten up with pride, he's quite the reverse."

"The aristocratic father, then? Surely he wouldn't object to a quartering with the Hancocks?"

"I'm not so sure of that; seeing that the Hancocks are Yankees, and he's a *chivalric Southerner*! But it's not old Poindexter I mean."

"Who, then, is the black beast, or what is it – if not a human?"

"It is human, after a fashion. A male cousin – a queer card he

is – by name Cassius Calhoun."

"I think I've heard the name."

"So have I," said the lieutenant of rifles.

"So has almost everybody who had anything to do with the Mexican war – that is, who took part in Scott's campaign. He figured there extensively, and not very creditably either. He was captain in a volunteer regiment of Mississippians – for he hails from that State; but he was oftener met with at the *monté-table* than in the quarters of his regiment. He had one or two affairs, that gave him the reputation of a bully. But that notoriety was not of Mexican-war origin. He had earned it before going there; and was well known among the desperadoes of New Orleans as a *dangerous man*."

"What of all that?" asked the young dragoon, in a tone slightly savouring of defiance. "Who cares whether Mr Cassius Calhoun be a dangerous man, or a harmless one? Not I. He's only the girl's cousin, you say?"

"Something more, perhaps. I have reason to think he's her lover."

"Accepted, do you suppose?"

"That I can't tell. I only know, or suspect, that he's the favourite of the father. I have heard reasons why; given only in whispers, it is true, but too probable to be scouted. The old story – influence springing from mortgage money. Poindexter's not so rich as he has been – else we'd never have seen him out here."

"If the lady be as attractive as you say, I suppose we'll have

Captain Cassius out here also, before long?"

"Before long! Is that all you know about it? He *is* here; came along with the family, and is now residing with them. Some say he's a partner in the planting speculation. I saw him this very morning – down in the hotel bar-room – 'liquoring up,' and swaggering in his old way."

"A swarthy-complexioned man, of about thirty, with dark hair and moustaches; wearing a blue cloth frock, half military cut, and a Colt's revolver strapped over his thigh?"

"Ay, and a bowie knife, if you had looked for it, under the breast of his coat. That's the man."

"He's rather a formidable-looking fellow," remarked the young rifleman. "If a bully, his looks don't belie him."

"Damn his looks!" half angrily exclaimed the dragoon. "We don't hold commissions in Uncle Sam's army to be scared by looks, nor bullies either. If he comes any of his bullying over me, he'll find I'm as quick with a trigger as he."

At that moment the bugle brayed out the call for morning parade – a ceremony observed at the little frontier fort as regularly as if a whole *corps-d'armée* had been present – and the three officers separating, betook themselves to their quarters to prepare their several companies for the inspection of the major in command of the cantonment.

Chapter Ten.
Casa Del Corvo

The estate, or "hacienda," known as Casa del Corvo, extended along the wooded bottom of the Leona River for more than a league, and twice that distance southwards across the contiguous prairie.

The house itself – usually, though not correctly, styled the *hacienda*– stood within long cannon range of Fort Inge; from which its white walls were partially visible; the remaining portion being shadowed by tall forest trees that skirted the banks of the stream.

Its site was peculiar, and no doubt chosen with a view to defence: for its foundations had been laid at a time when Indian assailants might be expected; as indeed they might be, and often are, at the present hour.

There was a curve of the river closing upon itself, like the shoe of a racehorse, or the arc of a circle, three parts complete; the chord of which, or a parallelogram traced upon it, might be taken as the ground-plan of the dwelling. Hence the name – Casa del Corvo – "the House of the Curve" (curved river).

The façade, or entrance side, fronted towards the prairie – the latter forming a noble lawn that extended to the edge of the horizon – in comparison with which an imperial park would have

shrunk into the dimensions of a paddock.

The architecture of Casa del Corvo, like that of other large country mansions in Mexico, was of a style that might be termed Morisco-Mexican: being a single story in height, with a flat roof —*azotea*– spouted and parapeted all round; having a courtyard inside the walls, termed *patio*, open to the sky, with a flagged floor, a fountain, and a stone stairway leading up to the roof; a grand entrance gateway – the *saguan*– with a massive wooden door, thickly studded with bolt-heads; and two or three windows on each side, defended by a *grille* of strong iron bars, called *reja*. These are the chief characteristics of a Mexican hacienda; and Casa del Corvo differed but little from the type almost universal throughout the vast territories of Spanish America.

Such was the homestead that adorned the newly acquired estate of the Louisiana planter – that had become his property by purchase.

As yet no change had taken place in the exterior of the dwelling; nor much in its interior, if we except the *personnel* of its occupants. A physiognomy, half Anglo-Saxon, half Franco-American, presented itself in courtyard and corridor, where formerly were seen only faces of pure Spanish type; and instead of the rich sonorous language of Andalusia, was now heard the harsher guttural of a semi-Teutonic tongue – occasionally diversified by the sweeter accentuation of Creolian French.

Outside the walls of the mansion – in the village-like cluster of yucca-thatched huts which formerly gave housing to the *peons*

and other dependants of the hacienda – the transformation was more striking. Where the tall thin *vaquero*, in broad-brimmed hat of black glaze, and chequered *serapé*, strode proudly over the sward – his spurs tinkling at every step – was now met the authoritative "overseer," in blue jersey, or blanket coat – his whip cracking at every corner; where the red children of Azteca and Anahuac, scantily clad in tanned sheepskin, could be seen, with sad solemn aspect, lounging listlessly by their *jacalés*, or trotting silently along, were now heard the black sons and daughters of Ethiopia, from morn till night chattering their gay "gumbo," or with song and dance seemingly contradicting the idea: that slavery is a heritage of unhappiness!

Was it a change for the better upon the estate of Casa del Corvo?

There was a time when the people of England would have answered – no; with a unanimity and emphasis calculated to drown all disbelief in their sincerity.

Alas, for human weakness and hypocrisy! Our long cherished sympathy with the slave proves to have been only a tissue of sheer dissembling. Led by an oligarchy – not the true aristocracy of our country: for these are too noble to have yielded to such, deep designings – but an oligarchy composed of conspiring plebs, who have smuggled themselves into the first places of power in all the four estates – guided by these prurient conspirators against the people's rights – England has proved untrue to her creed so loudly proclaimed – truculent to the trust reposed in her by the

universal acclaim, of the nations.

On a theme altogether different dwelt the thoughts of Louise Poindexter, as she flung herself into a chair in front of her dressing-glass, and directed her maid Florinda to prepare her for the reception of guests – expected soon to arrive at the hacienda.

It was the day fixed for the "house-warming," and about an hour before the time appointed for dinner to be on the table. This might have explained a certain restlessness observable in the air of the young Creole – especially observed by Florinda; but it did not. The maid had her own thoughts about the cause of her mistress's disquietude – as was proved by the conversation that ensued between them.

Scarce could it be called a conversation. It was more as if the young lady were thinking aloud, with her attendant acting as an echo. During all her life, the Creole had been accustomed to look upon her sable handmaid as a thing from whom it was not worth while concealing her thoughts, any more than she would from the chairs, the table, the sofa, or any other article of furniture in the apartment. There was but the difference of Florinda being a little more animated and companionable, and the advantage of her being able to give a vocal response to the observations addressed to her.

For the first ten minutes after entering the chamber, Florinda had sustained the brunt of the dialogue on indifferent topics – her mistress only interfering with an occasional ejaculation.

"Oh, Miss Looey!" pursued the negress, as her fingers fondly

played among the lustrous tresses of her young mistress's hair, "how bewful you hair am! Like de long 'Panish moss dat hang from de cyprus-tree; only dat it am ob a diff'rent colour, an shine like the sugar-house 'lasses."

As already stated, Louise Poindexter was a Creole. After that, it is scarce necessary to say that her hair was of a dark colour; and – as the sable maid in rude speech had expressed it – luxuriant as Spanish moss. It was not black; but of a rich glowing brown – such as may be observed in the tinting of a tortoise-shell, or the coat of a winter-trapped sable.

"Ah!" continued Florinda, spreading out an immense "hank" of the hair, that glistened like a chestnut against her dark palm, "if I had dat lubbly hair on ma head, in'tead ob dis cuss'd cully wool, I fotch em all to ma feet – ebbry one oh dem."

"What do you mean, girl?" inquired the young lady, as if just aroused from some dreamy reverie. "What's that you've been saying? Fetch them to your feet? Fetch whom?"

"Na, now; you know what dis chile mean?"

"'Pon honour, I do not."

"Make em lub me. Dat's what I should hab say."

"But whom?"

"All de white gen'l'm. De young planter, de officer ob de Fort – all ob dem. Wif you hair, Miss Looey, I could dem all make conquess."

"Ha – ha – ha!" laughed the young lady, amused at the idea of Florinda figuring under that magnificent chevelure. "You think,

with my hair upon your head, you would be invincible among the men?"

"No, missa – not you hair alone – but wif you sweet face – you skin, white as de alumbaster – you tall figga – you grand look. Oh, Miss Looey, you am so 'plendidly bewful! I hear de white gen'l'm say so. I no need hear em say it. I see dat for masef."

"You're learning to flatter, Florinda."

"No, 'deed, missa – ne'er a word ob flattery – ne'er a word, I swa it. By de 'postles, I swa it."

To one who looked upon her mistress, the earnest asseveration of the maid was not necessary to prove the sincerity of her speech, however hyperbolical it might appear. To say that Louise Poindexter was beautiful, would only be to repeat the universal verdict of the society that surrounded her. A single glance was sufficient to satisfy any one upon this point – strangers as well as acquaintances. It was a kind of beauty that needed no *discovering*– and yet it is difficult to describe it. The pen cannot portray swell a face. Even the pencil could convey but a faint idea of it: for no painter, however skilled, could represent upon cold canvas the glowing ethereal light that emanated from her eyes, and appeared to radiate over her countenance. Her features were purely classic: resembling those types of female beauty chosen by Phidias or Praxiteles. And yet in all the Grecian Pantheon there is no face to which it could have been likened: for it was not the countenance of a goddess; but, something more attractive to the eye of man, the face of a woman.

A suspicion of sensuality, apparent in the voluptuous curving of the lower lip – still more pronounced in the prominent rounding beneath the cheeks – while depriving the countenance of its pure spiritualism, did not perhaps detract from its beauty. There are men, who, in this departure from the divine type, would have perceived a superior charm: since in Louise Poindexter they would have seen not a divinity to be worshipped, but a woman to be loved.

Her only reply vouchsafed to Florinda's earnest asseveration was a laugh – careless, though not incredulous. The young Creole did not need to be reminded of her beauty. She was not unconscious of it: as could be told by her taking more than one long look into the mirror before which her toilet was being made. The flattery of the negress scarce called up an emotion; certainly not more than she might have felt at the fawning of a pet spaniel; and she soon after surrendered herself to the reverie from which the speech had aroused her.

Florinda was not silenced by observing her mistress's air of abstraction. The girl had evidently something on her mind – some mystery, of which she desired the *éclaircissement*– and was determined to have it.

"Ah!" she continued, as if talking to herself; "if Florinda had half de charm ob young missa, she for nobody care – she for nobody heave do deep sigh!"

"Sigh!" repeated her mistress, suddenly startled by the speech. "What do you mean by that?"

"Pa' dieu, Miss Looey, Florinda no so blind you tink; nor so deaf neider. She you see long time sit in de same place; you nebber 'peak no word – you only heave de sigh – de long deep sigh. You nebba do dat in de ole plantashun in Loozyanny."

"Florinda! I fear you are taking leave of your senses, or have left them behind you in Louisiana? Perhaps there's something in the climate here that affects you. Is that so, girl?"

"Pa' dieu, Miss Looey, dat question ob youself ask. You no be angry case I 'peak so plain. Florinda you slave – she you lub like brack sisser. She no happy hear you sigh. Dat why she hab take de freedom. You no be angry wif me?"

"Certainly not. Why should I be angry with you, child? I'm not. I didn't say I was; only you are quite mistaken in your ideas. What you've seen, or heard, could be only a fancy of your own. As for sighing, heigho! I have something else to think of just now. I have to entertain about a hundred guests – nearly all strangers, too; among them the young planters and officers whom you would entangle if you had my hair. Ha! ha! ha! *I* don't desire to enmesh them – not one of them! So twist it up as you like – without the semblance of a snare in it."

"Oh! Miss Looey, you so 'peak?" inquired the negress with an air of evident interest. "You say none ob dem gen'l'm you care for? Dere am two, tree, berry, berry, berry han'som'. One planter dar be, and two ob de officer – all young gen'l'm. You know de tree I mean. All ob dem hab been 'tentive to you. You sure, missa, tain't one ob dem dat you make sigh?"

"Sigh again! Ha! ha! ha! But come, Florinda, we're losing time. Recollect I've got to be in the drawing-room to receive a hundred guests. I must have at least half an hour to compose myself into an attitude befitting such an extensive reception."

"No fear, Miss Looey – no fear. I you toilette make in time – plenty ob time. No much trouble you dress. Pa' dieu, in any dress you look 'plendid. You be de belle if you dress like one ob de fiel' hand ob de plantashun."

"What a flatterer you are grown, Florinda! I shall begin to suspect that you are after some favour. Do you wish me to intercede, and make up your quarrel with Pluto?"

"No, missa. I be friend nebber more wid Pluto. He show hisseff such great coward when come dat storm on de brack prairee. Ah, Miss Looey! what we boaf do if dat young white gen'l'm on de red hoss no come ridin' dat way?"

"If he had not, cher Florinde, it is highly probable neither of us should now have been here."

"Oh, missa! wasn't he real fancy man, dat 'ere? You see him bewful face. You see him thick hair, jess de colour ob you own – only curled leetle bit like mine. Talk ob de young planter, or dem officer at de Fort! De brack folk say he no good for nuffin, like dem – he only poor white trash. Who care fo' dat? He am de sort ob man could dis chile make sigh. Ah! de berry, berry sort!"

Up to this point the young Creole had preserved a certain tranquillity of countenance. She tried to continue it; but the effort failed her. Whether by accident or design, Florinda had touched

the most sensitive chord in the spirit of her mistress.

She would have been loth to confess it, even to her slave; and it was a relief to her, when loud voices heard in the courtyard gave a colourable excuse for terminating her toilette, along with the delicate dialogue upon which she might have been constrained to enter.

Chapter Eleven.
An Unexpected Arrival

"Say, ye durnationed nigger! whar's yur master?"

"Mass Poindex'er, sar? De ole massr, or de young 'un?"

"Young 'un be durned! I mean Mister Peintdexter. Who else shed I? Whar air he?"

"Ho – ho! sar! dey am boaf at home – dat is, dey am boaf away from de house – de ole massr an de young Massr Henry. Dey am down de ribber, wha de folk am makin' de new fence. Ho! ho! you find 'em dar."

"Down the river! How fur d'ye reck'n?"

"Ho! ho! sar. Dis nigga reck'n it be 'bout tree or four mile – dat at de berry leas'."

"Three or four mile? Ye must be a durnationed fool, nigger. Mister Peintdexter's plantation don't go thet fur; an I reck'n he ain't the man to be makin' a fence on some'dy else's clarin'. Lookee hyur! What time air he expected hum? Ye've got a straighter idee o' thet, I hope?"

"Dey boaf 'pected home berry soon, de young massr and de ole massr, and Mass Ca'houn too. Ho! ho! dar's agwine to be big dooin's 'bout dis yar shanty – yer see dat fo' yeseff by de smell ob de kitchen. Ho! ho! All sorts o' gran' feassin' – do roas' an de bile, an de barbecue; de pot-pies, an de chicken fixins. Ho! ho! ain't

thar agwine to go it hyar jess like de ole times on de coass ob de Massippy! Hoora fo' ole Mass Poindex'er! He de right sort. Ho! ho! 'tranger! why you no holla too: you no friend ob de massr?"

"Durn you, nigger, don't ye remember me? Now I look into yur ugly mug, I recollex you."

"Gorramighty! 'tain't Mass 'Tump – 't use to fotch de ven'son an de turkey gobbla to de ole plantashun? By de jumbo, it am, tho'. Law, Mass 'Tump, dis nigga 'members you like it wa de day afore yesserday. Ise heern you called de odder day; but I war away from 'bout de place. I'm de coachman now – dribes de carriage dat carries de lady ob de 'tablishment – de bewful Missy Loo. Lor, massr, she berry fine gal. Dey do say she beat Florinday into fits. Nebba mind, Mass 'Tump, you better wait till ole massr come home. He am *a bound to be hya*, in de shortess poss'ble time."

"Wal, if thet's so, I'll wait upon him," rejoined the hunter, leisurely lifting his leg over the saddle – in which up to this time he had retained his seat. "Now, ole fellur," he added, passing the bridle into the hands of the negro, "you gi'e the maar half a dozen yeers o' corn out o' the crib. I've rid the critter better 'n a score o' miles like a streak o' lightnin' – all to do yur master a sarvice."

"Oh, Mr Zebulon Stump, is it you?" exclaimed a silvery voice, followed by the appearance of Louise Poindexter upon the verandah.

"I thought it was," continued the young lady, coming up to the railings, "though I didn't expect to see you so soon. You said you

were going upon a long journey. Well – I am pleased that you are here; and so will papa and Henry be. Pluto! go instantly to Chloe, the cook, and see what she can give you for Mr Stump's dinner. You have not dined, I know. You are dusty – you've been travelling? Here, Morinda! Haste you to the sideboard, and pour out some drink. Mr Stump will be thirsty, I'm sure, this hot day. What would you prefer – port, sherry, claret? Ah, now, if I recollect, you used to be partial to Monongahela whisky. I think there is some. Morinda, see if there be! Step into the verandah, dear Mr Stump, and take a seat. You were inquiring for papa? I expect him home every minute. I shall try to entertain you till he come."

Had the young lady paused sooner in her speech, she would not have received an immediate reply. Even as it was, some seconds elapsed before Zeb made rejoinder. He stood gazing upon her, as if struck speechless by the sheer intensity of his admiration.

"Lord o' marcy, Miss Lewaze!" he at length gasped forth, "I thort when I used to see you on the Massissippi, ye war the puttiest critter on the airth; but now, I think ye the puttiest thing eyther on airth or in hewing. Geehosofat!"

The old hunter's praise was scarce exaggerated. Fresh from the toilette, the gloss of her luxuriant hair untarnished by the notion of the atmosphere; her cheeks glowing with a carmine tint, produced by the application of cold water; her fine figure, gracefully draped in a robe of India muslin – white and semi-

translucent – certainly did Louise Poindexter appear as pretty as anything upon earth – if not in heaven.

"Geehosofat!" again exclaimed the hunter, following up his complimentary speech, "I hev in my time seed what I thort war some putty critters o' the sheemale kind – my ole 'ooman herself warn't so bad-lookin' when I fast kim acrost her in Kaintuck – thet she warn't. But I will say this, Miss Lewaze: ef the puttiest bits o' all o' them war clipped out an then jeined thegither agin, they wudn't make up the thousanth part o' a angel sech as you."

"Oh – oh – oh! Mr Stump – Mr Stump! I'm astonished to hear *you* talk in this manner. Texas has quite turned you into a courtier. If you go on so, I fear you will lose your character for plain speaking! After that I am sure you will stand in need of a very big drink. Haste, Morinda! I think you said you would prefer whisky?"

"Ef I didn't say it, I thunk it; an that air about the same. Yur right, miss, I prefar the corn afore any o' them thur furrin lickers; an I sticks to it whuriver I kin git it. Texas hain't made no alterashun in me in the matter o' lickerin'."

"Mass 'Tump, you it hab mix wif water?" inquired Florinda, coming forward with a tumbler about one-half full of "Monongahela."

"No, gurl. Durn yur water! I hev hed enuf o' thet since I started this mornin'. I hain't hed a taste o' licker the hul day – ne'er as much as the smell o' it."

"Dear Mr Stump! surely you can't drink it that way? Why, it

will burn your throat! Have a little sugar, or honey, along with it?"

"Speil it, miss. It air sweet enuf 'ithout that sort o' docterin'; 'specially arter you hev looked inter the glass. Yu'll see ef I can't drink it. Hyur goes to try!"

The old hunter raised the tumbler to his chin; and after giving three gulps, and the fraction of a fourth, returned it empty into the hands of Florinda. A loud smacking of the lips almost drowned the simultaneous exclamations of astonishment uttered by the young lady and her maid.

"Burn my throat, ye say? Ne'er a bit. It hez jest eiled thet ere jugewlar, an put it in order for a bit o' a palaver I wants to hev wi' yur father – 'bout thet ere spotty mow-stang."

"Oh, true! I had forgotten. No, I hadn't either; but I did not suppose you had time to have news of it. Have you heard anything of the pretty creature?"

"Putty critter ye may well pernounce it. It ur all o' thet. Besides, it ur a maar."

"A ma-a-r! What is that, Mr Stump? I don't understand."

"A maar I sayed. Shurly ye know what a maar is?"

"Ma-a-r – ma-a-r! Why, no, not exactly. Is it a Mexican word? *Mar* in Spanish signifies the sea."

"In coorse it air a Mexikin maar – all mowstangs air. They air all on 'em o' a breed as wur oncest brought over from some European country by the fust o' them as settled in these hyur parts – leesewise I hev heern so."

"Still, Mr Stump, I do not comprehend you. What makes this

mustang a ma-a-r?"

"What makes her a *maar*? 'Case she ain't a *hoss*; thet's what make it, Miss Peintdexter."

"Oh – now – I – I think I comprehend. But did you say you have heard of the animal – I mean since you left us?"

"Heern o' her, seed her, an feeled her."

"Indeed!"

"She air grupped."

"Ah, caught! what capital news! I shall be so delighted to see the beautiful thing; and ride it too. I haven't had a horse worth a piece of orange-peel since I've been in Texas. Papa has promised to purchase this one for me at any price. But who is the lucky individual who accomplished the capture?"

"Ye mean who grupped the maar?"

"Yes – yes – who?"

"Why, in coorse it wur a mowstanger."

"A mustanger?"

"Ye-es – an such a one as thur ain't another on all these purayras – eyther to ride a hoss, or throw a laryitt over one. Yo may talk about yur Mexikins! I never seed neery Mexikin ked manage hoss-doin's like that young fellur; an thur ain't a drop o' thur pisen blood in his veins. He ur es white es I am myself."

"His name?"

"Wal, es to the name o' his family, that I niver heern. His Christyun name air Maurice. He's knowed up thur 'bout the Fort as Maurice the mowstanger."

The old hunter was not sufficiently observant to take note of the tone of eager interest in which the question had been asked, nor the sudden deepening of colour upon the cheeks of the questioner as she heard the answer.

Neither had escaped the observation of Florinda.

"La, Miss Looey!" exclaimed the latter, "shoo dat de name ob de brave young white gen'l'm – he dat us save from being smodered on de brack prairee?"

"Geehosofat, yes!" resumed the hunter, relieving the young lady from the necessity of making reply. "Now I think o't, he told me o' thet suckumstance this very mornin', afore we started. He air the same. Thet's the very fellur es hev trapped spotty; an he air toatin' the critter along at this eyedentical minnit, in kump'ny wi' about a dozen others o' the same cavyurd. He oughter be hyur afore sundown. I pushed my ole maar ahead, so 's to tell yur father the spotty war comin', and let him git the fust chance o' buyin'. I know'd as how thet ere bit o' hosdoin's don't get druv fur into the Settlements efore someb'dy snaps her up. I thort o' *you*, Miss Lewaze, and how ye tuk on so when I tolt ye 'bout the critter. Wal, make yur mind eezy; ye shell hev the fast chance. Ole Zeb Stump 'll be yur bail for thet."

"Oh, Mr Stump, it is so kind of you! I am very, very grateful. You will now excuse me for a moment. Father will soon be back. We have a dinner-party to-day; and I have to prepare for receiving a great many people. Florinda, see that Mr Stump's luncheon is set out for him. Go, girl – go at once about it!"

"And, Mr Stump," continued the young lady, drawing nearer to the hunter, and speaking in a more subdued tone of voice, "if the young – young gentleman should arrive while the other people are here – perhaps he don't know them – will you see that he is not neglected? There is wine yonder, in the verandah, and other things. You know what I mean, dear Mr Stump?"

"Durned if I do, Miss Lewaze; that air, not adzackly. I kin unnerstan' all thet ere 'bout the licker' an other fixins. But who air the young gen'leman yur speakin' o'? Thet's the thing as bamboozles me."

"Surely you know who I mean! The young gentleman – the young man – who, you say, is bringing in the horses."

"Oh! ah! Maurice the mowstanger! That's it, is it? Wal, I reck'n yur not a hundred mile astray in calling *him* a gen'leman; tho' it ain't offen es a mowstanger gits thet entitlement, or desarves it eyther. *He air one*, every inch o' him – a gen'leman by barth, breed, an raisin' – tho' he air a hoss-hunter, an Irish at thet."

The eyes of Louise Poindexter sparkled with delight as she listened to opinions so perfectly in unison with her own.

"I must tell ye, howsomdiver," continued the hunter, as some doubt had come across his mind, "it won't do to show that 'ere young fellur any sort o' second-hand hospertality. As they used to say on the Massissippi, he air 'as proud as a Peintdexter.' Excuse me, Miss Lewaze, for lettin' the word slip. I did think o't thet I war talkin' to a Peintdexter – not the proudest, but the puttiest

o' the name."

"Oh, Mr Stump! you can say what you please to me. You know that I could not be offended with you, you dear old giant!"

"He'd be meaner than a dwurf es ked eyther say or do anythin' to offend you, miss."

"Thanks! thanks! I know your honest heart – I know your devotion. Perhaps some time – some time, Mr Stump," – she spoke hesitatingly, but apparently without any definite meaning – "I might stand in need of your friendship."

"Ye won't need it long afore ye git it, then; thet ole Zeb Stump kin promise ye, Miss Peintdexter. He'd be stinkiner than a skunk, an a bigger coward than a coyoat, es wouldn't stan' by sech as you, while there wur a bottle-full o' breath left in the inside o' his body."

"A thousand thanks – again and again! But what were you going to say? You spoke of second-hand hospitality?"

"I dud."

"You meant – ?"

"I meaned thet it 'ud be no use o' my inviting Maurice the mowstanger eyther to eat or drink unner this hyur roof. Unless yur father do that, the young fellur 'll go 'ithout tastin'. You unnerstan, Miss Lewaze, he ain't one o' thet sort o' poor whites as kin be sent roun' to the kitchen."

The young Creole stood for a second or two, without making rejoinder. She appeared to be occupied with some abstruse calculation, that engrossed the whole of her thoughts.

"Never mind about it," she at length said, in a tone that told the calculation completed. "Never mind, Mr Stump. You need not invite him. Only let *me* know when he arrives – unless we be at dinner, and then, of course, he would not expect any one to appear. But if he *should* come at that time, *you* detain him – won't you?"

"Boun' to do it, ef you bid me."

"You will, then; and let me know he is here. *I* shall ask him to eat."

"Ef ye do, miss, I reck'n ye'll speil his appetite. The sight o' you, to say nothin' o' listenin' to your melodyus voice, ud cure a starvin' wolf o' bein' hungry. When I kim in hyur I war peckish enuf to swaller a raw buzzart. Neow I don't care a durn about eatin'. I ked go 'ithout chawin' meat for month."

As this exaggerated chapter of euphemism was responded to by a peal of clear ringing laughter, the young lady pointed to the other side of the patio; where her maid was seer emerging from the "cocina," carrying a light tray – followed by Pluto with one of broader dimensions, more heavily weighted.

"You great giant!" was the reply, given in a tone of sham reproach; "I won't believe you have lost your appetite, until you have eaten Jack. Yonder come Pluto and Morinda. They bring something that will prove more cheerful company than I; so I shall leave you to enjoy it. Good bye, Zeb – good bye, or, as the natives say here, *hasta luego*!"

Gaily were these words spoken – lightly did Louise Poindexter

trip back across the covered corridor. Only after entering her chamber, and finding herself *chez soi-même*, did she give way to a reflection of a more serious character, that found expression in words low murmured, but full of mystic meaning: —

"It is my destiny: I feel – I know that it is! I dare not meet, and yet I cannot shun it – I may not – I would not – I *will not*!"

Chapter Twelve.
Taming a Wild Mare

The pleasantest *apartment* in a Mexican house is that which has the roof for its floor, and the sky for its ceiling – the *azotea*. In fine weather – ever fine in that sunny clime – it is preferred to the drawing-room; especially after dinner, when the sun begins to cast rose-coloured rays upon the snow-clad summits of Orizava, Popocatepec, Toluca, and the "Twin Sister;" when the rich wines of Xeres and Madeira have warmed the imaginations of Andalusia's sons and daughters – descendants of the Conquistadores – who mount up to their house-tops to look upon a land of world-wide renown, rendered famous by the heroic achievements of their ancestors.

Then does the Mexican "cavallero," clad in embroidered habiliments, exhibit his splendid exterior to the eyes of some señorita – at the same time puffing the smoke of his paper cigarito against her cheeks. Then does the dark-eyed donçella favourably listen to soft whisperings; or perhaps only pretends to listen, while, with heart distraught, and eye wandering away, she sends stealthy glances over the plain towards some distant hacienda – the home of him she truly loves.

So enjoyable a fashion, as that of spending the twilight hours upon the housetop, could not fail to be followed by any one who

chanced to be the occupant of a Mexican dwelling; and the family of the Louisiana planter had adopted it, as a matter of course.

On that same evening, after the dining-hall had been deserted, the roof, instead of the drawing-room, was chosen as the place of re-assemblage; and as the sun descended towards the horizon, his slanting rays fell upon a throng as gay, as cheerful, and perhaps as resplendent, as ever trod the azotea of Casa del Corvo. Moving about over its tessellated tiles, standing in scattered groups, or lined along the parapet with faces turned towards the plain, were women as fair and men as brave as had ever assembled on that same spot – even when its ancient owner used to distribute hospitality to the *hidalgos* of the land – the *bluest* blood in Coahuila and Texas.

The company now collected to welcome the advent of Woodley Poindexter on his Texan estate, could also boast of this last distinction. They were the *élite* of the Settlements – not only of the Leona, but of others more distant. There were guests from Gonzales, from Castroville, and even from San Antonio – old friends of the planter, who, like him, had sought a home in South-Western Texas, and who had ridden – some of them over a hundred miles – to be present at this, his first grand "reception."

The planter had spared neither pains nor expense to give it *éclat*. What with the sprinkling of uniforms and epaulettes, supplied by the Fort – what with the brass band borrowed from the same convenient repository – what with the choice wines found in the cellars of Casa del Corvo, and which had formed

part of the purchase – there could be little lacking to make Poindexter's party the most brilliant ever given upon the banks of the Leona.

And to insure this effect, his lovely daughter Louise, late belle of Louisiana – the fame of whose beauty had been before her, even in Texas – acted as mistress of the ceremonies – moving about among the admiring guests with the smile of a queen, and the grace of a goddess.

On that occasion was she the cynosure of a hundred pairs of eyes, the happiness of a score of hearts, and perhaps the torture of as many more: for not all were blessed who beheld her beauty.

Was she herself happy?

The interrogatory may appear singular – almost absurd. Surrounded by friends – admirers – one, at least, who adored her – a dozen whose incipient love could but end in adoration – young planters, lawyers, embryo statesmen, and some with reputation already achieved – sons of Mars in armour, or with armour late laid aside – how could she be otherwise than proudly, supremely happy?

A stranger might have asked the question; one superficially acquainted with Creole character – more especially the character of the lady in question.

But mingling in that splendid throng was a man who was no stranger to either; and who, perhaps, more than any one present, watched her every movement; and endeavoured more than any other to interpret its meaning. Cassius Calhoun was the

individual thus occupied.

She went not hither, nor thither, without his following her – not close, like a shadow; but by stealth, flitting from place to place; upstairs, and downstairs; standing in corners, with an air of apparent abstraction; but all the while with eyes turned askant upon his cousin's face, like a plain-clothes policeman employed on detective duty.

Strangely enough he did not seem to pay much regard to her speeches, made in reply to the compliments showered upon her by several would-be winners of a smile – not even when these were conspicuous and respectable, as in the case of young Hancock of the dragoons. To all such he listened without visible emotion, as one listens to a conversation in no way affecting the affairs either of self or friends.

It was only after ascending to the azotea, on observing his cousin near the parapet, with her eye turned interrogatively towards the plain, that his detective zeal became conspicuous – so much so as to attract the notice of others. More than once was it noticed by those standing near: for more than once was repeated the act which gave cause to it.

At intervals, not very wide apart, the young mistress of Casa del Corvo might have been seen to approach the parapet, and look across the plain, with a glance that seemed to interrogate the horizon of the sky.

Why she did so no one could tell. No one presumed to conjecture, except Cassius Calhoun. He had thoughts upon the

subject – thoughts that were torturing him.

When a group of moving forms appeared upon the prairie, emerging from the garish light of the setting sun – when the spectators upon the azotea pronounced it a drove of horses in charge of some mounted men – the ex-officer of volunteers had a suspicion as to who was conducting that *cavallada*.

Another appeared to feel an equal interest in its advent, though perhaps from a different motive. Long before the horse-drove had attracted the observation of Poindexter's guests, his daughter had noted its approach – from the time that a cloud of dust soared up against the horizon, so slight and filmy as to have escaped detection by any eye not bent expressly on discovering it.

From that moment the young Creole, under cover of a conversation carried on amid a circle of fair companions, had been slyly scanning the dust-cloud as it drew nearer; forming conjectures as to what was causing it, upon knowledge already, and as she supposed, exclusively her own.

"Wild horses!" announced the major commandant of Fort Inge, after a short inspection through his pocket telescope. "Some one bringing them in," he added, a second time raising the glass to his eye. "Oh! I see now – it's Maurice the mustanger, who occasionally helps our men to a remount. He appears to be coming this way – direct to your place, Mr Poindexter."

"If it be the young fellow you have named, that's not unlikely," replied the owner of Casa del Corvo. "I bargained with him to catch me a score or two; and maybe this is the first instalment

he's bringing me."

"Yes, I think it is," he added, after a look through the telescope.

"I am sure of it," said the planter's son. "I can tell the horseman yonder to be Maurice Gerald."

The planter's daughter could have done the same; though she made no display of her knowledge. She did not appear to be much interested in the matter – indeed, rather indifferent. She had become aware of being watched by that evil eye, constantly burning upon her.

The *cavallada* came up, Maurice sitting handsomely on his horse, with the spotted mare at the end of his lazo.

"What a beautiful creature!" exclaimed several voices, as the captured mustang was led up in front of the house, quivering with excitement at a scene so new to it.

"It's worth a journey to the ground to look at such an animal!" suggested the major's wife, a lady of enthusiastic inclinings. "I propose we all go down! What say you, Miss Poindexter?"

"Oh, certainly," answered the mistress of the mansion, amidst a chorus of other voices crying out —

"Let us go down! Let us go down!"

Led by the majoress, the ladies filed down the stone stairway – the gentlemen after; and in a score of seconds the horse-hunter, still seated in his saddle, became, with his captive, the centre of the distinguished circle.

Henry Poindexter had hurried down before the rest, and

already, in the frankest manner, bidden the stranger welcome.

Between the latter and Louise only a slight salutation could be exchanged. Familiarity with a horse-dealer – even supposing him to have had the honour of an introduction – would scarce have been tolerated by the "society."

Of the ladies, the major's wife alone addressed him in a familiar way; but that was in a tone that told of superior position, coupled with condescension. He was more gratified by a glance – quick and silent – when his eye changed intelligence with that of the young Creole.

Hers was not the only one that rested approvingly upon him. In truth, the mustanger looked splendid, despite his travel-stained habiliments. His journey of over twenty miles had done little to fatigue him. The prairie breeze had freshened the colour upon his cheeks; and his full round throat, naked to the breast-bone, and slightly bronzed with the sun, contributed to the manliness of his mien. Even the dust clinging to his curled hair could not altogether conceal its natural gloss, nor the luxuriance of its growth; while a figure tersely knit told of strength and endurance beyond the ordinary endowment of man. There were stolen glances, endeavouring to catch his, sent by more than one of the fair circle. The pretty niece of the commissary smiled admiringly upon him. Some said the commissary's wife; but this could be only a slander, to be traced, perhaps, to the doctor's better half – the Lady Teazle of the cantonment.

"Surely," said Poindexter, after making an examination of the

captured mustang, “this must be the animal of which old Zeb Stump has been telling me?”

“It ur thet eyedenticul same,” answered the individual so described, making his way towards Maurice with the design of assisting him. “Ye-es, Mister Peintdexter; the eyedenticul critter – a maar, es ye kin all see for yurselves – ”

“Yes, yes,” hurriedly interposed the planter, not desiring any further elucidation.

“The young fellur hed grupped her afore I got thur; so I wur jess in the nick o’ time ’bout it. She mout a been tuck elswhar, an then Miss Lewaze thur mout a missed hevin’ her.”

“It is true indeed, Mr Stump! It was very thoughtful of you. I know not how I shall ever be able to reciprocate your kindness?”

“Reciperkate! Wal, I spose thet air means to do suthin in return. Ye kin do thet, miss, ’ithout much difeequilty. I han’t dud nothin’ for you, ceptin’ make a bit o’ a journey acrost the purayra. To see yur bewtyful self mounted on thet maar, wi’ yur ploomed het upon yur head, an yur long-tailed pettykote streakin’ it ahint you, ’ud pay old Zeb Stump to go clur to the Rockies, and back agin.”

“Oh, Mr Stump! you are an incorrigible flatterer! Look around you! you will see many here more deserving of your compliments than I.”

“Wal, wal!” rejoined Zeb, casting a look of careless scrutiny towards the ladies, “I ain’t a goin’ to deny thet thur air gobs o’ putty critters hyur – dog-goned putty critters; but es they used to

say in ole Loozyanney, thur air but one Lewaze Peintdexter."

A burst of laughter – in which only a few feminine voices bore part – was the reply to Zeb's gallant speech.

"I shall owe you two hundred dollars for this," said the planter, addressing himself to Maurice, and pointing to the spotted mare. "I think that was the sum stipulated for by Mr Stump."

"I was not a party to the stipulation," replied the mustanger, with a significant but well-intentioned smile. "I cannot take your money. *She* is not for sale."

"Oh, indeed!" said the planter, drawing back with an air of proud disappointment; while his brother planters, as well as the officers of the Fort, looked astonished at the refusal of such a munificent price. Two hundred dollars for an untamed mustang, when the usual rate of price was from ten to twenty! The mustanger must be mad?

He gave them no time to descant upon his sanity.

"Mr Poindexter," he continued, speaking in the same good-humoured strain, "you have given me such a generous price for my other captives – and before they were taken too – that I can afford to make a present – what we over in Ireland call a 'luckpenny.' It is our custom there also, when a horse-trade takes place at the house, to give the *douceur*, not to the purchaser himself, but to one of the fair members of his family. May I have your permission to introduce this Hibernian fashion into the settlements of Texas?"

"Certainly, by all means!" responded several voices, two or

three of them unmistakably with an Irish accentuation.

"Oh, certainly, Mr Gerald!" replied the planter, his conservatism giving way to the popular will – "as you please about that."

"Thanks, gentlemen – thanks!" said the mustanger, with a patronising look towards men who believed themselves to be his masters. "This mustang is my luckpenny; and if Miss Poindexter will condescend to accept of it, I shall feel more than repaid for the three days' chase which the creature has cost me. Had she been the most cruel of coquettes, she could scarce have been more difficult to subdue."

"I accept your gift, sir; and with gratitude," responded the young Creole – for the first time prominently proclaiming herself, and stepping freely forth as she spoke. "But I have a fancy," she continued, pointing to the mustang – at the same time that her eye rested inquiringly on the countenance of the mustanger – "a fancy that your captive is not yet *tamed*? She but trembles in fear of the unknown future. She may yet kick against the traces, if she find the harness not to her liking; and then what am I to do – poor I?"

"True, Maurice!" said the major, widely mistaken as to the meaning of the mysterious speech, and addressing the only man on the ground who could possibly have comprehended it; "Miss Poindexter speaks very sensibly. That mustang has not been tamed yet – any one may see it. Come, my good fellow! give her the lesson.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" continued the major, turning towards the company, "this is something worth your seeing – those of you who have not witnessed the spectacle before. Come, Maurice; mount, and show us a specimen of prairie horsemanship. She looks as though she would put your skill to the test."

"You are right, major: she does!" replied the mustanger, with a quick glance, directed not towards the captive quadruped, but to the young Creole; who, with all her assumed courage, retired tremblingly behind the circle of spectators.

"No matter, my man," pursued the major, in a tone intended for encouragement. "In spite of that devil sparkling in her eye, I'll lay ten to one you'll take the conceit out of her. Try!"

Without losing credit, the mustanger could not have declined acceding to the major's request. It was a challenge to skill – to equestrian prowess – a thing not lightly esteemed upon the prairies of Texas.

He proclaimed his acceptance of it by leaping lightly out of his saddle, resigning his own steed to Zeb Stump, and exclusively giving his attention to the captive.

The only preliminary called for was the clearing of the ground. This was effected in an instant – the greater part of the company – with all the ladies – returning to the azotea.

With only a piece of raw-hide rope looped around the under jaw, and carried headstall fashion behind the ears – with only one rein in hand – Maurice sprang to the back of the wild mare.

It was the first time she had ever been mounted by man – the first insult of the kind offered to her.

A shrill spiteful scream spoke plainly her appreciation of and determination to resent it. It proclaimed defiance of the attempt to degrade her to the condition of a slave!

With equine instinct, she reared upon her hind legs, for some seconds balancing her body in an erect position. Her rider, anticipating the trick, had thrown his arms around her neck; and, close clasping her throat, appeared part of herself. But for this she might have poised over upon her back, and crushed him beneath her.

The uprearing of the hind quarters was the next "trick" of the mustang – sure of being tried, and most difficult for the rider to meet without being thrown. From sheer conceit in his skill, he had declined saddle and stirrup, that would now have stood him in stead; but with these he could not have claimed accomplishment of the boasted feat of the prairies —*to tame the naked steed*.

He performed it without them. As the mare raised her hind quarters aloft, he turned quickly upon her back, threw his arms around the barrel of her body, and resting his toes upon the angular points of her fore shoulders, successfully resisted her efforts to unhorse him.

Twice or three times was the endeavour repeated by the mustang, and as often foiled by the skill of the mustanger; and then, as if conscious that such efforts were idle, the enraged

animal plunged no longer; but, springing away from the spot, entered upon a gallop that appeared to have no goal this side the ending of the earth.

It must have come to an end somewhere; though not within sight of the spectators, who kept their places, waiting for the horse-tamer's return.

Conjectures that he might be killed, or, at the least, badly "crippled," were freely ventured during his absence; and there was one who wished it so. But there was also one upon whom such an event would have produced a painful impression – almost as painful as if her own life depended upon his safe return. Why Louise Poindexter, daughter of the proud Louisiana sugar-planter – a belle – a beauty of more than provincial repute – who could, by simply saying yes, have had for a husband the richest and noblest in the land – why she should have fixed her fancy, or even permitted her thoughts to stray, upon a poor horse-hunter of Texas, was a mystery that even her own intellect – by no means a weak one – was unable to fathom.

Perhaps she had not yet gone so far as to fix her fancy upon him. She did not think so herself. Had she thought so, and reflected upon it, perhaps she would have recoiled from the contemplation of certain consequences, that could not have failed to present themselves to her mind.

She was but conscious of having conceived some strange interest in a strange individual – one who had presented himself in a fashion that favoured fanciful reflections – one who differed

essentially from the common-place types introduced to her in the world of social distinctions.

She was conscious, too, that this interest – originating in a word, a glance, a gesture – listened to, or observed, amid the ashes of a burnt prairie – instead of subsiding, had ever since been upon the increase!

It was not diminished when Maurice the mustanger came riding back across the plain, with the wild mare between his legs – no more wild – no longer desiring to destroy him – but with lowered crest and mien submissive, acknowledging to all the world that she had found her master!

Without acknowledging it to the world, or even to herself, the young Creole was inspired with a similar reflection.

"Miss Poindexter!" said the mustanger, gliding to the ground, and without making any acknowledgment to the plaudits that were showered upon him – "may I ask you to step up to her, throw this lazo over her neck, and lead her to the stable? By so doing, she will regard you as her tamer; and ever after submit to your will, if you but exhibit the sign that first deprived her of her liberty."

A prude would have paltered with the proposal – a coquette would have declined it – a timid girl have shrunk back.

Not so Louise Poindexter – a descendant of one of the *filles-à-la-casette*. Without a moment's hesitation – without the slightest show of prudery or fear – she stepped forth from the aristocratic circle; as instructed, took hold of the horsehair rope; whisked it

across the neck of the tamed mustang; and led the captive off towards the *caballeriza* of Casa del Corvo.

As she did so, the mustanger's words were ringing in her ears, and echoing through her heart with a strange foreboding weird signification.

"*She will regard you as her tamer; and ever after submit to your will, if you but exhibit the sign that first deprived her of her liberty*."

Chapter Thirteen.
A Prairie Pic-Nic

The first rays from a rosy aurora, saluting the flag of Fort Inge, fell with a more subdued light upon an assemblage of objects occupying the parade-ground below – in front of the "officers' quarters."

A small sumpter-waggon stood in the centre of the group; having attached to it a double span of tight little Mexican mules, whose quick impatient "stomping," tails spitefully whisked, and ears at intervals turning awry, told that they had been for some time in harness, and were impatient to move off – warning the bystanders, as well, against a too close approximation to their heels.

Literally speaking, there were no bystanders – if we except a man of colossal size, in blanket coat, and slouch felt hat; who, despite the obscure light straggling around his shoulders, could be identified as Zeb Stump, the hunter.

He was not standing either, but seated astride his "ole maar," that showed less anxiety to be off than either the Mexican mules or her own master.

The other forms around the vehicle were all in motion – quick, hurried, occasionally confused – hither and thither, from the waggon to the door of the quarters, and back again from the

house to the vehicle.

There were half a score of them, or thereabouts; varied in costume as in the colour of their skins. Most were soldiers, in fatigue dress, though of different arms of the service. Two would be taken to be mess-cooks; and two or three more, officers' servants, who had been detailed from the ranks.

A more legitimate specimen of this profession appeared in the person of a well-dressed darkie, who moved about the ground in a very authoritative manner; deriving his importance, from his office of *valet de tout* to the major in command of the cantonment. A sergeant, as shown by his three-barred chevron, was in charge of the mixed party, directing their movements; the object of which was to load the waggon with eatables and drinkables – in short, the paraphernalia of a pic-nic.

That it was intended to be upon a grand scale, was testified by the amplitude and variety of the *impedimenta*. There were hampers and baskets of all shapes and sizes, including the well known parallelopipedon, enclosing its twelve necks of shining silver-lead; while the tin canisters, painted Spanish brown, along with the universal sardine-case, proclaimed the presence of many luxuries not indigenous to Texas.

However delicate and extensive the stock of provisions, there was one in the party of purveyors who did not appear to think it complete. The dissatisfied Lucullus was Zeb Stump.

"Lookee hyur, surgint," said he, addressing himself confidentially to the individual in charge, "I hain't seed neery

smell o' corn put inter the veehicle as yit; an', I reck'n, thet out on the purayra, thur'll be some folks ud prefar a leetle corn to any o' thet theer furrin French stuff. Sham-pain, ye call it, I b'lieve."

"Prefer corn to champagne! The horses you mean?"

"Hosses be durned. I ain't talkin' 'bout hoss corn. I mean M'nongaheela."

"Oh – ah – I comprehend. You're right about that, Mr Stump. The whisky mustn't be forgotten, Pomp. I think I saw a jar inside, that's intended to go?"

"Yaw – yaw, sagint," responded the dark-skinned domestic; "dar am dat same wesicle. Hya it is!" he added, lugging a large jar into the light, and swinging it up into the waggon.

Old Zeb appearing to think the packing now complete, showed signs of impatience to be off.

"Ain't ye riddy, surgint?" he inquired, shifting restlessly in his stirrups.

"Not quite, Mr Stump. The cook tells me the chickens want another turn upon the spit, before we can take 'em along."

"Durn the chickens, an the cook too! What air any dung-hill fowl to compare wi' a wild turkey o' the purayra; an how am I to shoot one, arter the sun hev clomb ten mile up the sky? The major sayed I war to git him a gobbler, whativer shed happen. 'Tain't so durnation eezy to kill turkey gobbler arter sun-up, wi' a clamjamferry like this comin' clost upon a fellur's heels? Ye mustn't surpose, surgint, that thet ere bird air as big a fool as the sodger o' a fort. Of all the cunnin' critters as ferquents these hyur

purayras, a turkey air the cunninest; an to git helf way roun' one o' 'em, ye must be up along wi' the sun; and preehap a leetle urlier."

"True, Mr Stump. I know the major wants a wild turkey. He told me so; and expects you to procure one on the way."

"No doubt he do; an preehap expex me likeways to purvid him wi' a baffler's tongue, an hump – seein' as thur ain't sech a anymal on the purayras o' South Texas – nor hain't a been for good twenty yurs past – noterthstandin' what Eur-óp-ean writers o' books hev said to the contrary, an 'specially French 'uns, as I've heern. Thur ain't no burner 'bout hyur. Thur's baar, an deer, an goats, an plenty o' gobblers; but to hev one o' these critters for yur dinner, ye must git it urly enuf for yur breakfist. Unless I hev my own time, I won't promise to guide yur party, an git gobbler both. So, surgint, ef ye expex yur grand kumpny to chaw turkey-meat this day, ye'll do well to be makin' tracks for the purayra."

Stirred by the hunter's representation, the sergeant did all that was possible to hasten the departure of himself and his parti-coloured company; and, shortly after, the provision train, with Zeb Stump as its guide, was wending its way across the extensive plain that lies between the Leona and the "River of Nuts."

The parade-ground had been cleared of the waggon and its escort scarce twenty minutes, when a party of somewhat different appearance commenced assembling upon the same spot.

There were ladies on horseback; attended, not by grooms, as at the "meet" in an English hunting-field, but by the gentlemen

who were to accompany them – their friends and acquaintances – fathers, brothers, lovers, and husbands. Most, if not all, who had figured at Poindexter's dinner party, were soon upon the ground.

The planter himself was present; as also his son Henry, his nephew Cassius Calhoun, and his daughter Louise – the young lady mounted upon the spotted mustang, that had figured so conspicuously on the occasion of the entertainment at Casa del Corvo.

The affair was a reciprocal treat – a simple return of hospitality; the major and his officers being the hosts, the planter and his friends the invited guests. The entertainment about to be provided, if less pretentious in luxurious appointments, was equally appropriate to the time and place. The guests of the cantonment were to be gratified by witnessing a spectacle – grand as rare – a chase of wild steeds!

The arena of the sport could only be upon the wild-horse prairies – some twenty miles to the southward of Fort Inge. Hence the necessity for an early start, and being preceded by a vehicle laden with an ample *commissariat*.

Just as the sunbeams began to dance upon the crystal waters of the Leona, the excursionists were ready to take their departure from the parade-ground – with an escort of two-score dragoons that had been ordered to ride in the rear. Like the party that preceded them, they too were provided with a guide – not an old backwoodsman in battered felt hat, and faded blanket coat, astride a scraggy roadster; but a horseman completely costumed

and equipped, mounted upon a splendid steed, in every way worthy to be the chaperone of such a distinguished expedition.

"Come, Maurice!" cried the major, on seeing that all had assembled, "we're ready to be conducted to the game. Ladies and gentlemen! this young fellow is thoroughly acquainted with the haunts and habits of the wild horses. If there's a man in Texas, who can show us how to hunt them, 'tis Maurice the mustanger."

"Faith, you flatter me, major!" rejoined the young Irishman, turning with a courteous air towards the company; "I have not said so much as that. I can only promise to show you where you may *find* them."

"Modest fellow!" soliloquised one, who trembled, as she gave thought to what she more than half suspected to be an untruth.

"Lead on, then!" commanded the major; and, at the word, the gay cavalcade, with the mustanger in the lead, commenced moving across the parade-ground – while the star-spangled banner, unfurled by the morning breeze, fluttered upon its staff as if waving them an elegant adieu!

A twenty-mile ride upon prairie turf is a mere bagatelle – before breakfast, an airing. In Texas it is so regarded by man, woman, and horse.

It was accomplished in less than three hours – without further inconvenience than that which arose from performing the last few miles of it with appetites uncomfortably keen.

Fortunately the provision waggon, passed upon the road, came close upon their heels; and, long before the sun had attained the

meridian line, the excursionists were in full pic-nic under the shade of a gigantic pecân tree, that stood near the banks of the Nueces.

No incident had occurred on the way – worth recording. The mustanger, as guide, had ridden habitually in the advance; the company, with one or two exceptions, thinking of him only in his official capacity – unless when startled by some feat of horsemanship – such as leaping clear over a prairie stream, or dry arroyo, which others were fain to ford, or cross by the crooked path.

There may have been a suspicion of bravado in this behaviour – a desire to exhibit. Cassius Calhoun told the company there was. Perhaps the ex-captain spoke the truth – for once.

If so, there was also some excuse. Have you ever been in a hunting-field, at home, with riding habits trailing the sward, and plumed hats proudly nodding around you? You have: and then what? Be cautious how you condemn the Texan mustanger. Reflect, that he, too, was under the artillery of bright eyes – a score pair of them – some as bright as ever looked love out of a lady's saddle. Think, that Louise Poindexter's were among the number – think of that, and you will scarce feel surprised at the ambition to "shine."

There were others equally demonstrative of personal accomplishments – of prowess that might prove manhood. The young dragoon, Hancock, frequently essayed to show that he was not new to the saddle; and the lieutenant of mounted rifles, at

intervals, strayed from the side of the commissary's niece for the performance of some equestrian feat, without looking exclusively to her, his reputed sweetheart, as he listened to the whisperings of applause.

Ah, daughter of Poindexter! Whether in the *salons* of civilised Louisiana, or the prairies of savage Texas, peace could not reign in thy presence! Go where thou wilt, romantic thoughts must spring up – wild passions be engendered around thee!

Chapter Fourteen.
The Manada

Had their guide held the prairies in complete control – its denizens subject to his secret will – responsible to time and place – he could not have conducted the excursionists to a spot more likely to furnish the sport that had summoned them forth.

Just as the sparkling Johannisberger – obtained from the German wine-stores of San Antonio – had imparted a brighter blue to the sky, and a more vivid green to the grass, the cry "Musteños!" was heard above the hum of conversation, interrupting the half-spoken sentiment, with the peal of merry laughter. It came from a Mexican *vaquero*, who had been stationed as a vidette on an eminence near at hand.

Maurice – at the moment partaking of the hospitality of his employers, freely extended to him – suddenly quaffed off the cup; and springing to his saddle, cried out —

"*Cavallada*?"

"No," answered the Mexican; "*manada*."

"What do the fellows mean by their gibberish?" inquired Captain Calhoun.

"*Musteños* is only the Mexican for mustangs," replied the major; "and by 'manada' he means they are wild mares – a drove of them. At this season they herd together, and keep apart from

the horses; unless when – ”

“When what?” impatiently asked the ex-officer of volunteers, interrupting the explanation.

“When they are attacked by asses,” innocently answered the major.

A general peal of laughter rendered doubtful the *naïvété* of the major’s response – imparting to it the suspicion of a personality not intended.

For a moment Calhoun writhed under the awkward misconception of the auditory; but only for a moment. He was not the man to succumb to an unlucky accident of speech. On the contrary, he perceived the chance of a triumphant reply; and took advantage of it.

“Indeed!” he drawled out, without appearing to address himself to any one in particular. “I was not aware that mustangs were so dangerous in these parts.”

As Calhoun said this, he was not looking at Louise Poindexter or he might have detected in her eye a glance to gratify him.

The young Creole, despite an apparent coolness towards him, could not withhold admiration at anything that showed cleverness. His case might not be so hopeless?

The young dragoon, Hancock, did not think it so; nor yet the lieutenant of rifles. Both observed the approving look, and both became imbued with the belief that Cassius Calhoun had – or might have – in his keeping, the happiness of his cousin.

The conjecture gave a secret chagrin to both, but especially

to the dragoon.

There was but short time for him to reflect upon it; the manada was drawing near.

"To the saddle!" was the thought upon every mind, and the cry upon every tongue.

The bit was rudely inserted between teeth still industriously grinding the yellow corn; the bridle drawn over shoulders yet smoking after the quick skurry of twenty miles through the close atmosphere of a tropical morn; and, before a hundred could have been deliberately counted, every one, ladies and gentlemen alike, was in the stirrup, ready to ply whip and spur.

By this time the wild mares appeared coming over the crest of the ridge upon which the vidette had been stationed. He, himself a horse-catcher by trade, was already mounted, and in their midst – endeavouring to fling his lazo over one of the herd. They were going at mad gallop, as if fleeing from a pursuer – some dreaded creature that was causing them to "whigher" and snort! With their eyes strained to the rear, they saw neither the sumpter waggon, nor the equestrians clustering around it, but were continuing onward to the spot; which chanced to lie directly in the line of their flight.

"They are chased!" remarked Maurice, observing the excited action of the animals.

"What is it, Crespino?" he cried out to the Mexican, who, from his position, must have seen any pursuer that might be after them.

There was a momentary pause, as the party awaited the

response. In the crowd were countenances that betrayed uneasiness, some even alarm. It might be Indians who were in pursuit of the mustangs!

"*Un asino cimmaron*!" was the phrase that came from the mouth of the Mexican, though by no means terminating the suspense of the picknickers. "*Un macho*!" he added.

"Oh! That's it! I thought it was!" muttered Maurice. "The rascal must be stopped, or he'll spoil our sport. So long as he's after them, they'll not make halt this side the sky line. Is the macho coming on?"

"Close at hand, Don Mauricio. Making straight for myself."

"Fling your rope over him, if you can. If not, cripple him with a shot – anything to put an end to his capers."

The character of the pursuer was still a mystery to most, if not all, upon the ground: for only the mustanger knew the exact signification of the phrases – "un asino cimmaron," "un macho."

"Explain, Maurice!" commanded the major. "Look yonder!" replied the young Irishman, pointing to the top of the hill.

The two words were sufficient. All eyes became directed towards the crest of the ridge, where an animal, usually regarded as the type of slowness and stupidity, was seen advancing with the swiftness of a bird upon the wing.

But very different is the "asino cimmaron" from the ass of civilisation – the donkey be-cudgelled into stolidity.

The one now in sight was a male, almost as large as any of the mustangs it was chasing; and if not fleet as the fleetest, still able

to keep up with them by the sheer pertinacity of its pursuit!

The tableau of nature, thus presented on the green surface of the prairie, was as promptly produced as it could have been upon the stage of a theatre, or the arena of a hippodrome.

Scarce a score of words had passed among the spectators, before the wild mares were close up to them; and then, as if for the first time, perceiving the mounted party, they seemed to forget their dreaded pursuer, and shied off in a slanting direction.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" shouted the guide to a score of people, endeavouring to restrain their steeds; "keep your places, if you can. I know where the herd has its haunt. They are heading towards it now; and we shall find them again, with a better chance of a chase. If you pursue them at this moment, they'll scatter into yonder chapparal; and ten to one if we ever more get sight of them.

"Hola, Señor Crespino! Send your bullet through that brute. He's near enough for your *escopette*, is he not?"

The Mexican, detaching a short gun – "escopeta" – from his saddle-flap, and hastily bringing its butt to his shoulder, fired at the wild ass.

The animal brayed on hearing the report; but only as if in defiance. He was evidently untouched. Crespino's bullet had not been truly aimed.

"I must stop him!" exclaimed Maurice, "or the mares will run on till the end of daylight."

As the mustanger spoke, he struck the spur sharply into the

flanks of his horse. Like an arrow projected from its bow, Castro shot off in pursuit of the jackass, now galloping regardlessly past.

Half a dozen springs of the blood bay, guided in a diagonal direction, brought his rider within casting distance; and like a flash of lightning, the loop of the lazo was seen descending over the long ears.

On launching it, the mustanger halted, and made a half-wheel – the horse going round as upon a pivot; and with like mechanical obedience to the will of his rider, bracing himself for the expected pluck.

There was a short interval of intense expectation, as the wild ass, careering onward, took up the slack of the rope. Then the animal was seen to rise erect on its hind legs, and fall heavily backward upon the sward – where it lay motionless, and apparently as dead, as if shot through the heart!

It was only stunned, however, by the shock, and the quick tightening of the loop causing temporary strangulation; which the Mexican mustanger prolonged to eternity, by drawing his sharp-edged *macheté* across its throat.

The incident caused a postponement of the chase. All awaited the action of the guide; who, after "throwing" the macho, had dismounted to recover his lazo.

He had succeeded in releasing the rope from the neck of the prostrate animal, when he was seen to coil it up with a quickness that betokened some new cause of excitement – at the same time that he ran to regain his saddle.

Only a few of the others – most being fully occupied with their own excited steeds – observed this show of haste on the part of the mustanger. Those who did, saw it with surprise. He had counselled patience in the pursuit. They could perceive no cause for the eccentric change of tactics, unless it was that Louise Poindexter, mounted on the spotted mustang, had suddenly separated from the company, and was galloping off after the wild mares, as if resolved on being foremost of the field!

But the hunter of wild horses had not construed her conduct in this sense. That uncourteous start could scarce be an intention – except on the part of the spotted mustang? Maurice had recognised the manada, as the same from which he had himself captured it: and, no doubt, with the design of rejoining its old associates, it was running away with its rider!

So believed the guide; and the belief became instantly universal.

Stirred by gallantry, half the field spurred off in pursuit. Calhoun, Hancock, and Crossman leading, with half a score of young planters, lawyers, and legislators close following – each as he rode off reflecting to himself, what a bit of luck it would be to bring up the runaway.

But few, if any, of the gentlemen felt actual alarm. All knew that Louise Poindexter was a splendid equestrian; a spacious plain lay before her, smooth as a race-track; the mustang might gallop till it tired itself down; it could not throw her; there could be little chance of her receiving any serious injury?

There was one who did not entertain this confident view. It was he who had been the first to show anxiety – the mustanger himself.

He was the last to leave the ground. Delayed in the rearrangement of his lazo – a moment more in remounting – he was a hundred paces behind every competitor, as his horse sprang forward upon the pursuit.

Calhoun was a like distance in the lead, pressing on with all the desperate energy of his nature, and all the speed he could extract from the heels of his horse. The dragoon and rifleman were a little in his rear; and then came the "ruck."

Maurice soon passed through the thick of the field, overlapped the leaders one by one; and forging still further ahead, showed Cassius Calhoun the heels of his horse.

A muttered curse was sent hissing through the teeth of the ex-officer of volunteers, as the blood bay, bounding past, concealed from his sight the receding form of the spotted mustang.

The sun, looking down from the zenith, gave light to a singular tableau. A herd of wild mares going at reckless speed across the prairie; one of their own kind, with a lady upon its back, following about four hundred yards behind; at a like distance after the lady, a steed of red bay colour, bestridden by a cavalier picturesquely attired, and apparently intent upon overtaking her; still further to the rear a string of mounted men – some in civil, some in military, garb; behind these a troop of dragoons going at full gallop, having just parted from a mixed group of ladies and

gentlemen – also mounted, but motionless, on the plain, or only stirring around the same spot with excited gesticulations!

In twenty minutes the tableau was changed. The same personages were upon the stage – the grand *tapis vert* of the prairie – but the grouping was different, or, at all events, the groups were more widely apart. The manada had gained distance upon the spotted mustang; the mustang upon the blood bay; and the blood bay – ah! his competitors were no longer in sight, or could only have been seen by the far-piercing eye of the *caracara*, soaring high in the sapphire heavens.

The wild mares – the mustang and its rider – the red horse, and his – had the savanna to themselves!

Chapter Fifteen.
The Runaway Overtaken

For another mile the chase continued, without much change. The mares still swept on in full flight, though no longer screaming or in fear. The mustang still uttered an occasional neigh, which its old associates seemed not to notice; while its rider held her seat in the saddle unshaken, and without any apparent alarm.

The blood bay appeared more excited, though not so much as his master; who was beginning to show signs either of despondency or chagrin.

"Come, Castro!" he exclaimed, with a certain spitefulness of tone. "What the deuce is the matter with your heels – to-day of all others? Remember, you overtook her before – though not so easily, I admit. But now she's weighted. Look yonder, you dull brute! Weighted with that which is worth more than gold – worth every drop of your blood, and mine too. The yegua pinta seems to have improved her paces. Is it from training; or does a horse run faster when ridden?

"What if I lose sight of her? In truth, it begins to look queer! It would be an awkward situation for the young lady. Worse than that – there's danger in it – real danger. If I should lose sight of her, she'd be in trouble to a certainty!"

Thus muttering, Maurice rode on: his eyes now fixed upon

the form still flitting away before him; at intervals interrogating, with uneasy glances, the space that separated him from it.

Up to this time he had not thought of hailing the rider of the runaway.

His shouts might have been heard; but no words of warning, or instruction. He had refrained: partly on this account; partly because he was in momentary expectation of overtaking her; and partly because he knew that acts, not words, were wanted to bring the mustang to a stand.

All along he had been flattering himself that he would soon be near enough to fling his lazo over the creature's neck, and control it at discretion. He was gradually becoming relieved of this hallucination.

The chase now entered among copses that thickly studded the plain, fast closing into a continuous chapparal. This was a new source of uneasiness to the pursuer. The runaway might take to the thicket, or become lost to his view amid the windings of the wood.

The wild mares were already invisible – at intervals. They would soon be out of sight altogether. There seemed no chance of their old associate overtaking them.

"What mattered that? A lady lost on a prairie, or in a chapparal – alone, or in the midst of a manada – either contingency pointed to certain danger."

A still more startling peril suggested itself to the mind of the mustanger – so startling as to find expression in excited speech.

"By heavens!" he ejaculated, his brow becoming more clouded than it had been from his first entering upon the chase. "*If the stallions should chance this way*! 'Tis their favourite stamping ground among these mottos. They were here but a week ago; and this – yes – 'tis the month of their madness!"

The spur of the mustanger again drew blood, till its rowels were red; and Castro, galloping at his utmost speed, glanced back upbraidingly over his shoulder.

At this crisis the manada disappeared from, the sight both of the blood-bay and his master; and most probably at the same time from that of the spotted mustang and its rider. There was nothing mysterious in it. The mares had entered between the closing of two copses, where the shrubbery hid them from view.

The effect produced upon the runaway appeared to proceed from some magical influence. As if their disappearance was a signal for discontinuing the chase, it suddenly slackened pace; and the instant after came to a standstill!

Maurice, continuing his gallop, came up with it in the middle of a meadow-like glade – standing motionless as marble – its rider, reins in hand, sitting silent in the saddle, in an attitude of easy elegance, as if waiting for him to ride up!

"Miss Poindexter!" he gasped out, as he spurred his steed within speaking distance: "I am glad that you have recovered command of that wild creature. I was beginning to be alarmed about – "

"About what, sir?" was the question that startled the

mustanger.

"Your safety – of course," he replied, somewhat stammeringly. "Oh, thank you, Mr Gerald; but I was not aware of having been in any danger. Was I really so?"

"Any danger!" echoed the Irishman, with increased astonishment. "On the back of a runaway mustang – in the middle of a pathless prairie!"

"And what of that? The thing couldn't throw me. I'm too clever in the saddle, sir."

"I know it, madame; but that accomplishment would have availed you very little had you lost yourself, a thing you were like enough to have done among these chapparal copses, where the oldest Texan can scarce find his way."

"Oh —*lost myself*! That was the danger to be dreaded?"

"There are others, besides. Suppose you had fallen in with – "

"Indians!" interrupted the lady, without waiting for the mustanger to finish his hypothetical speech. "And if I had, what would it have mattered? Are not the Comanches *en paz* at present? Surely they wouldn't have molested me, gallant fellows as they are? So the major told us, as we came along. 'Pon my word, sir, I should seek, rather than shun, such an encounter. I wish to see the noble savage on his native prairie, and on horseback; not, as I've hitherto beheld him, reeling around the settlements in a state of debasement from too freely partaking of our fire-water."

"I admire your courage, miss; but if I had the honour of being

one of your friends, I should take the liberty of counselling a little caution. The 'noble savage' you speak of, is not always sober upon the prairies; and perhaps not so very gallant as you've been led to believe. If you had met him – "

"If I had met him, and he had attempted to misbehave himself, I would have given him the go-by, and ridden, straight back to my friends. On such a swift creature as this, he must have been well mounted to have overtaken me. You found some difficulty – did you not?"

The eyes of the young Irishman, already showing astonishment, became expanded to increased dimensions – surprise and incredulity being equally blended in their glance.

"But," said he, after a speechless pause, "you don't mean to say that you could have controlled – that the mustang was not running away with you? Am I to understand – "

"No – no – no!" hastily rejoined the fair equestrian, showing some slight embarrassment. "The mare certainly made off with me – that is, at the first – but I – I found, that is – at the last – I found I could easily pull her up. In fact I did so: you saw it?"

"And could you have done it sooner?"

A strange thought had suggested the interrogatory; and with more than ordinary interest the questioner awaited the reply.

"Perhaps – perhaps – I might; no doubt, if I had dragged a little harder upon the rein. But you see, sir, I like a good gallop – especially upon a prairie, where there's no fear of running over pigs, poultry, or people."

Maurice looked amaze. In all his experience – even in his own native land, famed for feminine *braverie*– above all in the way of bold riding – he had met no match for the clever equestrian before him.

His astonishment, mixed with admiration, hindered him from making a ready rejoinder.

"To speak truth," continued the young lady, with an air of charming simplicity, "I was not sorry at being run off with. One sometimes gets tired of too much talk – of the kind called complimentary. I wanted fresh air, and to be alone. So you *see*, Mr Gerald, it was rather a bit of good fortune: since it saved explanations and adieus."

"You wanted to be alone?" responded the mustanger, with a disappointed look. "I am sorry I should have made the mistake to have intruded upon you. I assure you, Miss Poindexter, I followed, because I believed you to be in danger."

"Most gallant of you, sir; and now that I know there *was* danger, I am truly grateful. I presume I have guessed aright: you meant the Indians?"

"No; not Indians exactly – at least, it was not of them I was thinking."

"Some other danger? What is it, sir? You will tell me, so that I may be more cautious for the future?"

Maurice did not make immediate answer. A sound striking upon his ear had caused him to turn away – as if inattentive to the interrogatory.

The Creole, perceiving there was some cause for his abstraction, likewise assumed a listening attitude. She heard a shrill scream, succeeded by another and another, close followed by a loud hammering of hoofs – the conjunction of sounds causing the still atmosphere to vibrate around her.

It was no mystery to the hunter of horses. The words that came quick from his lips – though not designed – were a direct answer to the question she had put.

"*The wild stallions*!" he exclaimed, in a tone that betokened alarm. "I knew they must be among those mottes; and they are!"

"Is that the danger of which you have been speaking?"

"It is."

"What fear of them? They are only mustangs!"

"True, and at other times there is no cause to fear them. But just now, at this season of the year, they become as savage as tigers, and equally as vindictive. Ah! the wild steed in his rage is an enemy more to be dreaded than wolf, panther, or bear."

"What are we to do?" inquired the young lady, now, for the first time, giving proof that she felt fear – by riding close up to the man who had once before rescued her from a situation of peril, and gazing anxiously in his face, as she awaited the answer.

"If they should charge upon us," answered Maurice, "there are but two ways of escape. One, by ascending a tree, and abandoning our horses to their fury."

"The other?" asked the Creole, with a *sang froid* that showed a presence of mind likely to stand the test of the most exciting

crisis. “Anything but abandon our animals! ’Twould be but a shabby way of making our escape!”

“We shall not have an opportunity of trying it, I perceive it is impracticable. There’s not a tree within sight large enough to afford us security. If attacked, we have no alternative but to trust to the fleetness of our horses. Unfortunately,” continued he, with a glance of inspection towards the spotted mare, and then at his own horse, “they’ve had too much work this morning. Both are badly blown. That will be our greatest source of danger. The wild steeds are sure to be fresh.”

“Do you intend us to start now?”

“Not yet. The longer we can breathe our animals the better. The stallions may not come this way; or if so, may not molest us. It will depend on their mood at the moment. If battling among themselves, we may look out for their attack. Then they have lost their reason – if I may so speak – and will recklessly rush upon one of their own kind – even with a man upon his back. Ha! ’tis as I expected: they are in conflict. I can tell by their cries! And driving this way, too!”

“But, Mr Gerald; why should we not ride off at once, in the opposite direction?”

“’Twould be of no use. There’s no cover to conceal us, on that side – nothing but open plain. They’ll be out upon it before we could get a sufficient start, and would soon overtake us. The place we must make for – the only safe one I can think of – lies the other way. They are now upon the direct path to it, if I can judge

by what I hear; and, if we start too soon, we may ride into their teeth. We must wait, and try to steal away behind them. If we succeed in getting past, and can keep our distance for a two-mile gallop, I know a spot, where we shall be as safe as if inside the corrals of Casa del Corvo. You are sure you can control the mustang?"

"Quite sure," was the prompt reply: all idea of deception being abandoned in presence of the threatening peril.

Chapter Sixteen.
Chased by Wild Stallions

The two sat expectant in their saddles – she, apparently, with more confidence than he: for she confided in him. Still but imperfectly comprehending it, she knew there must be some great danger. When such a man showed sign of fear, it could not be otherwise. She had a secret happiness in thinking: that a portion of this fear was for her own safety.

"I think we may venture now;" said her companion, after a short period spent in listening; "they appear to have passed the opening by which we must make our retreat. Look well to your riding, I entreat you! Keep a firm seat in the saddle, and a sure hold of the rein. Gallop by my side, where the ground will admit of it; but in no case let more than the length of my horse's tail be between us. I must perforce go ahead to guide the way. Ha! they are coming direct for the glade. They're already close to its edge. Our time is up!"

The profound stillness that but a short while before pervaded the prairie, no longer reigned over it. In its stead had arisen a fracas that resembled the outpouring of some overcrowded asylum; for in the shrill neighing of the steeds might have been fancied the screams of maniacs – only ten times more vociferous. They were mingled with a thunder-like hammering of hoofs – a

swishing and crashing of branches – savage snorts, accompanied by the sharp snapping of teeth – the dull "thud" of heels coming in contact with ribs and rounded hips – squealing that betokened spite or pain – all forming a combination of sounds that jarred harshly upon the ear, and caused the earth to quake, as if oscillating upon its orbit!

It told of a terrible conflict carried on by the wild stallions; who, still unseen, were fighting indiscriminately among themselves, as they held their way among the mottes.

Not much longer unseen. As Maurice gave the signal to start, the speckled crowd showed itself in an opening between two copses. In a moment more it filled the gangway-like gap, and commenced disgorging into the glade, with the impetus of an avalanche!

It was composed of living forms – the most beautiful known in nature: for in this man must give way to the horse. Not the unsexed horse of civilisation, with hunched shoulders, bandied limbs, and bowed frontlet – scarce one in a thousand of true equine shape – and this, still further, mutilated by the shears of the coper and gentleman jockey – but the wild steed of the savannas, foaled upon the green grass, his form left free to develop as the flowers that shed their fragrance around him.

Eye never beheld a more splendid sight than a *cavallada* of wild stallions, prancing upon a prairie; especially at that season when, stirred by strong passions, they seek to destroy one another. The spectacle is more than splendid – it is fearful – too

fearful to be enjoyed by man, much less by timid woman. Still more when the spectator views it from an exposed position, liable to become the object of their attack.

In such situation were the riders of the blood bay and spotted mustang. The former knew it by past experience – the latter could not fail to perceive it by the evidence before her.

"This way!" cried Maurice, lancing his horse's flanks with the spur, and bending so as to oblique to the rear of the cavallada.

"By heaven – they've discovered us! On – on! Miss Poindexter! Remember you are riding for your life!"

The stimulus of speech was not needed. The behaviour of the stallions was of itself sufficient to show, that speed alone could save the spotted mustang and its rider.

On coming out into the open ground, and getting sight of the ridden horses, they had suddenly desisted from their internecine strife; and, as if acting under the orders of some skilled leader, come to a halt. In line, too, like cavalry checked up in the middle of a charge!

For a time their mutual hostility seemed to be laid aside – as if they felt called upon to attack a common enemy, or resist some common danger!

The pause may have proceeded from surprise; but, whether or no, it was favourable to the fugitives. During the twenty seconds it continued, the latter had made good use of their time, and accomplished the circuit required to put them on the path of safety.

Only on the path, however. Their escape was still problematical: for the steeds, perceiving their intention, wheeled suddenly into the line of pursuit, and went galloping after, with snorts and screams that betrayed a spiteful determination to overtake them.

From that moment it became a straight unchanging chase across country – a trial of speed between the horses without riders, and the horses that were ridden.

At intervals did Maurice carry his chin to his shoulder; and though still preserving the distance gained at the start, his look was not the less one of apprehension.

Alone he would have laughed to scorn his pursuers. He knew that the blood-bay – himself a prairie steed – could surpass any competitor of his race. But the mare was delaying him. She was galloping slower than he had ever seen her – as if unwilling, or not coveting escape – like a horse with his head turned away from home!

"What can it mean?" muttered the mustanger, as he checked his pace, to accommodate it to that of his companion. "If there should be any baulk at the crossing, we're lost! A score of seconds will make the difference."

"We keep our distance, don't we?" inquired his fellow-fugitive, noticing his troubled look.

"So far, yes. Unfortunately there's an obstruction ahead. It remains to be seen how we shall get over it. I know you are a clever rider, and can take a long leap. But your mount? I'm not

so sure of the mare. You know her better than I. Do you think she can carry you over – ”

“Over what, sir?”

“You’ll see in a second. We should be near the place now.”

The conversation thus carried on was between two individuals riding side by side, and going at a gallop of nearly a mile to the minute!

As the guide had predicted, they soon came within sight of the obstruction; which proved to be an arroyo – a yawning fissure in the plain full fifteen feet in width, as many in depth, and trending on each side to the verge of vision.

To turn aside, either to the right or left, would be to give the pursuers the advantage of the diagonal; which the fugitives could no longer afford.

The chasm must be crossed, or the stallions would overtake them.

It could only be crossed by a leap – fifteen feet at the least. Maurice knew that his own horse could go over it – he had done it before. But the mare?

“Do you think she can do it?” he eagerly asked, as, in slackened pace, they approached the edge of the barranca.

“I am sure she can,” was the confident reply.

“But are you sure you can sit her over it?”

“Ha! ha! ha!” scornfully laughed the Creole. “What a question for an Irishman to ask! I’m sure, sir, one of your own countrywomen would be offended at your speech. Even I, a

native of swampy Louisiana, don't regard it as at all gallant. Sit her over it! Sit her anywhere she can carry me."

"But, Miss Poindexter," stammered the guide, still doubting the powers of the spotted mustang, "suppose she cannot? If you have any doubts, had you not better abandon her? I know that my horse can bear us both to the other side, and with safety. If the mustang be left behind, in all likelihood we shall escape further pursuit. The wild steeds – "

"Leave Luna behind! Leave her to be trampled to death, or torn to pieces – as you say she would! No – no, Mr Gerald. I prize the spotted mare too much for that. She goes with me: over the chasm, if we can. If not, we both break our necks at the bottom. Come, my pretty pet! This is he who chased, captured, and conquered you. Show him you're not yet so *subdued*, but that you can escape, when close pressed, from the toils of either friend or enemy. Show him one of those leaps, of which you've done a dozen within the week. Now for a flight in the air!"

Without even waiting for the stimulus of example, the courageous Creole rode recklessly at the arroyo; and cleared it by one of those leaps of which she had "done a dozen within the week."

There were three thoughts in the mind of the mustanger – rather might they be called emotions – as he sate watching that leap. The first was simple astonishment; the second, intense admiration. The third was not so easily defined. It had its origin in the words – "*I prize the spotted mare too much for that.*"

"Why?" reflected he, as he drove his spur-rowels into the flanks of the blood bay; and the reflection lasted as long as Castro was suspended in mid-air over the yawning abysm.

Cleverly as the chasm was crossed, it did not ensure the safety of the fugitives. It would be no obstruction to the steeds. Maurice knew it, and looked back with undiminished apprehension.

Rather was it increased. The delay, short as it was, had given the pursuers an advantage. They were nearer than ever! They would not be likely to make a moment's pause, but clear the crevasse at a single bound of their sure-footed gallop.

And then – what then?

The mustanger put the question to himself. He grew paler, as the reply puzzled him.

On alighting from the leap, he had not paused for a second, but gone galloping on – as before, close followed by his fugitive companion. His pace, however, was less impetuous. He seemed to ride with irresolution, or as if some half-formed resolve was restraining him.

When about a score lengths from the edge of the arroyo, he reined up and wheeled round – as if he had suddenly formed the determination to ride back!

"Miss Poindexter!" he called out to the young lady, at that moment just up with him. "You must ride on alone."

"But why, sir?" asked she, as she jerked the muzzle of the mustang close up to its counter, bringing it almost instantaneously to a stand.

"If we keep together we shall be overtaken. I must do something to stay those savage brutes. Here there is a chance – nowhere else. For heaven's sake don't question me! Ten seconds of lost time, and 'twill be too late. Look ahead yonder. You perceive the sheen of water. 'Tis a prairie pond. Ride straight towards it. You will find yourself between two high fences. They come together at the pond. You'll see a gap, with bars. If I'm not up in time, gallop through, dismount, and put the bars up behind you."

"And you, sir? You are going to undergo some great danger?"

"Have no fear for me! Alone, I shall run but little risk. 'Tis the mustang. – For mercy's sake, gallop forward! Keep the water under your eyes. Let it guide you like a beacon fire. Remember to close the gap behind you. Away – away!"

For a second or two the young lady appeared irresolute – as if reluctant to part company with the man who was making such efforts to ensure her safety – perhaps at the peril of his own.

By good fortune she was not one of those timid maidens who turn frantic at a crisis, and drag to the bottom the swimmer who would save them. She had faith in the capability of her counsellor – believed that he knew what he was about – and, once more spurring the mare into a gallop, she rode off in a direct line for the prairie pond.

At the same instant, Maurice had given the rein to his horse, and was riding in the opposite direction – back to the place where they had leaped the arroyo!

On parting from his companion, he had drawn from his saddle holster the finest weapon ever wielded upon the prairies – either for attack or defence, against Indian, buffalo, or bear. It was the six-chambered revolver of Colonel Colt – not the spurious *improvement* of Deane, Adams, and a host of retrograde imitators – but the genuine article from the "land of wooden nutmegs," with the Hartford brand upon its breech.

"They must get over the narrow place where we crossed," muttered he, as he faced towards the stallions, still advancing on the other side of the arroyo.

"If I can but fling one of them in his tracks, it may hinder the others from attempting the leap; or delay them – long enough for the mustang to make its escape. The big sorrel is leading. He will make the spring first. The pistol's good for a hundred paces. He's within range now!"

Simultaneous with the last words came the crack of the six-shooter. The largest of the stallions – a sorrel in colour – rolled headlong upon the sward; his carcass falling transversely across the line that led to the leap.

Half-a-dozen others, close following, were instantly brought to a stand; and then the whole cavallada!

The mustanger stayed not to note their movements. Taking advantage of the confusion caused by the fall of their leader, he reserved the fire of the other five chambers; and, wheeling to the west, spurred on after the spotted mustang, now far on its way towards the glistening pond.

Whether dismayed by the fall of their chief – or whether it was that his dead body had hindered them from approaching the only place where the chasm could have been cleared at a leap – the stallions abandoned the pursuit; and Maurice had the prairie to himself as he swept on after his fellow fugitive.

He overtook her beyond the convergence of the fences on the shore of the pond. She had obeyed him in everything – except as to the closing of the gap. He found it open – the bars lying scattered over the ground. He found her still seated in the saddle, relieved from all apprehension for his safety, and only trembling with a gratitude that longed to find expression in speech.

The peril was passed.

Chapter Seventeen.
The Mustang Trap

No longer in dread of any danger, the young Creole looked interrogatively around her.

There was a small lake – in Texan phraseology a "pond" – with countless horse-tracks visible along its shores, proving that the place was frequented by wild horses – their excessive number showing it to be a favourite watering place. There was a high rail fence – constructed so as to enclose the pond, and a portion of the contiguous prairie, with two diverging wings, carried far across the plain, forming a funnel-shaped approach to a gap; which, when its bars were up, completed an enclosure that no horse could either enter or escape from.

"What is it for?" inquired the lady, indicating the construction of split rails.

"A mustang trap," said Maurice.

"A mustang trap?"

"A contrivance for catching wild horses. They stray between the *wings*; which, as you perceive, are carried far out upon the plain. The water attracts them; or they are driven towards it by a band of mustangers who follow, and force them on through the gap. Once within the *corral*, there is no trouble in taking them. They are then lazoed at leisure."

"Poor things! Is it yours? You are a mustanger? You told us so?"

"I am; but I do not hunt the wild horse in this way. I prefer being alone, and rarely consort with men of my calling. Therefore I could not make use of this contrivance, which requires at least a score of drivers. My weapon, if I may dignify it by the name, is this – the lazo."

"You use it with great skill? I've heard that you do; besides having myself witnessed the proof."

"It is complimentary of you to say so. But you are mistaken. There are men on these prairies 'to the manner born' – Mexicans – who regard, what you are pleased to call skill, as sheer clumsiness."

"Are you sure, Mr Gerald, that your modesty is not prompting *you* to overrate your rivals? I have been told the very opposite."

"By whom?"

"Your friend, Mr Zebulon Stump."

"Ha – ha! Old Zeb is but indifferent authority on the subject of the lazo."

"I wish I could throw the lazo," said the young Creole. "They tell me 'tis not a lady-like accomplishment. What matters – so long as it is innocent, and gives one a gratification?"

"Not lady-like! Surely 'tis as much so as archery, or skating? I know a lady who is very expert at it."

"An American lady?"

"No; she's Mexican, and lives on the Rio Grande; but

sometimes comes across to the Leona – where she has relatives."

"A young lady?"

"Yes. About your own age, I should think, Miss Poindexter."

"Size?"

"Not so tall as you."

"But much prettier, of course? The Mexican ladies, I've heard, in the matter of good looks, far surpass us plain *Americanos*."

"I think Creoles are not included in that category," was the reply, worthy of one whose lips had been in contact with the famed boulder of Blarney.

"I wonder if I could ever learn to fling it?" pursued the young Creole, pretending not to have been affected by the complimentary remark. "Am I too old? I've been told that the Mexicans commence almost in childhood; that that is why they attain to such wonderful skill?"

"Not at all," replied Maurice, encouragingly. "'Tis possible, with a year or two's practice, to become a proficient lazoer. I, myself, have only been three years at; and – "

He paused, perceiving he was about to commit himself to a little boasting.

"And you are now the most skilled in all Texas?" said his companion, supplying the presumed finale of his speech.

"No, no!" laughingly rejoined he. "That is but a mistaken belief on the part of Zeb Stump, who judges my skill by comparison, making use of his own as a standard."

"Is it modesty?" reflected the Creole. "Or is this man mocking

me? If I thought so, I should go mad!"

"Perhaps you are anxious to get back to your party?" said Maurice, observing her abstracted air. "Your father may be alarmed by your long absence? Your brother – your cousin – "

"Ah, true!" she hurriedly rejoined, in a tone that betrayed either pique, or compunction. "I was not thinking of that. Thanks, sir, for reminding me of my duty. Let us go back!"

Again in the saddle, she gathered up her reins, and plied her tiny spur – both acts being performed with an air of languid reluctance, as if she would have preferred lingering a little longer in the "mustang trap."

Once more upon the prairie, Maurice conducted his protégée by the most direct route towards the spot where they had parted from the picnic party.

Their backward way led them across a peculiar tract of country – what in Texas is called a "weed prairie," an appellation bestowed by the early pioneers, who were not very choice in their titles.

The Louisianian saw around her a vast garden of gay flowers, laid out in one grand parterre, whose borders were the blue circle of the horizon – a garden designed, planted, nurtured, by the hand of Nature.

The most plebeian spirit cannot pass through such a scene without receiving an impression calculated to refine it. I've known the illiterate trapper – habitually blind to the beautiful – pause in the midst of his "weed prairie," with the flowers

rising breast high around him, gaze for a while upon their gaudy corollas waving beyond the verge of his vision; then continue his silent stride with a gentler feeling towards his fellow-man, and a firmer faith in the grandeur of his God.

"*Pardieu*! 'tis very beautiful!" exclaimed the enthusiastic Creole, reining up as if by an involuntary instinct.

"You admire these wild scenes, Miss Poindexter?"

"Admire them? Something more, sir! I see around me all that is bright and beautiful in nature: verdant turf, trees, flowers, all that we take such pains to plant or cultivate; and such, too, as we never succeed in equalling. There seems nothing wanting to make this picture complete – 'tis a park perfect in everything!"

"Except the mansion?"

"That would spoil it for me. Give me the landscape where there is not a house in sight – slate, chimney, or tile – to interfere with the outlines of the trees. Under their shadow could I live; under their shadow let me – "

The word: "love" uppermost in her thoughts – was upon the tip of her tongue.

She dexterously restrained herself from pronouncing it – changing it to one of very different signification – "die."

It was cruel of the young Irishman not to tell her that she was speaking his own sentiments – repeating them to the very echo. To this was the prairie indebted for his presence. But for a kindred inclination – amounting almost to a passion – he might never have been known as *Maurice the mustanger*.

The romantic sentiment is not satisfied with a "sham." It will soon consume itself, unless supported by the consciousness of reality. The mustanger would have been humiliated by the thought, that he chased the wild horse as a mere pastime – a pretext to keep him upon the prairies. At first, he might have condescended to make such an acknowledgment – but he had of late become thoroughly imbued with the pride of the professional hunter.

His reply might have appeared chillingly prosaic.

"I fear, miss, you would soon tire of such a rude life – no roof to shelter you – no society – no – "

"And you, sir; how is it *you* have not grown tired of it? If I have been correctly informed – your friend, Mr Stump, is my authority – you've been leading this life for several years. Is it so?"

"Quite true: I have no other calling."

"Indeed! I wish I could say the same. I envy you your lot. I'm sure I could enjoy existence amid these beautiful scene for ever and ever!"

"Alone? Without companions? Without even a roof to shelter you?"

"I did not say that. But, you've not told me. How do you live? Have *you* a house?"

"It does not deserve such a high-sounding appellation," laughingly replied the mustanger. "Shed would more correctly serve for the description of my *jacalé*, which may be classed

among the lowliest in the land."

"Where is it? Anywhere near where we've been to-day?"

"It is not very far from where we are now. A mile, perhaps. You see those tree-tops to the west? They shade my hovel from the sun, and shelter it from the storm."

"Indeed! How I should like to have a look at it! A real rude hut, you say?"

"In that I have but spoken the truth."

"Standing solitary?"

"I know of no other within ten miles of it."

"Among trees, and picturesque?"

"That depends upon the eye that beholds it."

"I should like to see it, and judge. Only a mile you say?"

"A mile there – the same to return – would be two."

"That's nothing. It would not take us a score of minutes."

"Should we not be trespassing on the patience of your people?"

"On your hospitality, perhaps? Excuse me, Mr Gerald!" continued the young lady, a slight shadow suddenly overcasting her countenance. "I did not think of it! Perhaps you do not live *alone*? Some other shares your – jacalé – as you call it?"

"Oh, yes, I have a companion – one who has been with me ever since I – "

The shadow became sensibly darker.

Before the mustanger could finish his speech, his listener had pictured to herself a certain image, that might answer to the

description of his companion: a girl of her own age – perhaps more inclining to *embonpoint*– with a skin of chestnut brown; eyes of almond shade, set piquantly oblique to the lines of the nose; teeth of more than pearly purity; a tinge of crimson upon the cheeks; hair like Castro's tail; beads and bangles around neck, arms, and ankles; a short kirtle elaborately embroidered; mocassins covering small feet; and fringed leggings, laced upon limbs of large development. Such were the style and equipments of the supposed companion, who had suddenly become outlined in the imagination of Louise Poindexter.

"Your fellow tenant of the jacalé might not like being intruded upon by visitors – more especially a stranger?"

"On the contrary, he's but too glad to see visitors at any time – whether strangers or acquaintances. My foster-brother is the last man to shun society; of which, poor fellow! he sees precious little on the Alamo."

"Your foster-brother?"

"Yes. Phelim O'Neal by name – like myself a native of the Emerald Isle, and shire of Galway; only perhaps speaking a little better brogue than mine."

"Oh! the Irish brogue. I should so like to hear it spoken by a native of Galway. I am told that theirs is the richest. Is it so, Mr Gerald?"

"Being a Galwegian myself, my judgment might not be reliable; but if you will condescend to accept Phelim's hospitality for half-an-hour, he will, no doubt, give you an opportunity of

judging for yourself."

"I should be delighted. 'Tis something so new. Let papa and the rest of them wait. There are plenty of ladies without me; or the gentlemen may amuse themselves by tracing up our tracks. 'Twill be as good a horse hunt as they are likely to have. Now, sir, I'm ready to accept your hospitality."

"There's not much to offer you, I fear. Phelim has been several days by himself, and as he's but an indifferent hunter, his larder is likely to be low. 'Tis fortunate you had finished luncheon before the *stampede*."

It was not Phelim's larder that was leading Louise Poindexter out of her way, nor yet the desire to listen to his Connemara pronunciation. It was not curiosity to look at the jacalé of the mustanger; but a feeling of a far more irresistible kind, to which she was yielding, as if she believed it to be her fate!

She paid a visit to the lone hut, on the Alamo; she entered under its roof; she scanned with seeming interest its singular *penates*; and noted, with pleased surprise, the books, writing materials, and other chattels that betokened the refinement of its owner; she listened with apparent delight to the *palthogue* of the Connemara man, who called her a "coleen bawn;" she partook of Phelim's hospitality – condescendingly tasting of everything offered, except that which was most urgently pressed upon her, "a dhrap of the craythe r, drawn fresh from the dimmyjan;" and finally made her departure from the spot, apparently in the highest spirits.

Alas! her delight was short-lived: lasting only so long as it was sustained by the excitement of the novel adventure. As she recrossed the flower prairie, she found time for making a variety of reflections; and there was one that chilled her to the very core of her heart.

Was it the thought that she had been acting wrongly in keeping her father, her brother, and friends in suspense about her safety? Or had she become conscious of playing a part open to the suspicion of being unfeminine?

Not either. The cloud that darkened her brow in the midst of that blossoming brightness, was caused by a different, and far more distressing, reflection. During all that day, in the journey from the fort, after overtaking her in the chase, in the pursuit while protecting her, lingering by her side on the shore of the lake, returning across the prairie, under his own humble roof – in short everywhere – her companion had only been polite —*had only behaved as a gentleman*!

Chapter Eighteen.
Jealousy upon the Trail

Of the two-score rescuers, who had started in pursuit of the runaway, but few followed far. Having lost sight of the wild mares, the mustang, and the mustanger, they began to lose sight of one another; and before long became dispersed upon the prairie – going single, in couples, or in groups of three and four together. Most of them, unused to tracking up a trail, soon strayed from that taken by the manada; branching off upon others, made, perhaps, by the same drove upon some previous stampede.

The dragoon escort, in charge of a young officer – a fresh fledgling from West Point – ran astray upon one of these ramifications, carrying the hindmost of the field along with it.

It was a rolling prairie through which the pursuit was conducted, here and there intersected by straggling belts of brushwood. These, with the inequalities of the surface, soon hid the various pursuing parties from one another; and in twenty minutes after the start, a bird looking from the heavens above, might have beheld half a hundred horsemen, distributed into half a score of groups – apparently having started from a common centre – spurring at full speed towards every quarter of the compass!

But one was going in the right direction – a solitary individual, mounted upon a large strong-limbed chestnut horse; that, without any claim to elegance of shape, was proving the possession both of speed and bottom. The blue frock-coat of half military cut, and forage cap of corresponding colour, were distinctive articles of dress habitually worn by the ex-captain of volunteer cavalry – Cassius Calhoun. He it was who directed the chestnut on the true trail; while with whip and spur he was stimulating the animal to extraordinary efforts. He was himself stimulated by a thought – sharp as his own spurs – that caused him to concentrate all his energies upon the abject in hand.

Like a hungry hound he was laying his head along the trail, in hopes of an issue that might reward him for his exertions.

What that issue was he had but vaguely conceived; but on occasional glance towards his holsters – from which protruded the butts of a brace of pistols – told of some sinister design that was shaping itself in his soul.

But for a circumstance that assisted him, he might, like the others, have gone astray. He had the advantage of them, however, in being guided by two shoe-tracks he had seen before. One, the larger, he recollected with a painful distinctness. He had seen it stamped upon a charred surface, amid the ashes of a burnt prairie. Yielding to an undefined instinct, he had made a note of it in his memory, and now remembered it.

Thus directed, the *ci-devant* captain arrived among the copses, and rode into the glade where the spotted mustang had been

pulled up in such a mysterious manner. Hitherto his analysis had been easy enough. At this point it became conjecture. Among the hoof-prints of the wild mares, the shoe-tracks were still seen, but no longer going at a gallop. The two animals thus distinguished must have been halted, and standing in juxtaposition.

Whither next? Along the trail of the manada, there was no imprint of iron; nor elsewhere! The surface on all sides was hard, and strewn with pebbles. A horse going in rude gallop, might have indented it; but not one passing over it at a tranquil pace.

And thus had the spotted mustang and blood bay parted from that spot. They had gone at a walk for some score yards, before starting on their final gallop towards the mustang trap.

The impatient pursuer was puzzled. He rode round and round, and along the trail of the wild mares, and back again, without discovering the direction that had been taken by either of the ridden horses.

He was beginning to feel something more than surprise, when the sight of a solitary horseman advancing along the trail interrupted his uncomfortable conjectures.

It was no stranger who was drawing near. The colossal figure, clad in coarse habiliments, bearded to the buttons of his blanket coat, and bestriding the most contemptible looking steed that could have been found within a hundred miles of the spot, was an old acquaintance. Cassius Calhoun knew Zebulon Stump, and Zeb Stump knew Cash Calhoun, long before either had set foot upon the prairies of Texas.

"You hain't seed nuthin' o' the young lady, hev ye, Mister Calhoun?" inquired the hunter, as he rode up, with an unusual impressiveness of manner. "No, ye hain't," he continued, as if deducing his inference from the blank looks of the other. "Dog-gone my cats! I wonder what the hell hev becomed o' her! Kewrious, too; sech a rider as she air, ter let the durned goat o' a thing run away wi' her. Wal! thur's not much danger to be reeprehended. The mowstanger air putty sartin to throw his rope aroun' the critter, an that 'll put an eend to its capers. Why hev ye stopped hyur?"

"I'm puzzled about the direction they've taken. Their tracks show they've been halted here; but I can see the shod hoofs no farther."

"Whoo! whoo! yur right, Mister Cashus! They hev been halted hyur; an been clost thegither too. They hain't gone no further on the trail o' the wild maars. Sartin they hain't. What then?"

The speaker scanned the surface of the plain with an interrogative glance; as if there, and not from Cassius Calhoun, expecting an answer to his question.

"I cannot see their tracks anywhere," replied the ex-captain.

"No, kan't ye? I kin though. Lookee hyur! Don't ye see them thur bruises on the grass?"

"No."

"Durn it! thur plain es the nose on a Jew's face. Thur's a big shoe, an a little un clost aside o' it. Thet's the way they've rud off,

which show that they hain't follered the wild maars no further than hyur. We'd better keep on arter them?"

"By all means!"

Without further parley, Zeb started along the new trail; which, though still undiscernible to the eye of the other, was to him as conspicuous as he had figuratively declared it.

In a little while it became visible to his companion – on their arrival at the place where the fugitives had once more urged their horses into a gallop to escape from the cavallada, and where the shod tracks deeply indented the turf.

Shortly after their trail was again lost – or would have been to a scrutiny less keen than that of Zeb Stump – among the hundreds of other hoof-marks seen now upon the sward.

"Hilloo!" exclaimed the old hunter, in some surprise at the new sign. "What's been a doin' hyur? This air some 'at kewrious."

"Only the tracks of the wild mares!" suggested Calhoun. "They appear to have made a circuit, and come round again?"

"If they hev it's been arter the others rud past them. The chase must a changed sides, I reck'n."

"What do you mean, Mr Stump?"

"That i'stead o' them gallupin' arter the maars, the maars hev been gallupin' arter them."

"How can you tell that?"

"Don't ye see that the shod tracks air kivered by them o' the maars? Maars – no! By the 'turnal airthquake! – them's not maar-tracks. They air a inch bigger. Thur's been *studs* this way – a hul

cavayurd o' them. Geehosofat! I hope they hain't – "

"Haven't what?"

"Gone arter Spotty. If they hev, then thur will be danger to Miss Peintdexter. Come on!"

Without waiting for a rejoinder, the hunter started off at a shambling trot, followed by Calhoun, who kept calling to him for an explanation of his ambiguous words.

Zeb did not deign to offer any – excusing himself by a backward sweep of the hand, which seemed to say, "Do not bother me now: I am busy."

For a time he appeared absorbed in taking up the trail of the shod horses – not so easily done, as it was in places entirely obliterated by the thick trampling of the stallions. He succeeded in making it out by piecemeal – still going on at a trot.

It was not till he had arrived within a hundred yards of the arroyo that the serious shadow disappeared from his face; and, checking the pace of his mare, he vouchsafed the explanation once more demanded from him.

"Oh! that was the danger," said Calhoun, on hearing the explanation. "How do you know they have escaped it?"

"Look thur!"

"A dead horse! Freshly killed, he appears? What does that prove?"

"That the mowstanger hes killed him."

"It frightened the others off, you think, and they followed no further?"

"They follered no further; but it wa'n't adzackly thet as scared 'em off. Thur's the thing as kep them from follerin'. Ole Hickory, what a jump!"

The speaker pointed to the arroyo, on the edge of which both riders had now arrived.

"You don't suppose they leaped it?" said Calhoun. "Impossible."

"Leaped it clur as the crack o' a rifle. Don't ye see thur toe-marks, both on this side an the t'other? An' Miss Peintdexter fust, too! By the jumpin' Geehosofat, what a gurl she air sure enuf! They must both a jumped afore the stellyun war shot; else they kedn't a got at it. Thur's no other place whar a hoss ked go over. Geeroozalem! wa'n't it cunnin' o' the mowstanger to throw the stud in his tracks, jest in the very gap?"

"You think that he and my cousin crossed here together?"

"Not adzackly thegither," explained Zeb, without suspecting the motive of the interrogatory. "As I've sayed, Spotty went fust. You see the critter's tracks yonner on t'other side?"

"I do."

"Wal – don't ye see they air kivered wi' them o' the mowstanger's hoss?"

"True – true."

"As for the stellyuns, they hain't got over – ne'er a one o' the hul cavayurd. I kin see how it hez been. The young fellur pulled up on t'other side, an sent a bullet back inter this brute's karkidge. 'Twar jest like closin' the gap ahint him; an the pursooers,

seein' it shet, guv up the chase, an scampered off in a different direckshun. Thur's the way they hev gone – up the side o' the gully!"

"They may have crossed at some other place, and continued the pursuit?"

"If they dud, they'd hev ten mile to go, afore they ked git back hyur – five up, an five back agin. Not a bit o' that, Mister Calhoun. To needn't be uneezy 'bout Miss Lewaze bein' pursooed by *them* any further. Arter the jump, she's rud off along wi' the mowstanger – both on 'em as quiet as a kupple o' lambs. Thur wa'n't no danger then; an by this time, they oughter be dog-goned well on torst rejoinin' the people as stayed by the purvision waggon."

"Come on!" cried Calhoun, exhibiting as much impatience as when he believed his cousin to be in serious peril. "Come on, Mr Stump! Let us get back as speedily as possible!"

"Not so fast, if you pleeze," rejoined Zeb, permitting himself to slide leisurely out of his saddle, and then drawing his knife from his sheath. "I'll only want ye to wait for a matter o' ten minutes, or thereabout."

"Wait! For what?" peevishly inquired Calhoun.

"Till I kin strip the hide off o' this hyur sorrel. It appear to be a skin o' the fust qualerty; an oughter fetch a five-dollar bill in the settlements. Five-dollar bills ain't picked up every day on these hyur purayras."

"Damn the skin!" angrily ejaculated the impatient Southerner.

"Come on, an leave it!"

"Ain't a goin' to do anythin' o' the sort," coolly responded the hunter, as he drew the sharp edge of his blade along the belly of the prostrate steed. "You kin go on if ye like, Mister Calhoun; but Zeb Stump don't start till he packs the hide of this hyur stellyun on the krupper o' his old maar. Thet he don't."

"Come, Zeb; what's the use of talking about my going back by myself? You know I can't find my way?"

"That air like enough. I didn't say ye ked."

"Look here, you obstinate old case! Time's precious to me just at this minute. It 'll take you a full half-hour to skin the horse."

"Not twenty minutes."

"Well, say twenty minutes. Now, twenty minutes are of more importance to me than a five-dollar bill. You say that's the value of the skin? Leave it behind; and I agree to make good the amount."

"Wal – that air durned gin'rous, I admit – dog-goned gin'rous. But I mussent except yur offer. It 'ud be a mean trick o' me – mean enuf for a yeller-bellied Mexikin – to take yur money for sech a sarvice as thet: the more so es I ain't no stranger to ye, an myself a goin' the same road. On the t'other hand, I kan't afford to lose the five dollars' worth o' hoss-hide which ud be rotten as punk – to say nuthin' o' it's bein' tored into skreeds by the buzzarts and coyoats – afore I mout find a chance to kum this way agin."

"'Tis very provoking! What am I to do?"

"You *air* in a hurry? Wal – I'm sorry to discommerdate ye. But – stay! Thur's no reezun for yur waitin' on me. Thur's nuthin' to hinder ye from findin' yur way to the waggon. Ye see that tree stannin' up agin the sky-line – the tall poplar yonner?"

"I do."

"Wal; do you remember ever to hev seed it afore? It air a queery lookin' plant, appearin' more like a church steeple than a tree."

"Yes – yes!" said Calhoun. "Now you've pointed it out, I do remember it. We rode close past it while in pursuit of the wild mares?"

"You dud that very thing. An' now, as ye know it, what air to hinder you from ridin' past it agin; and follering the trail o' the maars back'ard? That ud bring ye to yur startin'-peint; where, ef I ain't out o' my reck'nin', ye'll find yur cousin, Miss Peintdexter, an the hul o' yur party enjoying themselves wi' that 'ere French stuff, they call shampain. I hope they'll stick to it, and spare the Monongaheela – of which licker I shed like to hev a triflin' suck arter I git back myself."

Calhoun had not waited for the wind-up of this characteristic speech. On the instant after recognising the tree, he had struck the spurs into the sides of his chestnut, and gone off at a gallop, leaving old Zeb at liberty to secure the coveted skin.

"Geeroozalem!" ejaculated the hunter, glancing up, and noticing the quick unceremonious departure. "It don't take much o' a head-piece to tell why he air in sech a durned hurry. I ain't

myself much guv torst guessin'; but if I ain't doggonedly mistaken it air a clur case o' jellacy on the trail!"

Zeb Stump was not astray in his conjecture. It *was* jealousy that urged Cassius Calhoun to take that hasty departure – black jealousy, that had first assumed shape in a kindred spot – in the midst of a charred prairie; that had been every day growing stronger from circumstances observed, and others imagined; that was now intensified so as to have become his prevailing passion.

The presentation and taming of the spotted mustang; the acceptance of that gift, characteristic of the giver, and gratifying to the receiver, who had made no effort to conceal her gratification; these, and other circumstances, acting upon the already excited fancy of Cassius Calhoun, had conducted him to the belief: that in Maurice the mustanger he would find his most powerful rival.

The inferior social position of the horse-hunter should have hindered him from having such belief, or even a suspicion.

Perhaps it might have done so, had he been less intimately acquainted with the character of Louise Poindexter. But, knowing her as he did – associating with her from the hour of childhood – thoroughly understanding her independence of spirit – the *braverie* of her disposition, bordering upon very recklessness – he could place no reliance on the mere idea of gentility. With most women this may be depended upon as a barrier, if not to *mésalliance*, at least to absolute imprudence; but in the impure mind of Cassius Calhoun, while contemplating the

probable conduct of his cousin, there was not even this feeble support to lean upon!

Chafing at the occurrences of the day – to him crookedly inauspicious – he hurried back towards the spot where the pic-nic had been held. The steeple-like tree guided him back to the trail of the manada; and beyond that there was no danger of straying. He had only to return along the path already trodden by him.

He rode at a rapid pace – faster than was relished by his now tired steed – stimulated by bitter thoughts, which for more than an hour were his sole companions – their bitterness more keenly felt in the tranquil solitude that surrounded him.

He was but little consoled by a sight that promised other companionship: that of two persons on horseback, riding in advance, and going in the same direction as himself, upon the same path. Though he saw but their backs – and at a long distance ahead – there was no mistaking the identity of either. They were the two individuals that had brought that bitterness upon his spirit.

Like himself they were returning upon the trail of the wild mares; which, when first seen, they had just struck, arriving upon it from a lateral path. Side by side – their saddles almost chafing against each other – to all appearance absorbed in a conversation of intense interest to both, they saw not the solitary horseman approaching them in a diagonal direction.

Apparently less anxious than he to rejoin the party of picknickers, they were advancing at a slow pace – the lady a little

inclining to the rear.

Their proximity to one another – their attitudes in the saddle – their obvious inattention to outward objects – the snail-like pace at which they were proceeding – these, along with one or two other slighter circumstances observed by Calhoun, combined to make an impression on his mind – or rather to strengthen one already made – that almost drove him mad.

To gallop rapidly up, and rudely terminate the *tête-à-tête*, was but the natural instinct of the *chivalric* Southerner. In obedience to it he spitefully plied the spur; and once more forced his jaded chestnut into an unwilling canter.

In a few seconds, however, he slackened pace – as if changing his determination. The sound of his horse's hoofs had not yet warned the others of his proximity – though he was now less than two hundred yards behind them! He could hear the silvery tones of his cousin's voice bearing the better part of the conversation. How interesting it must be to both to have hindered them from perceiving his approach!

If he could but overhear what they were saying?

It seemed a most unpropitious place for playing eavesdropper; and yet there might be a chance?

The seeming interest of the dialogue to the individuals engaged in it gave promise of such opportunity. The turf of the savannah was soft as velvet. The hoof gliding slowly over it gave forth not the slightest sound.

Calhoun was still too impatient to confine himself to a walk;

but his chestnut was accustomed to that gait, peculiar to the horse of the South-Western States – the "pace"; and into this was he pressed.

With hoofs horizontally striking the sward – elevated scarce an inch above the ground – he advanced swiftly and noiselessly; so quick withal, that in a few seconds he was close upon the heels of the spotted mustang, and the red steed of the mustanger!

He was then checked to a pace corresponding to theirs; while his rider, leaning forward, listened with an eagerness that evinced some terrible determination. His attitude proclaimed him in the vein for vituperation of the rudest kind – ready with ribald tongue; or, if need be, with knife and pistol!

His behaviour depended on a contingency – on what might be overheard.

As chance, or fate, willed it, there was nothing. If the *two* equestrians were insensible to external sounds, their steeds were not so absorbed. In a walk the chestnut stepped heavily – the more so from being fatigued. His footfall proclaimed his proximity to the sharp ears, both of the blood-bay and spotted mustang; that simultaneously flung up their heads, neighing as they did so.

Calhoun was discovered.

"Ha! cousin Cash!" cried the lady, betraying more of pique than surprise; "you there? Where's father, and Harry, and the rest of the people?"

"Why do you ask that, Loo? I reckon you know as well as I."

"What! haven't you come out to meet us? And they too – ah! your chestnut is all in a sweat! He looks as if you had been riding a long race – like ourselves?"

"Of coarse he has. I followed you from the first – in hopes of being of some service to you."

"Indeed! I did not know that you were after us. Thank you, cousin! I've just been saying thanks to this gallant gentleman, who also came after, and has been good enough to rescue both Luna and myself from a very unpleasant dilemma – a dreadful danger I should rather call it. Do you know that we've been chased by a drove of wild steeds, and had actually to ride for our lives?"

"I am aware of it."

"You saw the chase then?"

"No. I only knew it by the tracks."

"The tracks! And were you able to tell by that?"

"Yes – thanks to the interpretation of Zeb Stump."

"Oh! he was with you? But did you follow them to – to – how far did you follow them?"

"To a crevasse in the prairie. You leaped over it, Zeb said. Did you?"

"Luna did."

"With you on her back?"

"I *wasn't anywhere else*! What a question, cousin Cash! Where would you expect me to have been? Clinging to her tail? Ha! ha! ha!"

"Did *you* leap it?" inquired the laugher, suddenly changing tone. "Did you follow us any farther?"

"No, Loo. From the crevasse I came direct here, thinking you had got back before me. That's how I've chanced to come up with you."

The answer appeared to give satisfaction.

"Ah! I'm glad you've overtaken us. We've been riding slowly. Luna is so tired. Poor thing! I don't know how I shall ever get her back to the Leona."

Since the moment of being joined by Calhoun, the mustanger had not spoken a word. However pleasant may have been his previous intercourse with the young Creole, he had relinquished it, without any apparent reluctance; and was now riding silently in the advance, as if by tacit understanding he had returned to the performance of the part for which he had been originally engaged.

For all that, the eye of the ex-captain was bent blightingly upon him – at times in a demoniac glare – when he saw – or fancied – that another eye was turned admiringly in the same direction.

A long journey performed by that trio of travellers might have led to a tragical termination. Such finale was prevented by the appearance of the picknickers; who soon after surrounding the returned runaway, put to flight every other thought by the chorus of their congratulations.

Chapter Nineteen.
Whisky and Water

In the embryo city springing up under the protection of Fort Inge, the "hotel" was the most conspicuous building. This is but the normal condition of every Texan town – whether new or founded forty years ago; and none are older, except the sparse cities of Hispano-Mexican origin – where the *presidio* and convent took precedence, now surpassed by, and in some instances transformed into, the "tavern."

The Fort Inge establishment, though the largest building in the place, was, nevertheless, neither very grand nor imposing. Its exterior had but little pretence to architectural style. It was a structure of hewn logs, having for ground-plan the letter T according to the grotesque alphabet – the shank being used for eating and sleeping rooms, while the head was a single apartment entirely devoted to drinking – smoking and *expectorating* included. This last was the bar-room, or "saloon."

The sign outside, swinging from the trunk of a post-oak, that had been *pollarded* some ten feet above the ground, exhibited on both sides the likeness of a well known military celebrity – the hero of that quarter of the globe – General Zachariah Taylor. It did not need looking at the lettering beneath to ascertain the name of the hotel. Under the patronage of such a portrait it could

only be called “Rough and Ready.”

There was a touch of the apropos about this designation. Outside things appeared rough enough; while inside, especially if you entered by the “saloon,” there was a readiness to meet you half way, with a mint julep, a sherry cobbler, a gin sling, or any other *mixed* drink known to trans-Mississippian tipplers – provided always that you were ready with the *picayunes* to pay for them.

The saloon in question would not call for description, had you ever travelled in the Southern, or South-Western, States of America. If so, no Lethean draught could ever efface from your memory the “bar-room” of the hotel or *tavern* in which you have had the unhappiness to sojourn. The counter extending longitudinally by the side; the shelved wall behind, with its rows of decanters and bottles, containing liquors, of not only all the colours of the prism, but every possible combination of them; the elegant young fellow, standing or sidling between counter and shelves, ycleped “clerk” – don’t call him a “barkeeper,” or you may get a decanter in your teeth – this elegant young gentleman, in blouse of blue *cottonade*, or white linen coat, or maybe in his shirt sleeves – the latter of finest linen and lace – ruffled, in the year of our Lord eighteen hundred and fifty – this elegant young gentleman, who, in mixing you a sherry cobbler, can look you straight in the face, talk to you the politics of the day, while the ice, and the wine, and the water, are passing from glass to glass, like an iris sparkling behind his shoulders, or an aureole

surrounding his perfumed head! Traveller through the Southern States of America you; cannot fail to remember him?

If so, my words will recall him, along with his surroundings – the saloon in which he is the presiding administrator, with its shelves and coloured decanters; its counter; its floor sprinkled with white sand, at times littered with cigar stumps, and the brown asterisks produced by *expectoration*– its odour of mint, absinthe, and lemon-peel, in which luxuriate the common black fly, the blue-bottle, and the sharp-tongued mosquito. All these must be sharply outlined on the retina of your memory.

The hotel, or tavern, "Rough and Ready," though differing but little from other Texan houses of entertainment, had some points in particular. Its proprietor, instead of being a speculative Yankee, was a German – in this part of the world, as elsewhere, found to be the best purveyors of food. He kept his own bar; so that on entering the saloon, instead of the elegant young gentleman with ruffled shirt and odorous chevelure, your "liquor" was mixed for you by a staid Teuton, who looked as sober as if he never tasted – notwithstanding the temptation of wholesale price – the delicious drinks served out to his customers. Oberdoffer was the name he had imported with him from his fatherland; transformed by his Texan customers into "Old Duffer."

There was one other peculiarity about the bar-room of the "Rough and Ready," though it scarce deserved to be so designated; since it was not uncommon elsewhere. As already

stated, the building was shaped like a capital T; the saloon representing the head of the letter. The counter extended along one side, that contiguous to the shank; while at each end was a door that opened outward into the public square of the incipient city.

This arrangement had been designed to promote the circulation of the air – a matter of primary importance in an atmosphere where the thermometer for half the year stands at 90 degrees in the shade.

The hotels of Texas or the South-Western States – I may say every part of the American Union – serve the double purpose of exchange and club-house. Indeed, it is owing to the cheap accommodation thus afforded – often of the most convenient kind – that the latter can scarce be said to exist.

Even in the larger cities of the Atlantic states the "club" is by no means a necessity. The moderate charges of the hotels, along with their excellent *cuisine* and elegant accommodations, circumscribe the prosperity of this institution; which in America is, and ever must be, an unhealthy exotic.

The remark is still more true of the Southern and South-western cities; where the "saloon" and "bar-room" are the chief places of resort and rendezvous.

The company, too, is there of a more miscellaneous character. The proud planter does not disdain – for he does not dare – to drink in the same room with the "poor white trash;" often as proud as himself.

There is no *peasant* in that part of the world – least of all in the state called Texas; and in the saloon of "Rough and Ready" might often be seen assembled representatives of every class and calling to be met with among the settlements.

Perhaps not upon any occasion since "Old Duffer" had hung out the sign of his tavern, was he favoured with a larger company, or served more customers across his counter, than upon that night, after the return of the horse-hunting party to Fort Inge.

With the exception of the ladies, almost every one who had taken part in the expedition seemed to think that a half-hour spent at the "Rough and Ready" was necessary as a "nightcap" before retiring to rest; and as the Dutch clock, quaintly ticking among the coloured decanters, indicated the hour of eleven, one after another – officers of the Fort – planters living near along the river – Sutlers – commissariat contractors – "sportsmen" – and others who might be called nondescripts – came dropping in; each as he entered marching straight up to the counter, calling for his favourite drink, and then falling back to converse with some group already occupying the floor.

One of these groups was conspicuous. It consisted of some eight or ten individuals, half of them in uniform. Among the latter were the three officers already introduced; the captain of infantry, and the two lieutenants – Hancock of the dragoons, and Crossman of the mounted rifles.

Along with these was an officer older than any of them, also higher in authority, as could be told by the embroidery on his

shoulder-strap, that proclaimed him of the rank of major. As he was the only "field officer" at Fort Inge, it is unnecessary to say he was the commandant of the cantonment.

These gentlemen were conversing as freely as if all were subalterns of equal rank – the subject of the discourse being the incidents of the day.

"Now tell us, major!" said Hancock: "you must know. Where did the girl gallop to?"

"How should I know?" answered the officer appealed to. "Ask her cousin, Mr Cassius Calhoun."

"We have asked him, but without getting any satisfaction. It's clear he knows no more than we. He only met them on the return – and not very far from the place where we had our bivouac. They were gone a precious long time; and judging by the sweat of their horses they must have had a hard ride of it. They might have been to the Rio Grande, for that matter, and beyond it."

"Did you notice Calhoun as he came back?" inquired the captain of infantry. "There was a scowl upon his face that betokened some very unpleasant emotion within his mind, I should say."

"He did look rather unhappy," replied the major; "but surely, Captain Sloman, you don't attribute it to – ?"

"Jealousy. I do, and nothing else."

"What! of Maurice the mustanger? Poh – poh! impossible – at least, very improbable."

"And why, major?"

"My dear Sloman, Louise Poindexter is a lady, and Maurice Gerald – "

"May be a gentleman for aught that is known to the contrary."

"Pshaw!" scornfully exclaimed Crossman; "a trader in horses! The major is right – the thing's improbable – impossible."

"Ah, gentlemen!" pursued the officer of infantry, with a significant shake of the head. "You don't know Miss Poindexter, so well as I. An eccentric young lady – to say the least of her. You may have already observed that for yourselves."

"Come, come, Sloman!" said the major, in a bantering way; "you are inclined to be talking scandal, I fear. That would be a scandal. Perhaps you are yourself interested in Miss Poindexter, notwithstanding your pretensions to be considered a Joseph? Now, I could understand your being jealous if it were handsome Hancock here, or Crossman – supposing him to be disengaged. But as for a common mustanger – poh – poh!"

"He's an Irishman, major, this mustanger; and if he be what I have some reason to suspect – "

"Whatever he be," interrupted the major, casting a side glance towards the door, "he's there to answer for himself; and as he's a sufficiently plain-spoken fellow, you may learn from him all about the matter that seems to be of so much interest to you."

"I don't think you will," muttered Sloman, as Hancock and two or three others turned towards the new-comer, with the design of carrying out the major's suggestion.

Silently advancing across the sanded floor, the mustanger had

taken his stand at an unoccupied space in front of the counter.

"A glass of whisky and water, if you please?" was the modest request with which to saluted the landlord.

"Visky und vachter!" echoed the latter, without any show of eagerness to wait upon his new guest. "Ya, woe, visky und vachter! It ish two picayunsh the glass."

"I was not inquiring the price," replied the mustanger, "I asked to be served with a glass of whisky and water. Have you got any?"

"Yesh – yesh," responded the German, rendered obsequious by the sharp rejoinder. "Plenty – plenty of visky und vachter. Here it ish."

While his simple potation was being served out to him, Maurice received nods of recognition from the officers, returning them with a free, but modest air. Most of them knew him personally, on account of his business relations with the Fort.

They were on the eve of interrogating him – as the major had suggested – when the entrance of still another individual caused them to suspend their design.

The new-comer was Cassius Calhoun. In his presence it would scarce have been delicacy to investigate the subject any further.

Advancing with his customary swagger towards the mixed group of military men and civilians, Calhoun saluted them as one who had spent the day in their company, and had been absent only for a short interval. If not absolutely intoxicated, it could be seen that the ex-officer of volunteers was under the influence of drink. The unsteady sparkle of his eyes, the unnatural pallor

upon his forehead – still further clouded by two or three tossed tresses that fell over it – with the somewhat grotesque set of his forage cap – told that he had been taking one beyond the limits of wisdom.

"Come, gentlemen!" cried he, addressing himself to the major's party, at the same time stepping up to the counter; "let's hit the waggon a crack, or old Dunder-und-blitzen behind the bar will say we're wasting his lights. Drinks all round. What say you?"

"Agreed – agreed!" replied several voices.

"You, major?"

"With pleasure, Captain Calhoun."

According to universal custom, the intended imbibers fell into line along the counter, each calling out the name of the drink most to his liking at the moment.

Of these were ordered almost as many kinds as there were individuals in the party; Calhoun himself shouting out – "Brown sherry for me;" and immediately adding – "with a dash of bitters."

"Prandy und pitters, you calls for, Mishter Calhoun?" said the landlord, as he leant obsequiously across the counter towards the reputed partner of an extensive estate.

"Certainly, you stupid Dutchman! I said brown sherry, didn't I?"

"All rights, mein herr; all rights! Prandy und pitters – prandy und pitters," repeated the German Boniface, as he hastened to

place the decanter before his ill-mannered guest.

With the large accession of the major's party, to several others already in the act of imbibing, the whole front of the long counter became occupied – with scarce an inch to spare.

Apparently by accident – though it may have been design on the part of Calhoun – he was the outermost man on the extreme right of those who had responded to his invitation.

This brought him in juxtaposition with Maurice Gerald, who alone – as regarded boon companionship – was quietly drinking his whisky and water, and smoking a cigar he had just lighted.

The two were back to back – neither having taken any notice of the other.

"A toast!" cried Calhoun, taking his glass from the counter.

"Let us have it!" responded several voices.

"America for the Americans, and confusion to all foreign interlopers – especially the damned Irish!"

On delivering the obnoxious sentiment, he staggered back a pace; which brought his body in contact with that of the mustanger – at the moment standing with the glass raised to his lips.

The collision caused the spilling of a portion of the whisky and water; which fell over the mustanger's breast.

Was it an accident? No one believed it was – even for a moment. Accompanied by such a sentiment the act could only have been an affront intended and premeditated.

All present expected to see the insulted man spring instantly

upon his insulter. They were disappointed, as well as surprised, at the manner in which the mustanger seemed to take it. There were some who even fancied he was about to submit to it.

"If he does," whispered Hancock in Sloman's ear, "he ought to be kicked out of the room."

"Don't you be alarmed about that," responded the infantry officer, in the same *sotto voce*. "You'll find it different. I'm not given to betting, as you know; but I'd lay a month's pay upon it the mustanger don't back out; and another, that Mr Cassius Calhoun will find him an ugly customer to deal with, although just now he seems more concerned about his fine shirt, than the insult put upon him. Odd devil he is!"

While this whispering was being carried on, the man to whom it related was still standing by the bar – to use a hackneyed phrase, "the observed of all observers."

Having deposited his glass upon the counter, he had drawn a silk handkerchief from his pocket, and was wiping from his embroidered shirt bosom the defilement of the spilt whisky.

There was an imperturbable coolness about the action, scarce compatible with the idea of cowardice; and those who had doubted him perceived that they had made a mistake, and that there was something to come. In silence they awaited the development.

They had not long to wait. The whole affair – speculations and whisperings included – did not occupy twenty seconds of time; and then did the action proceed, or the speech which was likely

to usher it in.

"*I* am an Irishman," said the mustanger, as he returned his handkerchief to the place from which he had taken it.

Simple as the rejoinder may have appeared, and long delayed as it had been, there was no one present who mistook its meaning. If the hunter of wild horses had tweaked the nose of Cassius Calhoun, it would not have added emphasis to that acceptance of his challenge. Its simplicity but proclaimed the serious determination of the acceptor.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.