

Aimard Gustave

The Bee Hunters: A Tale of Adventure



Gustave Aimard

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CHAPTER I

A MEETING IN THE FAR WEST

Since the discovery of the goldfields in California and on the Fraser River, North America has entered into a phase of such active transformation, civilisation has advanced with such giant strides, that only one region is still extant – a region of which very little is known – where the poet, or the dreamer who delights in surrounding himself with the glories of nature, can revel in the grandeur and majesty, which are the great characteristics of the mysterious savannahs.

It is the only country, nowadays, where such men can sate themselves with the contemplation of those immense oceans of alternate verdure and sand, which spread themselves out in striking contrast, yet wonderful harmony, – expanding, boundless, solemn, silent, and threatening, under the eye of the omnipotent Creator.

This region, in which the sound of the squatter's axe has not yet roused the slumbering echoes, is called the Far West.

Here the Indians still reign as masters, tracing paths on rapid mustangs, as untamed as their riders, through the vast solitudes, whose mysteries are known only to themselves; hunting the bison and wild horse, waging war with each other, or pursuing with deadly enmity, the white hunters and trappers daring enough to venture into this last formidable refuge of the redskins.

On the 27th July, 1858, about three hours before sunset, a cavalier, mounted on a magnificent mustang, was carelessly following the banks of the Rio Bermejo, a tributary of the Rio Grande del Norte, into which it falls after a course of from seventy to eighty leagues across the desert.

This cavalier, clad in the leather dress worn by Mexican hunters, was, as far as one could judge, a man not more than thirty years of age, of tall and well-knit frame, and graceful in manner and action. His face was proud and determined; and his hardy features, stamped with an expression of frankness and good nature, inspired, at first sight, respect and sympathy.

His blue eyes, soft and mild as a woman's; the thick curls of blonde hair, which escaped in masses from under the brim of his cap of vicuña skin, and wantoned in disorder on his shoulders; the sallownish white of his skin, very different from the olive tint, approaching to bronze, peculiar to the Mexicans, – all these would lead one to surmise that he had not first seen the light under the hot sun of Spanish America.

This man, who was to all appearance so peaceable and so little to be dreaded, concealed, under a slightly effeminate exterior, a courage which nothing could daunt, nor even startle: the delicate and almost diaphanous skin of his white hands, with their rosy nails, served as a covering to nerves of steel.

At the moment of which we speak this personage seemed to be half-asleep in his saddle, and allowed his mustang to choose his own pace; and the beast, profiting by a liberty to which he was not accustomed, nibbled off with the tips of his lips the blades of sun-dried grass he met with on his road.

The place where our cavalier found himself was a plain of tolerable extent, cut into two nearly equal parts by the Rio Bermejo, whose banks were steep, and here and there strewn with bare, gray rocks.

This plain was enclosed between two chains of hills, rising to right and left in successive undulations, until they formed at the horizon high peaks covered with snow, on which the purple splendours of sunset were playing.

However, in spite of the real or pretended somnolence of the cavalier, his eyes half opened occasionally and, without turning his head, he cast a searching glance around him, but betrayed no symptom of apprehension, which nevertheless would have been quite pardonable in a district where the jaguar is the least formidable of man's enemies.

The traveller, or hunter, – for as yet we do not know who he is, – continued his road at a pace which became more and more slow and careless; he was on the point of passing at about a hundred yards' distance from a rock which rose like a solitary watchtower on the bank of the Rio Bermejo, when, from behind the mass, where he had probably lain in ambush, there half emerged a man, armed with an American rifle.

This individual for a moment examined the traveller with the minutest attention: then, levelling his rifle, he pressed the trigger, and fired.

The cavalier, bounding in his saddle, and uttering a suppressed scream, flung up his arms, lost his stirrups, and rolled on the turf, where, after a few convulsive movements, he remained motionless.

The horse, in alarm, reared, lashed out wildly with his heels, and started off at full speed in the direction of the woods scattered over the hills, in the midst of which he soon disappeared.

Having thus cleverly knocked over his man, the assassin dropped the butt of his weapon on the ground, and, doffing his cap of vicuña skin, dried his forehead, while he murmured expressions of gratified vanity.

"¡*Canarios!* This time I don't think my marauding friend will come to life again; I must have broken his backbone for him. What a glorious shot! What will those fools say who wanted to make me believe at the venta that he was a sorcerer, who could not be hit without putting a silver ball into my rifle, if they could see him now, stretched out in that way? Capital! I have loyally earned my hundred piastres. It's not bad luck. I had lots of trouble in succeeding. May the holy Virgin be blessed for the protection she has deigned to grant me! I will take care not to be ungrateful to her for it."

All the time he was muttering thus, the worthy fellow was reloading his rifle with the most scrupulous care.

"Well," continued he, seating himself on a clod of turf, "I am knocked up with having had to watch so long. Suppose I were to go and convince myself of his death? By Heaven, no; he might still be breathing, and treat me to a thrust of the knife. I'm no such fool. I prefer sitting here in peace, and smoking a cigarette. If, within an hour, he has not stirred, all will be over, and then I'll run the risk. And indeed I'm in no sort of hurry," he added, with a sinister smile.

Upon that, with an air of the greatest coolness, he took the tobacco from his pouch, twisted a *pajillo* (straw cigarette), lit it, and commenced smoking with immense *sangfroid*, never ceasing to watch, out of the corner of his eye, the corpse lying a few yards from him.

Let us profit by this moment of respite to make the reader a little better acquainted with this interesting personage.

He was a man a little below the average height, but the breadth of his shoulders and bigness of his limbs showed him to be endowed with immense muscular power; his forehead was low and receding like that of a wild beast; his nose, long and hooked, bent down over a mouth immense in size, but with thin lips, and garnished with long pointed and irregular teeth; gray eyes, with squinting pupils, stamped his physiognomy with a sinister expression.

The man was dressed in a hunter's garb, similar to that of the cavalier. *Calzoneras* (loose trousers) of leather, bound about at the hips with a *faja*, or sash of silk, and falling as low as the knee, were fastened under *botas vaqueras* (heavy boots), intended to preserve the legs. A kind of

half-jacket, half-blouse, also of leather, covered the upper part of his body, which garment, open in front like a shirt, had sleeves reaching to the elbow; a *machete* or straight sword, passed without sheath through an iron ring, hung on his left hip; and a game bag, apparently well supplied was slung to his right side by a strip of bison hide worn across the shoulder; a *zarapé*, or Indian blanket, motley with brilliant colours, lay on the earth beside him.

In the meanwhile time was passing; an hour and a half had already elapsed without our friend, who smoked cigarette after cigarette, appearing to be able to decide upon going to convince himself of the death of him on whom he had treacherously drawn trigger from behind the rock.

During all this time, the cavalier, after he fell, had preserved the most complete immobility; attentively watched by the assassin, the latter had not been able to perceive the slightest motion. The *zopilotes* (turkey buzzards) and the condors, in all probability attracted by the scent of the corpse, were beginning to circle in wide rings over it, uttering their rough and discordant cries; the sun, on the point of disappearing, had assumed the shape of a globe of fire on the edge of the horizon. It became necessary to act.

The assassin rose, greatly against his will.

"Pooh!" he murmured, "The man must be dead enough by this time, or if not his soul has turned to ashes in his heart. Let's go and look. Nevertheless, as prudence is the mother of safety, let us be prudent."

And in accordance with this reasoning, he drew from his garter the sharp-pointed knife which every Mexican carries for the purpose of cutting the thong if an enemy happens to cast the lasso round his neck. Having tried the spring of the blade against a stone, and convinced himself that the point was not broken, he made up his mind, at last, to approach the body, still lying motionless on the spot where it had fallen. But in the American deserts there is an axiom the justice of which is acknowledged by all. It is this: That the shortest road from one point to another is a curve. Our friend took good care to put it in practice on this occasion. Instead of advancing straight to the object of his visit, he made a long circuit, drawing nearer little by little, stealing along softly, stopping at intervals to examine the body, and ready to fly at the slightest movement he might see, and with his knife ready to strike.

But these precautions were useless; the corpse preserved the immobility of a statue, and our man stopped almost within reach without discovering a single thing to betray an atom of life in the unhappy wretch stretched upon the ground before him.

The murderer crossed his arms over his chest, and contemplated the body, whose face was turned to the ground.

"By my faith, he is dead indeed. It is a pity; for he was a formidable fellow. I should never have dared to attack him face to face. But a man must stick to his word. I had been paid; I was bound to fulfil my engagement. Curious! I see no blood! Pooh! It is a case of internal bleeding. So much the better for him, for his sufferings will have been less. However, to make doubly sure, I'll plant my knife between his two shoulders: in that way I shall be sure of my bird, although there is no danger of his coming to life again. You see, one must not deceive those who pay us; a man must stick to his word."

After this soliloquy he knelt down, bent over the body, supporting himself by one hand on its shoulders, and lifted his knife; but suddenly, by a movement of unexampled rapidity, the supposed corpse rose with a bound like a jaguar, and oversetting the stupefied assassin, seized him by the throat, pinned him to the earth, planted his knee on his chest, and deprived him of his knife before his brains could render an account of what was happening.

"Hulloa, *compadre!*" (comrade) said the cavalier in a jeering tone; "One moment, if you please, *¡cuerpo de Cristo!*"

All this passed in much less time than we have taken to write it.

However, sudden and unexpected as the attack had been, the other was too much accustomed to strange vicissitudes in somewhat similar situations not to recover his presence of mind almost immediately.

"Well, comrade," resumed the cavalier, "what have you got to say to all this?"

"I?" replied the other, with a sneer; "*¡Caray!* I say the game has been well played."

"Then it is one you are acquainted with?"

"A little," was the modest reply.

"I have been a little sharper than you."

"Yes, sharper; yet I certainly thought I had killed you. Curious," he continued, as if talking to himself, "the others were right; it is I who have been a fool. I will take a silver ball next time; it is surer."

"What are you saying?"

"Nothing."

"Pardon me, you did say something."

"Are you very anxious to know?"

"Apparently, since I have asked the question."

"Very well. I said I would take a silver bullet next time."

"What for?"

"Why, to kill you."

"To kill me? Go to; you are a fool! Do you fancy I will let you escape?"

"I do not fancy anything of the kind, the more so as you could not do anything worse."

"Because you would kill me?"

"By Heavens! Yes, as soon as possible."

"Then you hate me?"

"I? Not the least in the world."

"Well, then, if not, what is your motive?"

"Confound it! A man must stick to his word."

The cavalier cast a long look upon him, shaking his head the while with a thoughtful air.

"H'm," said he, at last, "promise me not to attempt to escape if I leave you free for a time."

"I promise, with so much the more pleasure, since I am obliged to confess that I find myself in a most fatiguing posture, and am very anxious to change it."

"Rise," said the cavalier, helping him up.

The other did not wait for the mandate to be repeated: in an instant he was on his legs.

"Ah," he replied, with a grunt of satisfaction, "liberty is a blessing!"

"Is it not? Now shall we talk a little?"

"I desire nothing better, *caballero*. I can only be the gainer by your conversation," replied the other, bowing, with an insinuating smile.

The two enemies placed themselves side by side, as if nothing extraordinary had happened between them.

This is one of the distinctive traits of Mexican character: murder amongst these people has grown so thoroughly into a habit, that it never astonishes anyone; and it often happens that the man just escaped falling a victim to an ambushade, does not scruple to press the hand extended by his would-be assassin, foreseeing that someday or other he too will be called on to play in his turn the part of murderer.

In the present circumstances it was certainly not this consideration which induced the cavalier to act as he was doing. He had a powerful motive, with which we shall become acquainted presently; for, in spite of his feigned indifference, it was only with a sentiment of lively disgust that he seated himself beside the bandit.

As to the latter, we feel ourselves bound in justice to state that he had only one feeling of regret – the shame of having missed his blow; but he promised himself, *in petto*, to take his revenge as soon as possible, and this time to take such sure precautions that he must succeed.

"What are you thinking of?" demanded the cavalier, all of a sudden.

"I? On my honour, nothing," was the ingenuous reply.

"You would deceive me. I know what you are thinking of at this very moment."

"Oh, as for that, permit me to tell you – "

"You were thinking of killing me," said the cavalier, interrupting him abruptly.

The other returned no answer; he contented himself with muttering between his teeth —

"What a devil! He reads the most hidden thoughts. One is not safe beside him."

"Will you answer honestly, and frankly, the questions I am about to put to you?" resumed the cavalier, after a time.

"Yes; as well as lies in my power."

"That is to say, just so far as your interest does not lead you to lie."

"Confound it, señor, no one likes to make war upon oneself! No one ought to force me to speak ill of myself."

"You are right. Who are you?"

"Señor," replied the other, raising himself proudly, "I have the honour to be a Mexican, My mother was an Opatá Indian; my father a *caballero* (gentleman) of Guadalupe."

"Very well; but I learn nothing from this about yourself."

"Alas, señor!" was the reply, given in that whining tone the Mexicans know so well how to adopt, "I have been unfortunate."

"Oh, you have met with misfortunes! Well, pardon me once more. You have forgotten to mention your name."

"It is a very obscure one, señor; but since you desire to know it, here it is: I am called Tonillo el Zapote – at your service, señor."

"Thanks, Señor Zapote. Now proceed; I am listening."

"I have followed many trades in my day. I have been by turns *lepero* (vagabond), muleteer, husbandman, soldier. Unhappily, I am of a quick temper: when I am in a passion, my hand is very ready."

"And heavy," said the cavalier, with a smile.

"It is all the same; so much so, that I have had the misfortune to *bleed* five or six individuals who had the imprudence to pick a quarrel with me. The *Juez de letras* (magistrate) was annoyed; and under the pretence that I was guilty of six murders, he asserted I deserved the garotte; so, seeing my fellow citizens misapprehended me – that society would not appreciate me at my real value – I took refuge in the desert, and turned hunter."

"Of men?" interrupted the cavalier in a tone of sarcasm.

"By Heavens! Señor, times are hard: the Gringos pay twenty dollars for a scalp. It is a pretty sum; and, on my honour, particularly so when want presses. But I never have recourse to these means except in the direst extremity."

"It is well. And now tell me, do you know me?"

"Very well by report; personally, not at all."

"Have you any reasons for hating me?"

"I have already the honour to tell you – none."

"In that case, why have you attempted to assassinate me?"

"I, señor?" cried he, showing signs of the utmost astonishment; "I assassinate you? Never!",

"What, fool!" exclaimed the cavalier, lowering his brows, "Dare you maintain such an imposture? Four times have I served as a target to your rifle. You have drawn trigger upon me this very day, and – "

"Oh! By your leave, señor," said El Zapote with warmth, "that is quite a different thing. True, I fired at you; it is even likely I shall fire at you again; but never, as I hoped for Paradise, have I dreamed of assassinating you. For shame! – I, a *caballero*! How could you form so bad an opinion of me, señor?"

"Then what was your intention in firing at me?"

"To kill you, señor; nothing more."

"Then in this case murder is not assassination?"

"Not in the slightest degree, señor; this was business."

"What! Business? – The rogue will make me go mad, upon my soul!"

"By Heaven, señor, an honest man must stick to his word."

"If it is to kill me?"

"Exactly so," answered El Zapote. "You can understand that, under the conditions, I was compelled to keep my engagement."

There was a moment of silence; evidently the reasoning did not seem so conclusive to the cavalier as to the *lepero*.

Then said the former:

"Enough; let us have done with this."

"I ask no better of your seigneurie."

"You acknowledge, I suppose, that you are in my power?"

"It would be difficult to assert the contrary."

"Good! As, according to your own confession you have fired on me with the evident intention of killing me – "

"I cannot deny it, señor."

"In killing you, now you are in my power, I should only be making use of reprisals?"

"That is perfectly true, *caballero*, I must even confess that you could not possibly have a stronger reason for doing so."

His companion gazed at him in surprise.

"Then you are content to die?" said he.

"Let us understand each other," replied the *lepero* with avidity. "I am not at all content. On the contrary, I only know that I am a thorough gambler, that is all. I played; I lost; I have to pay. It is reasonable."

The cavalier seemed to reflect.

"And if, instead of planting my knife in your throat, even as you yourself acknowledge I have the right to do – "

El Zapote made a sign of assent.

"I were to restore you to liberty," continued the cavalier, "leaving you the power of acting according to your own impulse?"

The bandit shook his head sorrowfully.

"I repeat," he said, "that I would kill you. A man must stick to his word. I cannot betray the confidence of my employers; it would ruin my reputation."

The cavalier burst out laughing.

"I suppose you have been well paid for this undertaking?" said he.

"Not a great deal; but want makes many things be done. I have received a hundred piastres."

"No more?" exclaimed the stranger, with a gesture of disdain; "It is very little; I thought myself worth more than that."

"A great deal more, particularly as the undertaking was difficult; but next time I will take a silver bullet."

"You are an idiot, comrade. You will not kill me the next, any more than you did the other times. Think of what has occurred up to today. I have already heard your balls whistle four times

about my ears: that annoyed me. At last I wished to find out who you were: you see I have succeeded."

"It is the truth. Now, after all, were you not aware of my being close to you?"

The cavalier shrugged his shoulders.

"I will not even demand of you," he said, "the name of him who has ordered you to compass my death. Here, take your knife, and begone. I despise you too much to fear you. Adieu!"

Speaking thus, the cavalier rose, and dismissed the bandit with a gesture full of majesty and disdain.

The *lepero* remained an instant motionless, then bowed profoundly before his generous adversary.

"Thanks, your worship," said he, in a voice exhibiting some emotion; "you are better than I. Never mind; I will prove to you that I am not the scoundrel you fancy me, and that there is still something within me which has not been utterly corrupted."

The cavalier's only answer was to turn his back upon him, with a shrug of the shoulders.

The *lepero* gazed after his retiring form with a look of which his savage features would have seemed incapable: a mixture of sorrow and gratitude impressed on his countenance a stamp very different to their customary expression.

"He does not believe me," he muttered – we have already seen that he had a decided taste for soliloquy – "he does not believe me. Why, indeed, should he trust my words? It is sad; but an honest man must stick to his word, and I will prove to him that he does not yet know me. Let me begone."

Comforting himself with these words, the bandit returned to the rock behind which he had originally hidden; there he picked up his rifle, then from the other side of the rock he brought his horse, which he had concealed in a hollow, replaced the bridle, and departed at a gallop, after casting a glance behind him, and murmuring, in a tone of sincere admiration:

"¡Caray! What a tremendous fellow! What natural power! What a pity it would be to knock him over like an antelope, from behind a bush! ¡Viva Dios! That shall not happen, if I can hinder it, on the honour of a Zapote."

He forded the Rio Bermejo, and speedily disappeared amongst the tall grasses that bordered the opposite bank.

As soon as the unknown had assured himself of the *lepero's* departure, he began to calculate the time by the enormously lengthened shadows of the trees; and, after looking about him attentively, gave a whistle, sharp and prolonged, which, although restrained, was nevertheless repeated by all the echoes of the river, so powerful was its tone.

At the end of a few seconds a distant neighing made itself audible, followed almost immediately after by the sound of precipitate galloping, resembling the rolling of distant thunder.

Little by little the sound grew nearer, the branches crashed, the underwood was violently dashed aside, and the unknown's mustang made his appearance on the skirt of a wood at a little distance.

When there, the noble animal paused, snuffed the air vigorously, turning his head and neck in all directions; then starting off, with a thousand capers he made the best of his way, till he halted before his master, and gazed upon him with eyes full of intelligence.

The latter patted him gently, talking to him in a caressing voice; then, having made quite sure that the *lepero* was gone, and that he was assuredly alone, he readjusted the trappings of his horse, which had become slightly disordered, vaulted into the saddle and in his turn departed.

But instead of continuing to follow the course of the Rio Bermejo, he turned his back upon it, and rode in the direction of the mountains.

The bearing of the unknown had undergone a complete change; it was no longer the man whom we formerly presented to our readers, half asleep, swaying in the saddle, and leaving his horse to wander at leisure. No; now he held himself firm and upright on his mustang, with limbs

closely pressing its flanks; his face was overcast with dark shades of thought; his glances wandered about as if they would pierce the mysteries of the thick forest with which he was surrounded; with head slightly bent forward, he listened with strained attention to the most trifling noise; and his rifle, placed across the saddlebow, had the lock exactly under his right hand, in such a fashion that he could fire instantaneously, if circumstances required.

One might have said, so suddenly had the man changed, that the strange scene to which we have just introduced our reader was for him only one of those thousand accidents, without consequences, to which his desert life exposed him, but that now he was preparing to battle with dangers which might really prove serious.

CHAPTER II IN THE FOREST

The unknown had struck into a dense forest, the last skirts of which dwindled away close to the banks of the Rio Bermejo.

American forests have little resemblance to those of the Old World: in the former, the trees shoot up hap-hazard, crossing and interlacing each other, and sometimes leaving large spaces completely open, strewn with dead trees, uprooted, and piled on each other in the strangest manner.

Some trees, partially or wholly withered, show in their hollow remnants of the strong and fruitful soil; others, equally ancient, are supported by the entangled creepers, which, in process of time, have almost attained the size of their former props – the diversity of foliage forming here the most agreeable contrast; others, concealing within their hollow trunks a hotbed, formed from the remains of their leaves and half-dead branches, which has promoted the germination of the seed that fell from them, seem to promise an indemnification for the loss of the parent trees in the saplings they nourish.

One could imagine that nature had determined to put beyond the ravages of time some of these old trees, when sinking under the weight of ages, by clothing them in a mantle of gray moss, which hangs in long festoons from the topmost branches to the ground. This moss, called *barbe d'Espagnol*, gives to the trees a most fantastic aspect.

The ground of these forests, formed from the remains of trees falling, in successive generations, for centuries, is most eccentric: sometimes raising itself in the shape of a mountain, to descend suddenly into a muddy swamp, peopled by hideous alligators wallowing in the green slime, and by millions of mosquitoes swarming amidst the fetid vapours exhaled, sometimes extending itself endlessly in plains of a monotony and regularity truly depressing.

Rivers, without a name, traverse these unknown deserts, bearing nothing on their silent waters save the black swans, which let themselves carelessly float down the currents; while rosy flamingoes, posted along the banks, fish philosophically for their dinners, with eyes half-closed and sanctimonious air.

Even where the view seems most contracted, sudden clearings sometimes open out prospects picturesque in the extreme and deliciously fortuitous.

Incessant noises, nameless sounds, make themselves heard without a break in these mysterious regions – the grand voices of the solitude – the solemn hymn of the invisible world, created by the Almighty.

In the bosom of these redoubtable forests the wild beasts and reptiles, which abound in Mexico, find refuge; here and there one meets with paths incessantly trodden for centuries by jaguars and bisons, and which, after countless meanderings, all debouch on unknown drinking holes.

Woe to the daring mortal who, without a guide ventures to tempt the inextricable mazes of these immense seas of verdure! After ineffable tortures, he succumbs, and falls a prey to the savage beasts. How many hardy pioneers have died thus, without the possibility of the veil being lifted which shrouds their miserable end! Their blanched bones, discovered at the foot of some tree, alone can teach those who come upon them that on that spot men have died, a prey to infinite suffering, and that the same fate, perchance, awaits the finders.

The stranger must have been the constant guest of the forest into which he had so audaciously plunged at the moment when the sun, quitting the horizon, had left the earth to darkness – darkness rendered still denser in the covert, in which the light even at midday could only struggle in at intervals through the tufted branches.

Bending a little forward, eye and ear on the watch, the unknown advanced as rapidly as the nature of the ground under his horse's hoofs would let him, following unhesitatingly the capricious deviations of a wild animal's path, whose traces were scarcely discoverable amidst the tall grasses which strove continually to efface it.

He had already ridden for several hours without having slackened the pace of his horse, plunging deeper and deeper into the forest.

He had forded several rivers, scaled many a steep ravine, hearing at a short distance, on right and left, the hoarse growlings of the jaguar and the mocking wailing of the tiger cat, which seemed to follow him with their menacing yells.

Taking no heed of roar or tumult, he continued his route, although the forest assumed a more dreary aspect at every step.

The bushes and trees of low growth had disappeared, to make room for gigantic mahogany trees, century old cork trees, and the acajou, whose sombre branches formed a vaulted roof of green eighty feet above his head. The path had grown wider, and stretched, in a gentle incline, towards a hillock of moderate height, entirely free from trees.

Arrived at the base of the hillock, the stranger halted; then, without dismounting, cast a searching glance on all around.

The stillness of death pervaded everything; the howling of the wild beasts was lost in the distance; no noise was audible, save that caused by a slender stream of water, which, trickling through the crevices of a rock, fell from a height of three or four yards into a natural basin.

The sky, of the deepest blue, was spangled with an infinite number of brilliant stars; and the moon, sailing amidst a sea of whitish clouds, cast her silvery rays in profusion on the hillock, whose sides, fantastically lighted up, formed a striking contrast with the rest of the landscape, merged, as it was, in the deepest obscurity.

During several minutes the unknown remained motionless as a statue, listening to the faintest sound, ready to fire at the slightest appearance of danger.

Convinced, at last, that all around was peaceful, and that nothing unusual disturbed the silence of the solitude, he prepared to dismount, when suddenly his horse threw up his head, laid back his ears, and snorted loudly.

A moment more, and a violent crashing was heard among the underwood; a noble moose deer rose from amidst the bushes, and, bounding to within a short distance from the cavalier, rapidly traversed the path, tossing his antlers in terror, and vanished in the darkness.

For a time the noise of its headlong course resounded over the dry leaves, crushed under its feet in the constantly increasing speed of its flight.

The cavalier, with a scarcely perceptible motion of the hand, backed his horse gradually to the foot of the hillock, with his head always turned in the direction of the forest, like a vidette who retires before a superior force.

As soon as he reached the spot he had selected, the unknown leaped lightly to the ground; and, making a rampart of his horse's body, levelled his rifle, steadied the barrel across the saddle, and waited patiently.

He had not to wait long: after a while the tread of several persons was heard approaching his place of ambush.

Most likely the unknown had already divined who these persons might be, even before he saw them; for he quitted his temporary shelter, passed his arm through his horse's reins, and, uncocking his rifle, let the butt drop on the ground, with every symptom of complete security, while a smile of indefinable expression played about his lips.

At last the branches parted, and five persons appeared on the scene.

Of these five persons, four were men; two of them supported the tottering form of a woman, whom they almost carried in their arms. And, what was most wonderful in these regions, the

strangers, whom it was easy to recognise as white men by their dress and the colour of their skin, had no horses with them.

They continued to advance without being aware of the presence of the unknown, who, still motionless, marked their approach with mingled pity and sadness.

Suddenly one of the strangers happened to lift his eyes.

"Praise be to God!" cried he, in Mexican, with lively satisfaction; "We are saved. Here is a human being at last."

The five stopped. The one who had first observed the unknown came rapidly towards him, and exclaimed, with a graceful inclination:

"Caballero, I entreat you to grant, what is seldom refused in the wilderness, aid and protection."

The unknown, before he replied, threw a searching look at the speaker.

The latter was a man of some fifty years; his manner was polished, his features noble, although his hair was growing white about his temples; his figure, upright and compact, had no more bent an inch, nor his black eyes lost a particle of their fire, than if he had been only thirty. His rich dress and the ease of his manner clearly proved him to belong to the highest grade of Mexican society.

"You have committed two grave errors in as many minutes, caballero," answered the unknown: "the first, in approaching me without precaution; the second, in demanding aid and protection without knowing who I am."

"I do not understand you, señor," replied the stranger, with astonishment. "Do not all men owe mutual assistance to each other?"

"In the civilised world it may be so," said the unknown, with a sneer; "but in the wilderness, the sight of a man always forebodes danger: we are savages here."

The stranger recoiled in astonishment.

"And thus," said he, "you would leave your fellow creatures to perish in these horrible solitudes without stretching forth a hand to help them?"

"My fellow creatures!" cried the unknown, with biting irony; "My fellow creatures are the wild beasts of the prairie. What have I in common with you men of towns and cities, natural enemies of every being that breathes the pure air of liberty? There is nothing in common between you and me. Begone, and weary me no more."

"Be it so," was the stranger's haughty answer. "I would not importune you much longer; were it only a question of myself, I would not have uttered a single prayer to you. Life is not so dear to me, that I should seek to prolong it on terms repugnant to my honour; but it is not a question of myself alone; here is a female, still almost a child, my daughter who is in want of prompt assistance, and will die if it is not rendered."

The unknown made no reply; he had turned away, as if reluctant to carry on any further conversation.

The stranger slowly rejoined his companions, who had halted at the edge of the forest.

"Well?" he asked uneasily.

"The señorita has fainted," sorrowfully replied one of the men.

The stranger uttered an exclamation of grief. He remained for some moments fixing his eyes on the girl, with an indescribable expression of despair.

All of a sudden he turned abruptly, and rushed towards the unknown.

The latter had mounted, and was on the point of retiring.

"Stop!" called the stranger.

"What is it you want with me?" replied the unknown once more. Then he added fiercely, "Let me begone; and thank God that our unforeseen meeting in this forest has not been productive of graver consequences to you."

The menace contained in these enigmatical words disturbed the stranger in spite of himself. However, he would not be discouraged.

"It is impossible," he resumed vehemently, "that you can be as cruel as you wish us to believe. You are too young for all feeling to have died out of your heart."

The unknown laughed strangely.

"I have no heart," he said.

"I implore you, in the name of your mother, not to abandon us!"

"I have no mother."

"Then I beseech you in the name of the being you love most upon earth, whoever that may be."

"I love no one."

"No one?" repeated the stranger, shuddering; "Then I pity you, for you must be most unhappy."

The unknown trembled; a feverish glow stole over his face; but soon recovering himself, he exclaimed:

"Now let me go."

"No; not before I learn who you are."

"Who I am! Have I not already told you? A wild beast; a being with only the semblance of humanity, with a hatred towards all men which nothing can ever appease. Pray to God you may never again encounter me on your path. I am like the raven – the sight of me foretells evil. Adieu!"

"Adieu!" murmured the stranger; "And may God have mercy on you, and not visit your cruelty upon you!"

Just at this moment a voice, feeble, but in its sad modulations sweet and melodious as the notes of the *centzontle*, the American nightingale, rose through the stillness.

"My father, my dear father!" it uttered. "Where are you? Do not abandon me."

"I am here, I am here," exclaimed the stranger tenderly, as he turned quickly to run to her who thus called him.

A cloud passed over the face of the unknown at the sound of these melodious accents; his blue eye flashed like the lightning. He placed his hand on his heart, trembling as if he had received an electric shock.

After a short hesitation, he forced his horse to make a sudden bound forward, and placing his hand on the stranger's shoulder:

"Whose voice is that?" he asked in singular accents.

"The voice of my daughter, who is dying, and calls me."

"Dying?" stammered the unknown, strangely moved. "She!"

"My father, my father!" repeated the girl in a voice which grew weaker and weaker.

The unknown raised himself to his full height; his face assumed an expression of indomitable energy.

"She shall not die!" said he in a low voice. "Come!"

They rejoined the group.

The young girl was stretched upon the ground, with her eyes closed, her face pale as a corpse; the feeble gasps of her breathing alone evincing that life had not completely left her.

The persons surrounding her watched her in profound sadness, while tears rolled silently down their bronzed cheeks.

"Oh!" cried the father, falling on his knees beside the young girl, seizing her hand and covering it with kisses, while his face was inundated with tears; "My fortune – my life – to him who will save my cherished child!"

The unknown had dismounted, and observed the girl with sombre and pensive eye. At last, after several minutes of this mute contemplation, he turned towards the stranger.

"What ails this girl?" he asked abruptly.

"Alas! An incurable ailment: she has been bitten by a grass snake."

The unknown frowned till his eyebrows nearly met together.

"Then she is lost indeed," said his deep voice.

"Lost! O Heavens! My daughter, my dearest daughter!"

"Yes; unless – " then, arousing himself: "How long is it since she was bitten?"

"Scarcely an hour."

The face of the unknown lighted up. He remained silent for a moment, during which the bystanders anxiously bent towards him, awaiting with impatience the opinion he would probably pronounce.

"Scarcely an hour?" said he at last. "Then she may be saved."

The stranger uttered a sigh of joy.

"You will answer for it?" he cried.

"I?" returned the unknown, shrugging his shoulders; "I will answer for nothing, except that I will attempt impossibilities for the chance of restoring her to you."

"Oh, save her, save her!" eagerly exclaimed the father; "And, whoever you may be, I will bless you."

"It matters not to me what you may do. I do not try to save this girl for your sake; and, whatever may be the motives inducing me, I exempt you from all feelings of gratitude."

"You may possibly harbour such thoughts; but for myself – "

"Enough," rudely broke in the unknown; "we have already lost too much time in idle words; let us make haste, if we would not be too late."

All were silent.

The unknown looked around.

We have already said that the strangers had halted at the edge of the forest; over their heads the last trees of the covert expanded their mighty branches.

Approaching the trees, the unknown examined them carefully, apparently in search of something he could not find.

All of a sudden, he uttered a cry of joy; and, unsheathing the long knife fastened to his right knee, he cut a branch from a creeper, and returned to the strangers, who were anxiously watching his proceedings.

"Here," said he to one of the party, who looked like a *peon* (a serf), "strip all the leaves from this branch, and pound them. Be quick; every second is worth a century to her whom we wish to save."

The *peon* set himself actively to the allotted task.

Then the unknown turned to the father:

"In what part of the body has this child been bitten?"

"A little below the left ankle."

"Has she much courage?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Answer! Time presses."

"The poor child is quite worn out; she is very weak."

"Then we must hesitate no longer; the operation must be performed."

"An operation!" cried the stranger, affrighted.

"Would you rather she should die?"

"Is this operation indispensable?"

"It is: we have already lost too much time."

"Then perform it. God grant you may succeed!"

The girl's leg was horribly swollen; the part round the serpent's bite, terribly tumefied, was already taking a greenish hue.

"Alas," muttered the unknown, "there is not a moment to spare. Hold the child so that she cannot stir while I perform the operation."

In these last words the voice of the unknown had assumed such an accent of command, that the strangers obeyed without hesitation.

The former seated himself on the ground, took the limb of the girl upon his knee, and made his preparations. Luckily the moon shone at this moment so clearly, that her vivid rays flooded the landscape, and everything was almost as visible as in broad daylight.

When the girl had first felt the bite, she had immediately, and happily for herself, torn off her silk stocking. The unknown grasped the blade of his knife an inch from the point, and, lowering his brow with terrible determination, buried the point in the wound, and made a cruciform incision about six lines deep, and more than an inch long.

The poor child must have felt terrible anguish; for she gave utterance to a dreadful scream, and twisted herself about nervously.

"Hold her tight, *cuerpo de Cristo!*" shouted the unknown in a voice of thunder, while with admirable coolness and skill he pressed the lips of the wound, so as to force out the black and decomposing blood it contained; "And now the leaves – the leaves!"

The *peon* ran up.

The unknown took the leaves, parted asunder the lips of the wound, and gently, carefully expressed their juice on the palpitating flesh. Making a kind of plaster of the same leaves, he applied it to the wound, tied it down firmly with a bandage, placed the foot carefully on the ground, and rose.

As soon as a certain quantity of the sap of the creeper had fallen upon the wound, the girl had seemed to experience a sensation of great relief; the nervous spasms began to abate; she closed her eyes; and finally she leaned back without attempting to struggle any longer with the persons who held her in their arms.

"You may leave her now," whispered the unknown; "she is asleep."

In fact, the regular though feeble breathing of the patient proved her to be plunged in a profound slumber.

"God be praised!" exclaimed the poor father, clasping his hands in ecstasy; "Then she is really saved?"

"She is," answered the unknown leisurely; "bating unforeseen accidents, she has nothing more to fear."

"But what is the extraordinary remedy you have employed to obtain such a happy result?"

The unknown smiled with disdain, and did not seem willing to reply; however, after a short hesitation, yielding perhaps to that secret vanity which induces us all to make a parade of our wisdom, he decided upon giving the information demanded.

"The pettiest things astonish you fellows who dwell in cities," said he ironically; "the man who has passed his whole life in the wilderness knows many things of which the inhabitants of your brilliant towns are ignorant, although, with the sole aim of humiliating, they take pleasure in parading their false science before us poor savages. Nature hides not the secret of her mysterious harmonics from him who ceaselessly pries into the darkness of night and the brightness of day, with a patience beyond proof, without suffering himself to be discouraged by failure. The sublime Architect, when he had created this immense universe, did not let it fall from his omnipotent hands until it had been made perfect, nor till the amount of good should counterbalance everywhere the amount of evil – placing, so to say, the antidote side by side with the poison."

The stranger listened with increasing surprise to the words of this man, whose real character was an enigma to him, and who at every moment showed himself in lights diametrically opposed, and under forms entirely distinct.

"But," continued the unknown, "pride and presumption make man blind. Accustomed to make all things bear upon himself, imagining that all existence has been specially created for his convenience, he takes no pains to study the secrets of nature further than they seem to have a direct influence on his personal welfare, not caring to make inquiry into her simplest actions. So, for instance, the region in which we now are, being low and marshy, is naturally infested with reptiles, which are so much the more dangerous and to be dreaded, because they are half-calcined and rendered furious by the rays of a torrid sun. Therefore provident nature has produced in abundance throughout these same regions a creeper called *mikania*— the one I have just used — which is an infallible remedy for the bites of serpents."

"I cannot doubt it, after having witnessed its efficacy; but how were the virtues of this creeper discovered?" said the stranger, involuntarily interested in the highest degree.

"A hunter of the woods," continued the unknown, with a certain self-complacency, "observed that the black falcon, better known as the *guaco*, a bird which feeds chiefly upon reptiles, takes special delight in exterminating serpents. This hunter had also observed that if, during the struggle, the serpent contrived to wound the *guaco*, the latter immediately retired from the combat, and flying to the *mikania*, tore off a few leaves, which it bruised in its beak. It afterwards returned to the fight more resolute than ever, until it had vanquished its redoubtable enemy. The hunter was an astute man, and of great experience; one who knew that animals, being devoid of reason, are more especially under the providence of God, and that all their actions proceed from laws laid down at the beginning. After mature reflection, he resolved to test his experience upon himself."

"And did he execute his project?" cried the stranger.

"He did. He let a coral snake bite him, the deadliest of all; but, thanks to the *mikania*, the bite proved as harmless to him as the prick of a thorn. That is the manner in which this precious remedy was discovered. But," added the unknown, suddenly changing his tone, "I have complied with your wishes in bringing help to your daughter; she is safe. Adieu! I may stay no longer."

"You must not go before you have told me your name."

"What good will this pertinacity do you?"

"I wish to embalm the name in my memory as that of a man to whom I have vowed a gratitude which will only end with my life."

"You are mad!" rudely answered the unknown. "It is useless to pronounce to you a name which you will very likely learn but too soon."

"Let it be so; I will not persist, nor ask the reasons which compel you to act thus. I will not seek to learn it in despite of you; but, if you refuse to teach me your name, you cannot prevent my making you acquainted with my own — I am called Don Pedro de Luna. Although until today I have never penetrated thus far into the prairies, my residence is not very far off. I am proprietor of the Hacienda de las Norias de San Antonio, close to the frontiers of the Despoblado, near the *embouchure* of the Rio San Pedro."

"I know the Hacienda de las Norias de San Antonio. Its owner ought to belong to the happy ones of earth, according to the opinion of those who dwell in cities. So much the better: if it does belong to you, I do not envy riches with which I should not know what to do. Now, you have nothing more to say, have you? Well, then, adieu!"

"What! Adieu! You will leave us?"

"Certainly; do you think I intend to remain all night with you?"

"I hoped, at least, you would not leave unfinished the work you have undertaken."

"I do not understand you; caballero."

"Will you abandon us thus? Will you leave my daughter in her present state, lost in the wilderness, without the means of escape, – in the depths of this forest, which has been so nearly fatal to her?"

The unknown frowned several times, then cast a stolen look on the girl. A violent struggle seemed to commence in his bosom; he remained silent for several minutes, uncertain how to decide. At last he raised his head.

"Listen," said he in a constrained voice; "I have never learnt to lie. At a short distance I have a *jacal* (hovel), as you would call the miserable *calli* (cottage) which shelters me; but, believe me, it is better for you to remain here than to follow me there."

"And why?" said the stranger, surprised.

"I have no explanation to give you, and I will not lie. I only repeat: believe me, and remain here. Nevertheless, if you persist in following me, I will not oppose it; I will be your faithful guide."

"Danger menace us under your roof? I will not stop on such an hypothesis: hospitality is sacred in the prairies."

"Perhaps so; I will neither answer yes nor no. Do you decide; only make your resolve quickly, for I am in haste to have the matter decided."

Don Pedro de Luna threw a sorrowful look at his daughter; then addressing the unknown —

"Whatever may happen," said he, "I will follow you. My daughter cannot stay here; you have done too much for her not to wish to save her. I confide in you; show me the way."

"Agreed," replied the unknown laconically. "I have warned you; take care you are on your guard."

CHAPTER III

THE CALLI

Much as the unknown had hesitated in offering shelter to Don Pedro de Luna and his daughter, – and we know in what terms the offer had been finally made, – he showed himself equally anxious, as soon as his decision was made, to quit that part of the forest where the scene passed which we have recorded in our preceding chapter. His eyes wandered about continually with a disquietude he took no pains to conceal. He turned his head repeatedly towards the hillock, as if he expected to see some horrible apparition suddenly rising from its summit.

In the state the girl was in, to awaken her would have been to commit a grave imprudence, seriously compromising her health. In accordance with orders delivered in a dry tone by the unknown, the *peones* of Don Pedro, and the *hacendero* himself, hastened to cut down some branches, in order to fashion a litter, which they covered with dry leaves. Over these they spread their *zarapés*, of which they deprived themselves in order to make a softer couch for their young mistress.

These preparations finished, the girl was raised with great precaution, and gently placed upon the litter.

Of the three men who accompanied Don Pedro, two were *peones*, or domestic Indians; the third was the *capataz* (bailiff) of the *hacendero*.

The *capataz* was an individual of about five feet eight, with broad shoulders, and legs bowed by the constant habit of riding. He was extraordinarily thin; but one could truly say of him, he was nothing but muscle and sinew. His strength was wonderful. This man, called Luciano Pedralva, was devoted, body and soul, to his master, whom, and his family, he and his had served for nearly two centuries.

His features, bronzed by the vicissitudes of the weather, although not striking, had an expression of intelligence and astuteness, to which his eyes, black and well opened, added an appearance of energy and courage beyond the common. Don Pedro de Luna had the greatest confidence in this man, whom he considered more in the light of a friend than a servitor.

When the girl had been placed upon the litter, the *peones* lifted it; while Don Pedro and the *capataz* placed themselves one on the right, the other on the left of the patient, in order to guard her from the branches of trees and creepers.

At a mute sign from the unknown, who had remounted, the little troop leisurely began its march.

Instead of reentering the forest, the unknown continued to advance towards the hillock, the base of which was speedily attained. A narrow pathway serpentine along its side in an incline sufficiently gentle. The little troop entered upon it without hesitation.

They ascended in this manner for some minutes, following ten or a dozen yards behind the unknown, who rode on in front by himself. Suddenly, on arriving at an angle of the road, round which their guide had already disappeared, a whistle rent the air, so sharp that the Mexicans halted involuntarily, not knowing whether to advance or retreat.

"What is the meaning of this?" murmured Don Pedro anxiously.

"Treachery, without a doubt," said the *capataz* casting his eyes searchingly around.

But all remained quiet about them; no change was perceptible in the landscape, which looked as lonely as ever.

Nevertheless, in a few minutes, more whistling, similar to the first they had heard, was audible in different directions at the same time, answering evidently to a signal which had been made.

At that moment the unknown reappeared; his face pale, his gestures constrained, and a prey to the most vivid emotion.

"It is you who have willed this," said he; "I wash my hands of what may happen."

"Tell us, at all events, what peril threatens us," replied Don Pedro, in agitation.

"Ah!" said the other, in a voice of subdued passion,

"Do I know it myself? And what would it aid you to know? Would you be the less lost for that? You refused to believe me. Now, pray to God to help you; for never danger threatened you more terrible than that which hangs over your head!"

"But why these perpetual reservations? Be frank; we are men, *vive Dios*, and, great as the peril may be, we shall know how to meet it bravely."

"You are mad! Can one man oppose a hundred? You will fall, I tell you; but it is to yourself alone you must address your reproaches; it is yourself who have persisted in braving the *Tigercat* in his lair."

"Alas," cried the *hacendero* in accents of horror, "what name is that you have uttered?"

"The name of the man in whose clutches you are at this very moment."

"What! the Tigercat? That redoubtable bandit, whose numberless crimes have shocked the land for so long; that man who seems endowed with a diabolical power to accomplish the atrocious deeds with which he incessantly sullies himself; – is that monster near us?"

"He is; and I warn you to be prudent, for perhaps he hears you at this moment, although invisible to your eyes and mine."

"What do I care?" energetically exclaimed Don Pedro. "Away with caution, since we are once in the power of this demon; he is a man devoid of pity, and my life is no longer my own."

"What do you know about it, Señor Don Pedro de Luna?" answered a mocking voice.

The *hacendero* trembled, and recoiled a step, uttering a stifled cry.

The Tigercat, bounding with the agility of the animal from which he took his name, had leaped upon the summit of an elevated rock which overhung the pathway some distance off, and now dropped lightly on the ground two paces from Don Pedro.

There was an instant of terrible silence. The two men, thus placed face to face, their eyes flashing, their lips compressed with rage, examined each other with ardent curiosity. It was the first time the *hacendero* had seen the terrible partisan, the fame of whose thirst for blood had reached the most ignorant villagers in the land, and who for thirty years had spread terror over the Mexican frontiers.

We will give, in a few words, the portrait of this man, who is destined to play an important part in our history.

The Tigercat was a species of Colossus, six feet high; his broad shoulders and limbs, from which the muscles stood out in marble rigidity, showed that, though long past the prime of life, his strength still existed in all its integrity; his long locks, white as the snows on Coatepec, fell in disorder on his shoulders, and mingled with the grizzly beard that covered his breast. His forehead was broad and open; he had the eye of the eagle, under the brows of the lion; his whole person offered, in a word, a complete type of the man of the desert, – grand, strong, majestic, and implacable. Although his skin was stained by every inclemency of weather till it had almost acquired the colour of brick, it was nevertheless easy to recognise, in the clearly defined lines of his face, that this man belonged to the race of whites.

His dress lay midway between that of the Mexican and of the redskin; for although he wore the *zarapé*, his mitasses, in two pieces, worked with hairs attached here and there, and his moccasins of different colours, embroidered with porcupine quills and ornamented with glass beads and hawks' bells, showed his preference for the Indians, to whose customs, by the by, he seemed to have entirely adapted his mode of life.

A large scalping knife, a hatchet, a bullet bag, and powder horn, were slung from a girdle of wild beast's skin, drawn tightly above his hips.

One thing must not be forgotten, – a singularity in a white man, – a white-headed eagle's plume was placed above his right ear, as if this man arrogated to himself the dignity of chief of an Indian tribe.

Lastly, he held in his hand a magnificent American rifle, damaskeened, and most skilfully inlaid with silver.

Such is the physical portrait of the man to whom white hunters and redskins had given the name of Tigercat; a name he deserved in every respect, if hearsay had not belied him, and if only half the stories reported of him were true.

As to the character of this strange being, we will abstain from dwelling upon it for the present. We are persuaded the scenes which follow will enable us to appreciate it correctly.

Although struck with surprise at the apparition – as sudden as it was unexpected – of the dreaded freebooter, Don Pedro was not long in recalling his presence of mind.

"You appear to know me much better than I know you," replied he coolly; "but if half the things I have heard reported about you be true, I can only expect, on your part, treatment similar to that which all unhappy persons encounter who fall into your hands."

The Tigercat smiled sarcastically.

"And do you not dread this treatment?" he asked.

"For myself, personally, no!" answered Don Pedro disdainfully.

"But," continued the freebooter, with a glance towards the wounded lady, "for the young girl?"

The *hacendero* trembled; a livid pallor overspread his features.

"You cannot mean what you are saying," was his answer; "for the honour of humanity, I will not think so. The Apaches themselves, fierce as they are, feel their rage vanish before the feebleness of woman."

"Have I not among the dwellers in cities the reputation of being fiercer than the fierce Apaches, – even than the very beasts?"

"Let us end this," replied Don Pedro haughtily; "since I have been fool enough, in spite of repeated warnings, to place myself in your hands, dispose of me as you think fit; but deliver me from the torture I undergo in conversing with you."

The Tigercat frowned; he struck the ground forcibly with the butt of his rifle, muttering some unintelligible words; but, by an extreme effort of his will, his features instantaneously resumed their habitual imperturbability, every trace of emotion vanished from his voice, and he answered, in the calmest tone:

"In beginning the conversation, about which you seem to care so little, *caballero*, I said to you, 'What do you know about it?'"

"Well?" said the *hacendero*, surprised and overcome, in spite of his efforts, by the strange change in the dreaded speaker.

"Well," replied the latter, "I repeat the phrase, not, as you may suppose, in mockery, but simply to elicit your frank opinion of me."

"That opinion can be of little value to you, I presume."

"More than you may imagine. But why these words? Answer me!"

The *hacendero* remained mute for a time. The Tigercat, his eyes fixed steadily upon him, watched him attentively.

As to the hunter who had been almost forced to consent to serve Don Pedro de Luna as guide, his astonishment was extreme. Believing himself to be thoroughly acquainted with the character of the freebooter, he could not understand the scene at all, and inwardly asked himself what this feigned courtesy of the Tigercat would end in.

Don Pedro himself argued quite differently on the bandit's sentiments; right or wrong, he fancied he had perceived an accent of sad sincerity in the tone in which the last words had been addressed to him.

"Since you absolutely desire it," said he, "I will reply frankly: I believe your heart to be not so cruel as you would have it supposed; and I imagine that this conviction, which you inwardly possess, makes you extremely unhappy; for, notwithstanding the barbarous acts with which they reproach you, other crimes have entered your thoughts, before the execution of which you have recoiled, in spite of the pitiless ferocity they attribute to you."

The Tigercat seemed about to speak.

"Do not interrupt me," continued the *hacendero* hastily; "I know that I am treading upon a volcano; but you have my promise to speak frankly, and, willing or not willing, you must hear me to the end. Most of mankind are the architects of their own fortunes in this world; you have not escaped the common lot. Gifted with an energetic character, with vivid passions, you have not sought to overcome these passions; you have suffered yourself to be overcome by them, and thus, fall after fall, you have reached that depth in which you are now lost; and yet all good feeling is not utterly dead in you."

A smile of contempt flickered over the lips of the old man.

"Do not smile at me," the *hacendero* went on; "the very question you have put proves my assertion. Leading in the wilderness the life of the plundering savage, hating society, which has cast you off, you still hanker after the opinion the world forms of you. And why? Because that sentiment of justice, which God has planted in the hearts of all, revolts in you at the universal reprobation heaped upon your name. It has roused your shame. The man who can still be ashamed of himself, criminal as he may be, is very close to repentance; for the voice that cries aloud in his heart is the voice of awakening remorse."

Although Don Pedro had ceased speaking for some time, the Tigercat still seemed to be listening to his words; but suddenly lifting his head proudly, he cast a mocking glance around him, and burst into a laugh, dry and hard as that which Goethe ascribes to Mephistopheles.

This laugh cut the *hacendero* to the heart. He comprehended that the evil instincts of the freebooter had resumed their sway over the better thoughts which, for a moment, had seemed to assert their mastery.

After this bout of laughter, the countenance of the Tigercat resumed its usual rigid immobility.

"Good!" cried he in a tone of apparent glee, which did by no means deceive Don Pedro; "I expected a sermon, and find I was not mistaken. Well, at the risk of sinking in your estimation, — or, to speak more truly, in order to flatter your self-esteem by leaving you in the belief that you judge my feelings correctly, — I decree that you and your followers return to your Hacienda de las Norias de San Antonio, not only without the loss of a hair, but even as partakers of my hospitality. Does not this decision astonish you? You were far from expecting it."

"Not so; it is exactly what I anticipated."

"Indeed!" said he, with astonishment; "Then if I offer you the hospitality of my *calli*, you will accept it?"

"And why not, if the offer is made in good faith?"

"Then come without fear; I pledge you my word that you nor yours need fear any injury on my part."

"I follow you," said Don Pedro.

But the unknown had watched with increasing anxiety the erratic course of this conversation, and advancing abruptly in front of, and extending his arms towards, the *hacendero*—

"Stop, as you value your life!" he cried in a voice trembling with secret emotion. "Stop! Do not let yourself be deceived by the assumed benevolence of this man; he is spreading a snare for you; his offer conceals a treason."

The Tigercat drew himself up to his full height, stared disdainfully at the speaker, and replied, in an accent of supreme majesty:

"Your senses wander, boy; this man runs no risk in confiding in me. Granted that there are many things I do not respect in this world, still there is at least one which I have always respected, and have suffered no one to doubt, – my word, – my word, which I have given to this *caballero*. Come! Let us pass; the young woman whom you have succoured so opportunely is not yet out of danger; her state demands attentions which are beyond your power to afford."

The unknown trembled; his dark-blue eyes flashed, his lips parted as if to answer; but he remained silent, and retired a few paces, knitting his brow in concentrated passion.

"Moreover," imperturbably continued the freebooter, "whatever force may lie at your disposal in other parts of the wilderness, you know that here I am all-powerful, and that here my will is law. Leave me to act as I please. Do not force me to measures I should abhor; for if I raised but a finger I could tame your fool's pride."

"I know," said the young man, "that I am powerless; but beware how you treat these strangers, who placed themselves under my protection; for I shall know how to take my revenge."

"Yes, yes," said the Tigercat drearily; "I know you would not hesitate to revenge yourself even on me, if you fancied you had a cause. But I care not; I am master here."

"I shall follow you even into your haunt; think not I intend to desert these strangers now they are in your hands."

"As you please; I do not forbid you to accompany them; on the contrary, I should regret your leaving them."

The unknown held his peace, smiling disdainfully.

"Come," resumed the Tigercat, turning to the *hacendero*.

The troop began again to ascend the hillock, following in the footsteps of the old freebooter, close to whom rode their former guide.

After some turnings and windings in the path, of more or less abruptness, some of which caused the Mexicans no little difficulty, the Tigercat turned towards the *hacendero*, and addressed him in a voice perfectly free from embarrassment:

"I beg you to excuse my guiding you over such villainous roads; unfortunately they are the only ones leading to my dwelling. It is at hand; in a few minutes we shall be there."

"But I see no traces of habitation," replied Don Pedro, vainly, scanning the country in all directions.

"True," said the Tigercat, with a smile; "nevertheless, we are hardly an hundred paces from the end of our journey; and I can assure you the abode to which I am leading you would harbour a hundred times our present numbers."

"I have not much idea where this dwelling is to be found, unless it be subterranean, as I begin to suspect."

"You have almost guessed it. The place I inhabit, if not subterranean in the strict sense of the word, is at least a dwelling covered by the ground. Few have entered it to leave it again safe and sound, as you shall."

"So much the worse," retorted roundly the *hacendero*; "so much the worse for them – and for you."

The Tigercat frowned, but immediately replied, in the light and careless tone he had affected for the last few minutes:

"Look you, I will clear up this mystery. Listen; the story is interesting enough. When the Aztecs quitted Azlin, which signifies 'the country of herons,' to conquer Anahuac, or 'the country between the waters,' their peregrinations were long, extending over several centuries. Disheartened at times by long travel, they halted, founded cities, in which they installed themselves as if they never intended to abandon the place they had chosen; and, perhaps with the object of leaving behind

them ineffaceable traces of their passage through the wild countries they traversed, they constructed pyramids. Hence the numerous ruins littering the soil of Mexico, and the *teocalis* one meets with occasionally, – last and mournful vestiges of a people that has disappeared. These *teocalis* built on a system of incredible solidity far from crumbling under the strenuous embrace of time, have ended in becoming a part of the ground which supported them, and so completely, that there is often difficulty in recognising them. I can give you no better proof of my assertion than what you have now before you. The elevation you are now ascending is not, as you might suppose, a hill caused by some perturbation of the earth, – it is an Aztec *teocali*."

"A *teocali*!" exclaimed Don Pedro, in astonishment.

"It is, indeed," continued the freebooter; "but so many centuries have elapsed since the day it was built, that, thanks to the vegetable matter incessantly conveyed by the winds, nature has apparently resumed her rights, and the Aztec watchtower has become a green hill. You are doubtless aware that the *teocalis* are hollow?"

"I am aware of it," answered the *hacendero*.

"It is in the interior of this one I have fixed my dwelling. See, we have reached it. Allow me to show you the way into it."

In fact, the travellers had arrived at a kind of coarse portal – a Cyclopean construction – which gave admittance to a subterranean building, in which a profound obscurity prevailed, forbidding any estimate of its dimensions.

The Tigercat stopped, and gave a peculiar whistle. Immediately a dazzling light broke forth from the interior, and illuminated it in all its vastness.

"Let us enter," said the freebooter, preceding his companions.

Without hesitation Don Pedro prepared to follow, after making a sign to his attendants, warning them to conceal their rising fears.

For a moment the unknown found himself, so to speak, alone with the *hacendero*, and bending swiftly down, whispered softly in his ear, "Be prudent; you are entering the tiger's den."

Saying this, he rapidly left them, as he feared the freebooter might perceive that he was giving a last word of warning to the stranger.

But, good or bad, the advice came too late: hesitation would have been folly, for flight was impossible.

On all sides, on every jutting rock, appeared as by enchantment, the dark shadows of a host of persons, who had started up around the strangers without their understanding whence they came, so stealthy had been their approach.

The Mexicans entered, then, although not without feelings of dread, into the terrible cavern, whose mouth opened yawning before them. The building was vast, the walls were lofty.

After proceeding for about ten minutes, the Mexicans found themselves in a species of rotunda, in the centre of which a huge brazier was flaming; four long corridors crossed the rotunda at right angles. The Tigercat, still followed by the travellers, entered one of these. He stopped on reaching a door formed of a reed hurdle.

"Make yourselves at home," said he; "your lodgings consists of two chambers, which have no communication with the rest of the cave. By my orders you will be supplied with food, with wood to make a fire, and torches of ocote to give you light."

"I thank you for these attentions," replied Don Pedro. "I had little reason to expect them."

"And why not? Do you think that I do not know how to practise Mexican hospitality, in its fullest extent, whenever it suits me?"

"Sir!" said the *hacendero*, with a gesture of deprecation.

"Silence!" said the bandit, interrupting him; "You are my guests for the night. Sleep in peace; nothing shall disturb your rest. In an hour I will send you a potion for the lady to drink. We shall

meet again tomorrow." And, bowing with an ease and courtesy little expected by Don Pedro from such a man, the Tigercat took his leave and quitted the chamber.

For a few seconds the step resounded under the dark vault of the corridor; then it was silenced. The travellers were alone, and the *hacendero* determined to investigate the chambers prepared for them.

CHAPTER IV

SUPERFICIAL REMARKS

The *haciendas* of Spanish America were never feudal tenures, whatever certain badly informed authors may assert, but simply large agricultural holdings, as their name clearly indicates.

These *haciendas*, scattered over Mexico at great distances from each other, and surrounded by vast stretches of country, for the greater part uninhabited, are generally situated on the top of abruptly rising hills, in positions easy of defence.

As the *hacienda*, properly so called, —*i. e.* the habitation of the proprietor of the estate, — forms the nucleus of the colony, and, in addition to the barns and stables, contains also the out houses, the lodgings of the *peones*, and, above all, the chapel, its walls are high, massive, and surrounded by a ditch, so as to put it out of danger from a *coup-de-main*.

These numerous *haciendas* frequently maintain from six to seven hundred individuals of all trades, the lands belonging to a farm of this description being often of greater extent than a whole province in France.

They are the wholesale breeding places of the wild horses and cattle that graze at freedom in the prairies, watched over at a distance by *peones vaqueros* as untamed as themselves.

The Hacienda de las Norias de San Antonio —*i. e.* St. Anthony's Wells — rose gracefully from the summit of a hill covered with thick groves of mahogany, Peru trees and *mesquites*, forming a belt of evergreen foliage, the palish green of which contrasted agreeably with the dead white of the lofty walls, crowned with *almenas*, a kind of battlement intended to announce the nobility of the proprietor of the holding.

In fact, Don Pedro de Luna was what is called a *cristiano viejo* (old Christian), and descended in a direct line from the first Spanish conquerors, without a single drop of Indian blood having been infused into the veins of his ancestors. So, although after the Declaration of Independence the ancient customs began to fall into disuse, Don Pedro de Luna was proud of his nobility, and clung to the *almenas* as marks of distinction which only noblemen were allowed to adopt in the time of the Spanish rule.

Since the period when, in the suite of that genial adventurer, Fernando Cortez, a Lopez de Luna had first put foot in America, the fortunes of this family, very poor and much reduced at that time — for Don Lopez literally possessed nothing but his cloak and sword, — the fortunes of this family, we say, had taken an incredible flight upwards, and entered on a career of prosperity that nothing in time's course could trammel. Thus Don Pedro de Luna, the actual representative of this ancient house, was in the enjoyment of wealth, the amount of which it would certainly have puzzled him to state, — wealth which had been increased still more by the property of Don Antonio de Luna, his elder brother, who had disappeared more than twenty-five years after events to which we shall have to revert, and who it was supposed had perished miserably in the mysterious wilderness in the neighbourhood of the *hacienda*. It was likely that he had fallen a victim to the horrible pangs of hunger, or more probably into the hands of the Apaches, those implacable enemies of the whites, on whom they ceaselessly wage an inveterate war.

In short Don Pedro was the sole representative of his name, and his fortune was immense. No one who has not visited the interior of Mexico can figure to himself the riches buried in these almost unknown regions, where certain land owners, if they would only take the trouble to put their affairs in order, would find themselves five or six times more wealthy than the greatest capitalists of the old world.

Now, although everything seemed to smile on the opulent *hacendero*, and although, to the world that looks beyond the surface, he seemed to enjoy, with every appearance of reason, an

unalloyed happiness, nevertheless the deep wrinkles channelled in the forehead of Don Pedro, the mournful severity of his face, and his gaze often turned to heaven with an expression of sombre despair, might give rise to the surmise that the life all thought so happy was secretly agitated by a profound sorrow, which the years, as they rolled on, augmented instead of solacing.

And what was the sorrow? What storms had troubled the course of a life so calm on the surface?

The Mexicans are the most forgetful people on earth. This certainly arises from the nature of their climate, which is incessantly distracted by the most frightful cataclysms. The Mexican, whose life is passed on a volcano, who feels the soil incessantly trembling under his feet, only cares to live for today. For him yesterday no longer exists; tomorrow he may never see the sun rise; today is his all, for today is his own.

The inhabitants of the Hacienda de las Norias, incessantly exposed to the inroads of their redoubtable neighbours the redskins, constantly occupied in defending themselves from their attacks and depredations, were still more forgetful than the rest of their countrymen of a past in which they took no interest.

The secret of Don Pedro's grief, if really such a secret existed, was, therefore, confined pretty nearly to his own breast; and as he never complained, – never made allusion to the earlier years of his life, – surmise was impossible, and the ignorance of everyone on the subject complete.

One single being had the privilege of smoothing the anxious brow of the *hacendero*, and of bringing a languid and fleeting smile to his lips.

It was his daughter. Doña Hermosa at sixteen was dazzlingly beautiful. The jet black arches of her brow, finely traced as with a pencil, enhanced the beauty of a forehead not too high and of a creamy white. Her large eyes, blue and pensive, contrasted harmoniously with hair of ebon hue, which curled about the delicate neck, and on which the sweet jasmines died away with pleasure.

Short, like all Spanish women of her race, her figure was slender but well knit. No smaller feet had ever pressed in the dance the greensward of Mexico; no more delicate hand ever ransacked the dahlias of a garden. Her walk, easy, like that of all Creoles, was a serpentine and undulating motion, full of grace and of *salero*, as they say in Andalusia.

This exquisite girl scattered mirth and joy over the *hacienda*, whose echoes from morning to night repeated lovingly the melodious modulations of her pellucid notes, the pure and fresh qualities of which made the birds die of envy as they hid themselves under the foliage of the *puerta* (open court).

Don Pedro idolised his daughter; he felt for her that passionate and boundless affection the immense power of which can only be understood by those who are fathers in the true sense of the word.

Hermosa, brought up at the *hacienda*, had only paid a few short visits, at long intervals, to the great centers of the Mexican Confederation. Their manners were entirely strange to her. Accustomed to lead the free and untrammelled life of a bird, and to express her thoughts aloud, her frankness and innocent simplicity were extreme, while her sweetness of temper made her adored by all the inhabitants of the *hacienda*, over whose welfare she watched with constant care.

Nevertheless, owing to the peculiar kind of education she had received, – exposed on this distant frontier to the frequent sound of the frightful war whoop of the redskins, and to be present during horrible scenes of carnage, – she had accustomed herself from an early age to look perils in the face, if not coldly, at all events with a courage and strength of mind scarcely to be expected in so delicate a child.

In conclusion, the influence she exercised over all who approached her was incomprehensible: it was impossible to know her without loving her, or without feeling a wish to lay down one's life for her.

On several occasions, in the attacks made on the *hacienda* by those ferocious plunderers of the desert the Apaches and Comanches, some wounded Indians had fallen into the hands of the Mexicans. Doña Hermosa, far from suffering these wretches to be maltreated, had ordered every care to be taken of them, and restored them to liberty as soon as their wounds were healed.

From this course of action it resulted that the redskins by degrees renounced their attacks upon the *hacienda*, and that the girl, attended by only one man – with whom we shall soon make the reader acquainted – unconcernedly took long rides in the wilderness, and often, carried away by the ardour of the chase, rambled off to a great distance from the *hacienda*; while the Indians who saw her pass not only abstained from injuring her, but laid no obstacles in her way. On the contrary, these primitive beings, having conceived a superstitious veneration for her, contrived, while remaining out of sight themselves, to remove from her path any dangers she might otherwise have encountered.

The redskins, with that natural tone of poetry which distinguishes them, had called her "the White Butterfly," so light and fragile did she seem to them as she bounded like a frightened fawn through the tall prairie grasses, which hardly bent under her weight.

One of her most favourite resting places in these excursions was a *rancho*, (a farm) seven or eight miles from the *hacienda*. The *rancho*, built in a charming situation and surrounded by fields well looked after and carefully cultivated, was inhabited by a woman of fifty and her son, a tall and handsome man of twenty-five or twenty-six with a proud eye and a warm heart, named Estevan Diaz. Na Manuela, as they called the old woman, and Estevan had an affection for the girl which knew no bounds. Manuela had nursed Hermosa when an infant, and the foster mother almost looked upon her young mistress as her own child, so deep was the love she bore her. The woman belonged to a class of domestics, now unhappily extinct in Europe, who form, as it were a part of the family, and are looked upon by their masters more as friends than servants.

It was under Estevan's escort that Hermosa took those long rides of which we spoke above. These continual *têtes-à-têtes* between a girl of sixteen and a man of twenty-five, which in our hypocritical and prudish world would be considered compromising, seemed very natural to the inhabitants of the *hacienda*. They knew the profound respect and loyal affection which bound Estevan to his mistress, whom he had dandled on his knees when a child, and whose first steps he had supported. Hermosa, who was as laughing, playful, and teasing as most girls of her age, took very great pleasure in being with Estevan, whom she could torment and plague to her heart's delight without his ever attempting to turn restive at the capricious vagaries of his young mistress. Did he not endure all her caprices with a patience beyond praise?

Don Pedro manifested an affectionate esteem for Manuela and her son. He had great confidence in both, and for the last two years had entrusted Estevan with the important post of *major-domo*— a post he shared, as far as the land was concerned, with Luciano Pedralva, who, however, was placed under his orders.

Thus Estevan Diaz and his mother were, next to the proprietor, the persons of greatest account at the *hacienda*, where they were treated with infinite respect, not only on account of the post they occupied, but also for the sake of their character, which was duly appreciated by all.

The Mexican *hacenderos*, whose properties are of immense extent, have a practice at certain times of the year of making a progress through their estates, in order to cast over their holding that "eye of the master" which, according to the favourite saying in Southern America, makes the crops ripen and the cattle fatten. Don Pedro never failed to undertake these tours, on which he was anxiously expected by the inferior persons in his employ, and by the *peones* of the *haciendas*, to whom the casual presence of their master brought some temporary alleviation of their miserable lives.

In Mexico slavery, abolished in principle by the Declaration of Independence, no longer exists by right; but it exists *de facto* through the whole extent of the Confederation; and the

following is the adroit manner in which the law is eluded by the rich owners of the soil: – Every *hacienda* necessarily employs a great number of individuals as *peones*, *vaqueros*, *tigres*, (herdsmen, hunters), &c. All these people are *Indios mansos*, or civilized Indians – that is to say, they have been baptised, and practise, after their own fashion, a religion they will not take the trouble to understand, and which they mix up with most absurd and ridiculous customs derived from their old creeds.

Brutalised by misery, the *peones* hire themselves, at very moderate wages, to the *hacenderos*, for the sake of satisfying their two chief vices, – gambling and drunkenness. But as Indians are the most thriftless beings in creation, their petty wages never suffice to feed and clothe them; and every day they are liable to die of hunger, if they cannot contrive to procure the ordinary necessities of life from some source independent of their pay. It is when they have reached this climax that the rich proprietors trap them.

The *capataz* and *major-domo* keep in every *hacienda*, by order of their master, stores filled with clothing, arms, household utensils, and so forth, which are open to the *peones*, who pawn their labour for the needful articles advanced to them; the prices of the articles being always ten times their value.

It follows, from this simple combination, that the poor devils of *peones* not only never touch an infinitesimal fraction of the nominal wages allotted to them, but find themselves always on the debit side of the *hacendero's* balance sheet; and in a few months owe sums they could not possibly pay off in a lifetime. As the law is positive in these cases, the *peones* are compelled to remain in the service of their masters until, by their labour, this debt is liquidated. Unfortunately for them, their necessities are so imperious at all times, their position so precarious, that, after a life spent in incessant toil, the *peones* die insolvent. They have lived as slaves, fatally, *adscripti glebæ*, shamelessly worked, without mercy, down to their latest sigh, by men whom their sweat and their labour have enriched tenfold.

Doña Hermosa, good natured, as girls usually are when brought up in the bosom of their families, generally accompanied her father in these annual progresses, and pleased herself by leaving bounteous marks of her welcome visit with the poor *peones*.

This year, as in the preceding ones, she had attended Don Pedro de Luna, signaling her visit to each *rancho* by relieving, in some way or other, the infirm, the old, and the children.

About forty-eight hours before the day on which our story commences, Don Pedro had left a silver mine he was working some leagues off in the desert, and set off for Las Norias de San Antonio. When he had got within twenty leagues of the *hacienda*, he felt convinced that his escort was not needed so near his own property, and sent forward Don Estevan and the armed retainers to announce his return, keeping with him only the *capataz*, Luciano Pedralva, and three or four *peones*.

Don Estevan had tried to dissuade his master from remaining in the desert almost single-handed, pointing out to him that the Indian frontiers were infested by freebooters and marauders of the vilest kind, who, skulking among the thickets, would be upon the watch for an opportunity of attacking his little band; but, by a singular fatality, Don Pedro, convinced that he had nothing to fear from these vagabonds, who had never exhibited signs of hostility towards him, had insisted on the *major-domo's* departure, and the latter had been forced to obey, although with reluctance.

The escort rode off; the *hacendero* quietly continued his road, chatting with his daughter, and laughing at the sinister presentiments clouding the face of the *major-domo* when he took leave of his master.

The day slipped away without anything happening to confirm the misgivings of Don Estevan; no accident interrupting the monotonous regularity of the march; no suspicious sign excited the fears of the travellers. The desert was at peace; as far as the eye could reach, nothing was to be

seen but some straggling herds of elks and antelopes, browsing on the tall and tufted grasses of the prairie.

At sunset Don Pedro and his companions had reached the outskirts of an immense virgin forest, part of which they would have to cross to reach the *hacienda*, now about a dozen leagues off.

The *hacendero* resolved to encamp for the night at the edge of the covert, hoping to reach Las Norias early on the morrow, before the great heat of the day set in.

In a short time everything was arranged; a hut of branches was put together for Doña Hermosa; fires were lit, and the horses securely tethered, to prevent their straying during the night.

The travellers supped gaily; after which everyone laid down to sleep as comfortably as he could manage.

However, the *capataz*, a man trained to Indian artifices, thought it prudent not to neglect a single precaution to secure the repose of his companions. He placed a sentry, to whom he recommended the utmost vigilance, and saddled his horse, with the intention of making a reconnaissance round the camp.

Don Pedro, already half asleep, raised his head, and asked Don Luciano what he intended to do. When the *capataz* had explained, the *hacendero* burst out laughing, and peremptorily ordered him to leave his horse to feed in peace, and to lay himself down by the fire, in order to be ready to resume the journey at break of day. The *capataz* shook his head, but obeyed; he could not understand the conduct of his master, who was usually so prudent and circumspect.

The truth was, that Don Pedro, impelled by one of those inexplicable fatalities which, without apparent reason, often make the most intelligent blind, was convinced that he had nothing to fear so near his home, and almost on his own territory, from the rovers and marauders of the frontiers, who would think twice before they attacked a man of his importance, having the means in his power to make them pay dearly for any attempt upon his person. Nevertheless, the *capataz*, agitated by a secret uneasiness, which kept him awake in spite of his efforts to sleep, determined to keep good watch during the night, notwithstanding the injunctions of his master.

As soon as he saw Don Pedro decidedly asleep, he rose softly, took his rifle, and crept stealthily towards the forest to reconnoitre; but he had scarcely quitted the circle of light formed by the watch fire, and advanced a few paces into the covert, than he was suddenly and rudely seized by invisible hands, thrown on the ground, gagged, and bound with cords; and with such expedition, that he could neither use his arms nor utter a cry of warning to his companions.

But, in strange contrariety to the tragical usages of the prairie, the persons who had so abruptly mastered the *capataz* subjected him to no ill usage, contenting themselves with binding him firmly, so as to put the possibility of the slightest resistance out of the question, and leaving him stretched upon the ground.

"My poor mistress!" sighed the worthy fellow as he fell, without indulging a thought for himself.

He remained in this position for a length of time, listening greedily to every sound in the desert, expecting every instant to hear cries of distress from Don Pedro and Doña Hermosa. But not a cry was heard: nothing disturbed the calm of the wilderness, over which the silence of death seemed brooding.

At last, after twenty or twenty-five minutes, someone threw a *zarapé* over his face, most likely with the intention of preventing any recognition of his assailants; he was lifted from the ground with a certain degree of precaution, and two men carried him in their arms to some considerable distance.

The situation became more complicated every moment. In vain the *capataz* racked his mind to divine the intentions of his captors. The latter uttered not a word, and glided over the ground with light and noiseless steps, as if they were spectres. The generality of Mexicans are fatalists.

The *capataz*, recognizing the futility of a struggle, philosophically consoled himself for what had happened, and patiently awaited the result of this singular scene.

He had not long to wait for the issue. His unknown captors, having probably reached the intended spot, halted and laid the *capataz* on the ground, after which everything round him grew calm and silent again.

At the end of several minutes he determined on an attempt to recover his liberty, and made a desperate effort to break his bonds. But here again a fresh surprise was reserved for him: the cords which bound him, and which were so fast a minute before, broke after a slight resistance.

The *capataz's* first impulse was to lift the *zarapé* which covered his face, and free himself from the gag. He next looked about him to reconnoitre, and to find out what had become of his companions, and uttered a cry of astonishment and fright on seeing Doña Hermosa, her father, and the *peones* stretched on the ground close by, gagged as he had been, and their heads muffled in *zarapés*.

The *capataz* hastened to the relief of his mistress and Don Pedro, after which he severed the cords which bound the *peones*.

The place to which the travellers had been transported by their invisible aggressors was completely dissimilar to the site chosen for the camp. They were in the midst of a thick forest, where at an immense height above their heads, the gigantic trees formed a green vault, almost impenetrable to the light of day. The horses and baggage of the travellers had vanished. Their position was frightful, deserted as they were in the virgin forest without provisions or horses. Every hope of safety was gone, and a terrible death, after horrible sufferings stared them in the face.

It is impossible to describe the despair of Don Pedro. He acknowledged, when it was too late, the folly of his conduct. He fixed his weeping eyes on his daughter with an expression of unspeakable tenderness and sorrow, accusing himself as the sole cause of the evil that had overwhelmed them. Doña Hermosa was the only one who did not give way to despair in these critical circumstances. After trying to raise the courage of her father by tender and consoling words, she was the first to speak of quitting the place and endeavouring to find the road they had lost.

The courage which sparkled in the eye of the daughter reanimated the energy of her father and the rest. If she did not succeed in reviving hope in their breasts, at all events she aroused in them sufficient spirit to encounter the necessary struggle before them. The final words of this young creature put a stop to all hesitation, and completed the happy reaction she had excited in their minds.

"Our friends," said she, "on finding we do not arrive, will suspect our misfortune, and devote themselves immediately to a search for us. Don Estevan, to whom all the secrets of the wilderness are known, will infallibly recover our trail. Our position, therefore, is far from desperate. Let us not abandon ourselves, if we do not wish God to abandon us. Let us go: soon I hope we shall find our way out of the forest, and see the sun once more."

So they began their march.

Unfortunately it is impossible to find the right direction in a virgin forest, unless we are well acquainted with the localities, – the forests, where all the trees are alike, where there is no visible horizon, and where the only available knowledge is the instinct of the brute, not the reason of man. Thus the travellers wandered at random the whole day long, always turning, without knowing it, in the same circle, travelling far without advancing, and vainly seeking to find a road which was not in existence.

Don Pedro endeavoured to discover a reason why the men who had stolen their horses should have abandoned them in this inextricable labyrinth; why they had been thus callously condemned to an agonising death; and who the enemy might be who had cruelly conceived a plan of such atrocious revenge. But the *hacendero* racked his brains in vain for even a surmise. His mind suggested no one on whom suspicion could rest as the probable author of this unqualified crime.

All the morning the travellers continued their devious course: the sun went down, the day gave way to night, and they were still toiling on, wandering mechanically without any fixed direction, now to the right, now to the left; struggling on more in the endeavour to escape from their thoughts by physical fatigue, than in the hope of emerging from the forest – their horrible prison.

Doña Hermosa uttered no complaint. Cool and resolute, she pushed forward with a firm step, encouraging her companions by voice and gesture, and still finding spirit enough to chide and shame them for their want of perseverance.

All of a sudden she uttered a cry of pain. She had been bitten by a snake. This fresh misfortune, which should have apparently completed the travellers' despair, on the contrary, excited them to such a pitch, that they forgot all else, except how to think for and to save her whom they called their guardian angel.

But human strength has limits, beyond which it may not go. The travellers, overcome by fatigue and their poignant emotions during their wanderings, and convinced, besides, of the inutility of their efforts, were on the point of yielding to their despair, when God placed them suddenly face to face with the hunter.

CHAPTER V

CONFIDENTIAL CHAT

After conducting his guests to the compartment of the *teocali* which he had appointed for them, the Tigercat retraced his steps, and turned in the direction of a sufficiently ample excavation, which served for his own particular abode.

The old man walked at a slow pace, with his head raised, and his brow wrinkled under the tension of mighty thoughts. The flame of the torch he held in his right hand played capriciously over his countenance, revealing a strange expression on his features, where hate, joy, and uneasiness reflected themselves by turns.

When he arrived at his *cuarto* (bedchamber), – if it is right to give the name chamber to a kind of hole ten feet square by seven feet high, which contained as furniture a few skulls of the bison dispersed here and there, with a handful of maize-straw negligently thrown into a corner, and serving, no doubt, as couch for the inhabitants of this sorry refuge, – the Tigercat fixed his *ocote* torch in a bracket of iron made fast to the wall, crossed his arms on his breast, lifted his eyes with an air of defiance, and muttered the words:

"At last!"

Doubtless these words summed up in his thoughts a long series of dark and bold combinations.

After pronouncing these words, the old man cast a searching glance around him, as if he dreaded having been overheard. A mocking smile passed across his pale lips; he sat down on a bison's skull, and, burying his face in his hands, plunged into profound meditation.

A long time elapsed before he changed his position. At last, a slight noise fell on his ear: he lifted his head with a start, and turned towards the entrance to his cell.

"Come in!" he shouted. "I have waited for you with impatience."

"I think not!" replied a powerful voice; and the young hunter appeared at the threshold, where he stopped, holding his head erect, and looking proud and daring.

A shade crossed the forehead of the Tigercat.

"Ah, ha!" cried he, with pretended gaiety. "In truth, I was not expecting you, *muchacho* (boy); but never mind; you are welcome."

"Is that wish truly in your thoughts at this moment?" sneered the other.

"And why should it not be in my thoughts? Am I in the habit of disguising them?"

"It is a useful habit under particular circumstances."

"A truth I do not deny; but not in this case. Come in; sit down, and let us talk."

"I comply," answered the hunter, taking a few steps forward, "particularly as I have to demand an explanation from you."

The Tigercat frowned, and replied, with rising and ill-suppressed anger:

"Is it to me you speak thus? Have you forgotten who I am?"

"I forget nothing that I ought to remember," concisely replied the other.

"Boy! Have you forgotten that I am your father?"

"My father! Who will prove it?"

"You are over-venturesome," cried the old man in ire.

"After all," said the hunter scornfully, "it is nothing to me whether you be my father or not. What does it matter? Have you not told me a thousand times over, that bonds of relationship do not exist in nature; that they are only a factitious sentiment, invented by human egotism for the profit of the petty exigencies of debased society? Here, we are only two men, equals in strength and courage; of whom the one comes to demand from the other a clear and unvarnished explanation."

While the hunter was speaking, the old man fixed upon him a look which flashed fire from under his half-closed eyelids. When he ceased, the Tigercat smiled ironically.

"The wolf's cub feels he is cutting his teeth, and wants to bite his fosterer."

"He will devour him without hesitation, if it be needful," fiercely replied the hunter, as he let the butt end of the heavy rifle he carried in his hand fall violently on the ground.

Instead of being lashed into a fury by a menace uttered so peremptorily, the Tigercat suddenly became calm. His austere features lighted up with an expression of good nature which rarely visited them. Clapping his large hands together gaily, he exclaimed, with an air of lively satisfaction:

"Well roared, my lion's whelp! *¡Vive Dios!* You deserve your name, Stoneheart! The more I see of you, the more I love you. I am proud of you, *muchacho*; for you are my handiwork, and I congratulate myself on my success in producing so complete a monster. Go on as you have begun, my son: I prophesy, you will go far."

The tone in which these words were pronounced by the Tigercat clearly proved that they were in reality the unreserved expression of his thoughts.

Stoneheart – for at last we know the name of this man – listened to his father with a shrug of his shoulders, and an affectation of disdain. When the latter ceased, the son replied as follows:

"Will you listen to me or not?"

"Certainly, my darling child. Speak! Tell me what frets you."

"Seek not to dupe me, gray-haired demon. I know your hellish malignity, and your unmatchable knavery."

"You are complimentary, *muchacho*."

"Answer frankly and categorically the questions I will put to you!"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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