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Lone Pine: The Story of a Lost Mine



Richard Townshend

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Lone Pine: The Story of a Lost Mine

A lone pine stands in the Northland
On a bald and barren height.
He sleeps, by the snows enfolded
In a mantle of wintry white.
He dreams of a lonely palm-tree,
Afar in the morning-land,
Consumed with unspoken longing
In a waste of burning sand.

After Heine.

CHAPTER I

INDIAN LOVERS

A moon just past its first quarter was shining on the Indian pueblo of Santiago, so that one side of the main street (it only boasted four) was in deep shadow, while on the other the mud-built houses were made almost beautiful by the silver light. The walls on the bright side were curiously barred with the slanting shadows cast by low, broad ladders, which led from storey to storey of the terrace-like buildings, and by the projecting ends of the beams which supported their flat roofs. Outside each house, clear away from the wall, stood a great clay oven, in shape exactly like a gigantic beehive as tall as a man. In the deepest shadow on the dark side of the street, between one of these ovens and the wall, something was crouching. The street was deserted, for the Indians, who practise the precept "early to bed and early to rise," had long ago lain down to sleep on their sheepskins. But if anyone had gone up to the crouching something, he would have found a young Indian, with a striped blanket drawn completely over and around him so as to conceal everything except the keen eyes that peered watchfully out of the folds. There was no one to disturb him, however, and the bright moon of New Mexican skies sank lower and lower in the west, and yet he remained there motionless, except when now and again the night air, growing colder, caused the blanket to be gathered more closely to the body it was protecting.

Just as the moon dipped behind the western hills, the figure sprang up and darted forward. The long, untiring watch was over at last. From a hole in the opposite wall, a good deal higher than a man's head from the ground, a little hand and wrist were seen waving.

In a moment the boy – he was hardly more – was underneath. He threw back the blanket from his head, and it fell down to his waist, where it was supported by a belt, leaving his body and arms free. His answering hand crept up the cold, rough surface of the wall till at its utmost stretch he felt a smooth, warm skin rub against his finger-tips, and instantly the two hands interlocked.

"Is that you, Felipe?" breathed a low voice from inside.

"Yes, my love, it is," came back a whisper as low from the Indian boy who had waited so long and so patiently for his sweetheart's signal. "Why did you look so sad," he continued, "when you gave me the signal to-day? Is there anything new?"

"Oh, Felipe, yes," she sighed. "I do not know how to tell you. My father spoke to me this morning and said it should be in three days. He has sent for the padre to come. In three days, Felipe! What shall I do? I shall die!"

The young Indian groaned under his breath. "In three days!" he said. "Ah, that is too cruel! Is it really true?"

"Oh yes," came the whispered answer. "My father said he would beat me to death if I did not consent. I should not so much mind being beaten, Felipe – it would be for you; but he would kill me, I believe. I am frightened."

Felipe felt the shiver that ran through the finger-tips clasped in his. "Do not be so afraid, Josefa," he said, trying to keep up her courage. "Can you not tell the padre that you hate old Ignacio and that you will not marry him?"

"Yes," replied she, "but he will say, 'Oh, nonsense, nonsense; girls are always afraid like that.' As long as my father is cacique the padre is bound to please him to make sure of getting his dues. He'll do what my father wants. He will not mind me."

"There is only one thing for us to do," said the boy; "we must run away together."

"But where?" said she, "and how? They will catch us, and they will beat us, and they will marry me all the same to that ugly old Ignacio. I hate him from the bottom of my heart; and if ever he dares to try to master me, I'll do him a mischief."

"Ah, but he is going to bribe your father with three cows," said her lover disconsolately. "He can do it, too, easy enough. He is the very richest man of all the Eagles, and I suppose the Eagles are the strongest family in the pueblo next to the Snakes. Anyway the cacique always favours them, so he has a double reason for wanting to hand you over to that old miser. Alas! I have no cows to give him, not even one little calf. We Turquoises are so few and so poor! The cacique would never hear of your marrying one of us. He is so proud of having married a Snake himself, that he thinks nobody good enough for his daughter who isn't able – " He was silenced by the girl.

"Hush!" said she quickly in a smothered tone, "I hear him moving about in the farther room"; and the Indian lad listened, motionless as a statue, with all the wary concentration of his race in the moment of danger.

The red Indian has often been represented as apathetic. He is not. His loves and his hatreds are intense, only, both by birth and bringing up, he is endowed with extraordinary power of controlling their expression. Underneath their outward self-restraint these simple folk of Santiago were capable enough of feeling all the emotions of humanity pulsing through their veins and plucking at their heart-strings. Felipe and Josefa, exchanging hand-clasps and vows of fidelity through a hole in an adobe wall, were as passionate and as miserable as if the little drama which meant so much to them was being played on the wider stage of the great world outside. When the girl whispered "hush" to her lover, both held their breath and listened, each conscious of the pulse that throbbed in the other's hand. It was a noise from inside the house that had startled the girl. She could hear that someone in a farther room had got up and was throwing a stick of wood on the fire. With a gentle pressure her finger-tips were withdrawn from her lover's, and her hand disappeared back through the hole. Felipe sank down into the crouching position he had been in till she came, drawing the blanket over him for concealment and warmth as before. For nearly half an hour he remained perfectly still. Then a slight rubbing on the inner side of the wall became audible, and presently looking up he saw not a hand only, but a whole arm reaching down to him from the opening. Up he sprang, and stretching himself on tiptoe against the wall he succeeded in bringing his lips up to the little hand, which he kissed silently again and again.

"It was my father," said she. "He must be asleep again now; he lay down again quite soon. They put a new stone," she continued, "in the hand-mill to-day, for I have quite worn out the old one with grinding corn on it for my step-mother. But they have brought the old one into the storeroom here, and I have taken it to stand on, so that I can see you now if I take my hand in and put my head to the hole. But, Felipe, let us settle what to do."

"I've been thinking," said Felipe, "we must run; we must. Of course it is no use for us to go to our padre. He is on their side, just as you say, so we will not go to him. We will try another padre, who has nothing to do with the pueblo and won't care for your father. I'll tell you. Let us go to Padre Trujillo at Ensenada. They say he is good and kind to his Indians. He will marry us. I have the money to pay his fee. When we are once married, my joy, we are safe. They cannot separate us when the padre has joined us for ever. They cannot do anything to us then; our own padre himself would forbid it."

"We would be safe then, indeed," sighed Josefa. "Oh, if we could only manage it! What shall we do for a horse? the horse herd is away in the sierra, and they will not bring it down till Sunday."

"Sunday will be too late for us," said Felipe sadly. "We want a horse now, at once; I could go out to the horse herd and get my father's horse if he would give me leave to get him. But you know this new captain of the horse herd is that bullying Rufino of the Eagles. He and his helpers have the herd now on the other side of the Cerro de las Viboras, the Mountain of the Snakes. I'm sure they'd never let me have the horse unless my father gave them the order or came to fetch him himself. But he won't do that, I know; the horse is thin after the cold winter, and he wants him to eat green grass now and grow fat. It won't do."

"Ask El Americano, then," suggested the girl quickly, as if a sudden thought had struck her. "Yes, why don't you ask him? Ask Don Estevan to lend you a horse or a mule; you work for him, and he seems so friendly with you, perhaps he'll let you have one of his."

"What!" exclaimed the young Indian, "ask him! Ask Turquoise-eyes to lend a horse! Ask Sooshuamo to do that! That's no sort of use." He spoke hopelessly, as if surprised at her even thinking of such a thing.

El Americano, as the girl had first called him, otherwise known as Don Estevan or Sooshuamo, was a solitary white man, a prospector who had obtained permission to spend the past winter in the village of the Indians of Santiago, and by them was often referred to as El Americano, the American *par excellence*, because he was the only one within fifty miles.

"You might just ask him once, though," she persisted, in spite of Felipe's attitude. "Oh yes, Felipe, go and ask him. Do try. Go now. It can't do any harm even if he won't."

"But I know he won't," returned the boy, unconvinced; "and I shall have to tell him what it's for, and if I go and tell Sooshuamo our secret, what's to prevent him telling the chiefs? He's very friendly with them all."

"Oh, but of course you mustn't tell him our plan," she answered; "we must keep that dark. But he's very kind to all our folk. Perhaps he'd do it for us out of kindness. It's all out of kindness, isn't it, that he's going to make the rocks fly away out of the acequia to-morrow? They say he's going to do a miracle for the pueblo. I heard my father talking about it."

"Yes, I know that," said Felipe; "I know he told me himself he would make the rocks jump out of the ditch, and that then we should have twice as much water as ever we had before. I know he's a good friend to us. But I know, too, he hates ever to lend any of his animals to any of us. He thinks we would ride them to death if he did. I will try him, though, anyway. I will beg very hard. Don't be afraid, dear heart; I will get one somehow, if you will really come – yes, if I have to take one of the Mexicans' horses."

"Oh no, not that!" cried she. "They will shoot you or hang you if you touch their horses. Don't do it. I will not go if you take a horse of the Mexicans. I would rather go afoot."

"No, dear heart, you couldn't. It isn't possible. It is ten leagues to Ensenada from here, and we must do it between moonset and daylight, or they will catch us. Do not talk of going afoot. Trust me, I will get a horse. But you will really come, Josefa *mia*? Do you really mean it? What other woman would be so brave?"

"I do mean it, indeed," she answered. "Oh, how I wish we could be married here in our own church by the padre! but my father wouldn't hear of it. He wouldn't even let me speak to you, you know, or let me go out without being watched."

"Yes, I wish we could," said the young Indian wistfully. "I spoke to my father to ask for you for me, but he only said, 'We are too poor. It is no use. We have only one horse and two cows. Ignacio has several horses and thirty cows.' As if that was a reason, when I want you so much!" he added indignantly. "If I had the whole world I would give it to Salvador, and he might be cacique of it all, if he would only let me have you." He drew himself up to the wall again and kissed the little warm hand eagerly. "My sweetheart!" he exclaimed, "I shall die if I do not get you! Oh, if I could only tear down this hateful wall! How can I talk to you properly when I cannot see you? May not I get in by the terrace roof? Let me try."

"Hush, Felipe," she said. "Don't be foolish, you silly boy. You would be sure to be heard, and then everything will be ruined. You must be patient." Here she gave his hand a little squeeze, which of course had just the contrary effect to her advice, for he kissed the fingers with redoubled ardour. Then he broke in —

"But if I can't get in without disturbing them, how will you be able to get out?"

"Oh, I can manage that," said the girl. "I will slip into this storeroom when they are asleep, as I always do, and from here I can get through the trap-door into the room above, and so out on to the terrace. There is an old ladder I can get up by."

The villages of the Pueblo Indians are built in terraces, each house-storey standing back from the one below it like a flight of gigantic steps. From terrace to terrace people ascend by ladders, and many of the lower rooms are without any door but a trap-door in the ceiling. The system is a relic of the times when their villages were castles for defence against their deadly enemies, the marauding Navajos and Apaches.

"How brave you are, Josefita *mia*!" he cried. "Will you really dare to run away from them, and come with me? How sweet it will be! we shall be together for the first time – think of it! Oh, I will make you happy, I will indeed!"

"If they rob me of you, I shall die," said the girl in a low, sad voice. "One thing, Felipe, I promise you, I will not be Ignacio's wife. Never! You need not fear that."

"Oh, my darling," he sighed, "how can I be content with that? I want you for my very own. In my eyes you are more beautiful than the saints in the church, and they are not more wise and good than you. Why are things made so hard for us?"

"I do not know," she said softly; "nobody seems to be so unhappy as we are. But we can comfort each other ever so much. My step-mother will make me work like a slave all to-morrow, I know, but I shall have the thought of you to comfort me."

"My sweetheart!" said he. "You have a thousand times more to bear than I have. But I will try to think for you. You must take some rest. I know how they treat you." He ground his teeth. "We must part now, but I will come to-morrow night. I will bring a horse if I can get one. If not, we have one day left still, and we will settle what to do."

"Till to-morrow night, then," said she.

"To-morrow night at moonset," said Felipe; and with many final pressures of hands, each one intended to be the very last, the lovers parted.

Silently the moccasined feet of the boy stole up the wide street, as he ran homeward under the clear starlight. He lifted the latch of his mother's door and entered. The fire was low, and he put on another stick of cedar wood, and lying down on the sheepskins spread upon the floor, covered himself with his blanket and lay still. His father, old Atanacio, woke up when he came in, but said nothing to him; and soon sleep reigned again supreme in the Indian house. The Indians are early risers as well as light sleepers, and before daylight they were up and stirring. After their breakfast of bread and dried mutton, Atanacio said, "When you have taken care of the horses of the Americano, Felipe, you had better weed the wheat patch by the meadow. Tomas and I are going to the patch up by the orchard."

"I wanted," said Felipe, somewhat timidly, "to go to the herd and get the horse."

"Bad luck take the boy!" snarled the old Indian. "What does he want with the horse? Does he think we keep a horse for him to wear him to a skeleton flying round the country on him? Let him be. Let him get fat on the green grass."

"But I shall want him if I go with Sooshuamo," answered Felipe diplomatically. "The Americano told me that he was going off to the sierra for a hunt to get meat as soon as he had made the rocks jump out of the acequia for us as he has promised. He said when he went on a hunt he wanted me to go along and help him to pack the meat down. His rifle never misses, and then when he kills a wild bull he will give me meat – fresh meat – father."

"Bad luck take the Americano, too," growled the old man, as crossly as ever. "Whose cattle are they that he wants to kill? The wild cattle in the mountain are the children of ours, though they have no brands. Why should he come and kill them?"

"The cacique gave him leave, father."

"Well, I suppose he says so," was the ungracious response. "But if he wants to take you, he can give you a beast to ride. He has two mules besides the mare, and they do nothing, and eat maize all the time. They ought to be fat."

"But if he kills a bull he will want them to carry the meat," said Felipe. "One mule can't carry it all."

"Very well, then, you can ride one of his up and walk back," snapped the stern parent. "Want to ride the horse indeed! Lazy young rascal! Go afoot."

Felipe felt rebellious. He was getting to be a man now, and his father still wanted to treat him with as little consideration as a child. Instead of showing increasing respect to his tall son, the old man grew crosser and crosser every day. But Felipe had never rebelled against the parental yoke, though he had said to himself a hundred times that he would not stand it any longer. Yet in plotting to elope with Josefa he was plotting a rebellion far more venturesome against the code of the community of which he was a member.

"There isn't much hope there," said he to himself as he left the house, "but I knew that before. Now for Don Estevan." It was no use to try to borrow from any of the other Indians, for every man of them had his horse out at the herd – except, indeed, the cacique himself – and the herd was a day's journey away. With an anxious heart the boy wended his way to the next street of the village, which was the one where the American lodged.

CHAPTER II

A LONE HAND

The sun was just rising above the mesas, or flat-topped hills that formed the eastern horizon of the view from the village, as Felipe knocked at the door in the row of mud-built houses. His knock was answered by a fierce growl from a dog, and a loud "Come in" in Spanish from a vigorous human voice. He opened the door, which was unlocked, and stepped cautiously inside. From the brown blankets of a bed that stood by the wall a brindled bulldog was emerging, and apparently proposed to drive the intruder out.

"Dry up, Faro, will you?" said the same voice in English, addressing the dog. "Can't you see it's only Felipe?"

The dog, who evidently had a general theory that all Indians would bear watching, lay down again sulkily on the bed, and Felipe advanced to the fireplace. The owner of the voice was seated on a low stool, bending over the coals, with his back to the door.

"Good-morning, Don Estevan; how are you?" said Felipe in Spanish. The Santiago people spoke an Indian dialect of their own amongst themselves, but they used Spanish as a medium of communication with the rest of the world.

Stephens, for that was the American's name, which in its Spanish form had become Don Estevan, was busy cooking, and he answered without looking round, "Good-morning, Felipe; how goes it?" A critic might have said that his Spanish accent was by no means perfect, but no more was the Indian's, and the pair were able to understand one another readily enough, which was the main point.

How had this American come to be living here by himself in a remote village community of the Pueblo Indians? During ten long years of search for gold he had wandered from Colorado to California, from California to Nevada, from Nevada to Montana, and from Montana back again to Colorado. The silver boom in Colorado had just begun, and then silver mines were all the talk there. Thereupon Stephens recollected a story he had heard from an old prospector with whom he had once been camped in Nevada about a deserted silver mine in New Mexico which had once been worked by the Spaniards, with the forced labour of their Indian slaves, and had since lain idle, untouched, and even unknown. When the Spanish power was broken, and the Spaniards driven out, the Indians had covered up the place and sworn never to disclose its existence. According to the story, the sole possessors of the secret were the Pueblo Indians of Santiago.

To Santiago accordingly Stephens had made his way in the hope of solving the mystery of the secret mine. This hope, however, was one which he could not avow openly at the first meeting, and when he presented himself before the chiefs of the pueblo it was of gold and not of silver that he spoke. He told them of his past toils and adventures, and the red men seemed to take a fancy to him on the spot. Hitherto these Indians had persistently enforced their right to prevent any man not of their own blood from taking up his abode within a league of their village of Santiago, a right secured to them by special grant from the kings of Old Spain. What was there about this man that melted their obduracy? Some charm they must have found in the face of this lone wanderer, for him alone among white men had they admitted as a permanent guest to the hospitality of their most jealously guarded sanctuary.

Perhaps there was something of pure caprice in their choice; perhaps it was in a way due to the effect of physical contrast. For in this case the contrast between the white man and the red, always marked, was as striking as it could possibly be. He was as fair as they were dark. With his white skin, his grey-blue eyes, and his curling golden hair, worn long in frontier fashion, he was as fair as any Norseman that ever boasted his descent from the ancient Vikings.

"Gold," said Tostado, one of the chiefs, as Stephens sat in the midst of them on the occasion of his first visit; "we ask you what sort of a life you live, and you answer us that you live only to search for gold. Why, here is the gold. You carry it with you"; and with a reverent grace the fine old chief laid his dark fingers gently on the long yellow locks that flowed down from under the prospector's wide sombrero.

The grey-blue eyes of the far-wandered man – one who like Ulysses of old had withstood the buffets of capricious Fortune through many adventurous years – found an expression of genuine friendliness in the dark orbs of this redskin chief, who smiled gravely at his own jest, as if in half-excuse of its familiarity. Tostado gazed into the white man's eyes a moment longer, and then turned to the circle of his fellow-chiefs.

"See," he said, "the white man's eyes are the same colour as our precious turquoise stones; they are the colour of our sacred jewel, the Shiuamo, that I wear as the head man of the Turquoise family," and he pointed to his breast where a large polished turquoise hung from a circlet round his neck. "The white man has travelled far; he is weary; he shall stay with us and rest a while; and we will give him an Indian name, and he shall be as one of ourselves. Let him be called 'Sooshuamo,' 'Turquoise-eyes.' My brothers, say, is it good?"

"Yes, it is good," they answered, "it is good. From henceforth Sooshuamo is one of us; he is our brother."

And in this fashion the roving gold-seeker had obtained amongst them the acceptance he desired.

Felipe, with his striped blanket gracefully draped round him, came and stood just behind his employer, but said nothing. On a rough table were a tin cup and tin plate and an iron-handled knife; a small coffee-pot was bubbling in the ashes on the hearth. Stephens held a frying-pan in his left hand, and beside him on a tent-cloth on the floor lay a large smooth boulder and a hammer, with which he had been pounding his tough dried meat before cooking it. He now stood up to his full height, and turning his face, flushed with the fire, to Felipe, pointed with the steel fork held in his right hand to a great wooden chest against the wall at one side of the room. "Go and take an almud of corn and give it to the stock," said he. "Give Morgana her extra allowance."

"Yes, señor," said Felipe; and taking down three nosebags which hung on a peg in the wall, he filled them, and went out to the corral in the outskirts of the village where the American kept his beasts. The mare Morgana was a beautiful bay, of pure Morgan stock, and the mules were sturdy little pack animals of Mexican breed. By the time they had eaten their corn, and the boy had returned to the house with the nosebags, his employer had finished his meal and was washing up the dishes. Felipe hung up the nosebags, and stood by the fire silent and thoughtful; it never occurred to him to offer to help in what he looked upon as women's work. Stephens took the wiping cloth and began to wipe up. Felipe at last screwed up his courage to ask for the mare he needed so badly.

"Oh, Don Estevan!" he began suddenly.

"Well, what is it?" said Stephens sharply, rubbing away at his tin plate. It always irritated him to see anyone else idle when he was busy. Felipe's heart sank. He felt he should fail if he asked now. Perhaps his master would be in a better humour later on.

"What shall I do with the beasts?" he said in his ordinary voice.

"Was that all you were going to say?" said Stephens, looking at him keenly. "What's the matter with you? What's up?"

"Nothing, Don Estevan – it's nothing," said Felipe. "Shall I put them into the meadow as usual?"

"Yes, certainly," replied Stephens. "I sha'n't ride. I shall walk up the acequia to the rock I am going to blast. If I want them after, I'll come down."

"Very well, señor," said the boy; and taking the lariats he went back to the corral, caught the stock, and led them down the Indian road, through the unfenced fields of springing crops, towards the river.

At the lower end of the plough-lands a steep bank of bare earth and clay dropped sharply to the green flat fifteen or twenty feet below, through which the river ran. The plough-lands lay on a sort of natural terrace, and were all watered by numerous channels and runlets, which had their sources in the great *acequia madre*, or main ditch. This ditch was taken out of the river some miles above, where it was dammed for the purpose, and was led along the side of the valley as high up as possible; the pueblo was built beside the ditch more than a league below the dam, nearly half a mile from the river in a direct line. The grassy flat through which the river flowed remained unploughed, because it was liable to be overflowed in flood time. It was a verdant meadow, the common pasture-ground of the milch cows of the village, which were herded here during the day by small boys and at night were shut up in the corrals to keep them out of the unfenced crops. Felipe hobbled the three animals in the meadow, and set to work weeding in the wheat land above, where he could keep an eye upon them.

Some time after Felipe's departure, Stephens went to his powder-keg and measured out three charges of blasting-powder.

"Curious, isn't it?" said he aloud to himself as he handled the coarse black grains in which so much potential energy lay hid, – "curious how these Indians, hard-working folk as ever I saw, have lived two or three hundred years here under the Spanish Government, and been allowed by those old Dons to go on, year after year, short of water for irrigating, every time."

He closed up his powder-keg again securely, and locked it away in the room that he used as a storeroom; it was the inner of the two rooms that he rented in the block of dwellings inhabited by the Turquoise family. Here he lived, alone and independent, simply paying Felipe a trifle to do his chores and go up to the mesas and get his fire-wood. Indoors the prospector distinctly preferred to keep himself free and un beholden to anybody; he continued to live exactly as he did in camp, doing his own cooking and mending, and doing them thoroughly well too, with a pioneer's pride in being sufficient to himself in all things.

"And now," said he, as he wrapped up the charges of powder, "I'll just show my good friends of Santiago here a little trick those old Spanish drones were too thick-headed or too lazy ever to work. This fossilised Territory of New Mexico don't rightly know what's the matter with her. She's got the best climate and some of the best land in America, and all she's good for at present is to bask in the sun. If she only knew it, she's waiting for a few live American men to come along and wake her up."

Stephens had been so much alone in the mountains that he had got into the solitary man's trick of talking to himself. Even among the Indians he would sometimes comment aloud upon things in English, which they did not understand; for in spite of their companionship he lived in a world of his own.

He took down a coil of fuse from a shelf, cut off a piece, rolled it up, and stowed it away along with the charges of blasting-powder in his pockets, first feeling carefully for stray matches inside. "Yes," he continued, as his fingers pried into every angle of each pocket preparatory to filling it with explosive matter, "drones is the only name for Spaniards when it comes to talking real work. They don't work, and they never did. They've made this Territory into a Sleepy Hollow. What she wants is a few genuine Western men, full of vim, vinegar, and vitriol, just to make things hum for a change. New Mexico has got the biggest kind of a future before her when the right sort of men come along and turn to at developing her."

He stood in the middle of his outer room, patting himself gently in various parts to make sure that he had got all his needful belongings stowed away. "Now then, Faro," and he addressed the dog, who was still curled upon the bed eyeing his master doubtfully, uncertain whether he was to be left at home on guard or taken out for a spree; "what this here benighted country needs is the right kind of men and the right kind of dogs. Aint that the sort of way you'd put it if you were a human? Come along then, and you and me'll take a little trot up along the ditch and astonish their weak minds for 'em."

With yelps of joy, uttered in a bulldog's strangled whistle, Faro bounded off the bed on to the earthen floor, and danced rapturously round his master, who was still thoughtfully feeling his pockets

from the outside to make certain that when he reached his destination he would not find that some quite indispensable requisite had been left behind. Then he bounced out of the open door into the street, scattered a pig and three scraggy chickens that were vainly hunting around after stray grains of corn where the horses had been fed, and then halted to await his master out by the corrals. Stephens, having at last assured himself that he had really forgotten nothing, came out after the dog, pulling to the door behind him, and the pair started off to walk up alongside the acequia. There was no water in it to-day, as it had been cut off up above to facilitate the work of blasting. Here and there in the fields Indians were at work: some wielded their great heavy hoes, with which they hacked away at the ground with astonishing vigour; others were ploughing with pairs of oxen, which walked stiffly side by side, their heads lashed firmly by the thick horns to the yoke, as they dragged the curious old-fashioned wooden ploughs, just like those described by Virgil in the *Georgics* two thousand years ago. In the peach orchards near the village women were at work, and little naked brown children stopped their play to stare at the white man as he passed, with the simplicity of Arcadia. After half an hour's walk he reached his destination, a rocky promontory that jutted out from the hills into the valley. The acequia ran round its base, and the Indians, in order to bring as much of the valley as possible under irrigation, had carried the line of the ditch as high as they could. They had carried it so high that where it rounded the rocks a point projected into it, and made it too narrow and too shallow to carry the amount of water that it was easily capable of containing both above and below. They had no saws to cut boards to make a flume for the ditch; and, besides, such a piece of engineering was quite beyond the range of their simple arts. This weak place had been a hindrance and a trial to them from time immemorial. If they attempted to run their ditch more than half full of water it brimmed over at this point, and then broke down the bank. It had to be patched every year, – sometimes several times in one year, – and this entailed much extra work on the members of the village community, who were all bound by their laws to work on the ditch when necessary, without pay. In fact, the repair of the ditch at the point of rocks was one of the stock grievances of the pueblo, everyone thinking that he was set to do more than his share of the work. Besides, it naturally broke down when fullest, that is to say, when they needed it most for irrigation, and everyone wanted water for his maize or his wheat crop. No wonder, then, they were first incredulous and then overjoyed when by a fortunate chance Stephens happened to hear of their difficulty and went to examine the spot, saw at once that it was a simple matter, and offered to lend them tools, to show them how to drill the necessary holes, and then to blast away the obnoxious rocks for them. These Indians were familiar with firearms and knew the force of gunpowder, but were ignorant of its use for blasting purposes; nor were their Mexican neighbours in this part of the country much more enlightened. Accordingly they had accepted with joy Stephens's proffered assistance, having learned by experience to set a high value on the skill and resource of their American friend.

CHAPTER III

BLASTING THE ACEQUIA

A little crowd of these peaceful and industrious red men, in character so unlike their wild cousins of the prairie and the sierra, were grouped around the point of rocks. As Stephens approached them he heard the click, click, of steel on stone; and as he came near the crowd made way for him, and the cacique saluted him: "Good morning, Sooshuamo; you have come at the right time. See how well the young men have worked at making the holes in the rock as you showed them yesterday. They have made them quite deep now. Come and tell us if they are right."

Stephens looked into the ditch, where a powerfully built Indian was laboriously jumping a heavy bar of steel up and down in a hole bored in the hard, solid rock, giving it a half-turn with his wrists at each jump. The Colorado miner got down into the ditch and took the drill he had lent them out of the hands of the Indian, and tried the hole with it. His deft and easy way of handling the heavy jumping-bar showed practised skill as well as strength. "That'll do right enough," he said, looking up at the cacique who stood on the bank above him. "You have got your chaps to do the business well. Are the other two holes as deep as this?"

"Yes, deeper," answered the Indian. "See, here they are; try them; the young men have been at them since noon yesterday."

Stephens moved along to the points indicated and examined in a critical manner the work that had been effected. "Yes, that looks as if it would do all right," he said in approving tones. "Now then, you fellows, give me room, and keep still a few minutes, and I'll show you some fireworks."

He produced from his pockets the powder and fuse, and proceeded to make his, to them, mysterious preparations, the eager and inquisitive circle of red men pressing as near as possible, and almost climbing over each other's shoulders in order to get a good view. Their excited comments amused Stephens greatly, and in return he kept up a running fire of jests upon them.

But it is not always easy to jest appropriately with men who stand on a different step of the intellectual ladder from yourself; and without his dreaming of such a thing, one of his laughing repartees suggested to his Indian auditors a train of thought that their minds took very seriously.

Stephens's action in ramming down a charge of powder, and then tamping it, had not unnaturally reminded them of an operation which was the only one connected with gunpowder that they had experience of. "Why, he's loading it just like a gun," cried a voice from the crowd; "but what's he going to shoot?"

"Shoot?" retorted Stephens, without looking up, as he adjusted the fuse with his fingers; "why, I'm going to shoot the sky, of course. Don't you see how this hole points right straight up to heaven? You sit on the mouth of it when I touch her off, and it'll boost you aloft away up over the old sun there"; and raising his face he pointed to the brightly glowing orb which was already high overhead.

At his words a sort of shiver ran around the ring of red men. Religion is the strongest and the deepest sentiment of the Indian mind, and the rash phrase sounded as if some violation of the sanctity of what they worshipped was intended. What! Shoot against the sacred sky! Shoot with sacrilegious gunpowder against the home of The Shiuana, of "Those Above"? The deed might be taken as a defiance of those Dread Powers, and bring down their wrath upon them all.

Then came a crisis.

"Bad medicine! witchcraft!" exclaimed a voice with the unmistakable ring of angry terror in it. To the Indian, witchcraft is the one unpardonable sin, only to be atoned for by a death of lingering torture.

A murmur of swift-rising wrath followed the accusing voice. The American was warned in a moment that he had made a dangerous slip, and he at once tried to get out of it with as little fuss as might be.

"You dry up!" he retorted indignantly. "Witchcraft be blowed! You ought to know better than to talk like that, you folks. I'm telling you truth now. That was only a little joke of mine, about shooting the sky. There's no bad medicine in that. We Americans don't know anything about such fool tricks as witchcraft. Here's all there is to it. I'm simply going to blast this rock for you. It's just an ordinary thing that's done thousands of times every day in the mines all over the United States."

"Ah, but there are great wizards among the Americans, and their medicine is very bad," cried the same voice of angry terror that had spoken before. "Are you working their works? are you one of them?"

Stephens glanced quickly round the ring of dark eyes now fixed on him with alien looks. He saw there a universal scowl that sent a chill through him.

"There's a lot of explosive stuff round here besides my blasting-powder," he said to himself, "and it looks as if I'd come mighty nigh touching it off, without meaning it, with that feeble little joke. What a flare-up about nothing!"

There flashed across his mind on the instant a story of three stranger Indians, who by some unlucky chance had violated the mysteries of the Santiago folk and had never been heard of more.

For himself he had every reason, so far, to be satisfied with his treatment, but now, at last, he had happened to touch on a sensitive spot with the Indians, and behold, this was the result. He saw that he must take a firm stand, and take it at once. He straightened himself up from his stooping position, dusting off the earth that adhered to his hands.

"Now, look here, you chaps," he said peremptorily, as he stood erect in the middle of the ditch, "you want to quit that rot about witches right here and now. There's only one question I'm going to ask you, and that's this – do you want your ditch fixed up, or don't you? You say it has been a trouble to you for hundreds of years, and here I stand ready to fix it for you right now in just one minute. There's only one more thing to be done, and that's to strike the match. Come, Cacique, you're the boss around here. Say which it is to be. Is it 'yes' or 'no'?"

Salvador, the cacique of Santiago, was no fool. Personally he was as firm a believer in witchcraft as any of his people, nor would he have hesitated for a moment to utilise such a charge as had just been made to rid himself of an enemy. But he was also well aware that there were times when it was far more expedient to suppress it, and that this was one of them.

"Nonsense, Miguel!" he exclaimed, turning abruptly on the Indian who had first raised the dreaded cry; "this Americano is a good man, and no wizard, and your business is to hold your tongue till you are asked to speak. It is the proper office of your betters to see to these matters, and you have no right nor call to interfere."

The lonely American heard him speak thus with an intense sense of relief. The power of the chief was great, and his words were strong to exorcise the malignant spirit of fanaticism.

"Good for you, Salvador!" he exclaimed, as the cacique's reproof ceased, and left a visible effect on the attitude of the crowd, "that's the talk! I'm glad to see you've got some sense. Your answer is 'yes,' I take it."

"Assuredly I mean 'yes,' Sooshuamo," answered the cacique; "we want you to go on and finish your work. I say so, and what I say I mean. But if all is ready, as you declare, before you strike the match we will offer a prayer to Those Above that all may be well."

"Why certainly, Cacique," assented Stephens, "I've got no sort of objection to make. You fire ahead." He breathed more freely now, but he was conscious of a vastly quickened interest in the religious methods of the Indians as he watched the cacique withdraw a little space from the edge of the ditch and turn, facing the east, the other Indians following his example, and standing in irregular open formation behind him, all facing towards the east likewise.

"Didn't reckon I was going to drop in for a prayer-meeting," said the American, with a humour which he kept to himself, "or I might have brought my Sunday-go-to-meeting togs if I'd only known. But, by George! when I was mining over on the Pacific slope, the days when things was booming over there, if we'd had to stop and have prayers on the Comstock lode every time we were going to let off a blast, I should rather say that the output of bullion in Nevada would have fallen off some."

He listened intently to the flow of words that the cacique, acting as the spokesman of his people, was pouring forth, but they were utterly unintelligible to him, for the prayer was couched in the language of the tribe, and not in civilised Spanish. All he could distinguish were the "Ho-a's" that came in at intervals from the crowd like responses.

"I wonder what he's saying, and who or what he's saying it to?" he meditated questioningly. "What was it that Nepomuceno Sanchez was telling me only last week, – that they didn't have service in that old Roman Catholic church of theirs more than once in a blue moon, and all the rest of the time they go in for some heathen games of their own in their secret estufas in the pueblo; he swore that one time he dropped on to a party of them at some very queer games indeed, on the site of an old ruined pueblo of theirs 'way off up on the Potrero de las Vacas – swore they had a pair of big stone panthers up there, carved out of the living rock, that they go and offer sacrifices to. I didn't more than half believe him then, but this makes me think there's something in it. What the blazes are they at now?" A chorus of "Ho-a's," uttered with a deep, heartfelt intonation, like the long a-a-mens at a revival meeting, rose from the crowd. There rose also from them little tufts of feather-down that floated upwards to the sky, soaring as it were on the breath of the worshippers, outward and visible symbols of the petitions that ascended from the congregation. The cacique took a step in advance, holding in his hands two long feathers crossed; he stooped down and began to bury them in the loose, light soil. Stephens, his curiosity now intensely aroused, was moving forward a little in order to see more closely what was taking place, but an Indian instantly motioned him back in silence, finger on lip, with a countenance of shocked gravity, making the irreverent inquirer feel like an impudent small boy caught in the act of disturbing a church service.

"Perhaps at this stage of the performances they'd like to have me take off my hat," he soliloquised. "Well, mebbe I will." He looked round at the motionless figures reverently standing with bowed heads. "Do at Rome as Rome does, so some folks say. These Indians themselves don't have any hats to take off, but they look so blamed serious over it that I'm dead sure they would if they wore 'em. Dashed if I don't do it; here goes!" and he swept his broad sombrero from his head, subduing his face to a decorously grave expression.

But the repressed humour of the American reasserted itself beneath this enforced solemnity of his exterior. "Makes me think of the story of the man the Indians in California once took prisoner, only instead of putting him to the torture they painted him pea-green and worshipped him as a deity. It's not so bad as that yet," he went on to himself, "but I don't much like taking any sort of part in this show, nohow." He looked at the hat which he was devoutly holding in his hand as he stood amongst the congregation, and his face assumed a quizzical expression. "I wonder now if by doing this I aint, by chance, worshipping some blamed idol or other. I used to be a joined member oncet, back there in Ohio, of the United Presbyterian Church. I wonder what poor old Elder Edkins would say now if he caught sight of me in this shivaree. However, I guess I can stand it, if it don't go too far. So long as they stick to this tomfoolery and only worship those turkey feathers, or whatever they are, that the cacique's been burying, I'll lay low. But if they want to play me for an idol, and start in to painting me pea-green, there'll be a rumpus. What a time their prayer-meeting does take, anyhow! Ah, thank goodness, here's the doxology."

The cacique had finished his incantation over the crossed feathers, and interred them properly. He now rose and dismissed the assembly, which instantly broke up, the serious expression rapidly dissolving from all faces, as it does from those of a congregation pouring out of church.

It was on the tip of Stephens's tongue to begin, "Why, Cacique, you've forgot to take up the collection. Where's your plate?" as he saw Salvador approaching him, but a sobering recollection of the awkward way in which his last joke had missed fire checked the temptation to be flippant as too dangerous.

"My game," thought he, "is to cut the gab and come to the 'osses, as the English circus-manager said; or else they might call on Brother Miguel to give an exhortation, and who knows which end of the horn I should be liable to come out at then?"

"Well, Cacique," he said aloud, "through? so soon? You don't say! Are you really ready now?"

"Yes," answered the Indian, "now you begin. Do your work."

"All right then," rejoined the American; "if that's so, by the permission of the chairman I'll take the floor." He sprang down into the ditch, drew out a match, and turned round to the cacique. "Now, Salvador," he called out, "make your people stand clear. Let them go right away."

They did not need telling twice, and there was a general stampede, the bolder hiding close by, the most part running off to the distance of a rifle-shot. The cacique gathered up the buckskin riata of his plump mustang, which stood there champing the Spanish ring-bit till his jaws dropped flakes of foam, and retired to a safe distance. Stephens stood alone in the ditch and struck the match. It went out; he took off his broad felt hat, struck another match, and held it inside. This time the flame caught, and he applied it to the ends of the fuses, and retreated in a leisurely manner round the back of a big rock near by. He found two or three of the boldest Indians behind it, and pushing them back stood leaning against the rock. They squeezed up against him, their bright black eyes gleaming and their red fingers trembling with excitement. They had never seen a blast let off before.

Boom! boom! went the first two charges, and the echoes of the reports resounded through the foothills that bordered the valley. Several Indians started forward from their hiding-places.

"Keep back there, will you!" shouted Stephens. "Keep 'em back, Salvador. Tito," he said familiarly to the Indian who was next him beside the rock, "if you go squeezing me like that I'll pull your pigtail." Tito's long black hair was done up and rolled with yellow braid into a neat pigtail at the nape of his neck. The Pueblo Indian men all wear their hair this way, and are as proud of their queues as so many Chinamen.

Tito laughed and showed his gleaming teeth, as he nudged the boy next to him at the American's joke. Boom! went the third charge. The practical miner looked up warily to see that no fragments were flying overhead, and then stepping from under cover waved his arm. At the signal the Indians poured from their hiding-places and rushed eagerly down to the scene of action.

The blast was a great success. Some tons of stone had been shattered and dislodged just where it was necessary, and it was plain to see that the ditch might now be made twice as big as before. Without any delay the Indians swarmed in like ants, and began picking up the broken stone with their hands, and carrying it out to build up and strengthen the lower side of the embankment.

While the workers were thus busily engaged, the cacique came forward, holding his horse by the riata of plaited buckskin. He made a deep, formal reverence before the man who had wrought what for them was nothing less than a miracle, – the man by whose superior art the solid rock had been dissipated into a shower of fragments, and who now stood quietly looking on at the scene of his triumph.

"It is truly most wonderful, this thing that you have done," began the chief, "and we will be your devoted servants for ever after this"; and he bowed himself again more deeply than before, as deeply as when he had buried the sacred feathers a few minutes earlier.

The native humour of the American asserted itself at once. "Here's the pea-green deity business on," he murmured to himself. "So far, so good; I don't mind the deity part, but I draw the line if he trots out his paint-pot; then I'll begin to kick."

"Since the days of Montezuma," continued the cacique, with an eloquent wave of his hand, "no benefactor like you has ever come to the red men; no blessing has been wrought for them such as you

have done. Would that our departed ancestors had been allowed to see with their own eyes the great, the glorious manifestation of power that has been shown to us, their children – " and his mellifluous oratory rolled on in an unceasing stream of praise.

"By George!" said Stephens to himself, "I wonder if right now isn't my best time to bounce him about the silver mine. I did calculate to bring it up before the council of chiefs when I saw a favourable opportunity, but though the rest of 'em aren't here at this moment the cacique's talking so almighty grateful that perhaps I'd better strike while the iron's hot." He listened a moment to the profuse expressions of gratitude that poured from the red man's lips. "If he only means a quarter of what he's saying, I ought to have no difficulty in getting him to back me up. But perhaps I'd best tackle him alone first, and make sure of his support." He waited until the cacique had finished his peroration.

"Glad you're pleased, I'm sure," said Stephens in reply, "and here's my hand on it," and he shook the cacique's hand warmly in his. "Just let's step this way a little," he went on quietly. "I've got a word or two to say to you between ourselves," and the pair moved away side by side to a distance of a few yards from the site of the blasted rock.

"You see, working together like this, how easily we've been able to manage it," began the American diplomatically. "I'm an expert at mining, and your young men have carried out the execution of this job admirably. Now, look at here, Cacique; what I wanted to say to you was this. Why shouldn't we go in together, sort of partners like, and work your silver mine together in the same sort of way? I could make big money for both of us; there'd be plenty for me and plenty for you and for all your people, if it's only half as good as I've heard tell"; he paused, looking sideways at the Indian as he spoke to note what effect his suggestion produced on him. At the words "silver mine" the chief's face, which had been smiling and gracious in sympathy with the feelings he had been expressing in his speech, suddenly clouded over and hardened into a rigid impassibility.

"I don't know what you mean by our silver mine, Don Estevan," he answered frigidly. "There is no such thing in existence."

"Tut, tut," said Stephens, good-humouredly, "don't you go to make any mystery of the thing with me, Cacique. I'm your good friend, as you acknowledged yourself only a minute ago. I mean that old silver mine you've got up there on Rattlesnake Mountain, Cerro de las Viboras as you call it. You keep it carefully covered up, with logs and earth piled up over the mouth of it. Quite right of you, too. No use to go and let everybody see what you've got. I quite agree to that. But you needn't make any bones about it with me who am your friend, and well posted about the whole thing to boot."

In reality Stephens was retailing to the Indian the story of the mine as far as he had been able to trace it among the Mexicans. This was the first time that he had even hinted to any of the Santiago people that he knew anything at all about it, or had any curiosity on the subject. Salvador maintained his attitude of impassibility.

"I don't know who has told you all this," he answered, "but it is all nonsense. Put it out of your mind; there's nothing in it."

But in spite of these denials Stephens believed his shot about the mine had gone home, and he knew also that the cacique was reputed to be fond of gain.

"Oh, I understand you well enough, Salvador," he rejoined with easy familiarity. "Of course you're bound to deny it. It's the old policy of your tribe. That's all right. But now, as between you and me, it's time there was a new departure, and you and I are the men to make it. I tell you I know just what I'm talking about, and there's money in it for both of us." He thought he saw the dark eyes of the Indian glisten, but his lips showed small sign of yielding.

"It's no use, Don Estevan," the latter said firmly. "I cannot tell you a word now, and I don't suppose I ever shall be able to. Keep silence. Let no one know you have spoken to me about such things."

At this moment loud cries broke out from where the workers were busy, and Stephens, wondering what was up, listened intently to the sounds. He thought he could distinguish one word,

"Kaeahvala," repeated again and again. The cacique turned round abruptly. A huge rattlesnake, which had been disturbed by the shock of the blast, had emerged from a crevice in the rocks, and showed itself plainly to view wriggling away over the open ground.

"After him, after him, Snakes!" called out the cacique in a loud voice. "He is angry because his house has been shaken. To the estufa without delay! You must pacify him."

On the instant there darted forth in pursuit half a dozen young men of the Snake family, and at the same moment Faro, with an eager yelp, announced his ardent intention of pacifying the snake in his own fashion, and away went the dog, who had been compelled to endure, much against his will, the tedium of the Indian prayer-meeting and the oratory of the cacique, and now proceeded to grow frantic with excitement at the chance of joining independently in the chase.

"Come back there, Faro," cried Stephens, in an agony of alarm for his favourite; "come back there, will you!" But Faro was headstrong and pretended not to hear.

The cacique too was filled with alarm, but the object of his solicitude was not the dog but the reptile. "Quick, quick!" he cried to the young men; "be quick and save him from that hound."

And then Stephens saw a sight that astonished him out of measure. The Indian youths had the advantage of Faro in starting nearer the snake; they ran like the wind, and the foremost of them, overtaking the reptile before Faro could get up, pounced upon him and swung him aloft in the air, grasping him firmly just behind the head and allowing the writhing coils to twine around his muscular arm. One of his companions produced a bunch of feathers and stroked the venomous head from which the forked tongue was darting, while the baffled Faro danced around, leaping high in his efforts to get at his prey. Stephens ran up and secured his dog, and looked on at this extraordinary piece of snake-charming with an amazement that increased every moment.

"But why don't you kill the brute?" he cried. "Don't play with him like that; kill him quick. Tell 'em to kill him, Cacique. I never passed a rattler in my life without killing it if I could; it's a point of conscience with me."

The Indian looked at him with grave disapproval, as a parent might look at a child who had in its ignorance been guilty of a serious fault.

"You do not understand, Sooshuamo," he said in a tone in which reproof was mingled with pity; "the snake is their grandfather, and they have to show their piety towards him." Then turning from the scoffer, "Hasten," he called to the young men; "run with him to the proper place"; and away they sped across the plain towards the pueblo, the writhing reptile still borne high in the air, and the bunch of feathers still playing around its angry jaws.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Stephens. "I never saw such a thing as that in my life. I say, Cacique, what is it that you want to do with the brute, anyhow? Do you mean to tell me that you make a deity of him?"

The cacique's face assumed the same rapt and solemn expression it had worn during what Stephens had irreverently called the prayer-meeting.

"These are our mysteries, Sooshuamo," he said with a voice of awe; "it is not for you to inquire into them. Be warned, for it is dangerous."

"Oh, blow your mysteries!" said Stephens in English, under his breath. "Very well, Salvador," he went on aloud. "I'm sure I don't want to go poking my nose into other people's business. I think I'll just say good-morning. I've blasted that rock for you all right. Now you see if you can make that ditch work; if you can't, you come and tell me, and I'll see what more I can do to fix it for you. So long"; and without more ado he turned on his heel and walked off down to the river.

CHAPTER IV

A RACE WITH A MULE

When Stephens arrived at the edge of the terrace on which the plough-lands lay, he looked down on the green expanse of meadow through which the river ran, and feeding in it half a mile below he saw some stock that he knew must be his. "There they are," said he to himself. "I reckon I'll take Jinks and go down to San Remo and get my mail, and see if those Winchester cartridges that I sent for from Santa Fé came last night."

He clambered down the abrupt bank of red clay to the meadow, and followed down the line of the stream till he came to where his stock were eagerly cropping the fresh green grass.

"Now how am I going to catch him?" said he to himself. "Let's see where Felipe and the lariats are"; and looking round, he presently perceived some clothes on the river bank, and going to them found Felipe, stripped to his waist-cloth, splashing about in the middle of a deep pool.

"Hullo, Felipe!" cried he playfully. "Trying to drown yourself there? You must go to the Rio Grande for that – there isn't water enough in the Santiago River."

Felipe heard him indistinctly, and came towards him, swimming in Indian style with an amazingly vigorous overhand stroke. Stephens picked up one of the lariats that were lying loose on the ground by the clothes, and swinging the noose round his head, jestingly tried to lasso the lad. Missing him, he turned it off with, "I don't want you yet. I want the big mule; I'm going to catch him and go down to San Remo"; and suiting the action to the word, he coiled the lariat as he spoke, and turned and started for the beasts.

Felipe came out and stood on the bank to watch him. "What a good humour he's in now," thought the boy. "I suppose he was lucky with the rock. Now is my time to ask him for the mare."

Stephens, holding the coil of rope behind him to conceal his intention from the mule he desired to catch, cautiously approached him. Jinks, the mule, however, was not to be deceived for a moment, and as his master came near, turned his heels to him and scuttled off. Horses and mules where they have frequently to wear hobbles become surprisingly active in them. They bound along for a short distance, in an up-and-down rocking-horse gallop, so fast that even a man on horseback has to make his mount put his best foot forward to get up to them. Stephens found himself outpaced, and gave it up, seeing that it was impossible for him to capture the truant single-handed.

Felipe flew to his side in a moment. "Let me try to catch him, Sooshiuamo," cried he, eagerly. "Let me!" and taking the lariat from the not unwilling hands of the American, he started off, coiling it rapidly as he ran. Before bathing he had undone his pigtail, and his long, glossy black hair hung in thick, wavy masses down to his waist. Among the Indians, the women cut their hair short – if it remained uncut the care of it would take too long, and would keep them from their household duties; but the men, having more leisure, allow theirs to grow, and are very proud of its luxuriance and beauty. As Felipe ran, his streaming locks floated out behind him on the air like the mane of a wild horse, and gave to his figure a wonderfully picturesque effect; his wet skin shone in the sun the colour of red bronze.

The Pueblo Indians are fine runners; they have inherited fleetness of foot and endurance from their forefathers, and keep up the standard by games and races among themselves. Felipe, young though he was, had no superior in swiftness in the village. He darted like a young stag across the meadow after the fugitive mule, and chased him at full speed down to the river brink, and over the dry shingle banks of its very bed. The pebbles rattled and flew back in showers from the hoof-prints of the mule. Round they wheeled, back into the meadow again; and here the Indian, putting on an astonishing burst of speed, fairly ran the quadruped down, lassoed him, and brought him to his master.

"Here he is, señor," said he modestly, handing Stephens the rope.

"Well done, Felipe," said Stephens. "You did that well. You do run like an antelope." He felt quite a glow of admiration for the athletic youth who stood panting before him, resting his hand on the mule's back.

"Now's my time," thought Felipe, "what luck! – oh, Don Estevan," he began, and then stopped with downcast eyes.

"Well, what is it?" said Stephens kindly.

"Oh, Don Estevan, if you would lend me your mare!" The murder was out, and Felipe looked up at his employer beseechingly. "I would take such care of her!" he continued; "I would indeed."

"Lend her for what?" said Stephens, a little taken aback. "What do you want with her?"

"I want her to go to Ensenada to-night," said the boy.

"Oh, but Felipe, I'm going to the sierra to-morrow to hunt, you know. It isn't possible. But," he continued, touched a little by the boy's evident distress, "what do you want to do there? Why don't you get your father's horse?"

"He's at the herd. My father doesn't let me," said Felipe despondently. Then he went on, "I thought perhaps you didn't go for a day or two. I will bring her back to-morrow in the night. And she shall not be tired – not a bit. Oh, do lend her to me! Please do!"

"I wonder what foolery he's up to now," said Stephens to himself; "I do hate to lend a horse anyhow – and to a harebrained Indian boy who'll just ride all the fat off her in no time. Cheek, I call it, of him to ask it."

"But," he continued in a not unfriendly tone, "why do you want her? Is it flour you have to fetch?" Wheat flour was rather scarce this spring in the pueblo, and some of the Indians were buying it over on the Rio Grande.

"No, sir, it's not that. Only I want her," he added. "Oh please, Don Estevan, please," said he with an imploring face; "do lend the mare or the mule, or anything to ride. Oh do!" and he threw all the entreaty he was capable of into his voice, till it trembled and almost broke into a sob.

"Why, what ails the boy?" said Stephens, surprised at his emotion. "If you want it so bad," he continued, "why don't you ask it from Tostado, or Miguel, or some of them? They'll let you have one. You know I never lend mine. If I did once, all the pueblo would be borrowing them every day. You know it yourself. You've always told me yourself that it would be like that." He was trying to harden his heart by going over his stock argument against lending. "You see I can't do it. I'm going off to the sierra to-morrow," and he turned away, leading the mule after him by the rope.

But before he had gone far he stopped and looked round as if an idea had struck him. "It might be a good notion to try and pump this boy a bit right now," he considered; "he's so desperate eager to borrow the mare he might be willing to let out a thing or two to please me." He beckoned with his hand to Felipe, who was gazing regretfully after his employer.

"See here, Felipe," said Stephens, as the boy eagerly ran to him; "there's something that I had in my mind to ask you, only I forgot. It's just simply this – did you ever kill a rattlesnake?"

"Never, oh, never in my life!" cried the young Indian, with a voice of horror.

"Well, and why not?" persisted the other. "What's your reason anyway? What is there to prevent you?"

"Oh, but, Soosuiamo, why should I?" said the boy in an embarrassed manner, looking distractedly at the ground as he balanced himself uneasily on one bare foot, crossing the other over it, and twiddling his toes together. "I don't know," he added after a pause. "Why should I kill them?"

"Well, they're ugly, venomous things," said the American, "and that would be reason enough for anybody, I should think. But tell me another thing then. What do your folks do with them in the estufa? Can't you tell me that much?"

"What are you saying about things in the estufa?" cried the boy excitedly. "Have any of the Mexicans been telling you, then, that we keep a sacred snake in the pueblo? Don't you ever believe

it, don't, don't!" and his voice rose to a passionate shrillness that betrayed the anxiety aroused in him by any intrusion on the mysteries of his people.

"The Mexicans be blown!" said Stephens. "I'm talking to you now of what I've just been seeing with my own eyes. There was a big old rattler came out of the rock after I blasted it, and young Antonio went and caught it by the neck and let it twist itself around his arm, and another fellow went to playing with it with a bunch of feathers, and then they ran off with it to the pueblo, – the cacique told them to, – and half a dozen more chaps with them, as tight as they could go. Now I want to know what all that amounts to."

"I can tell you this much," said Felipe after a moment's hesitation; "Antonio is one of the Snakes; so were the others, of course, who went with him. The snake is their grandfather, and so they know all about snakes. But I'm a Turquoise, like you, Sooshuamo. You are my uncle," he added insinuatingly, "and you should be kind to me and lend me a horse sometimes."

The American laughed aloud. "Oh, I know all about Grandfather Snake and Grandfather Turquoise and the rest of them," he said. "But I'm not an Indian, and I don't come into your family tree, even if you do call me Sooshuamo and I live in a Turquoise house. I don't lay claim to be any particular sort of uncle to you. But I do want you should tell me something more about this snake-charming business. Can't you let it out?"

"But how can I let it out?" exclaimed Felipe in an irritated voice. "Haven't I told you already that the Snakes know all about it, and not me? You may be sure the Snakes keep their own affairs private, and don't show them to outsiders. How should I know anything about the Snakes' business?"

"Well, Felipe, if you won't, you won't, I suppose," said Stephens. "I know you can be an obstinate young pig when you choose." He did not more than half believe in the lad's professed ignorance. He hesitated a moment as if in doubt whether to try another tack. "Look here, young 'un," he began again in a friendlier tone, "I'll pass that. We'll play it you don't know anything about snakes. You're a full-blooded Turquoise boy, you are, and your business is to know all about turquoises, and turquoise mines, and so on. Very well." He was pleased to see a sort of conscious smile come over the lad's mouth almost involuntarily. "All right then. Let's play it that you are my nephew if you like. Now then, fire ahead, you, and tell your uncle all about where we go to get our turquoises from. You're bound to be posted up in these family matters. There's a lot of things your uncle wants to hear. The silver plates for the horse bridles, for instance, now; let's hear where they come from. Go on; tell me about our silver mines."

"No, no, no!" he cried desperately, and he sprang back as if the American had struck him with a whip. "It is impossible; there aren't any; there are no such things; the Mexicans have been telling you that, too, have they? but they're all liars, yes, liars; don't you ever believe one word that they say about us." He paused, his lips parted with excitement and his lithe frame passionately convulsed.

Regretfully Stephens looked at him and recognised that it was hopeless to get anything out of him, at least in his present condition. "Very well, Felipe," he said, "I think I understand your game. You just don't choose, and that's about the size of it"; and gathering up the coils of the lariat he turned abruptly away and led off the reluctant Captain Jinks in the direction of the pueblo in order to saddle him up. He felt decidedly cheap; as yet he had not scored a single trick in the game he was trying to play.

Felipe stood looking after him disconsolately; at last he gave a heavy sigh and walked back to where he had left his clothes, with drooping head and flagging step, a figure how unlike the elastic form that had burst full speed across the meadow five minutes before. "It's no use," said he to himself. "He doesn't care; he's a very hard man, is Don Estevan." He did up his glossy hair into its queue, put on his long buckskin leggings and his cotton shirt, worn outside in Indian fashion like a tunic and secured with a leather belt, bound his red handkerchief as a turban round his head – the universal pueblo head-dress – and with a very heavy heart went back to his weeding.

CHAPTER V

"OJOS AZULES NO MIRAN"

"*Ojos azules no miran*— Blue eyes don't see," said a soft voice to Stephens in gently rallying tones. He was sitting on Captain Jinks in the roadway, nearly opposite to the first house in San Remo, with his eyes shaded under his arched hands, and gazing fixedly back across the long levels of the Indian lands over which he had just ridden.

"*Si, miran*, — Yes, they do see," he answered coolly, without either looking at the speaker or removing his hands from his forehead, as he still continued his searching gaze. He was trying to make out whether the animals he had left in Felipe's charge were kept by him still grazing safely in the meadow, or if they had been allowed to wander off into the young wheat. The distance to where he had left them feeding was nearer two miles than one, but nature had gifted him with singularly keen vision, and the frontiersman's habit of being perpetually on the lookout had developed this power to the utmost. He was able to identify positively his own stock amongst the other animals at pasture, and to assure himself that, so far, they were all right.

He took his hands from his forehead, straightened himself in his saddle, and looked down at the person who had ventured to speak in so disrespectful a way of the quality of his eyesight. The speaker was a young Mexican woman, and he encountered the glance of a pair of eyes as soft as velvet and as black as night, set in a face of rich olive tint. At that pleasant sight his firm features relaxed into a smile, and he took up her bantering challenge.

"*Si, miran*," he repeated, — "Yes, they do see, señorita; they see a very pretty girl"; and with a ceremonious sweep of his arm he took off his broad sombrero, as the conventional way of emphasising the conventional gallantry.

The girl blushed with pleasure at the American's compliment. She had a dark scarf drawn over her head, and she now tossed the end of it coquettishly across her face, and kept up her bantering tone.

"Then," replied she, "as you had them directed straight towards the Indian pueblo, I suppose it was a pretty little Indian squaw they were gazing back at so earnestly."

"No," he returned bluntly, matter-of-fact Anglo-Saxon that he was; "I was looking back towards Santiago in order to make out whether my horses had got into the Indians' wheat. But they're all right. And how is your father, Don Nepomuceno?" he added civilly.

"He is very well, señor; he is now at home. Won't you come in and see him? He said he hoped you would be coming down this morning, as it was mail day."

"I am much obliged to him," answered Stephens. "I am on my way now to the stage station, and I will look in as I return."

San Remo was the place where the weekly mail from Santa Fé to Fort Wingate crossed the Santiago River. It was a village of the Mexicans, and lay just outside the boundary of the four square leagues of the Indian grant.

"That is where we two were going," she answered, "my little sister and myself," and she laid her hand on a little brown maiden of ten years or so, who had come out of the house and now stood shyly behind the elder sister, holding on to her dress. "We have to buy some sugar," she continued, "and there is a new storekeeper at the stage station, and they say he sells cheap."

"Then with your permission, señorita, I'll walk along there with you," said the American. He suited the action to the word, throwing his right leg lightly over the neck of his mule and then dropping both feet together to the ground so as to alight facing the girl.

"Say, Chiquita," and he addressed the younger girl, "don't you want a ride? Let me put you up"; but the child only smiled, showing her ivory teeth and clinging more closely behind her sister.

"Don't be a silly, Altagracia," cried the latter, bringing her round to the front. "Why don't you say 'thank you' to the American señor for his kindness in giving you a ride on his mule?" and she pushed her, in spite of her affected reluctance, into the hands of Stephens, who raised her from the ground and placed her, sitting sideways, in the wide California saddle, and gave her the reins to hold. Then, resting his right hand on the mule's neck, he walked forward towards the store beside the elder girl.

"I heard a new man had moved in and taken charge of the stage station and post-office this week," he said. "Has he got a good stock? – many pretty things for the señoras?"

"They say he has beautiful things, – velvet dresses and splendid shawls," she replied; "but I haven't seen them yet. I've only been in with my aunt to buy things for the house, not to see his dress goods. But I hope my father will take us there soon, before all the best of them are gone. The wife of Ramon Garcia got a lovely pink muslin there. She showed it to me yesterday in her house. He's a very clever man, too, is the new storekeeper; he is a Texan, but he speaks Spanish beautifully, just like ourselves. He has a Mexican wife."

"Ah," remarked Stephens, "has he? What's his name, do you know?"

"Bah-koose," answered the girl, giving full value to the broad Spanish vowels which she imported into the somewhat commonplace name of "Backus." "Don Tomas Bah-koose is his name," she repeated. "He is not old, he appears to be about thirty, and he has three children. But perhaps you have met him; is he a friend of yours?"

"Backus," said Stephens reflectively; "Thomas Backus. No, I can't say that he is; I don't remember ever meeting anyone of that name."

"It sounds almost like our Spanish name, Baca," said she; "but he is not one of the Bacas, though he has been living at Peña Blanca, where so many of them live." The Bacas of New Mexico are a fine old family, sprung from the loins of Cabeza de Vaca, the comrade of Ponce de Leon, one of the heroes of the Spanish conquest.

"Well," said Stephens, "we'll soon see what he looks like, anyhow, for here we are at the store." He lifted the child down from the saddle, and the two girls at once went inside while he tied up his mule to a hitching-post that was set in front of the door.

After he had finished doing so, he followed them in; and stepping across the threshold he was instantly aware of a surprised glance of half-recognition darted at him by a man who stood behind the counter, where he was showing some cotton prints to three shawl-clad Mexican women. "Mornin', mister," said the storekeeper, in English. "Excuse me if I keep you waitin' a minute while I 'tend on these ladies."

"All right," answered Stephens briefly, and he leaned quietly back against the mud-plastered adobe wall till the other should be at leisure. He ran his eye over the shelves, which, like those of most Mexican country village shops, contained a varied assortment that ranged from tenpenny nails to the tin saints whose shrines decorate even the poorest hovel in New Mexico. His gaze reverted to the storekeeper, who was a tall, dark, spare man, with a clean-shaven face, a bilious complexion, and snaky black hair. This, then, was Mr. Thomas Backus, an American citizen married to a Mexican wife. She had certainly helped him to a fluent command of her mother tongue, and Stephens could not help envying the easy way in which he poured out lavish praises of his new goods to the customers whom he was serving. The purchases of these ladies were presently completed, but they still remained in the store carrying on an animated conversation with Don Nepomuceno's daughter, who had joined them in discussing the patterns they had chosen.

"And now what can I do for you?" inquired the storekeeper, looking Stephens in the face as he turned to him.

"Surely I have met this man before, but where?" said Stephens to himself, while he answered Mr. Backus's question by remarking politely, "Oh, I'm not in any hurry, thank you. Won't you serve this young lady first?" and with a slight gesture he indicated Manuelita, who was still absorbed in the

muslins of her friends. Rack his memory as he would, he could not recall the occasion when he and Backus had met previously, yet he felt almost certain it had occurred.

"Why certainly, certainly," returned the storekeeper cheerily; "so long as you don't mind waitin' a few minutes," and he turned to the girl. "Then what may I have the pleasure of being allowed to show you, señorita?"

"Two peloncillos, Don Tomas, if you will be so kind," answered the young lady; and two conical loaves of the brown Mexican sugar so popular in the Territory were accordingly wrapped in paper and handed over to her; but it was manifest that the pretty frocks were what were nearest to her heart, and she and her three friends still continued to discuss the subject with all the ardour of connoisseurs.

Meantime Stephens became more and more convinced in his own mind not only that this was not his first encounter with Backus, but that the latter was also engaged in watching him as closely as possible. He chose, however, not to call attention to this by any inquiry when at length the storekeeper announced himself ready to wait upon him, contenting himself with simply explaining the object of his visit to the store.

"I just wanted to see," he said quietly, "if you happened to have a parcel here for me by the stage to-day from Santa Fé. Stephens is my name, John Stephens. It's a parcel from Spiegelberg's," he added explanatorily, "that I'm looking for; a small, heavy parcel; it's Winchester cartridges."

"Oh yes, they're here; the stage driver left 'em for you all right," said Mr. Backus promptly, reaching down for them under the counter and handing them over. "And I think there's some mail matter too for you; I'll just see"; with which remark he disappeared into the little post-office that was boarded off at one end of the store, returning from there presently with some papers in his hand. "I reckon this letter's for you"; he read out the address with the laboured enunciation of a man of limited education. "To Mr. John Stephens, living among the Pueblo Indians, Santiago, N.M."

"Yes, that'll be for me," said Stephens, putting out his hand for it.

"I reckoned as how you must be the man as soon as I seed you come in," answered Backus, handing over the letter along with a newspaper and a postal packet, "'cos by what I hear thar' aint no other American living in this valley."

"Just so," assented the prospector; "I'm the only one there is anywhere around here. I've been playing a lone hand down in these parts all winter. For six months I haven't spoken to an American except the stage-driver."

It was a relief to him to talk English to anyone again after so long an interval, although he was not exactly prepossessed by Mr. Backus's looks, nor by the only thing he knew for certain about him, namely, that he had gone and married a Mexican wife, a decidedly eccentric thing for an American to do, in Stephens's eyes. But the mere sound of his native language again was music in his ears, even though it were spoken by a man as illiterate as the storekeeper. For, compared to the other, Backus was illiterate. And it was a thing worth noting about Stephens, who had had the advantage of a high-school education, that though he now freely made use of the rude, vigorous colloquialism of the West, – so much so, indeed, that he talked to himself in it, – yet he could drop it in a moment on occasion. Before a stranger for whom he felt an instinctive distaste, he at once became formal, and his language took on a precision and his tone a punctiliousness that were foreign to his more familiar discourse. As he would have said of himself, "If I don't cotton to a man at once, I always feel like putting on a lot of frills."

"You bin long in these parts?" inquired Mr. Backus carelessly.

"About a year now in New Mexico," replied Stephens; "but I've been in this Western country a good deal longer than that. I'm not a tenderfoot, exactly, if I may say so; I didn't come to this country for my health."

Many men whose lungs are affected have hoped to shake off their dread malady by breathing the pure, thin, dry air of Colorado and New Mexico. The hardy Western pioneer pities the consumptive patient; he succours him freely in distress; and, above all things, he hates to be mistaken for one

himself. Stephens was determined that his fellow-countryman should be under no misapprehension on this point.

"No," laughed Mr. Backus lightly, "nor you don't look much like one of them pore health-seekers neither. Say, though," he continued, more warily, "you'll excuse my axin', but was you never in New Mexico before this last year?"

"No," replied Stephens – "that is – yes, I should have said," correcting himself, "I was once, but only for a short time, and that was some years ago, and not in this part of the Territory." He shifted his position against the adobe wall a little, and laid down on the counter in a casual sort of way the parcel and the mail matter which he was holding, as if to indicate that he was ready for a long chat. In reality he was setting his hands free in case he might possibly need to use them. To be at all closely questioned about one's past life by an absolute stranger acts on the experienced Western man as a danger signal. He noted the intense glow in Backus's eyes, and as he did so he grew conscious of a strange sense of doubleness in his own brain, as if all this scene had been enacted once before, and he ought to know what was coming next. He shifted his waist-belt and left his thumbs resting lightly on the buckle in front; it was a perfectly natural thing to do, and yet it left his right hand within six inches of the trusty Colt's revolver at his hip. Assuredly Stephens was no tenderfoot; he was watching every motion of Backus out of the corner of his eye.

"Say, stranger," began the latter, leaning forward over the counter, and speaking low and clear, "no offence, but I want to ax you a certain question. It's a little sudden-like, but I have a reason for it; allers no offence, you understand?"

"You can ask me any question you have a mind to, Mr. Backus," said Stephens coolly. "Of course, whether I answer it or not is my choice."

Mr. Backus might be his fellow-countryman, but he must learn not to be presuming. Almost unconsciously to himself his tone hardened. Stephens could stand the easy familiarity of races that were not his own, and treat the Indians of Santiago with a friendliness that was all the more kindly for his own underlying sense of superiority, but for an American to treat him lightly was another matter. The pride and reserve that had grown up in solitude revolted at this man's inquisitiveness.

"Wal' then, stranger," continued Backus, with an apologetic manner that was due to the other's change of voice, "allers, as I said before, meanin' no offence, did you ever happen to kill a man?"

Manuelita, though apparently absorbed in a rose-sprigged muslin, caught a note in the Texan's tone that aroused her vigilance. She knew no English, but her quick brain divined that when he asked, "Did you ever kill a man?" he was putting no common question.

Stephens started at the abrupt query, and his face flushed. He paused a moment, looking hard at the other; then he slowly answered, "I don't *know* that I have ever killed anyone."

"Meanin', I take it," rejoined the other, "that you don't know for certain, neither, that you haven't. I ax yer pardon again, stranger, but as sure as God made little apples I've got a reason for what I'm saying. That ar' time you was in New Mexico years ago that you spoke of just now, was you, by any chance, at the battle of Apache Cañon?"

The words "Apache Cañon" sent a thrill through Manuelita; she knew well that there had been a bloody fight there.

"Yes," answered Stephens, a strange new light beginning to dawn upon him; "I fought at Apache Cañon, if you must know."

"You was on the Northern side, warn't you?" queried the storekeeper again.

"Yes," said the prospector quietly; "I was a volunteer in the Second Colorado Regiment."

"By gum, then, I knowed it!" cried the Texan excitedly; "you was one of the Pet Lambs."

At the beginning of the Civil War the Colorado troops, a pretty tough lot, were sometimes sportively alluded to as the "Pet Lambs."

A dry smile came to Stephens's lips at the sound of the old name. "I was a Lamb," said he.

"And I was one of Baylor's Babes," returned the other.

"Baylor's Babes" was the nickname bestowed upon a force of Texas rangers who invaded New Mexico, and had the audacity to propose to conquer the whole Rocky Mountain country for Jefferson Davis off their own bats.

"Yes, you bet I was a Babe," he repeated, "and a whale of a Babe at that, and hurrahed for Jeff Davis as long as I could stand. But that's all over and done with now, and we've buried the war hatchet. But say, stranger, do you happen to recollect what kind of a wepping you was carrying at Apache Cañon? There warn't no Winchesters in them days," he added, patting the parcel of cartridges that lay on the counter.

"I was armed with a muzzle-loading Springfield U.S. rifle, altered in Denver to fire with a tape cap," replied Stephens. His nerves grew tense, and he braced himself for a possible struggle to the death, for he thought the Texan was about to spring on him; but he only asked with quaint earnestness:

"Du tell; what's a tape cap, mister?"

"Why, did you never see one?" said Stephens. "But of course they're out of date now. It was a dodge for capping a gun automatically. There was a tape fitted with caps that was fed forward on top of the tube in front of the hammer. It worked like a charm. You bet there was no time lost fumbling around in your pouch for a cap with your fingers if you had one of them fixed on your gun."

"Great Scot!" cried Backus, "then now I know how't was."

He raised his hands so suddenly to the neck of his shirt that he made Stephens think he was reaching for the bowie-knife which some fighting men carry in a sheath under the coat at the back of the neck. Manuelita thought the same thing, and drew her breath hard, feeling her heart leap with terror. Instinctively Stephens's fingers found the butt of his revolver, but he felt paralysed at the thought of the defenceless women by the counter. If there was to be a fuss, how could they make their escape before it began?

But Mr. Backus was not preparing to start a fuss, and he was not feeling for a weapon. He tore open the front of his shirt excitedly and bared his breast, and showed a livid bluish mark close beside the collarbone.

"Strange!" he cried, "'t was you as give me that; 't was that darned tape cap of yourn as done me. Now, don't you remember?"

"By thunder, I do!" exclaimed Stephens. "You were the man I shot that day at close quarters. I recall your face now. I thought I'd seen you before."

"I knowed you the minute you set foot inside this door," answered the Texan, drawing himself up, and eyeing Stephens keenly. "You see, you give me a good argyment for remembering you that day. Shake, partner," he added quickly, thrusting out his bony right hand across the counter. "Bygones is bygones. As I said just now, we've buried the war hatchet for good, and *I* don't bear *you* no ill-will."

Was this a move to get him off his guard? Stephens felt more than half doubtful, but he decided to chance it, especially as he had a stout sheath-knife handy at his left hip. He loosed his fingers from the ready revolver butt, and the two strong hands met in a vigorous clasp.

CHAPTER VI

AN OLD WOUND REOPENED

If it was a strange coincidence that had thus suddenly brought these two old foes together, face to face, in this remote quarter of New Mexico, it was a coincidence no less strange that they were both there for the same object. For Mr. Backus, too, was after the lost silver mine. Ever since his marriage with the daughter of a Mexican peasant he had made a tolerably easy living in a small way by keeping a country store, and in the knowledge which he thus gained of the common pursuits and dominant ideas among the Mexicans, what fascinated him particularly were the tales of hidden mines and buried treasures so often to be heard amongst them. Of all these tales, the legend of the secret mine of the Indians of Santiago had excited his interest most, so that when he learned that the San Remo stage station in their immediate neighbourhood was vacant, and afforded an opening for a store such as his, he speedily arranged to take charge of it and to transfer himself, his family, and his goods to the spot. He had as yet no definite plan of operations beyond keeping his ears open for every scrap of information that might come into his way from any quarter, and doing all he knew to ingratiate himself with the Indians themselves; but the very first step he had proposed to take was to find out about this white man who was said to be living among them, and to discover what his objects were and how much he knew. Fortune had favoured him so far, and here he was shaking hands with the man himself, who had thus unexpectedly proved to be no other than his ancient enemy.

At the moment when the pair were thus exchanging signs of amity, the doorway was darkened by the form of a tall, swarthy, well-dressed Mexican. Mr. Backus hailed the new-comer instantly.

"Welcome, Don Nepomuceno. You come at a good hour. See the wonderful thing that has happened. This American señor that you were telling me of only yesterday, who lives with the Indians of Santiago, has turned out to be the very same man that plugged me in the great fight at Apache Cañon nine years ago. We were just shaking hands over it as you came in, and I've been showing him a little mark over my lungs that he gave me as a remembrancer." Mr. Backus was speaking in Spanish, and Manuelita was drinking in every syllable with intense interest.

"Well, if you come to that," returned Stephens, baring his left arm and displaying the scar of an old bullet wound between the elbow and wrist, "I can do ditto. Perhaps you didn't know that your bullet took me through the fleshy part of the arm here," and he pointed with his finger to the place where the ball had entered.

Don Nepomuceno Sanchez, who had seen fighting in the wars with the Navajos, and knew well what wounds were, came forward to examine the scars of either man with critical eyes. "Truly these are honourable scars," he said; "tell me about it, please, if you don't mind talking over old war times."

"Well, señor," said Backus, in his rapid, fluent Spanish, "it was like this: we were fighting there in the hills, on opposite sides, as of course you know; and naturally, being all frontiersmen on both sides, we advanced under cover as much as ever we could, firing as we got a chance. And so it came about that he and I, sudden-like, found ourselves quite close to one another in the brush, and we both fired as it might be at the same moment. He must have missed me clean that time, but according to the way he tells it, I must have plugged him right through that left arm of his; I didn't even know as I'd touched him though, for it never seemed to phase him, and we both of us set to reloading in a hurry, you bet. We both put in the powder, and both rammed down the bullets, and I had got a trifle ahead of him as I brought up my gun to the hip in order to have it ready to put on the cap. Wal', I'm jiggered if he didn't leave out the capping part of the business, and brought his piece straight up to his shoulder to draw a bead on me. You bet I just thought I knowed as I'd got the deadwood on him then. 'Got ye, Yank,' I called out, slipping the cap on my tube, 'ye haint capped yer gun.' 'Don't want to,' sez he; and whang-g-g! she went, and took me right here through the lung; and that was the last

I ever knowed of anything for about a day and a half. You see, he had some kind of a gol-durned, stem-winding trick on his gun that did the capping for him, that I didn't know nothing about."

"Well, now it's all over," said Stephens frankly, "I'm real glad to learn that your wound wasn't mortal. My company fell back directly after we exchanged shots, so that I never knew what had become of you."

"Oh," said the Texan, "they patched me up in the hospital somehow or another, and then I was took in and nursed in a Mexican family, and the end of it was I married one of the darters and settled in the Territory, and here I am with a wife and three kids, and running a store. I do keep a little good whisky, too, you may like to know. Say, won't you take a drink? It's my treat. You'll join us in a *tragito*, won't you, Don Nepomuceno?"

"I'll drink with you with pleasure," said Stephens, "if you'll allow me to take it in something like a lemon soda. Whisky's a thing I don't use, if you'll excuse me."

"Surely, surely," in amiable tones remarked Mr. Backus, who was setting out on the counter a three-parts full decanter and some glasses. "I'll try and mix something of the lemon-soda order as near as I can fix it." He had hoped to get Stephens into a loquacious mood and pump him over a few social drinks, but he was too cunning to show any trace of disappointment. "Every man has a right to choose his own liquor; I don't quarrel with no man's taste," he said, as he passed the decanter to Don Nepomuceno, with a familiar "Help yourself, friend," and busied himself in searching for materials for concocting some kind of a temperance drink for his other guest.

Sanchez poured a little of the strong spirit into a glass and filled it up with water. "You are coming to take dinner in my house presently, are you not, Don Estevan?" he said in his courteous tones, addressing Stephens, who accepted the invitation cordially. "Manuelita, my child," he turned to his eldest daughter, "run home now quick with Altagracia, and tell your aunt that Don Estevan is coming and to have dinner ready soon."

The temperance drink was compounded, and the three men clinked glasses and pledged each other.

"And what have you bin' doing ever since our last meeting?" said Mr. Backus genially to his former foe. "I've give ye my story; now let's hear yours."

"Mining," said Stephens with curt emphasis. The word made the Texan give a start of surprise. "Yes," he continued, "it's mining and prospecting for gold and silver that has been my trade ever since; and, what's more, I've travelled over a good part of the Pacific slope at it, too. It's a game you get terribly stuck on after once you take to it."

"Mining, eh?" said the Texan with affected indifference. "Wal', that ar's a thing as I dunno nothin' at all about."

He gave a careless laugh. "Oh, by the way," he said, turning his back on the two men and rummaging on the shelf behind him for a couple of cans of oysters which he displayed with a great show of earnestness, "that's the brand of oysters, Don Nepomuceno, that I meant to bring to your notice, first chance. I can recommend 'em; they're prime."

"Yes," he continued, turning again to Stephens, "you was saying as how you was interested in mines; but as far as that goes, why there ain't no mines being worked in this part of the country, not as I know of." A suspicious man might have guessed that Backus's interest in the possibility of a mine in the neighbourhood of Santiago was a good deal stronger than he chose to let appear, but John Stephens was not of a suspicious nature.

"No," he said in reply, "there aren't any now, but there have been, and there will be again, if I'm any judge." Then, reflecting that he might say too much, and checking himself he went on more cautiously. "But I don't see any opening here myself. I guess I'm about through with New Mexico for the present, and I calculate to light out for Colorado pretty soon. The railroads have got in there, and there's a boom on."

Mr. Backus was sharp at reading other people's motives, and saw in an instant that Stephens was trying to disguise his. So much the more reason for finding out what they were.

"What! going off to Colorado?" he exclaimed with an air of surprise. "Why, I'd understood from the folks here that you had settled down in Santiago for keeps. That's really how I come to hear of you; I heard that you was a white man living amongst them Indians, and had joined the tribe; so I supposed you was adopted by them, and had gone and got hitched up with a squaw."

Stephens's eyes flashed.

"Shouldn't wonder if that drew him out a bit," reflected Mr. Backus privately to himself.

"If anyone told you so," said the prospector stiffly, "let me tell you that you have been misinformed. No sir, squaws aren't in my line; I'm not that sort of a man. I never have proposed to go outside of my own colour, and I never will."

Mr. Backus gave a short laugh. The word colour touched him on the raw. He was married to a Mexican, and many Americans are indiscriminating enough to class the Mexicans with coloured people. The Mexicans themselves naturally resent such a slight on their race; although a part of them have more or less Indian blood in their veins, they prefer to ignore that side of their pedigree and trace their descent solely back to the conquering cavaliers of Spain. But Mr. Backus was himself a quarter-blooded Indian. He called himself a Texan, and passed as such; though he was born in the Indian Territory and his mother had been a half-breed Cherokee.

He changed the subject abruptly. "Fill your glass again, Don," he said, pushing the decanter towards the Mexican. "It's good whiskey, real old Bourbon. 'There isn't a headache in a hog's head of it,' as the Irishman said."

"A thousand thanks, no, if you will excuse me," replied the Mexican, "I have sufficient. I think I must be going," he went on, for indeed he felt a little out of it, seeing that the two Americans had dropped back instinctively into talking in their own language, of which he knew but a few words. "I shall see you again, then, presently, Don Estevan, at my house," and bowing politely he departed homewards.

"That man's darned well fixed, I can tell you," remarked the storekeeper, refilling his own glass and tossing it off as soon as the Mexican had gone. "And what's more, he's a square man, too. I don't mind saying that Nepomuceno Sanchez can just have all the credit he wants at this store. He's one of the heirs to the Sanchez grant, and that gives him the use of all the pasture land he needs for his sheep. He's a very peart business man, for a Mexican. I used to come across him over in Peña Blanca, you know. He's a relation of old man Baca's by marriage, and he's got a lot of his sheep on shares and makes a good thing of it."

The personage irreverently referred to by the Texan as "old man Baca" was the head of the family of that name, and a man of no small position and wealth. The old families of New Mexico own immense flocks of hardy little Mexican sheep, whose numbers often run into hundreds of thousands. Their flocks are divided into bands of a few thousand and let out on shares to retainers, who return a rent in kind of the wool and the increase. The relation between these retainers and the heads of the great families is semi-feudal.

"Yes," said Stephens, "taking sheep on shares is a good business. I've seen his son, young Andrés Sanchez, up there on that Sanchez grant with their sheep herd when I've been out on the mountains."

"Oh, you've been up on the mountains round here?" said Backus, who saw his chance to lead the conversation once more in the direction he wanted. "Mining, I suppose?" he added, as if it were an afterthought.

"Well, I've prospected some," returned the other. "But you've heard me say I didn't think much of the opening here."

"Ever take any of the Indians out prospecting with you?" inquired the Texan. "They've bin here so long they'd ought to know if there's anything lying around worth looking at. Did they never tell you anything about mines?" He let these last words fall after a pause with studied carelessness.

"No, sir," said the prospector, "I've learnt nothing from the Indians, and it's highly possible that they've nothing to tell."

"You never thought to ask 'em, I suppose?" suggested Backus.

"Why should I?" returned the other quietly. "May I ask, Mr. Backus, if you've any special reason for these questions?"

The Texan hesitated; he felt sure now that his old antagonist was not at Santiago by mere chance, but had an object in view which he did not care to disclose. He quickly decided to try and gain his confidence by a show of openness.

"Wal', yes, I have," he admitted; "I guess I've got some information that might be of value to anyone as knew how to use it."

"What could he mean?" Stephens thought. "Was this information the knowledge of the secret mine? If so, it might be worth while to make terms with him, as the Indians seemed to be so impracticable."

"If anyone will show me a mine," said the prospector, "I can tell him if it's worth working, and how to work it."

"Yes," returned Backus, "and if so what terms would you expect?"

"A half-interest," said Stephens. "If I thought it good enough I'd take a half-interest and bear my share of the expenses."

"That's a square offer," replied the Texan. "Now look at here. Now, s'posin' I was to tell you of a mine in this neighbourhood, you'd be willing to do that with me?"

"Are you referring to the lost mine of the Indians?" asked the prospector. It was not worth while to make any further mystery of the matter, for the Texan had obviously heard the story.

"That's just what I am," said Backus. "I thought as how you must have heard some talk about it. Now you allow as you don't know where it is."

"I do not," said the other.

"Wal', I do," said Backus. "And I'll tell it to you on your own terms, and that's a half-interest for each of us. It's on the Indian grant up in the mountains."

"Well, I knew that much," said Stephens.

"Ah," returned the Texan, "but I can tell you more'n that. The Indians haint got no right to keep it; that grant haint been confirmed to them by act of Congress."

"But, my dear sir," returned Stephens, with something that savoured of contempt, "you're revealing to me as your precious secret what's matter of common knowledge. If you ask anyone in the office at Santa Fé, they'll tell you that the grant to the Indians of four square leagues round the pueblo has been confirmed to them, and that they own it from grass-roots to Hades by a perfectly indefeasible title; but they'll tell you there, too, in the office, that the twenty miles square that they claim in the mountains has never been confirmed, and for that matter is overlapped by half a dozen unconfirmed Mexican grants as well. The real title to that land is in the United States Government. That's as old as a last year's bird's-nest."

"I see you're well posted in the business," said Backus; "but maybe you don't know that the secret mine's on the Cerro de las Viboras. I can tell you that."

"If you can show it to me up there on that Rattlesnake Mountain, Mr. Backus," was Stephens's reply, "I'm ready to acknowledge at once that you'll show me something I don't know. But as you know so much you are probably aware that the mine has been closed for a hundred years or more, and that rumour locates it in a dozen different places, and that to look for it on the Cerro without knowing where it is is to look for a needle in a haystack. I've been all around that Cerro, you can bet, but I haven't run across the mine. The Cerro's a mountain five miles round and five thousand feet high, and a precious rough mountain at that. I'm willing to go up there again; I'm ready to start tomorrow if you like; and if you'll show me the mine there I'm ready to do as I said with you about

working it; but unless you can do that I don't consider that what has passed constitutes any claim between us on either side."

"Wal'," said the Texan, "I couldn't leave the store here just yet, not till I get things straightened out and settled down. Nor I won't swear for sartin as I can put you right on to the exact spot, seein' as how I've not been up thar myself yet; but mebbe I can before long, and I reckon that ought to be enough for ye. Say, look here, couldn't we work it between us, somehow, to get them Indians to show us the spot?"

This intrusive Texan had so far told Stephens nothing he did not know already, and now here he was wanting to poach on the prospector's private preserve – his personal influence with the Indians.

"That's what I've been trying to do already, Mr. Backus," said Stephens irritably; "and, to be plain with you, I'm not looking out for a partner in this matter."

"Ah, but mebbe that's just what you want," returned the storekeeper imperturbably; "mebbe the reason as you haint won nary trick so far is that you've bin playing a lone hand. Now, I'll gamble from what you said just now that you've bin trying to get the secret out of the bucks over there, and that you haven't tried the women for it at all. Now, aint I right?" and he gave the other a cunning look.

"I've never seen any reason to think that the women know anything about it," returned Stephens. "It isn't likely they would." The idea had never even occurred to him.

"Ah, and I'll gamble they do," replied Backus. "I know a thing or two about Indians myself, and it's a great trick of theirs to let some of the squaws – only some, mind you – keep some of the secrets of the tribe. You see they don't go and get killed off like the bucks, so it acts as a kind of safeguard against losing the knowledge of a thing entirely that way. Aint there some extra high-toned women, now, in the Santiago tribe, – chief's darters and the like, eh?" His keen black eyes were turned on the other with a cunning inquisitiveness. "Yes, by the way, aint there a white squaw in the tribe somewheres?"

Stephens was startled. "You've taken a lot of trouble to find out things, I fancy, Mr. Backus," he said rather suspiciously; "a great deal more, indeed, than you seemed inclined to let on at first. But you're quite right. Yes, there is a white squaw in the tribe, and she's the daughter of the cacique."

Backus listened with extreme interest. "You reckon she's an Indian, then?" he said. "You don't think she's a white girl they've picked up and adopted, by any chance? I've seen a good few sorts of Indians, but never any white ones yet."

"Oh no, she's Indian, right enough," said Stephens; "she's a natural Indian blonde, as fair-complected as I am. They're none so rare among these Pueblo Indians. There's twenty or thirty of them over in Zuñi."

"I wanter know!" exclaimed the Texan, by which phrase he indicated extreme surprise. "Wal', she might be worth trying. The cacique had ought to know the secret if anybody does, and she'd be as likely as any of the squaws to be let into it. Why shouldn't you tackle her? Is she married?"

"No, she's not married yet," replied the other.

"Wal', there's yer chance," said the storekeeper, with a knowing grin; "but I forgot, you draw the line pretty close in the matter of colour; or mebbe, she being light-complected as yourself, you'd reckon she was white enough to suit you."

Stephens flushed; he had given this man no right to intrude these familiarities upon him; in silence he picked up his parcels to go. When you have just been forgiven by a man for shooting him through the lungs, you can hardly blaze out at him for being a trifle too personal in his conversation.

"Wal', I'm going to be up there right along," continued the storekeeper, seeing that Stephens volunteered no further comment, and was preparing to start, "and then you can introduce me. I'm going to make a bid for the trade of the pueblo anyhow, and I'll have to get on the right side of the cacique for that, and I might as well get the inside track with the girl, too. It's all in the family, eh?" He grinned again with a kind of a grin that Stephens loathed. "And't won't be trespassing on your property neither, I s'pose?"

"I leave the Indian women alone, Mr. Backus, as I think I told you before," said Stephens haughtily, and he drew himself up and moved to the door.

"Oh, no offence," cried the other quickly, following him; "I see you're high-toned, of course. I didn't mean nothing low-down, nohow"; he attended the prospector out to the hitching-post, where the mule was fastened, and watched him as he put the parcels into his saddle-bags.

"That's a real nice California saddle of yourn," he said in a propitiatory tone, "and an A1 mule wearing it. Wal', when are you going to ask me to come and meet Miss Pocahontas?"

"I'm afraid I'm off to the sierra to-morrow on a hunt," was the somewhat ungracious reply, "but we may meet again later on when I come back, before I start for Colorado, if I decide after all to go there"; and he swung himself into his saddle and raised his bridle rein.

"What makes ye so sot on leavin' this Territory?" queried Backus, laying his hand on the mule's neck and walking a few paces alongside the parting guest. "Aint it most time for ye to quit all this rovin' round, and settle down? Why don't you ask Don Nepomuceno, now, for his darter? She's gone on you already, if you only knowed it. When you was fingering your revolver there in the store just now – oh, I seen what your little game was, right enough – her eyes was just glued to you. Oh yes; if I was watching you close, right along the hull time, you bet I kept my little eye open for what the women thought of it all as well. You bet I aint no innercent; I aint bin and lived here these seven years in New Mexico without learning to watch the women every time. I'm on the spot there, and no mistake. I know how a girl looks when she thinks as how her man's in danger that she's gone on. You ask her father for her, and you'll find you've got the inside track there, or my name aint Tom Backus."

"Really, Mr. Backus," replied Stephens, "you've set yourself to discuss a matter I prefer not to talk about. I think I'll say good morning now."

With a regretful air Mr. Backus removed his hand from the mule's neck, and remained there still looking at Stephens's back, while the animal he bestrode, feeling its rider's spurs, quickened its pace.

"Wal', so long," he cried after him as the distance between them rapidly increased. "You'd better think over that idea of mine. Take care of yerself now. Good men is scarce" – "and prospectors who know a mine when they see it are scarcer, just now, in this part of the world," he continued to himself. "I've no fancy to have you putting out for Colorado till you've done my bit of work for me down here, Mister Stephens. If I can once get you to fooling with that squaw girl, I'll bet a dollar you can get the secret of the Indians' silver mine out of her; and if she ain't enough to keep you here you may sport around after Miss Manuelita, but stop here you must till you've found that mine for me. You find it and I take the profits, that's fair division," and he gave a chuckle of satisfaction; "and when the time comes for paying you your share, you'll find I haint forgotten how to shoot. Lord! what luck to drop on you like this, and you as innercent as a new-born babby, for all your fingering your six-shooter the way you did. I reckon you'll just play the cards as I deal 'em, and never spot me a-raising a cold deck on you, as I will."

CHAPTER VII

DESDEMONA LISTENS

It was but slowly that Manuelita obeyed her father's order to return home; her little feet lagged as the girl dwelt on the scene she had just witnessed, and wondered what it meant. Somehow this American always set her wondering about something. His very unlikeness to the men whom she had hitherto lived among made him appear almost as strange to her as a visitor from another world. He had begun by half repelling, and had ended by fascinating her; on this point the guess of the coarse-minded but quick-witted Texan was not mistaken. Although in speech and manners, in all his tastes and habits, Stephens offered a complete contrast to her Mexican fellow-countrymen, he himself with his light hair and fair complexion was not a type absolutely new to this girl, for in the place of honour in her grandfather's dining-room had hung a portrait of a golden-haired *caballero*, the great Manuel Sanchez, the friend of Cortez; and Manuelita had woven so many romantic dreams about her glorious ancestor that this fair-haired American had come to seem to her a sort of copy of her hero of romance. It was only in dreams and traditions that the girl had met with heroes; the secluded life led by Mexican ladies was in her case more solitary than usual, for the Sanchez family was poor (poor for its position, that is) but proud, and Manuelita turned up her pretty nose at the few young rancheros of the neighbourhood, and held them beneath the notice of the daughter of a *conquistador*. The girl's passionate southern nature, with all its capacity for devotion, had slept longer than was usual among her people, and when her heart should awake it would be the heart of a woman, not of a schoolgirl. The young rancheros flaunted their silver spurs and velvet jackets at the Fiestas in vain; they swore the señorita was as wild as an antelope; and, like an antelope, she was caught by her curiosity. She could not keep from speculating on the strange character of this American who bore the golden locks of her great ancestor. The character of a handsome young man is a dangerous study for the peace of mind of a girl, and her interest in the stranger grew so rapidly that soon it seemed to her that there was little else worth studying "beneath the visiting moon."

Nor was the opportunity lacking. Stephens had struck up quite a friendship with her father in the course of the winter, and had got into the way, especially on mail days, of dropping in for a chat with his Mexican crony, who, within his somewhat narrow intellectual limits, was a man both of strong character and active mind. She had listened to them talking together by the hour. The Mexican had many incidents to tell of the ceaseless struggles of his people with the marauding Navajo Indians, who had been but lately reduced to subjection, and of the hardly less constant struggle between the rival great families, the Bacas, the Armijos, the Chavez, and the rest, for supremacy among themselves. The American found no lack of matter in the tale of his wanderings between the Sierra Nevada and the Rocky Mountains, and of the toils and hopes of a seeker after gold. To her, directly, he had not spoken very much; as an unmarried girl, under the watchful tutelage of her aunt, she was not expected to take a prominent part in conversation, but she went and came freely between the living-room where her father entertained his guest, and the sleeping-chambers which opened off it and the kitchen communicating with it on the other side.

Once, too, it had been her luck to see the American perform a feat that impressed her not a little. She had gone out one evening with Juana, the Navajo captive who had been brought up in the house as a bondservant, to bring in the milk from the corral, when she caught sight in the dusk of an animal prowling near that seemed like a dog, and yet was assuredly something other than a dog. The two girls ran indoors, crying out that there was a wild beast of some kind, a wolf they thought, close by, and Stephens, who was sitting with her father, sprang up, seized his Winchester, which stood in the corner, and hastily threw a cartridge into it as he stepped forth, while she followed to point out the marauder. There, in the dim light, some seventy yards away, the animal stood, hesitating whether

to advance or to fly. She well remembered the quick, smooth, steady action with which the rifle came up, came level, went off; the loud clap of the bullet hitting the object; and the nonchalant way in which the tall American had turned on his heel and, without any apparent interest in the effect of his shot, had gone in and replaced the rifle in its corner, merely remarking, "I reckon it's nothing but a coyote."

Pedro, the peon, had run to see, and presently brought in the limp body of the animal, a coyote as he had guessed, its skull shattered to a pulp by the deadly hollow bullet. But what impressed her more than the death-dealing powers of the terrible weapon, was the quiet confidence exhibited by the marksman in his rapid aim, a confidence so entirely justified by the event; and it was this that struck deep into her imagination.

Yes, in her eyes, without doubt, the American was a hero; and yet he was but a cold-hearted hero after all. He could turn a compliment because he had picked up the trick of it from the young Mexicans whom he met occasionally in Don Nepomuceno's house, but his compliments lacked the fanciful gallantry of the words of her countrymen; yes, he was hard, she was sure of it, hard and cold as the ice-bound soil of his own frozen North; she would waste no more thoughts on him, she resolved; and then she thought of him more than ever, and it was in such a mood as this that she re-entered her father's door.

* * * * *

When Stephens turned his back somewhat ungraciously on Mr. Backus in front of the stage station, he rode off without casting a look behind him, and urged his mule forward at an easy amble towards the house where he was expected. Those last words of the storekeeper had jarred on him very unpleasantly. Who had asked this intruder to spy on the expression of the girl's face? What business was it of his anyhow? Of course it was all rubbish. He himself had never said a single word to Manuelita that all the world might not hear. Of course he had to pay her a compliment once in a while; he could hardly do less, coming and going at the house as he did, and all these Mexican señoras and señoritas expected it, just as the girls back in Ohio expected you to treat them to candy and ice-cream. That never meant anything particular, neither did his compliments, and she was much too sensible a girl to think they did. It was characteristic of the man that he never for a moment thought of himself as likely by his person and his character to make an impression on a girl's heart. The idea that came into his head when Backus made the suggestion was that if there was anything in it it must be due to this precious art of paying compliments, which was about the only point in Mexican manners that he had taken any special pains to acquire. But the whole thing was rubbish, so he assured himself again and again. Sanchez was no fool, and no more was his daughter. They were kindly people, who had behaved with true Mexican hospitality to a stranger – but they were people of another race: their customs, their beliefs, their ideals, were all strange to him. Between an American and a Mexican there could be no real community of feeling. And yet some Americans did marry Mexicans, and did not seem to repent it. Even that low-down skunk of a storekeeper, who was an American of sorts, had a Mexican wife. Probably she was not much to boast of, a mere peon's daughter most likely, – well, that was his taste. But there were other Americans who had Mexican wives; he could count up several whom he had seen in Santa Fé, – traders, Government employés, and the like, – and they had as comfortable homes as if they had gone back to the States and married American girls. But confound that Backus's impudence! What should he know about these Sanchez folks anyway?

Beneath all this anger lay two very uncomfortable suspicions. One was that the storekeeper was a man with a great deal of low cunning, and might have, as indeed he boasted, most confoundedly sharp eyes for prying into other people's affairs; and the other was that he, Stephens, had never given such an affair as this a serious thought before, and knew precious little about womankind in general; and this last thought of his was much truer than he himself realised.

There are no men whose experience of women, as a rule, is so small as the pioneers of a new country. In older countries there are unmarried men in plenty, but they are brought into frequent daily contact with the other sex unless they take deliberate pains to prevent it, and not seldom they prove to understand women better than those who might be supposed to have a better right. But the celibates of a new country are quite different. In their case it is not choice but necessity that makes the mere sight of a woman's face a rare thing. In the wild, remote mining camps where Stephens's years of adventure had been mostly passed, among a thousand men there would barely be a score or so who ever brought their women-folks along. True enough, where the miners had struck it rich, and hundreds and thousands of dollars were being taken out by eager crowds of men, another class of women did not delay long in appearing upon the scene; but that was a class from which Stephens studiously kept aloof. He had not even the perverted experience that may be thus gained; and he positively knew less at nine-and-twenty about the ways in which girls think and feel than he had known before he left home at nineteen. If he knew little he had been contented with his ignorance, but now this random shaft of the storekeeper had gone home, and he was contented no longer.

Alighting from Captain Jinks before Don Nepomuceno's door, he was welcomed by the Mexican, who insisted on unsaddling the mule for him himself, loudly calling meanwhile for Pedro to come and take him round to the corral and give him some corn. The house was built in Mexican style, of sun-dried bricks, in the form of a hollow square, with a patio, or courtyard, in the centre on which all the doors and windows gave, the outer wall being blank except for a peephole or two high up. It had a flat clay roof, with a low parapet all round. It was, in fact, a miniature castle, as was every house in the country of any pretensions built during the days when the Navajos and Apaches were a constant terror in the land. Stephens followed his host inside after taking off his spurs, Spanish fashion. He had unbuckled his belt and handed it, revolver and all, to his host, begging him to take charge of it. This, too, he had learned was a piece of Spanish etiquette. You give him your arms to keep, for you are under his protection. Don Nepomuceno bustled around, laying the saddle with its "cantines" neatly in a corner, with the saddle blanket over it, and hanging up the belt on a peg, while he kept calling out to his sister to bring in the dinner, and to the Navajo captive, Juana, to bring water for washing. There were no chairs or tables, but a broad divan covered with gaily striped serapes ran all along one side of the room and served as a seat.

On this Stephens sat down, and, while the master of the house showed his hospitable ardour by urging the women in the kitchen to make a wholly unnecessary haste, the American drew from his pocket the letter he had received at the stage station, and proceeded to read it. It ran as follows:

*"The What Cheer House, Denver, Col.,
"April 2, 187-.*

"To Mr. John Stephens, among the Pueblo Indians of Santiago, N.M.

"Friend Stephens, – It's two years and a half ago that you and me parted company in Helena, Montana, after I'd done my best to bust you that time, you remember. I've knocked around and had my ups and downs since, but I haven't done so badly on the whole. Last summer I was in Col. here, and I got on to a goodish thing up on Boulder. I wish you would come up here this summer and join me in trying to work it, for I think if it was handled right there's big money in it for both of us. I don't want to say too much, for I don't feel plumb sure of this letter reaching you. And for the same reason I don't put in a draft for what I owe you still, but I've got it here for you all right and regular, and if you can't come you've only got to let me know where and how to send it, and it's yours. I'm well enough fixed now to be able to do it right enough. I don't know if there's any chance of this letter finding you. I haven't heard sign or sound of you since we quit being pardners, till yesterday I run on to that Sam Argles as you may remember in Helena in old times; he'd been

wintering away down in Arizona, and he said as how when he was passing through New Mexico a stage driver there told him as he knowed of a white man, calling himself John Stephens, that had been a miner, and was living now with the Indians of Santiago, N.M. That Sam Argles is an old gasbag, sure, but I had to allow as it sounded like you in some ways, for he said the driver said this Stephens wouldn't never drink nor gamble; but he said too another thing, that he was living there with 'em as a squawman, and then I didn't hardly believe as it could be you, but I guessed that stage driver might have been lying, and so figuring on it like that I calculated I might as well write you there. Hoping as it is you, and that you're going strong and doing fine, I remain, your former pard,
"Jeff. A. Rockyfeller.

"You can address me, care of Hepburn & Davis, 397 Arapahoe, Denver."

Stephens perused this letter with a dry smile upon his face.

"Yes, Rocky," he said, apostrophising his ex-partner, "it's me, sure pop, that Mr. Sam Argles heard of here; but I'm not a squawman yet, not quite; you were right not to believe that, not if all the darned fool stage drivers in the country were to swear to it."

By the code of the West, a squawman is nothing less than a renegade to his own race, and is hated accordingly.

He refolded the letter and placed it back in his pocket, as Juana appeared bearing a towel and soap and a bowl, which she placed on the clean-swept floor in front of him preparatory to aiding him to wash by pouring a little stream of water over his hands. The Navajo handmaiden, having been captured as a child, had been brought up in Mexican style, but her blood was pure Indian; that showed plainly in her impassive face as she held the towel for him to wipe his hands, and the strong animal expression given by the heavy jaw and dark skin struck him forcibly. He wondered what she was thinking of as she stood there as still as if she had been cast in bronze, and he reflected, with some disgust at his own stupidity, that that 'cute storekeeper down below could probably have made a pretty accurate guess. Yes, in future he positively would pay more attention to what women were thinking about. In that respect there was no doubt he must amend his ways.

At last Don Nepomuceno condescended to settle down and seat himself on the divan beside his guest; a low table was brought in and placed before them, and on it were set two bowls of rich mutton-broth. When the empty bowls were removed by Juana, the master of the house called out loudly, so as to be heard in the kitchen through the open door, "It is very excellent broth! Ah, what capital broth!"

"I have often heard it said," remarked Stephens, by way of showing his appreciation, "that the Mexican ladies make the best soup in the world."

"It is true, Don Estevan, it is quite true. They are capital cooks, capital. I wonder now, Don Estevan, that you can be contented to cook for yourself. Cooking seems such a waste of time for a man!"

Stephens laughed. "It's my bad luck, señor," he said. "You see, the ladies wouldn't ever look at a rover like myself."

"Don't you believe it, don't you believe it," cried the other; "indeed you have no call to say so. Ah, here is the stew," he added, as Juana set down before each of them two small saucers, one of frijoles, or Mexican beans boiled with onions, and one of stewed mutton with red pepper; in fact both dishes were made nearly red-hot by a liberal admixture of the famous chili colorado. For bread she laid before them tortillas, large thin pancakes of the blue Indian corn, peculiar to New Mexico.

Following the example of his host, Stephens broke off a piece of tortilla, formed it into a scoop, and dipping up mouthfuls of the two messes alternately, thus consumed both bread and meat together. His host's approval of this course was delivered for the benefit of the kitchen as emphatically as it had been of the soup.

"It is very savoury meat," he shouted in his commanding voice, as soon as he had tasted two or three mouthfuls from each saucer, "very savoury; and they are excellent beans, delicious beans. Ah yes, Don Estevan," he continued to his guest, "what a pity it is that you have not someone to cook for you like this. To live all by yourself is so solitary, so *triste*."

"Yes," answered the American quietly; "but how should I do when I went off to the mountains prospecting? I'm off again, I expect, shortly, to Colorado, you see; and what would I do with the cook then?"

"But why do you go?" queried his host. "Is it not time for you to leave off this wandering, roving life of yours and settle down? You are rich, everybody knows. You should marry, man, marry, and enjoy yourself"; he dropped into a more familiar tone, – "yes, marry before old age comes. You are a young man still, but age will be upon you before you know it."

Stephens, instead of giving a direct answer, made play with the tortilla and the stew. "I do begin to believe that cunning Backus was nearer right than I had any idea of," he said to himself. "I suppose this means that my good friend here wants to suggest that he'll find me a wife in short order if I say so – only, as it happens, he's a little too previous; I aint ready just yet." By this time he had consumed sufficient of the stew to set a dry man on fire, and utilised this fact to change the subject.

"Excuse me," said he, "but may I, by your permission, beg for a drink of water? This meat is delicious, but the chili makes me rather thirsty."

"Oh, certainly," cried his hospitable host; "but we have coffee coming. We have coffee here. Bring the coffee, Juana, at once," he shouted to the bondmaid.

"Water, please, if I may be so bold, Don Nepomuceno," pleaded Stephens, whose mouth was really burning.

"Yes, yes; bring water, then, Juana," cried the other, anxious to accommodate his guest. "Or would you not like a little atole? There is atole, too, plenty of it."

Atole is an old and favourite Mexican drink made of the finest Indian corn meal boiled till it becomes a thin gruel.

A jug of atole presently appeared with two cups, and the American was permitted to ease the burning sensations of his palate.

"Thank you," he said gratefully, putting down the cup; "that's very refreshing. Atole is a real good drink, Don Nepomuceno."

"Oh, yes," said the latter, "it's a good drink enough; but now that coffee has come in so much, it is used more by our handmaidens and the peons. All the well-to-do people here buy coffee, with sugar, now. We will have the coffee in in a minute. Tell them to make haste with the coffee, Juana. Did you never hear," he continued to Stephens, "the song that the musician of San Remo has made about Mr. Coffee and Mr. Atole? It is comic, you must know, very comic. You see Mr. Coffee comes from far, far away off in Tamaulipas, or farther still, to cut out his rival Mr. Atole. And then they meet, and the pair have a conversation, and Mr. Coffee tells poor Mr. Atole that he is doomed. Let me see, how does it go? Oh yes, Mr. Coffee begins, and he says to the other jokingly:

"'Como te va, amigo Atole?
Como has pasado tu tiempo;
Desde lejos hé venido
Para hacer tu testamento.'

"'How do you do, Mr. Gruel?
I fear you are rather unwell;
I've taken a mighty long journey
To ring your funeral knell.'

That's how it goes, Don Estevan. There's a great deal more of it; they go on arguing ever so long. We must get him in some time and make him repeat it all for you."

"You're most kind, I'm sure," said the American, wondering in himself the while how any human being could be amused by such a rigmarole concerning Messrs. Coffee and Atole. But there was no accounting for tastes; and he had found out that American humour did not seem at all funny to Mexican ears, while his recent experience in blasting the ditch had taught him that the mildest of American jokes might send red Indians on the war-path. A difference in the sense of humour goes down to the very roots of our nature.

They had finished dinner by this time, and the American, declining a cigarette, filled his pipe, and rising went over to his saddle and extracted from the "cantines" the packet which had come for him by mail. He brought this over to his host and offered it to him.

"Here, señor," said he, "is a little bag I will beg you to accept. It is from Denver; it contains some seed of alfalfa, that clover I told you about, that grows so splendidly in California and Colorado."

The Mexican was warm in his thanks as he untied the bag and took a sample in his hand.

"I told them to send me the best seed," said Stephens. "I think it ought to grow well in this country. You'd better sow it soon in a piece of your ploughed land, and irrigate it when it comes up."

"Yes, I will," said the Mexican. "I'll have it planted to-morrow in the land I am preparing for corn. Come and see my seed corn; I am not content with this common blue corn of the Indians. I have white corn with big ears that I mean to sow. Come along to the storeroom and look at it."

He led the way, and as they passed through the door they almost stepped over Manuelita, who was seated on the ground just outside, busy cleaning a large basket of frijoles. Stephens paused idly to look at what she was doing, while her father bustled around, noisily demanding of his sister where the key of the storeroom was. The girl's task struck him as terribly tedious. She took up a small handful of beans at a time and picked out one by one the little bits of stone that had got in when the threshing was done, in the good old style, by the feet of the wild mares on a floor of clay and gravel concrete.

"That's a long business you're in there," he remarked sympathetically.

"Yes," she answered, glancing up at him with a shy smile, "it takes time," and she bent her eyes on her hand again so as not to interrupt her work. He caught the beautiful smooth outline of her cheek with the long dark lashes showing distinct against it.

"You don't mean to say you have to do the lot that way, picking out all those bits of rock one at a time?" he asked.

"Oh, but yes, of course," she answered. "You would break your teeth if we did not take them out before we cook them."

"But," he rejoined, his practical mind revolting against waste of labour, "it'll take you a good hour to do that lot the way you're doing it, and you could do it better in three minutes." His tone was oracular.

"I don't think it's possible," she said, "unless you had a witch to do it. There is an old woman, the mother of Pedro, that we get sometimes, but she often leaves some in, and then my father hurts his teeth. The people here call her a witch, but she would take three hours instead of three minutes."

"Well, I'm no witch," said he, "though the Indians here wanted to play me for one this morning. But you give me a pan – a milk-pan'll do – and I'll show you."

The pan was brought, and he put in the beans and poured in water enough to set them a-swim. He gave the pan a few deft twirls and shook it from side to side.

"This is the way we wash gravel to get the gold, señorita," he said, as he set it down. "The rocks are all at the bottom of that pan now, you bet. If you'll kindly give me another pan to put the beans into," he went on, "I'll prove it to you."

The girl hastened to bring a second pan and put it beside the first, and in doing so their hands touched.

"You'd better hold it there," said he, "while I shovel them across," and with his hollowed palms he scooped the beans from one to the other. In the pan he had shaken there now remained a little discoloured water, and at the bottom about a teacupful of gravel.

"There you are," said he triumphantly; "here's your gravel in this one, and there's your frijoles in that one. It's as easy as rolling off a log." She looked agreeably surprised, and he laughed.

"How would you look," said he, "if those little rocks were nuggets, eh? Coarse gold, heavy gold, eh?" He smiled a strange smile, and a strange light shone in his eyes. "Many a thousand pounds of gravel I've washed, looking for gold in the bottom of every one; but this is the first time I ever panned out beans to get gravel. Maybe some day I'll find that heavy gold yet, but God knows where."

He straightened himself up to his full height, leaving on the ground the pan over which he had been stooping. His eyes ranged out across the courtyard through the open gateway to distant pine-clad peaks standing out against the intense blue of the sky.

Manuelita had likewise set down her pan, and was leaning her hand against the side of the doorway and her head against her hand.

"I hope you will find it," she said, with a glance from the depths of her liquid eyes. His eyes met hers and dwelt there for a moment.

"Thanks," he said; "your good wishes should bring good luck."

"I wish they might"; she half sighed as she spoke; "but which of us can ever tell where good fortune comes from?"

And then broke in the voice of Don Nepomuceno, "Come along and see the seed corn, Don Estevan. I have found the key."

CHAPTER VIII

CHILDREN OF THE SUN

They looked at the seed corn, and the American complimented Don Nepomuceno on his enterprise as an improving farmer.

"Why don't you take to the business yourself?" said the Mexican, as he relocked the door behind them. "You have money and you have a pair of good mules. You could buy land and work-oxen and hire peons. You would make your living at it easier than at the mining. How long have you been a miner?"

"Ten years, on and off," answered the other. "It is a good slice out of one's life, I admit"; there was a certain wistfulness in his tone. He was beginning to think that perhaps he had missed a good deal of happiness in his time.

"Ten years of wandering!" exclaimed the Mexican. "*Ay de mi*, but you must be tired. Why should you want to go back to Colorado and begin it all over again?"

"Well, for one thing," answered the other, "I've just heard from an old pard of mine up there, and I think from the way he talks he's got hold of a good thing. I'm going to see."

"And you'll go all that journey just to see!" said the other. "You trust him? You think he's a good man?"

"Well, I don't know so much about that," admitted Stephens. "Truth to tell, the last time I saw him we had considerable of a difference of opinion; in fact we split, and we reckoned to stay split. You see, he busted me up as we call it, ruined me, that is; only I had the luck to sort of pull myself round. But that happened two years ago; all the same I don't say that I want him for a pard again, though he must have pretty well straightened himself out, the way he talks; but still, you bet, I'd like mighty well to shake hands with him, right now."

"And he ruined you?" exclaimed the Mexican.

"Busted me wide open. Left me flat broke," said the American.

"How did it all happen?" asked the other. "Tell us all about it; we have heard some of your adventures, but not this. Come into the sitting-room here and let us have it."

"Well, if it won't bore you, you're welcome," said Stephens, following his host and preparing to refill his pipe.

"Ah, you must smoke when you talk, I know," said Sanchez, "and you wish to smoke your own American tobacco, for you do not like the flavour of our New Mexican *punche* in your pipe. Ho, a light here, Pedrito! quick, bring a live coal for the señor."

Pedrito, a small son of the peon, came running from the kitchen with a live coal in a piece of hoop iron, which he offered to Stephens, pulling off his cap and standing bareheaded before the honoured guest, with old-world courtesy. Manuelita knew very well what was up, and fixed herself down to listen just by the door, where she could hear every word. Stephens settled himself down comfortably on the divan, and began.

"I picked up with this partner, who has just written me this letter, Rockefeller his name is, when I was up in Idaho. We took to each other kind of natural-like, and he and I pulled together as amiably as a span of old wheel-horses for a goodish bit. We were quite different sort of men, too, in ourselves; but somehow that seemed to make it all the easier for us to get along. We worked in the mines all that winter, and when spring came we had enough saved to rig out a real A1 prospecting outfit. Rocky – that's what I called him – used to spree a bit every once in a while, but nothing really to hurt, you know. He could pull up short, which is more than most men who go on the spree have sense to do. His sprees didn't prevent our saving over four hundred dollars. Then we bought two cayuses to ride – cayuses is the name they give to those broncho horses up that way, – and a good pack-mule and

plenty of grub and blankets. We put in the whole of that summer prospecting off in the Cœur d'Alène country, and we staked out a lot of claims on different lodes, and we put in a good bit of work on some of 'em so as to hold 'em for the year. Well, come fall, we hadn't been able to sell any one of our claims, and we hadn't taken out any high-grade ore that would pay for packing over the mountains to any reduction works, and there we were, short of cash. So we cleared from that Cœur d'Alène country at last. It was too far from a railroad. We sold our claims for what we could get, and that wasn't much, and we lit out for Montana, and there that next summer we just did everlastingly prospect over some of the roughest country I ever ran across. The Indians were powerful bad too, to say nothing of the road-agents. But we struck it at last pretty rich on a lode that we called 'The Last Lap' – that's the last round, you know, that the horses make on a race-track. I'd spent eight mortal years chasing my tail all round the Pacific slope looking for a good lode, and here it was, after all, across on the head-waters of the Missouri in Montana. We knew we'd got a good thing. The ledge was three to five feet thick, with a nice, uniform lot of high-grade ore, and a special streak that would assay up to five hundred dollars a ton. I never saw a nicer lode. The only thing was, it was a plaguy long way from any quartz mill for the free ore, and it was a plaguy sight farther to the only reduction works that could handle the richest portions of it. Of course what the mine wanted was a smelter of its own, right on the spot, but that's what got us. We hadn't the capital to start it. It wanted at least fifty or a hundred thousand dollars laid out before we could hope to get back a cent. That mine was worth a million, if we'd had it in California, but off there, five or six hundred miles from a railroad, owned by us two prospectors who'd just about got to the end of our tether, it was too big a thing for us to handle. Well, we did what work we could on it. We sunk a shaft and ran a bit of a drift, and we went into Helena and we offered a share in it to a few capitalists we thought we could trust. None of 'em would even look at it. At last we ran on to Colonel Starr, – old Beebee Starr; likely you never heard of him, but they knew him well enough up there, – and he rode out with us to see it; and he tumbled to it, too, as soon as ever he'd grubbed out a few specimens with his own pick and had 'em assayed. Well, he wouldn't take a half-interest and find the money to develop the mine, which was what we wanted him to do, and we were stony-broke by that time except for our cayuses and our camp outfit, and winter a-coming on; and the long and short of it was that we gave Colonel Starr a quitclaim deed to our whole interest in the Last Lap Lode for twelve thousand five hundred dollars in greenbacks, paid down on the nail. The Last Lap has paid more than that much in a month in dividends since then, but that's common enough; that's how things do pan out; but I don't believe in whining over my luck, never did. And I'd been waiting eight years for a look in, and I didn't despise getting my half of the twelve thousand five hundred dollars, if the Last Lap was worth a million.

"So we sold the best quartz mine in Montana, and that's where Rocky and I split. We got the money from Colonel Starr in greenbacks, and it was a roll as thick as my arm. And Rocky pouched it all, for I had to go out to a cabin three miles out of town to see another old pard of mine who had been crushed by a fall of rock and was dying. I know I ought never to have left Rocky with that money on him; but what was I to do? It was late in the day; I had to go; I couldn't take it along with me, for a man was liable in those days to be held up anywhere round the outskirts of town by those cursed road-agents. Rocky had kept plumb straight for over a year. I trusted him, and I went. I got back to our hotel that night about ten o'clock, and a man says to me, 'D'you know where your pard Rocky's gone?'

"'No,' says I, 'aint he here?'

"'Not much,' says he; 'he's at Frenchy's, bucking agi'n' the tiger.'

"My heart felt like a lump of ice. I just turned right around and walked across the road to where this Frenchy kept a faro bank, and went in. There was Rocky, about half drunk, sitting at the table, with about three little chips on the cloth before him. I went up and put my hand on Rocky's shoulder and looked on. The dealer turned up the jack, I think it was, and raked in Rocky's stake. Rocky turns his head and looks up at me with a ghastly grin. 'Is that you?' says he; 'Jack, you'd orter hev come before. I've had a devil of a run of bad luck; I'm cleaned out.'

"'In God's name,' says I, 'is that so?'"

"'You bet,' says he."

"I felt as if my eyes were two big burning holes in my head. 'God forgive you, Rocky,' says I, 'for playing the giddy goat, and me for leaving you alone for one night in Helena, Montana. Come on out of this now, Rocky, and I'll divide my share with you. I never went back on a pard.'"

"Then the big blow came. 'Your share?' says he; 'why it's all gone. It's all gone, every dollar of it, and them chips you saw me lose was the end of the Last Lap Lode.' I heard some bummer behind me give a laugh, one of those whiskey-soaking galoots that think it funny to see the next man cleaned out."

"I felt a queer lump in my throat, and I says to the banker, very solemn, 'Mr. Frenchy, this gentleman here,' I was holding my hand on Rocky, 'he's my pardner, and I must beg you to take notice that half what you've won off him is my property that he had charge of.'"

"'That's no use, young man,' says the banker to me. 'We play for keeps in this house, and so you'll find it.'"

"'We'll see about that,' says I. 'Now, Rocky, tell me, is the whole of the Last Lap gone, the whole of the twelve thousand five hundred dollars?'"

"'Every last cent,' says Rocky. I could see by his looks that he felt powerful mean."

"'Then, mister,' says I to the banker – I was determined to be deadly civil – 'six thousand two hundred and fifty dollars of what you've took from this gentleman belongs to me.'"

"'You're interfering with the progress of the game,' says he; 'and say, look here, you don't need to make that remark of yours here again. That's entirely a matter between you and your pard; it's none of my business, but if you want any advice of me, it is that you take him outside and settle it with him.'"

"He had his gang around him, and I saw that they had the deadwood on me, and the other players wanted to go ahead with their game. I was a stranger from the mountains, dead-broke, with no backing, and I felt there was no show for me in that shebang. I didn't open my mouth, but I set myself to get Rocky home, first thing. I had pretty near to drag him there. When I got him on the street the whiskey he'd drunk went into his head, and he was like a madman. He wanted to fight me, actually he did, till I got his gun away from him. He hit me, yes, he struck me with his fist, till I had to pinion him; luckily I was the stronger man of the two. I got him back to our room at last, and got him to bed. He just laid there on his bed like a log and snored. And I laid over there on mine and cursed. I lay awake all that night thinking. I'd been a brother to Rocky; I'd saved him time and again before that night; and now he'd been and given me clean away, – lost me the only good stake I'd ever had in eight years."

"I was sick. I didn't know what to do. We hadn't even money to pay our livery-stable and hotel bill. We'd put up at a first-class hotel when we made our bargain with Colonel Starr, reckoning to pay our account out of the proceeds of the Last Lap. Now, by selling our cayuses we'd hardly cover it; so that here we were, fairly busted, afoot, stony-broke, and winter coming on. Sick was no name for what I felt. It was all to begin over again, and I was eight years older than when I started out at prospecting. You bet I felt old that night. Morning came, and I couldn't eat any breakfast. Rocky was snoring still. I belted on my six-shooter, stepped over to Frenchy's, and asked for the proprietor. They told me he wasn't up. It was a tony gambling-house, you know, quite a 'way-up' sort of place. I sat down and said I could wait. At last they told me he'd see me. I was shown up into a room. He was there, spick and span, in a biled shirt and diamond pin, and all that."

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