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The Lost Mountain: A Tale of Sonora



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Mayne Reid

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Chapter One. In Want of Water

“*Mira! El Cerro Perdido!*” (See! The Lost Mountain!)

The man who thus exclaims is seated in a high-peak saddle, on the back of a small sinewy horse. Not alone, as may be deduced from his words; instead, in company with other men on horseback, quite a score of them. There are several wagons, too; large cumbrous vehicles, each with a team of eight mules attached. Other mules, pack animals, form an *atajo* or train, which extends in a long line rearward, and back beyond this a drove of cattle in charge of two or three drovers – these mounted, as a matter of course.

The place is in the middle of a vast plain, one of the *llanos* of Sonora, near the northern frontier of this sparsely inhabited state. And the men themselves, or most of them, are miners, as might be told by certain peculiarities of costume, further evinced by a paraphernalia of mining tools and machinery seen under the canvas tilts of the wagons. There are women seen there too, with children of both sexes and every age; for it is a complete mining establishment on the move from a *veta*, worn out and abandoned, to one late discovered and still unworked.

Save two of the party all are Mexicans though not of like race. Among them may be noted every shade of complexion, from the ruddy white of the Biscayan Spaniard to the copper-brown of the aboriginal, many being pure-blooded Opata Indians, one of the tribes called *mansos* (tamed). Distinctive points of dress also, both as to quality and cut, denote difference in rank and calling. There are miners *pur sang*– these in the majority; teamsters who drive the wagons; *arrieros* and *mozos* of the mule train; *vaqueros* with the cattle; and several others, male and female, whose garb and manner proclaim them household servants.

The man who has called out differs from all the rest in costume as in calling, for he is a *gambusino*, or professional gold-seeker. A successful one, too; since he it is who discovered the *veta* above spoken of, in the Great Sonora Desert, near the border-line of Arizona. “Denounced” it as well – that is, made declaration and registration of the discovery, which, by Mexican law, makes the mine his own, with exclusive right of working it. But he is not its owner now. Without sufficient means to undertake the *exploitation*, he has transferred his interest to those who can – Villanueva and Tresillian, a wealthy mining firm, long established near the town of Arispe, with all their *empleyós* and a complete apparatus for excavating, crushing, and amalgamating – furniture and household gods added – are *en route* for the new-found lode, with high hopes it may prove a “bonanza.” It is their caravan that is halted on the plain, for to halt it has come at a hail from the *gambusino* himself, acting as its guide.

He is some distance in advance of the wagons with two other horsemen, to whom his speech is particularly addressed. For they are the chiefs of the caravan – the masters and partners of the mining company composing it. One of them, somewhat over middle age, is Don Estevan Villanueva, a born Mexican, but with features of pure Spanish type, from his Andalusian ancestry. He is somewhat the senior of the two, and senior partner of the firm, the junior being Robert Tresillian, an Englishman, and native of Cornwall.

Up to that moment there had been anxiety on the countenances of both, as on those of their followers, indeed more, a look of gravest apprehension. Its cause is apparent; a glance along the line of animals – ridden horses as well as draught and pack-mules – clearly proclaiming it. All show signs

of distress, by sides hollowed in, necks outstretched and drooping, eyes deep down in their sockets, and tongues protruding from lips that look hot and dry. No wonder! For three days they have not tasted water; and the scant herbage of the plains, on which they have been depasturing, is without a particle of moisture. It has been a season of drought all over Sonora, not a drop of rain having fallen for months, and every stream, spring, and pool along their route dried up. Little strange, then, the animals looking distressed, and no more that the minds of the men are filled with gloomy fears as to what might be before them. Another three days, and it may be death to most, if not all.

Just in like proportion are their spirits uplifted on hearing the exclamation of the *gambusino*. Well know they what it means – good grass and abundance of water. All along has he been telling them of this, picturing the “Lost Mountain,” or, rather, a spot by its base, as a very Paradise of a camping-place. No want of water there, he has said, however dry the season or long-continued the drought; no fear of animals being famished, since not only is there a spring and running stream, but a lake, surrounded by a belt of meadow-like land, with grass thick, succulent, and green as emeralds.

“You’re sure it’s the Cerro Perdido?”

It is Don Estevan who thus doubtingly interrogates, his eyes fixed on a solitary eminence seen afar over the plain.

“*Si, señor,*” affirms the guide, “sure as that my name’s Pedro Vicente. And I ought to be sure of that, from what my mother told me; the old lady in her life never getting over her anger at the cost of my christening. Twenty silver *pesos*, with a pair of church candles – big ones, and of best wax! All that for only handing down to me my father’s name, he being Pedro, and a poor *gambusino* as myself! *Carramba!* The *padres* are the veriest extortioners – levy black-mail more rigorously than either footpad or highwayman.”

“*Vaya, hombre!*” rejoins Don Estevan. “Don’t be so hard upon the poor priests. And as for the expense your mother was put to in celebrating your baptismal rites, that’s all past and gone. If you were poor once, you’re now rich enough to care nothing for such a trifle as twenty dollars and a couple of wax candles.”

The senior partner speaks truth, as any one who had seen Pedro Vicente three months before, seeing him now, would say. Then was he sparsely clad, in garments of faded hue, tattered and dust-stained; his mount the scraggiest of mustangs – a very Rosinante. Now bestrides he a horse of best blood and shapely proportions, in a deep tree-saddle of stamped leather, with ornamental housings; his own body bedight with all the glittering adornments peculiar to that special Mexican dress known as “*ranchero*,” picturesque as any in the world. His lucky find of gold, still in its matrix of quartz —*madre de oro*, as the Mexican miners call it – with its transference to Villanueva y Tresillian, has given him sufficient of this same metal with the mint stamp on it for all matters of comfort, costume, and equipment.

“Oh! bother your christening and candles,” puts in the Englishman, with a show of impatience; “we’ve something more serious to think about. You’re quite sure, Señor Vicente, that yonder eminence is the Cerro Perdido?”

“I’ve said,” laconically and somewhat gruffly answers the guide, showing slightly nettled at the doubt cast on his affirmation, and by one he supposes a stranger to the country and its ways – in short, a “*gringo*.”

“Then,” pursues Tresillian, “the sooner we get to it the better. It’s ten miles off, I take it.”

“Twice ten, *caballero*, and a trifle over.”

“What! Twenty miles? I can’t believe that.”

“If your worship had been roaming about these *llanos* as long as I have, you could and would,” rejoins the guide, in quiet confidence.

“Oh! if you say so, it must be. You seem to know, Señor Vicente; and should, from all I’ve heard of your skill as a path-finder. That you’re good at finding gold we have the proofs.”

“*Mil gracias*, Don Roberto,” returns the *gambusino*, with a bow, his *amour propre* appeased by the complimentary speech; “I’ve no doubt about the distance, for I’m not trusting to guesswork. I’ve been over this ground before, and remember that big *palmilla*.” He points to a tree at some distance, with stout stem, and a bunch of bayonet-like leaves on its summit – a species of *yucca*, of which there are several straggled over the plain, but this one taller than any. Then adds, “If your worship doubts my word, ride up to it, and you’ll see a P and V carved in the bark, the initials of your humble servant. It was done to commemorate the occasion of my first setting eyes on the Cerro Perdido.”

“But I don’t doubt your word,” says Tresillian, smiling at the odd memento in such an out-of-the-way place; “certainly not.”

“Then, señor, let me assure you that from it to the mountain is all of twenty miles, and we’ll do well if we get there before sun-down.”

“In which case, the sooner we start for it the better.”

“Yes, Pedro,” adds Don Estevan, speaking to the gold-seeker in a friendly, familiar way. “Ride back and give the order for resuming route. Tell the teamsters and all to do their best.”

“At your worship’s command,” returns the *gambusino*, with a bow, and wave of his broad-brimmed hat raised high over his head.

Then, pricking his horse with a spur having rowels full five inches in diameter, he canters off towards the caravan.

Before reaching it he again uncovers, respectfully saluting a group which has not yet been introduced to the reader, though possibly the oddest, with the individuals comprising it, the most interesting of all the travelling party. For two of them are of the fair sex – ladies – one middle-aged and of matronly aspect, the other a girl late entered upon her teens. Only their faces and the upper portion of their forms are visible, for they are inside a sort of palanquin – the *litera* of Mexico, used by grand dames on long journeys, and roads over which carriages cannot be taken. The face of the older lady, with dark complexion and features of Andalusian type, is still attractive, but that of the younger one strikingly beautiful; and between the two is a strong family resemblance, as there should, since they are mother and child – the Señora Villanueva and her daughter.

The *litera* is borne between two mules, attached to shafts fore and aft, in charge of a strapping fellow in velveteen jacket, and *calzoneras*, *botas* of stamped leather, and *sombrero* of black glaze, with a band of silver bullion round it. But there is a fourth personage comprising the group, unlike all the others, and bearing no resemblance to any of the wayfarers save one – the Englishman. To him the youth – for young he is – shows the likeness, unmistakable, of son to father; and such is the relationship between them.

Henry Tresillian, just turned seventeen, is a handsome fellow, fair-haired, of bright complexion, and features delicately chiselled, still aught but effeminate in their expression; instead, of a cast which proclaims courage and resolution, while a figure tersely knit tells of strength and activity equal to anything. On horseback, he sits bending over in his saddle with face to the curtains of the *litera*. There may be eyes inside admiring him; and the expression of his own tells he would fain have it so. But all their eyes, late full of gloom, sparkle delightedly now. The Lost Mountain has been sighted; their fears are over, and so soon will be their sufferings.

“*Anda! adalante!*” (advance) shouts Pedro Vicente.

His words echoed rearward along the line, followed by other cries, with a creaking of wheels and a cracking of whips, as the wagons once more got into motion.

Chapter Two. The “Coyoteros.”

The moving miners are not the only travellers making for the Cerro Perdido on this same day. Just as they have sighted it, approaching from the south, another party is advancing towards it from the north, though not yet within view of it, from being farther off, with a swell of the plain interposed.

Very different in appearance, and, indeed, almost in every respect, is this second band from that already introduced to the reader; in count of men outnumbering the latter by more than treble, though in bulk as a moving mass far inferior to it. For with it are no wagons, nor wheeled vehicles of any kind; no mule train nor cattle drove. Neither are they encumbered with women and children, least of all a *litera* and ladies. All men, and every one of them on horseback, each bearer of his own baggage, as well he may be, so little and light it is. Their sole *impedimenta* consist of a few trifling commodities, chiefly provision wallets, with water gourds (*xuages*) strapped over their shoulders or tied to the wither-locks of their horses. Equally unobstructive is their garb, few of them having other articles of dress than a breech-clout, leggings, and moccasins, with a rolled-up blanket or *serape* in reserve. The exceptions are some half-dozen, who appear to exercise authority, one especially holding command over all.

His insignia are peculiar; a coat of arms that would puzzle all the heraldic colleges of Christendom. Nor does he wear it on his shield, though one he carries. It is borne on his naked breast of bronze black, in a tattooing of vivid red; the device, a rattlesnake coiled and couchant, with tail and head erect, jaws wide agape, and forked tongue protruding ready to strike. Beneath are other symbols equally eloquent of anger and menace; one in white, set centrally, well known all over the world – the “death’s head and crossbones.”

It need hardly be said that he, embellished with this savage investiture, is an Indian, and his following the same. Indians they are, of a tribe noted for bloodthirstiness beyond all others of their race; for they are the Wolf-Apaches, or Coyoteros, so called because of mental and moral attributes which liken them to the *coyoté*– jackal of the Western world.

Unaccompanied by their women and children, as unencumbered with baggage, proclaims them on a warlike expedition – a *maraud*; their arms and equipments telling of the same. They carry guns, and long-shafted lances with pennons attached, that no doubt once waved above the heads of Mexican *lanzeros*. Pistols too, some even having revolvers, with rifles of latest pattern and patent; of which by their way of handling them they well know the use. If civilisation has taught them nothing else, it has how to *kill*.

They are marching along, not in ruck, or straggling crowd, but regular formation, aligned in rank and file, “by twos.” Long since have the Horse Indians of both prairie and pampa learnt the military tactics of their pale-faced foes – those special to cavalry – and practise them. But nowhere with more ability and success than in the northern states of Mexico – Tamaulipas, Chihuahua, and Sonora – where Comanches, Navajoes, and Apaches have charged in battle line, breaking that of their white adversaries, and scattering them as chaff. “Indian file,” oft used as a synonym for “single file,” is a march formation long since abandoned by these Transatlantic Centaurs, save where the nature of the ground makes it a necessity.

None such exists on the open *llano*, where this Apache band is now; and they might move in a column or extended line, if willing it; but numbering scant two hundred, they prefer the double file. Unlike the miners, in their three days’ traverse of a waterless desert, they have been making way through a district with which they are familiar; acquainted with all the camping-places – every stream, spring, and pond – so they have not suffered from want of water. Nor are they likely now, since their course lies along the banks of a creek – a tiny rivulet, yet running, despite the continued

drought. It is a branch of the Rio San Miguel of the maps – locally known as the Horcasitas – and they are descending it southward, thirst having no terrors for them.

Just as the sun is about to set they catch sight of the Cerro Perdido. To them it is not known by that name, but *Nauchampa-tepetl*. Somewhat strange this, pointing to an affinity known to exist between the Indians of Northern Mexico and the Aztecs of the South. In the language of these last the mountain Peroté bears the same designation, the “Cofré” usually attached being synonymous with “Nauchampa,” both signifying chest, or box. For the Cerro Perdido, viewed from certain points, bears a quaint resemblance to this, as does also the summit of Peroté.

Neither philology nor ethnography is in the minds of this band of redskins; their thoughts are dwelling on a subject altogether different – robbery and murder. For they *are* on the maraud; their objective point the towns on the Horcasitas.

Just now, however, as they sight the Cerro, another question occupies them: whether it be prudent or possible to continue on to it without halting for the night. Some say Yes, but most No. It is still good twenty miles off, though appearing scarce ten. In the diaphanous atmosphere of the Sonora tableland distances are deceptive, as Pedro Vicente has said. But the native inhabitants, above all the aborigines, are aware of this, and reckon accordingly. Besides, the Coyoteros, like the *gambusino*, have been over the ground before, and are familiar with every foot of it. So distance has nought to do with their discussion, save as it affects the capability of their horses. Since morning they have made fifty miles, and are fagged; twenty more would be killing work for them. And the twenty to Nauchampa-tepetl will be a nice distance to their next day’s noon halt.

The question of continuing on is at length decided in the negative, by him of the grotesque heraldry dropping down from his horse, and proceeding to picket the animal on the grass. As his example has the force of a command, all the others follow it, and camp is quickly formed. A simple affair this; only the tethering out of their steeds, and stripping them of such caparison as they carry. Then follows a search for dry faggots, and the kindling of a fire; not for warmth, but cooking. There is a bit of butchering to precede; these redskinned rovers having their commissariat on the hoof – this in the shape of some spare horses driven along *en caballada*. A knife drawn across the throat of one lets his blood out in a torrent, and he drops down dead, – to be skinned and cut up in a trice, the pieces impaled upon sticks and held over the blaze of the fire.

But the hippophagists avail themselves of other comestibles of a vegetable kind; seeds from the cones of the *piñon*, or edible pine, and beans of the *algarobia*– trees of both sorts growing near. Enough of both are collected and roasted, to form an accompaniment to the horseflesh.

Fruit they find too on several species of cactus; the best of them on the *pitahaya*, whose tall rigid stems, with limbs like the branches of a candelabrum, tower up around their camp. So, in the desert – for it is such – they are enabled to end their dinner with dessert. To provide something for breakfast besides, a viand rare and strange, but familiar to them, a branch of their tribe – the “Mezcaleros” – making it their staple food, even to deriving their tribal appellation from it. For it is the mezcal plant, one of the wild species of magueys (*Agave Mexicana*). The central core, from which radiate the stiff spinous blades, is the part eaten, and the mode of preparing it is now made manifest in the Coyotero camp. Several plants are torn out by the roots, their leaves hacked off, and the skin of the core itself cut away – leaving an egg-shaped mass of white vegetable substance, large as a man’s head, or a monster mangold-wurzel. Meanwhile, a hole has been “crowed” in the ground, pit-shaped, its sides fended by flat stones, with a like pavement at the bottom. Into this red coals are flung, nigh enough to fill it; an interval allowed for these to smoulder into ashes, and the stones become burning hot. The mezcals, already wrapped up in the horse’s skin late stripped off, red side inward, along with some loose pieces of the flesh, and the bundle is lowered down into the improvised oven, then all covered over with a coat of turf. Thus buried it is left to bake all night, and in the morning will afford them a meal Lucullus need not have disdained to partake of.

The Coyoteros, well sure of this, go to sleep contentedly and without care; each rolled-up in his own wrap, his couch the naked earth, canopied by a star-bespangled sky.

In that uninhabited and pathless wilderness, or with paths only known to themselves, they have little fear of encountering an enemy; and as little dream they that within less than two hours' gallop of their camping-ground is another camp occupied by the foes of their race, too few to resist their attack. Knew they but this, there would be a quick uprising among them, a hasty springing to horse, and hurried ride towards Nauchampa-tepetl.

Chapter Three.

A Rush for Water

Meanwhile, with many a crack of whip and cry of “*Anda!*” “*Mula maldita!*” the miners have been toiling on towards the Lost Mountain. At slow pace, a crawl; for their animals, jaded and distressed by the long-endured thirst, have barely strength enough left to drag the wagons after them. Even the pack-mules totter under their loaded *alparejas*.

Viewing the eminence from the place where they had pulled up, the mine labourers, like the Englishman, had been inclined to doubt the guide’s allegation as to the distance. Men whose lives are for the most part spent underground, are as sailors ashore when above it, oddly ignorant of things on the surface, save what may be learnt inside a liquor saloon. Hence their unbelief in Vicente’s statement was altogether natural. But the mule and cattle-drivers knew better, and that the *gambusino* was not deceiving them.

All come to this conclusion ere long, a single hour sufficing to convince them of their mistake; at the end of which, though moving continuously on, and making the best speed in their power, the mountain seems far off as ever. And when a second hour has elapsed, the diminution of distance is barely perceptible.

The sun is low down – almost touching the horizon – as they get near enough to the Cerro to note its peculiar features; for peculiar these are. Of oblong form it is; and, viewed sideways, bears resemblance to a gigantic catafalque or coffin, its top level as the lid. Not smooth, however, the horizontal line being broken by trees and bushes that stand in shaggy silhouette against the blue background of sky. At all points it presents a *façade* grim and precipitous, here and there enamelled by spots and streaks of verdure, wherever ledge or crevice gives plants of the scandent kind an opportunity to strike root. It is about a mile in length, trending nearly north and south, having a breadth of about half this; and in height some five hundred feet. Not much for a mountain, but enough to make it a conspicuous object, visible at a great distance off over that smooth expanse of plain. All the more from its standing solitary and alone; no other eminence within view of it, neither *sierra* nor spur; so looking as if strayed and *lost*– hence the quaint appellation it bears.

“At which end is the lake, Señor Vicente?” asks the elder Tresillian, as they are wending their way towards it; he, with Don Estevan and the guide, as before, being in advance of the wagon train.

“The southern and nearer one, your worship. And luckily for us it is so. If it were at the other end, we’d still have a traverse of a league at least before reaching it.”

“How’s that? I’ve heard that the Cerro is only a mile in length.”

“True, señor, that’s all. But there are rocks strewn over the *llano* below, for hundreds of yards out, and so thick we couldn’t take the wagons through them. I suppose they must have fallen from the cliffs, but how they got scattered so far, that puzzles me, though rocks have been the study of my life.”

“So they have, Pedro,” put in Don Estevan. “And you’ve studied them to some purpose. But let us not enter into a geological discussion now. I feel more concerned about something else.”

“About what, your worship?”

“Some memory tells me that Indians are accustomed to visit the Cerro Perdido. Though I can see no sign of human being about it, who knows but there might be?”

This is said after examination of the plain all along the base of the mountain through a field-glass, which Don Estevan habitually carries on his person.

“Therefore,” he continues, “I think it advisable that some five or six ride ahead – those who are best mounted – and make sure that the coast is clear. In case of redskins being there in any formidable numbers, the knowledge of it in time will enable us to form *corral*, and so better defend ourselves should we be attacked.”

Before becoming a master miner, Don Estevan had been a soldier, and seen service on the Indian frontier, in more than one campaign against the three great hostile tribes, Comanches, Apache, and Navajo. For which reason the *gambusino*, instead of making light of his counsel, altogether approves of it – of course volunteering to be himself of the reconnoitring party.

In fine, there is another short halt, while the scouts are being selected; half a dozen men of spirit and mettle, whose horses are still strong enough to show speed, should there be Indians and pursuit.

Of the half-dozen, Henry Tresillian is one; he coming up quick to the call. No fear of his horse giving out, or failing to carry him safe back if pursued, and whoever the pursuers. A noble animal of Arab strain it is, coal-black, with a dash of dun-colour between the hips and on either side of the muzzle. Nor shows it signs of distress, as the others, notwithstanding all it has come through. For has not its young master shared with it every ration of water served out along the way, even the last one that morning?

In a few minutes the scouting party is told off, and, after receiving full instructions, starts onward.

The elder Tresillian has made no objection to his son being of it; instead, being rather proud of the spirit the latter is displaying, and follows him with admiring eyes as he rides off.

Still another pair of eyes go after him, giving glances in which pride and fear are strangely commingled. For they are those of Gertrudes Villanueva. She is proud that he, whom her young heart is just learning to love, should possess such courage, while apprehensive of what may come of it.

“*Adelante!*” calls out the *mayor-domo*, who has chief charge of the caravan; and once more there is a vigorous wielding of whips, with an adjuration of mules, as the animals move reluctantly and laboriously on.

In twenty minutes after, all is changed with them. Horse and hybrid – every animal in the train – have raised head and pricked up ears, with nostrils distended. Even the horned cattle to rearward have caught the infection, and low loudly in response to the neighing of the horses and the hinneying of the mules. There is a very *fracas* of noises, like a Bedlam broke loose, the voice of the *mayor-domo* rising above all as he cries out,

“*Guarda, la estampeda!*”

And a “stampede” it becomes, all knowing the cause. The animals have scented water, and no longer need whip-lash or cry to urge them on. Instead, teamsters and *arrieros* find it impossible to restrain them, for it were a struggle against Nature itself. Taking the bits between their teeth, and regardless of rein, horses, mules, all rush simultaneously and madly forward, as if each had a score of gadflies with their venomous probosces buried deep in its body.

A helter-skelter it is, with a loud hullabaloo, the heavily-laden wagons drawn over the ground as light-like and with the velocity of bicycles, and making noise as of thunder. For now, near the mountain’s foot, the plain is bestrewed with stones, some big enough to raise the wheels on high, almost to overturning the vehicles, eliciting agonised cries from the women and children inside them. No more are Indians thought of for the time; enough danger without that, from upsets, broken bones, indeed death.

In the end none of these eventualities arise. Luckily – and more by good luck than guiding – the wagons keep their balance, and they within them their places, till all come to a stand again. While still tearing on, they see before them a disc of water lit up by the last rays of departing sunlight, with half a dozen horsemen – the reconnoitring party – drawn up on its edge, in attitude of wonder at their coming after so soon.

But their animals, still in rush, give no opportunity for explanation. On go they into the lake, horses, mules, and cattle mingled together; nor stop till they are belly-deep, with the water up over their nostrils. No more neighing nor lowing now, but all silent, swilling, and contented.

Chapter Four.

El Ojo de Agua

Morning dawns upon the Lost Mountain, to disclose a scene such as had never before been witnessed in that solitary spot. For never before had wagon, or other wheeled vehicle, approached it. Remote from town or civilised settlement, leagues away from any of the customary routes of travel, the only white men having occasion to visit it had been hunters or gold-seekers, and their visits, like those of angels, few and far between. Red men, however, have sought it more frequently, for it is not far from one of their great war-trails – that leading from the Apache country to the settlements on the Horcasitas, so serving these savages as a convenient halting-place when on raid thither. The reconnoitring party, sent in advance of the caravan, had discovered traces of their presence by the lake's edge; but none recent, and nothing to signify. There were no fresh tracks upon the meadow-grass, nor the belt of naked sand around the water, save those of wild animals that had come thither to quench their thirst.

In confidence, therefore, the miners made camp, though not negligently or carelessly. The old *militario* had seen too much campaigning for that, and directed the wagons to be drawn up in a *corral* of oval shape, tongues and tails united as the links of a chain. Lone-bodied vehicles, the six enclose a considerable space – enough to accommodate all who have need to stay inside. In case of attack it could be still further strengthened by the bales, boxes, and *alparejas* of the pack-mules. Outside the animals were staked, and are still upon their tethers, though without much concern about their running away. After the long traverse over the dry *llanos*, and the suffering they have endured, now on such good grass, and beside such sweet water, they will contentedly stay till it please their masters to remove them.

Fires had been kindled the night before, but only for cooking supper; it is summer, and there is no discomfort from cold – heat rather. And now at dawn the fires are being re-lighted with a view to *desayuna*, and later on breakfast; for, though the caravan had unexpectedly run short of water, its stock of provisions is still unexhausted.

Among the earliest up – nay, the very first – is Pedro Vicente. Not with any intention to take part in culinary operations. *Gambusino* and guide, he would scorn such menial occupations. His reasons for being so early astir are altogether different and twofold; though but one of them has he made known, and that only to Henry Tresillian. Overnight, ere retiring to rest, he had signified his intention to ascend the Cerro in the morning – soon as there was enough of daylight to make the ascent practicable – in hopes of finding game both of the furred and feathered sorts, he said. For in addition to his *métier* as guide to the caravan – being a skilled hunter as well as gold-seeker – he holds engagement to supply it with venison, or such other meat commodity as may fall to his gun. For days he has had but little opportunity of showing his hunter skill. On the sterile tract through which they have been passing birds and quadrupeds are scarce, even such as usually inhabit it having gone elsewhere in consequence of the long-continued drought. All the more is he desirous to make up for late deficit, and at least furnish the table of the quality with something fresh. He knows there are game animals on the mountain – a *mesa*, as already said, level-topped, with trees growing over it, besides water; for there is the fountain's head, source of the stream and lake below. On the night before, he had spoken of wild sheep as likely to be found above, with antelopes, and possibly a bear or two, also turkeys. Now, in the morning, he is sure about these last, having heard them, as is their wont before sunrise, saluting one another with that sonorous call from which they derive their Mexican name, *guajaloté*.

These confidences he has imparted to Henry Tresillian, who is to accompany him in the chase, though not from any view of inspiring the latter with its ardour. There is no need; the young Englishman being a hunter by instinct, with a love for natural history as well, and the Lost

Mountain promises rich reward for the climbing, in discovery as in sport. Besides, the two have been *compagnons de chasse* all along the route; habitually together, the fellow-feeling of huntership making such association congenial. So, early as is the Mexican afoot, he beats the English youth by barely a minute of time; the latter seen issuing forth from one of the tents that form part of the encampment, just as the former has crawled out from between the wheels of a wagon, under which, rolled-up in his *frezada*, he had passed the night.

With just enough light to identify him, Henry Tresillian is seen to be habited in shooting coat, breeches, and gaiters, laced buskins, and a tweed cloth cap; in short, the costume of an English sportsman – shot-belt over the shoulders, and double-barrel in hand – about to attack a pheasant preserve, or go tramping through stubble and swedes. The *gambusino* himself wears the picturesque dress of his class and country; the gun he carries being a rifle, while the sword-like weapon hanging along his hip is the ever-present *macheté*– in Sonora sometimes called *cortanté*.

As, overnight, the programme had been all arranged, their interchange of speech at present has only reference to something in the way of *desayuna* before setting out. This they find ready and near; at the central camp fire now blazing up, where several of the women, “whisks” in hand, are bending over pots of chocolate, stirring the substantial liquid to a creamy froth.

A *taza* of it is handed to each of the “*cazadores*,” with a “*tortilla enchilada*,” accompanied by a graceful word of welcome. Then, emptying the cups, and chewing up the tough, leatherlike maize cakes, the hunters slip quietly out of camp, and set their faces for the Cerro.

The ascent, commenced almost immediately, is by a ravine – a sort of gorge or chine worn out by the water from the spring-head above and disintegrating rains throughout the long ages. They find it steep as a staircase, though not winding as one; instead, trending straight up from its debouchment on the plain to the summit level, between slopes, these with grim, rocky *façade*, still more precipitous. Down its bottom cascades the stream – a tiny rivulet now, but in rain-storms a torrent – and along this lies the path, the only one by which the Cerro can be ascended, as the *gambusino* already knows.

“There’s no other,” he says, as they are clambering upward, “where a man could make the ascent, unless with a Jacob’s ladder let down to him. All around, the cliff is as steep as the shaft of a mine. Even the wild sheep can’t scale it, and if we find any on the summit – and it’s to be hoped we shall – they must either have been bred there, or gone up this way. *Guarda!*” he adds, in exclamation, as he sees the impulsive English youth bounding on rather recklessly. “Have a care! Don’t disturb the stones; they may go rattling down and smash somebody below.”

“By Jove! I didn’t think of that,” returns he thus cautioned, turning pale at thought of how he might have endangered the lives of those dear to him; then ascending more slowly, and with the care enjoined upon him.

In due time they arrive at the head of the gorge, there stopping to take breath. Only for an instant, when they proceed on, now no longer in a climb, the path thence leading over ground level as the plain itself; but still by the rivulet’s edge, through a tangle of trees and bushes.

At some two hundred yards from the head of the gorge they come into an opening, the Mexican as he enters it exclaiming:

“*El ojo de agua!*”

Chapter Five.

Los Guajalotes

The phrase, “*ojo de agua*” (the water’s eye), is simply the Mexican name for a spring; which Henry Tresillian needs not to be told, being already acquainted with the pretty poetical appellation. And he now sees the thing itself but a few paces ahead, gurgling up in a little circular basin, and sending off the stream which supplies the lake below.

In an instant they are upon its edge, to find it clear as crystal, the *gambusino* saying, as he unslings his drinking-cup of cow’s horn,

“I can’t resist taking a swill of it, notwithstanding the gallons I had swallowed overnight. After such a long spell of short-water rations, one feels as though he could never again get enough.” Then filling the horn, and almost instantly emptying it, he concludes with the exclamation “*Delicioso!*”

His companion drinks also, but from a cup of solid silver; vessels of this metal, even of gold, being aught but rare among the master-miners of Sonora.

They are about to continue on, when lo! a flock of large birds by the edge of the open. On the ground these are – having just come out from among the bushes – moving leisurely along, with beaks now and then lowered to the earth; in short, feeding as turkeys in a pasture field. And turkeys they are, the Mexican saying in a whisper:

“*Los guajalotes!*”

So like are they to the domestic bird – only better shaped and every way more beautiful – that Henry Tresillian has no difficulty in identifying them as its wild progenitors. One of superior size, an old cock, is at their head, striding to and fro in all the pride of his glittering plumage, which, under the beams of the new-risen sun, shows hues vivid and varied as those of the rainbow. A very sultan he seems, followed by a train of sultanas and their attendants; for there are young birds in the flock, fledglings, that differ in appearance from the old ones.

Suddenly the grand satrap erects his head, and with neck craned out, utters a note of alarm. Too late. “Bang – bang!” from the double-barrel – the sharper crack of the rifle sounding simultaneously – and the old cock, with three of his satellites, lies prostrate upon the earth, the rest taking flight with terrified screeches, and a clatter of wings loud as the “whirr” of a threshing machine.

“Not a bad beginning,” quietly observes the *gambusino*, as they stand over the fallen game. “Is it, señorito?”

“Anything but that,” answers the young Englishman, delighted at having secured such a good bottom for their bag. “But what are we to do with them? We can’t carry them along.”

“Certainly not,” rejoins the Mexican. “Nor need. Let them lie where they are till we come back. But no,” he adds, correcting himself. “That will never do. There are wolves up here, no doubt – certainly coyotes, if no other kind – and on return we might find only feathers. So we must string them up out of reach.”

The stringing up is a matter which occupies only a few minutes’ time; done by one leg thrust through the opened sinew of the other to form a loop; then the birds hoisted aloft, and hung upon the up-curving arms of a tall *pitahaya*.

“And now, on!” says the *gambusino*, after re-loading guns. “Let us hope we may come across something in the four-legged line, big enough to give everybody a bit of fresh meat for dinner. Likely we’ll have to tramp a good way before sighting any; the report of our guns will have frightened both birds and beasts, and sent all to the farthest side of the *mesa*. But no matter for that. I want to go there direct, and at once, for a reason, *muchacho*, I’ve not yet made known to you.”

While speaking, an anxious expression has shown itself on the *gambusino*’s face, which, taken in connection with his last words, leads Henry Tresillian to suspect something in, or on, his mind, beside

the desire to kill game. Moreover, before leaving the camp he had noticed that the Mexican seemed to act in a manner more excited than was his wont – as if in a great hurry to get away. That, no doubt, for the reason he now hints at; though what it is the young Englishman cannot even give a guess.

“May I know it now?” he asks, with some eagerness, noting the grave look.

“Certainly you may, and shall,” frankly responds the Mexican. “I would have told you sooner, and the others as well, but for not being sure about it. I didn’t like to cause an alarm in the camp without good reason. And I hope still there’s none. After all it may not have been smoke.”

“Smoke! What?”

“What I saw, or thought I saw, yesterday evening, just after we arrived by the lake’s edge.”

“Where?”

“To the north-east – a long way off.”

“But if it was a smoke, what would that signify?”

“In this part of the world, much. It might mean danger; ay, death.”

“You astonish – mystify me, Señor Vicente. How could it mean that?”

“There’s no mystery in it, *muchacho*. Where smoke is seen there should be fire; and a fire on these *llanos* is likely to be one with Indians around it. Now do you understand the danger I’m thinking of?”

“I do. But I thought there were no Indians in this part of the country, except the Opatas; and they are Christianised, dwelling in towns.”

“True, all that. But the Opatas towns are far from here, and in an entirely different direction – the very opposite. If smoke it was, the fire that made it wasn’t one kindled by Opatas, but men who only resemble them in the colour of their skin – Indians, too.”

“What Indians do you suspect?”

“*Los Apaches*.”

“Danger indeed, if they be in the neighbourhood.” The young Englishman has been long enough in Sonora to have acquaintance with the character of these cruel savages. “But I hope they’re not,” he adds, trustfully, still with some apprehension, as his thoughts turn to those below.

“That hope I heartily echo,” rejoins the Mexican, “for if they be about, we’ve got to look out for the skin of our heads. But come, *muchacho mio*! Don’t let us be down in the mouth till we’re sure there *is* a danger. As I’ve said, I’m not even sure of having seen smoke at all. It might have been a dust-whirl, just as I noticed the thing, the *estampeda* commenced; and after it the rush for water, which of course took off my attention. When that was over, and I again turned my eyes north-eastward, it was too dark to distinguish smoke or anything else. I then looked for a light all along the sky-line, and also several times during the night – luckily to see none. For all I can’t help having fears. A man who’s once been prisoner to the Apaches never travels through a district where they are like to be encountered without some apprehension. Mine ought to be of the keenest. I’ve not only been their prisoner, but rather roughly handled, as no doubt you’ll admit after looking at this.”

Saying which, the Mexican opens his shirt-front, laying bare his breast; on which appears a disc, bearing rude resemblance to a “death’s head,” burnt deep into the skin.

“They gave me that brand,” he continues, “just by way of amusing themselves. They meant to have further diversion out of it by using me as a target, and it for a centre mark at one of their shooting matches. Luckily, before that came off, I found the chance of giving them leg-bail. Now, *muchacho*, you’ll better understand my anxiety to be up here so early, and why I want to push on to the other end. *Vamonos!*”

Shouldering their guns, they proceed onward; now at slower pace, their progress obstructed by thick-growing bushes and trees, with *llianas* interlacing. For beyond the spring there is neither stream nor path, save here and there a slight trace, often tortuous, which tells of the passage of wild animals wandering to and fro. The hunters are pleased to see it thus; still more when the Mexican, noting some hoof-marks in a spot of soft ground, pronounces them tracks of the *carnero cimmaron*.

“I thought we’d find some of the bighorn gentry up here,” he says; “and if all the caravan don’t this day dine on roast mutton, it’ll be because Pedro Vicente isn’t the proper man to be its purveyor. Still, we mustn’t stop to go after the sheep now. True, we’ve begun the day hunting, but before proceeding farther with that, we must make sure we shan’t have to end it fighting. Ssh!”

The sibillatory exclamation has reference to a noise heard a little way off, like the stroke of a hoof upon hard turf, several times rapidly repeated. And simultaneous with it another sound, as the snort or bark of some animal.

“That’s a *carnero*, now!” says the Mexican, *sotto voce*; as he speaks, coming to a stop and laying hold of the other’s arm to restrain him. “Since the game offers itself without going after, or out of our way, we may as well secure a head or two. Like the turkeys, it can be strung up till our return.”

Of course his *compagnon de chasse* is of the same mind. He but longs to empty his double-barrel again, all the more at such grand game, and rejoins, saying, “Just so; it can.”

Without further speech they stalk cautiously forward, to reach the edge of another opening, and there behold another flock – not of birds, but quadrupeds. Deer they might seem at the first glance, to eyes unacquainted with them; and for such Henry Tresillian might mistake them, but that they show no antlers; instead, horns of a character proclaiming them sheep.

Sheep they are, wild ones, different from the domesticated animal as greyhound from dachshund. No short legs nor low bodies theirs; no bushy tails, nor tangle of wool to encumber them. Instead, coats clean and smooth, with limbs long, sinewy, and supple as those of stag itself. Several pairs of horns are visible in the flock, one pair spirally curving much larger than any of the others; indeed, of such dimensions, and seeming weight, as to make it a wonder how the old ram, their owner, can hold up his head. Yet is it he who is holding head highest; the same who had snorted, hammering the ground with his hoof.

He has done so, repeatedly, since; the last time to be the last in his life. Through the leafy branches, cautiously parted, shoots out a double jet of flame and smoke; three cracks are heard; then again there is dead game on the ground.

This time, however, counting less in heads; only one – that carrying the grand curvature of horns. Alone the leader of the flock has fallen to the second fusillade, killed by the rifle’s bullet. For the shot from the double-barrel, though hitting too, has glanced off the thick felt-like coats of the *carneros* as from a corslet of steel.

“*Carrai!*” exclaims the *gambusino*, with a vexed air, as they step up to the fallen quarry. “This time we haven’t done so well – in fact, worse than nothing.”

“But why?” queries the young Englishman, in wonder at the other’s strange words and ways, after having made such a big kill.

“Why, you ask, señorito! Don’t your nostrils tell you? *Mil diablos!* how the brute stinks!”

Truth he speaks, as his hunting companion, now standing over the dead body of the bighorn, can well perceive – sensible of an offensive odour arising from it as that of ram in the rutting season.

“What a fool I’ve been to spend bullet upon him!” continues the Mexican, without awaiting rejoinder. “Nor was it his great bulk or horns that tempted me. No; all through thinking of that other thing, which made me careless which of them I aimed at.”

“What other thing?”

“The smoke. Well, it’s no use crying over spilt milk nor any to bother more about the brute. It’s only fit food for coyotes; and the sooner they get it into their bellies the better. Faugh! Let us away from it.”

Chapter Six.

A Homeric Repast

Early as are the white men astir, yet earlier are the red ones. For the Coyoteros, like the animal from which they derive their tribal name, do more of their prowling by night than by day. Moreover, it is the sultry season, and they design reaching Nauchampa-tepetl before the sun gets so high and hot as to make travelling uncomfortable. Even savages are not averse to comfort; though these are now thinking more about that of their horses than their own. They are on an expedition that will need keeping the animals up to their best strength; and journeying in the noon hours would distress and pull them down.

So nearly an hour before dawn declines itself they are up and active, moving about in the dim light, silent as spectres. Silent, not from any fear of betraying their presence to an enemy – they know of none likely to be near – but because it is their habit.

What they first do is to shift the picket-pins of their horses, or give greater length to the trail-ropes, in order that the animals may get a bite of clean fresh grass, that on which they were tethered throughout the night being now trampled down.

Next, they proceed to take care of themselves – to fortify the inner man with a bit of breakfast. No fire is needed for the cooking it, and none is kindled. The *mezcal* and horse-meat pie has been baking all the night; and now, near morning, they know it will be ready – done to a turn. It but needs the turf lifted off their primitive oven, and the contents extracted.

Five or six, detailed for the task, at once set about it; first taking off the top sods, now calcined and still smoking. Then the loose mould, which the fire has converted into ashes, is removed with more care. It is hot, and needs handling gingerly; but the savage *cuisiniers* know how, and soon the black bundle is exposed to view, the hide now hairless and charred, but moist and reeking. It still adheres sufficiently to bear hoisting out, without fear of spilling the contents; and at length it is so lifted and carried to a clean spot of sward. Then cut open and spread out, there is displayed a steaming savoury mass, whose appetising odour, borne upward and outward on the fresh morning air, inspires every redskin around with delightful anticipations.

And not without reason either. To say nothing of the baked horseflesh – by many *gourmets* esteemed a delectable dish – the corn of the *mezcal*, treated thus, is a viand palatable as peculiar. And peculiar it is, bearing resemblance to nothing I either know or can think of. In appearance it is much like candied citron, with a sweetish taste too, only firmer and darker in colour. But while eating it the tongue seems penetrated with a thousand tiny darts; a sort of prinkling sensation, quite indescribable, and, to one unaccustomed to it, not altogether agreeable. In time this passes away; and he who has made the experiment of eating *mezcal* comes to like it exceedingly. Many grand people among the whites regard it in the light of a luxury; and as such it has found its way into most Mexican towns – even the capital itself – where it commands a high price.

With the Apache Indians, as already said, it is a staple food, even giving their tribal name to one branch of this numerous nation – the Mezcaleros. But all eat of it alike, and the Coyoteros, *en bivouac*, show, by their knowledge of how to prepare it, that baked *mezcal* is noways new to them.

At the word “ready!” they gather around the hot steaming mass; and, regardless of scorched lips or tongues, set upon it with knife and tooth.

Soon the skin is cleaned out, every scrap of its contents eaten. They could eat the hide too, and would, were there a pinch. But there is none such now, and it is left for their namesakes, the coyotes.

A smoke follows the Homeric repast, for all American Indians are addicted to the use of the nicotian weed. They were so before the caravels of Columbus spread sail on the Haytian seas.

Every Coyotero in camp has his pipe and pouch of tobacco, be it genuine or adulterated; this depending on how their luck has been running, or how recent their latest raid upon some settlement of the palefaces.

Pipes smoked out and returned to their places of deposit, all are afoot again. Nothing more now but to draw picket-pins, coil up trail-ropes, mount, and move off; for their horse caparison, scant and easily adjusted, is already on.

The chief gives the order “to horse,” not in words, but by example – springing upon the back of his own. Then they ride off, as before, in formation “by twos,” each file falling into rank as the line lengthens out upon the plain.

Scarce is the last file clear of the abandoned camp-ground ere this becomes occupied by animated beings of another kind – wolves, whose howling has been heard throughout all the night. Having scented the slaughtered horse, these now rush simultaneously towards it, to dispute the banquet of bones.

Shortly after leaving the camp the marching redskins lose sight of the Cerro. This is accounted for by a dip in the plain, with a ridgelike swell beyond, which runs transversely to their course. The hollow continues for several miles before the mountain will be again in view; but, well knowing the way, they need not this to guide them. Nor are they in any particular hurry. They can reach their intended halting-place by the lake long ere the sun becomes sultry, there to lie up till the cool hours of evening. So they move leisurely along, and with a purpose – to spare the sinews of their horses.

They talk enough now, loudly and laughingly. They have slept well, and breakfasted satisfactorily; besides, it is broad daylight, and no danger to be apprehended, no fear of hostile surprise. For all that they keep their eyes on the alert through habitude, every now and then scanning the horizon around.

Soon they see that which gives them something serious to speak about. Not upon the horizon, nor anywhere upon the plain, but up in the heavens above it – birds. What of them? And what in their appearance to attract the attention of the Coyoteros? Nothing, or not much, were the birds other than they are. But they are vultures, black vultures of two sorts —*gallinazos* and *zopilotes*. Nor would the Indians think of giving them a second glance were they soaring about in their ordinary way, wheeling in circles and spirals. But they are not; instead, passing overhead in straight onward flight, with a quick, earnest plying of wings, evidently making for some point where they expect to stoop upon carrion. Scores there are of them, straggled out in a long stream, but all flying in one direction – the same in which the savages are themselves proceeding – towards Nauchampa-tepetl.

What can be drawing the vultures thither? This the question which the Indians ask one another, in their own formularies of speech; none able to answer it, save by conjecture. Without in any way alarming, the spectacle excites them; and they quicken their pace, eager to learn what is attracting the birds. It should be something more than dead antelope or deer, so many are tending towards it, and from so far. For their high flight, straight onward, tells of their having been for some time keeping the same course.

Hastening on up the slope of the swell, the dusky horsemen once more catch sight of the mountain, there to see what brings them to an abrupt halt – a filmy purplish haze hanging over its southern end, more scattered higher up in the sky. Is it fog rising from the water they know to be there? No: smoke, as their practised eyes tell them after regarding it a moment. And with like celerity they interpret it, as proceeding from the fire, or fires, of a camp. Other travellers, anticipating them, are encamped by Nauchampa-tepetl,

Who? Opatas? Not likely. Sons of toil —*Indicos mansos*– slaves, as these the *bravos*, their kindred only in race, scornfully call them – the Opatas keep to their towns, and the patches of cultivation around them. Improbable that they should have ventured into that wilderness so far from home. More likely it is a party of palefaces; men in search of that shining metal which, as the Apaches know, has often lured their white enemies into the very heart of the desert, their own domain, and to

destruction – themselves the destroyers. If the smoke of those camp fires they now see be over such a party, then is it doomed – at least so mentally resolve the red centaurs, hoping it may be thus.

While still gazing at the blue cloud, taking its measure, and discussing the probabilities of who and what sort of men may be under it, another appears before their eyes; this whiter and of smaller size – a mere puff suddenly rising over the crest of the *mesa*, and separating from it as it drifts higher.

From the fire of a gun, or guns, as the Coyoteros can tell, though not by any crack of one having reached their ears, since none has. In the rarefied atmosphere of the high-lying *llanos* the eye has the advantage of the ear, sounds being heard only at short distance. They are still more than ten miles from the mountain, and the report of a cannon, discharged on its summit, would be barely audible to them.

Still staying at halt, but keeping to their horses, the chief and others in authority enter into consultation. And while they are deliberating on the best course to be pursued, still another puff of smoke shoots up over the *mesa*, similar to that preceding, but at a different point. It aids them in coming to conclusions; for now they are sure there is a camp of palefaces by the pond; and they above are hunters who have gone up to get game, which the Indians know to be there in abundance.

But what sort of palefaces? Of this they are not sure. Knowing it to be a miners' camp, they would ride straight on for it, in gallop. But it may be an encampment of *soldados*, which would make a difference. Not that the Coyoteros are afraid to encounter Mexican soldiers – far from it. Rather would they rejoice at finding it these. For their tribe, their own branch of it, has an old score against the men in uniform; and nothing would please them better than an opportunity to settle it. Indeed, partly to seek this, with purposes of plunder combined, are they now on the *war-trail*. Only in their mode of action would there be a difference, in the event of the encampment turning out to be occupied by *soldados*. Soldiers in that quarter should be cavalry, and to approach them caution would be called for, with strategy. But these red centaurs are soldiers themselves – veterans, skilled, cunning strategists – and now give proof of it. For the time has come for them to advance; which they do, not straight forward nor in single body, but broken into two bands, one facing right, the other left, with a design to enfilade the camp by approaching it from opposite points. Separating at the start, the two cohorts soon diverge wide apart, both making for the mountain, but with the intention to reach its southern end on different sides.

If the black vultures, still in streaming flight above, have hopes of getting a repast there, they may now feel assured of its being a plenteous one.

Chapter Seven.

Los Indios!

Parting from the despised carcase of the ram the hunters press onward, the younger with mental resolve to return to it, come back what way they will. Its grand spiral horns have caught his fancy: such a pair would grace any hall in Christendom; and, though he cannot call the trophy his own, since it fell not to his gun, he intends appropriating it.

Only for a brief moment does the young Englishman reflect about them; in the next they are out of his mind. For, glancing at the Mexican's face, he again sees that look of anxious uneasiness noted before. It had returned soon as the exciting incident of the sheep-shooting was over. And knowing the cause, he shares it; no more thinking about the chase or its trophies.

They say but little now, having sufficient work to occupy them without wasting time in words. For beyond the opening where the *carneros* were encountered, they find no path – not so much as a trace made by animals – and have to make one for themselves. As the trees stand close, with *lianas* interlacing, the Mexican is often compelled to use his *machet * for hewing out a passage-way; which he does with an accompaniment of *carrambas*! thick as the underwood he chops at.

Thus impeded, they are nearly an hour in getting through the *chapparal*, though the distance passed is less than the half of a mile. But at length they accomplish it, arriving on the *mesas* outer edge, close to that of the cliff. There the tall timber ends in a skirting of low bushes, and their view is no longer obstructed. North, east, and west the *llano* is under their eyes to the horizon's verge, twenty miles at least being within the scope of their vision.

They aim not to scan it so far. For at a distance of little more than ten they observe that which at once fixes their glance: a dun yellowish disc – a cloud – with its base resting upon the plain.

"Smoke, no – but dust!" exclaims the *gambusino*, soon as sighting it; "and kicked up by the heels of horses – hundreds of them. There can be nothing else out there to cause that. Horses with men on their backs. If a *caballada* of wild mustangs, the dust would show more scattered. *Indios, por cierto! Carra-i!*" he says in continuation, the shade on his brow sensibly darkening, as with a quick glance over his shoulder he sees real smoke in that direction. "What fools we've been to kindle fires! Rank madness. Better to have eaten breakfast raw. I myself most to blame of any; I should have known the danger. By this they'll have spied our camp smoke – that of our shots, too. Ah, *muchacho*! we've been foolish in every way."

Almost breathless from this burst of regret and self-recrimination, he is for a while silent; his heart beating audibly, however, as with gaze fixed on the far-off cloud, he endeavours to interpret it. But the dark cloud soon becomes less dense, partially dispersed, and under it appears something more solid; a clump of sombre hue, but with here and there sparkling points. No separate forms can as yet be made out; only a mass; but for all that, the *gambusino* knows it to be composed of horses and men, the corruscations being the glint of arms and accoutrements, as the sun penetrates through to them.

"What a pity," he exclaims, resuming speech, "I didn't think of asking Don Estevan for the loan of his telescope! If we only had it here now! But I can see enough without it; 'tis as I feared. No more hunting for us to-day; but fighting ere the sun goes down – perhaps ere it reach meridian. *Mira!* the thing's splitting into two. You see, *se orito?*"

The *se orito* does see that the dust-cloud has parted in twain, as also the dark mass underneath. And now they can distinguish separate forms; horses with men on their backs, and a more conspicuous glittering of arms, because of their being in motion.

"Ah, yes!" adds the Mexican, with increased gravity of tone, "*Indios bravos* they are, hundreds of them. If Apaches, as sure they must, Heaven help us all! I know what they mean by that movement. They've sighted the camp smoke, and intend coming on along both sides of the Cerro. That's why

they've broken into two bands. Back to camp, as fast as our legs can carry us! We've not a minute – not a second – to lose. *Vamos!*”

And back for camp they start, not to spend time on the way as when coming from it, but in a run and rush along the path already opened – past the dead sheep, past the spring, and the strung-up turkeys, without even staying to look at these, much less think of taking them along.

The occupants of the miners' camp, men, women, and children, are up and active now. Some are at work about the wagons, pouring water over their wheels to tighten the tyres, loose from the shrinking of the wood; others have set to mending harness and pack-saddles; while still others, out on the open plain, are changing the animals to fresh spots of pasturage. A small party is seen around the carcase of a bullock, in the act of skinning it to get beefsteaks for breakfast.

Several fires have been kindled, for the people are many, and have separate messes, according to rank and vocation. Around these are the women and grown girls, some bending over red earthenware pots that contain chocolate and coffee, others on their knees with the *metate* stone in front, and *metlapilla* in hand, crushing the boiled maize into paste for the indispensable *tortillas*. The children play by the lake's edge, wading ankle-deep into the water, plashing about like little ducks; some of the bigger boys, who have improvised a rude tackle, endeavouring to catch fish. In this remote tarn there are such, as it has an affluent stream connecting it with the Rio Horcasitas – now nearly dry, but at times having a volume of water sufficient for the finny tribes to ascend to the lake, into which several species have found their way.

Within the space enclosed by the wagons – the *corral*– three tents have been erected, and stand in a row. The middle one is a large square marquee, the two flanking it of the ordinary bell shape. The marquee is occupied by the senior partner and his señora; the one on the right by their daughter and an Indian *moza*– her waiting-maid; the third affords shelter and sleeping quarters for the two Tresillians.

All three are for a time empty, their occupants having stepped out of them. As known, Henry Tresillian has gone up to the summit of the Cerro, and his father is moving about the camp in the company of the *mayor-domo*, with an eye to superintendence of everything; while Don Estevan, his wife, and daughter, have strolled out along the lake's edge to enjoy the refreshing breeze wafted over its water. The three promenaders have but made one turn along the sandy shore, and back again, when they hear a cry which not only alarms them, but all within and around the camp —

“*Los Indios!*”

It has been sent from above – from the head of the ravine; and everybody looks up – all eyes raised simultaneously. To see two men standing on a projecting point of rock, their figures sharply outlined against the blue background of sky; at the same time to recognise them as the *gambusino*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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