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The Freebooters

A Story

BY

GUSTAVE AIMARD

AUTHOR OF "TRAPPERS OF ARKANSAS," "BORDER RIFLES," "WHITE SCALPERS," ETC.

REVISED AND EDITED BY PERCY B. ST. JOHN

NEW YORK

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THE FREEBOOTERS

CHAPTER I.

FRAY ANTONIO.

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

It is more than probable that Fray Antonio made none of these reflections while he stepped silently and quietly through the trees, leaving the man who had helped him, and probably saved his life, to struggle as he could with the crowd of red-skins.

In Mexico, as the clergy are recruited from the poorest class of the population, their ranks contain certain men of gross ignorance, and for the most part of doubtful morality.

Fray Antonio was assuredly no better or worse than the other monks whose gown he wore; but, unluckily for him, for some time past fatality appeared to have vented its spite on him.

The atrocious mystification of which John Davis had rendered the poor monk a victim had especially spread a gloomy haze over his hitherto so gay mind; a sad despondency had seized upon him; and it was with a heavy and uncertain step that he fled through the forest.

Night surprised poor Fray Antonio ere he had reached the skirt of this forest, which seemed to him interminable. Unarmed, without means of lighting a fire, half-dead with hunger and alarm, the monk glanced around in utter despair, and fell to the ground, giving vent to a dull groan.

Still, after a few moments, the instinct of self-preservation gained the mastery, and the monk, whose teeth chattered with terror on hearing through the forest the lugubrious roaring of the wild beasts, which were beginning to awaken, and greeted in their fashion the longed-for return of gloom—rose with a feverish energy, and suffering from that feverish over-excitement which fear raised to a
The Freebooters.

certain pitch produces, resolved to profit by the fugitive rays that still crossed the glade, to secure himself a shelter for the night.

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

Assuredly, under any other circumstances than those in which he found himself, the bare idea of clambering up this immense tree would have appeared to the monk the height of folly and mental aberration, owing to his paunch and awkwardness.

But it was a critical moment: at each instant the situation grew more dangerous; the howling came nearer; there was no time to hesitate. After walking once or twice round the tree in order to discover the spot which offered the greatest facility for his ascent, he gave vent to a sigh, embraced the enormous and rugged trunk with his arms and knees, and painfully commenced his attempt.

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

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

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

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

Soon, thanks to the rapidity of his movements, Fray Antonio had a considerable heap of wood. A smile of satisfaction lit up his wide face, and he breathed again as he wiped away the perspiration from his face.

"This time," he muttered, "if I do not succeed, I shall be clumsy."

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

The dangerous denizens of the forest had quitted their lurking-places, and crushed the dead wood, as they eagerly came on, amid a deafening current of cat-like howls. The monk had not an instant to lose.

After taking a searching glance around him, the monk devotedly crossed himself, recommended himself to Heaven with a sincerity he had probably never evinced before, and then, suddenly making up his mind, began resolutely climbing to the top of this fictitious mount.
He then stopped for a minute to draw breath; Fray Antonio was now nearly ten feet from the ground. It is true that any animal could easily have overthrown this obstacle; but this beginning of success revived the monk’s courage, the more so because, on raising his eyes he saw, a few paces above him, the blessed branch toward which he had so long extended his arms in vain.

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

“Mercy!” he exclaimed in a choking voice, “I am dead. Holy Virgin, have pity on me.”

His strength, paralysed by terror, deserted him, his hands let loose the protecting branch, and he fell, like a log, at the foot of the tree. Fortunately for Fray Antonio, the care he had taken in piling up the dead wood to a considerable extent broke his fall, otherwise it would probably have been mortal: but the shock he experienced was so great that he completely lost his senses. The monk’s fainting fit was long; when he returned to life and opened his eyes again, he took a frightened glance around, and fancied he must be suffering from a horrible nightmare.

He still found himself by the tree, which he had tried so long to climb, but he was lying close to an enormous fire, over which half a deer was roasting, and around him were some twenty Indians, crouching on their heels, silently smoking their pipes, while their horses, picketed a few yards off, and ready to mount, were eating their provender.

These new friends were clothed in their war-garb, and from their hair drawn off their foreheads, and their long barbed lances, it was easy to recognise them as Apaches.

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

Still, the Indians went on smoking silently, and did not appear to perceive that their captive had regained his senses. For his part, the monk kept his eyes closed.

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

At this moment the monk felt a heavy hand laid on his chest, while a voice said—

“Should the father of prayer can open his eyes now, for the venison is smoking, and his share is cut off.”
The monk, perceiving that his stratagem was discovered, and excited by the smell of the meat, having made up his mind, opened his eyes, and sat up.

"Och!" the man said, "my father can eat; he must be hungry, and has slept enough."

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

The behaviour of the Apaches was anything but hostile; on the contrary, they were most attentive, giving him more food so soon as they perceived that he had nothing before him: they had even carried their politeness so far as to give him a few mouthfuls of spirit, an extremely precious liquid, of which they are most greedy.

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

A considerable space of time elapsed, and not a syllable was exchanged. By degrees the ranks of the red-skins thinned: one after the other, at short intervals, rolled themselves in their blankets, lay down with their feet to the fire, and went to sleep. Fray Antonio, crushed by the emotions of the day, and the fatigue he had experienced, would gladly have imitated the Indians, had he dared, for he felt his eyes close involuntarily. At last the Indian who hitherto had alone spoken, perceiving his state of somnolency, took pity on him. He rose, fetched a horsecloth, and brought it to the monk.

"My father will wrap himself in this fressada," he said; "the nights are cold and my father needs sleep greatly, he will, therefore, feel warmed with this To-morrow Blue-fox will smoke the calumet with the father of prayer."

Fray Antonio gratefully accepted the horsecloth, wrapped himself up carefully, and lay down by the fire so as to absorb the largest amount of caloric possible. Still the Indian's words did not fail to cause him some degree of anxiety.

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

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

Blue-fox remained crouched over the fire the whole night, plunged in gloomy thought, and watching, alone of his comrades, over the common safety.

At sun-rise Blue-fox was still awake: he had remained the whole night without sleep.
CHAPTER II.

INDIAN DIPLOMACY.

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

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

"I have indeed slept well, chief, and I thank you for your cordial hospitality."

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

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

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

Fray Antonio had not even the resource of pretending not to understand the speaker, for the chief expressed himself in Spanish, a language all the Indian tribes understand.

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

"My father will listen," he said; "a chief is about to speak; Blue-fox is a sachem, his tongue is not forked."

"I am listening," Fray Antonio replied.

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

The chief paused. The monk was on the point of answering that he did not know the fact, and did not want to, but a moment's reflection made him understand the danger of such an answer.

"The brothers of the chief were ungrateful to him," he replied, "and the sachem left them, after shaking off his mocassins at the entrance of their village."

The chief shook his head in negation.

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

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

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

"Of course you have found the person again?"
"For a long time Blue-fox sought in vain; but one day he at length saw him again."

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

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

This was perfectly correct. The monk did not understand a syllable; but the peremptory accent with which Blue-fox uttered the last sentence aroused him, and while recalling him to a feeling of his present position, made him comprehend the danger of not seeming to take an interest in the conversation.

"Pardon me, chief," he eagerly answered; "on the contrary, I perfectly understand; but I am subject to a certain absence of mind completely independent of my will, which I assure you is no fault of mine."

"Good, my father is like all the chiefs of prayer of the pale-faces, his thoughts are constantly directed to the Wacondah."

"So it is, chief," the monk exclaimed; "continue your narrative, I beg."

"Wah! my father constantly traverses the prairies of the pale-faces; and my father knows the pale hunters of these prairies?"

"Nearly all."

"Very good; one of these hunters is the friend so deeply regretted by Blue-fox," the Indian continued. "Very often the red-skin warrior has been led a short distance from his friend by the incidents of the chase, but never near enough to make himself known."

"That is unfortunate."

"The chief would like to see his friend, and smoke the calumet of peace with him, while conversing about old times, and the period when they traversed together the hunting-grounds of the sachem's terrible nation."

"Then the hunter is an Indian?"

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

"But why does not the chief frankly go and join his friend, if he know where he is?"

At this insinuation, which he was far from anticipating, the chief frowned, and a cloud momentarily crossed his face.

"Blue-fox does not go to meet his friend, because the latter is not alone."

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

"Good," the Indian added; "wisdom speaks by the mouth of my father; he is certainly a chief of prayer, and his lips distil the purest honey."

Fray Antonio drew himself up, and his alarm was beginning to be dissipated; he saw vaguely that the red-skin wished to ask something of him. This thought restored his courage.

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

The Apache gave him a piercing glance.

"Wah!" he replied; "then my father knows where to find the chief's friend?"

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

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

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

"Blue-fox is rich; he has numerous horses; he can assemble round his totem one hundred warriors, and ten times twenty times more. If my father is willing to serve the sachem, he will find him grateful."
“I ask nothing better than to be agreeable to you, chief, if it lies in my
power; but you must explain clearly what I have to do.”
“Good; the sachem will explain everything. My father will listen. Among
all the pale hunters, whose mocassins trample the prairie grass in all directions,
there is one who is braver and more terrible than the rest; the tigers and
jaguars fly at his approach, and the Indian warriors themselves are afraid to
cope with him. This hunter is no effeminate Yori; the blood of the Gachupinos
does not flow in his veins; he is the son of a colder land, and his ancestors
fought for a lengthened period with the Long Knives of the East.”
“Good,” the monk said; “from what the chief tells me, I see that this man
is a Canadian.”
“That is the name given, I think, to his nation.”
“But among all the hunters I am acquainted with, there is only one who is a
Canadian.”
“Waah!” said the chief, “only one?”
“Yes; his name is Tranquil, I think, and he is attached to the Larch-tree
hacienda.”
“Waah! that is the very man. Does my father know him?”
“Not much, I confess, but still sufficiently to present myself to him.”
“Very good.”
“Still, I warn you, chief, that this man, like all his fellows, leads an extremely
vagabond life, being here to-day and gone to-morrow.”
“My father need not trouble himself; the sachem will lead him to the camp
of the Tiger-killer.”
“Very good; I will answer for the rest.”
“My father must carefully retain in his heart the words of Blue-fox. The
warriors are awaking; they must know nothing.”
The conversation broke off here. The warriors were really awaking, and the
camp, so quiet a few moments previously, had now the aspect of a hive, when
the bees prepare at sunrise to go in search of their daily crop. At a sign from
the chief, the hachesto, or public crier, mounted a fallen tree, and twice uttered
a shrill cry. At this appeal all the warriors, even those still lying on the ground,
hastened to range themselves behind the chief. A deep silence then prevailed
for several minutes; all the Indians, with their arms folded on their chest, and
their faces turned to the rising sun, awaited what the sachem was about
to do.
The latter took a calabash full of water, which the hachesto handed him, and
in which was a spray of wormwood. Then raising his voice, he sprinkled
toward the four cardinal points, saying—
“Wacondah, Wacondah! thou unknown and omnipotent Spirit, whose uni-
verse is the temple, Master of the life of man, protect thy children!”
“Master of the life of man, protect thy children!” the Apaches repeated in
chorus, respectfully bowing.
“Creator of the great sacred tortoise, whose skill supports the world, keep
far from us Nyang, the genius of evil! deliver our enemies to us, and give us
their scalps. Wacondah! Wacondah! protect thy children!”
“Wacondah! Wacondah! protect thy children!” the warriors repeated.
The sachem then bowed to the sun.
“And thou, sublime star, visible representative of the omnipotent and invin-
cible Creator, continue to pour thy vivifying heat on the hunting-grounds of thy
red sons, and intercede for them with the Master of life. May this clear water
I offer thee be grateful. Wacondah! Wacondah! protect thy children!”
“Wacondah! Wacondah! protect thy children!” the Apaches repeated, and
followed their chief's example by kneeling. The latter then took a medicine-
rod, and waved it several times over his head.

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

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

Fray Antonio had witnessed with extreme astonishment this sacred and
affecting ceremony, whose details, however, escaped his notice, for the words
uttered by the chief had been in the dialect of his nation, and consequently in-
comprehensible to the monk. He experienced a certain delight on seeing that
these men, whom he regarded as barbarians, were not entirely so.

The expiring camp-fires were now rekindled, in order to prepare the morning
meal, while scouts started in every direction to assure themselves that the road
was free. The monk, being now completely reassured, ate with good appetite
the provisions offered him, and made no objection to mount the horse the chief
indicated to him, when they set out on the termination of the meal.

They rode for several hours along tracks marked by wild beasts, forced,
through the narrowness of the paths, to go in Indian file, and although the
monk perceived that the sachem constantly kept by his side, he did not feel at
all alarmed.

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

At about four p.m. the band re-mounted, and set out again; but this time,
instead of going at a walking pace, they galloped. The ride was long; the sun
had set for more than two hours, and still the Indians galloped. At length, at
a signal from their chief, they halted. Blue-fox then went up to the monk, and
drew him aside.

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

"I?" the monk said, in surprise; "you are jesting, chief—I prefer remaining
with you."

"That cannot be," the Indian said.

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

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

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

"Very good; that flame is produced by a camp-fire of the pale-faces."

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

"Yes; but my father must listen; the pale-faces will receive my friend kindly."

"I understand; then I will tell Tranquil that his friend Blue-fox desires to
speak with him."

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

"Oh!" the monk said, in confusion.

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

Fray Antonio shuddered at this menace.

"I swear it, chief," he said.
"A man does not swear," the chief remarked; "he says yes or no. When my father reaches the camp of the pale-faces he will not allude to the Apaches; but when the pale hunters are asleep, my father will leave the camp and come to Blue-fox."

"But where shall I find you?" the monk asked.

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

"Very good."

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

"Good-bye, then," replied the monk.

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

Fray Antonio made no reply, but uttered a deep sigh, and pushed on in the direction of the camp. The nearer he drew to it, the more difficult did it appear to him to accomplish the sinister mission with which the Apache chief had intrusted him; twice or thrice the idea of flight crossed his mind, but whither? At length the camp appeared before the monk's startled eyes; as he could not draw back, for the hunters had doubtless perceived him already, he decided on pushing forward, while desperately muttering—

"The Lord have mercy upon me!"

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CHAPTER III.

DOWN THE PRECIPICE.

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

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

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

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

Their expectations were deceived, at least, temporarily. Davis, at this moment, had no intention of making the borderers elect him as their chief: the fate of his friend entirely absorbed him.

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

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

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

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

The Border Rifles declared, with one accord, that they would find their chief again, dead or alive.

"Good, my friends," the American exclaimed; "if he be unhappily dead, we will bury him and protect his remains, so dear to us on many accounts, from the insults of wild beasts: but, I repeat to you, a presentiment tells me that he is still alive."

"May Heaven hear you, John Davis," the borderers shouted, "and restore us our chief."

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

This proposal of John Davis was greeted as it deserved, by enthusiastic shouts.

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

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

"I have known this spot for a long time."

"Come to facts, my friend."

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

"Ah, ah," John said thoughtfully, "and what do you conclude from that, Rupert?"
"That it would be, perhaps, better to mount and skirt the hills."
"Yes, yes, that is a good idea, and we will take advantage of it; take twenty men with you, Ruperto, and proceed at full speed to the plain you allude to, for we must not throw away any chance; the rest of the band will remain here to watch the environs, while I effect the descent of the barranca."
"You still adhere to your idea, then?"
"More than ever!"
"As you please, John Davis, as you please, though you risk your bones on such a black night as this."
"I trust in Heaven, and I hope it will protect me."
"I hope so too, for your sake."

Red Ruperto then went off, followed by twenty borderers, and soon disappeared in the darkness. The descent John Davis was about to make was anything but easy. The American was too experienced a wood-ranger not to know this, and hence took all proper precautions. He placed in his belt his knife and a wide and strong axe, and fastened round his waist a rope formed of several reatas. Three men seized the end of the rope, which they turned round the stem of a tree, so as to let it out gently whenever the American desired it. As a final precaution, he lit a branch of ocote wood, which was to serve as a torch during his perilous descent, for the sky was so perfectly black, it was impossible to see anything two paces away. His last measures taken, with the coolness that distinguishes men of his race, the North American pressed the hands held out to him, tried once again to restore hope to his comrades by a few hearty words, and kneeling on the brink of the abyss, began slowly descending. John Davis was a man of tried courage, his life had been one continued struggle, in which he had only triumphed through his strength of will and energy; still, when he was being lowered into the barranca, he felt chilled to the heart, and could not repress a slight start of terror, which ran over all his limbs like an electric flash.

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

The first minutes were the most terrible; the feet and hands must grow accustomed to the rude task imposed on them, and they only gradually learn to find, as it were instinctively, their resting-places.

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

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

John Davis continued his descent; the slope became constantly less abrupt, and the adventurer met, not only shrubs, but clumps of trees, grouped here and there. Still, as John Davis found no further traces, a fear fell upon him, and painfully contracted his heart; he was afraid, lest the shrubs, through their elasticity, might have hurled the two unhappy men into space, instead of
letting them follow the slope of the precipice. This thought so powerfully occupied the American's mind, that a deep discouragement seized upon him, and for some moments he remained without strength or will, crouching sadly on the ground.

But Davis was a man of too energetic a character to give way for any length of time to despair; he soon raised his head, and looked boldly around him.

"I must go on," he said in a firm voice. But, at the same moment, he suddenly gave a start of surprise, and, uttering a loud cry, rushed quickly toward a black mass, to which he had hitherto paid but slight attention.

The white-headed eagle, the most powerful and cleverest of birds, ordinarily builds its nest on the sides of barrancas, at the top of the loftiest trees, and chiefly those denuded of branches to a considerable height. This nest, strongly built, is composed of sticks from three to five feet long, fastened together and covered with Spanish beard, a species of cryptogamic plant of the lichen family, wild grass, and large patches of turf. When the nest is completed, it measures from six to seven feet in diameter, and at times the accumulation of materials is so considerable—for the same nest is frequently occupied for a number of years, and receives augmentations each season—that its depth equals its diameter. As the nest of the white-headed eagle is very heavy, it is generally placed in the centre of a fork formed by the fortuitous meeting of several large branches.

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

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

It was not an easy undertaking to reach this nest, which was nearly ten yards from the edge of the precipice; but John Davis, now that he had found the body of his chief, was determined to learn, at all risks, whether he were alive or dead. But what means was he to employ to acquire this certainty? how reach the tree, which oscillated violently with every gust? After some thought, the American recognised the fact that he could never climb the tree alone; he therefore placed his hands funnel-wise to his mouth, and gave the shout agreed on. After half an hour of unheard-of fatigue, Davis found himself again among his comrades.

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

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

All was in the same state as Davis left it: the two bodies were still motionless, and still intertwined. Were they dead, or had they fainted? Such was the question all asked themselves, and no one could answer. All at once a loud noise was heard, and the bottom of the barranca was illumined by a number of torches. Ruperto's party had reached the spot. Guided by the flashes they
saw running along the sides of the precipice, they soon discovered the
nest.

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

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

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

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

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

The adventurers were not easily induced to spare the captain. Still, owing
to the influence he enjoyed with the band, Davis succeeded in making them
listen to reason.

CHAPTER IV.

TWO ENEMIES.

The hesitation of the Border Rifles was brief; for these half-savage men, an
obstacle to be overcome was only a stimulus. The two wounded men, securely
fastened on cross-pieces of wood by reatas, were let down one after the other to
the bottom of the precipice, and laid on the bank of a small stream, which ran
noiselessly through the plain. John Davis, fearing some outbreak on the part
of his angry comrades, himself undertook to let the captain down, in order to
be certain that no accident would happen to him.
When the wounded men had been removed from the eagle's nest, the adventurers glided along the cliff with marvellous rapidity, and the whole band was soon collected on the bank of the stream. As is frequently the case in a mountainous country, the bottom of the barranca was a rather wide prairie, sheltered between two lofty hills, which enclosed it on the right and left, thus forming a species of gorge, which, at the spot where the fight took place, was a gulf of great depth.

John Davis, without losing an instant, did all he could for the Jaguar; while Ruperto, though much against the grain, did the same for the Mexican captain.

Meanwhile the night had slipped away, and the sun rose as the adventurers completed their perilous descent. The landscape then resumed its real aspect, and what had appeared by the flickering light of the torches a desolate and arid desert became a charming and smiling appearance.

The sun has enormous power over the human organisation; it not only dispels those sombre phantoms which are produced by darkness, but also restores to the body and mind their elasticity and vigour. With day, hope and joy returned to the heart of the adventurers; a joy rendered more lively still by the sight of the gold-chests hurled over the previous night by the Mexicans, and which, though crushed by their fall, had lost none of their precious contents.

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

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

The adventurers surrounded their chief, anxiously watching his every movement. The young man soon opened his eyes again, and, helped by Davis, managed to sit up. A slight patch of red was visible on his cheek-bones, but the rest of his face retained an ashen hue. He looked slowly round him, and the wild expression of his glance gradually gave way. "Drink!" he muttered in a hollow and inarticulate voice.

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

"I fancied I was dead," he said. "Is Captain Melendez still alive?"

"Yes."

"What state is he in?"

"No worse than your own."

"All the better."

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

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

And he added in a low voice, unintelligible by his hearers, "I swore it."

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

The Jaguar made an angry gesture.

"All right," the adventurer continued; "if it is not pleasant to you, we will say no more about it."

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

"That's enough. Don't be angry, captain; you shall be obeyed."

And Ruperto went off, growling, to see about the wounded man confided to
Two Enemies.

His care. On approaching the spot where the captain was laid, he could not restrain a cry of surprise.

"By Jupiter," he said, "that's a fellow who can boast of having a tough life, at any rate."

Ere through the coolness of the morning breeze or some other cause, the captain had regained his senses.

"Hilloh!" the adventurer exclaimed, as he came up. "You seem better."

"Yes," the officer answered laconically.

"You will soon be cured, I can see; still, I may tell you that you had a very narrow escape."

"Where am I?"

"Don't you see? In a superb prairie, on the bank of a limpid stream," replied the adventurer.

"Let us have no insolence, fellow, but answer my questions plainly."

"You can, I suppose, recognise a borderers' camp."

"Then I am in the power of bandits?"

"Rather so," Ruperto replied, mockingly.

"Tell me the name of the chief whose prisoner I am?"

"The Jaguar."

"What!" the captain exclaimed; "is he not dead?"

"Why should he be, since you are alive? That seems to annoy you, does it? Still I must do you the justice of saying, that you did all you could to kill him; and if he be alive, on the word of a man, you have not the least cause to reproach yourself."

These words were accompanied by a sarcastic grin, which excited the captain's anger.

"Does your chief wish to impose a fresh torture on me," he said, "by sending you to insult me?"

"You misunderstand his kindly intentions; he ordered me to watch over your health, and offer you the most touching attentions," Ruperto answered, ironically.

"Then leave me, for I do not want your help; I seek nothing but repose."

"As you please, my officer; settle matters as you think proper. From the moment you refuse my assistance, I wash my hands of all that may happen, and withdraw; I do not care about your company."

And after giving the captain an ironic bow, the adventurer turned on his heel.

"What a pity," he muttered, "the captain will not permit that charming young man to be hung!"

As soon as he was alone, Captain Melendez let his head fall on his hands, and tried to arrange his ideas, which the shock he had received had utterly disorganised. Still he gradually yielded to a species of lethargy, the natural result of his fall, and soon fell into a deep sleep.

He slept peacefully for several hours, nothing happening to disturb his repose: and when he awoke he found himself quite a new man; the restorative he had enjoyed had completely rested his nervous system, his strength had returned; and it was with an indescribable feeling of joy that he rose and walked a few steps on the prairie. With calmness of mind, courage returned, and he was ready to recommence the contest.

Ruperto now returned with some provisions in a basket. The adventurer offered them to the captain with rough politeness, in which, however, the desire to be agreeable was perceptible. The captain readily accepted the food, and ate with an appetite that surprised himself after so serious a fall.
"Well," Ruperto remarked, "did I not tell you that you would soon be at
right? it is just the same with the captain—he is as fresh as a fioripondio and
was never better in his life."
"Tell me, my friend," Don Juan answered, "may I be allowed to speak
with the chief?"
"Yes, and he even ordered me to ask you if you would allow him an inter-
view after dinner."
"Most heartily; I am entirely at his orders; especially," the captain added
with a smile, "since I am his prisoner."
"That is true; well, eat quietly, and while you are doing so I will convey
your message."

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

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

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

The captain bowed.
"I was far from expecting," he said, "so much courtesy from—"
He stopped, not daring to utter the word that rose to his lips, through fear
of offending the other.
"From bandits, I suppose, captain?" the Jaguar replied, with a smile.
"Oh, no denial, I know what we are called at Mexico. Yes, caballero, at the
present day we are outlaws, border-ruffians, freebooters; to-morrow, perhaps,
we shall be heroes and saviours of a people; but so the world wags; but never
mind that. You wish to speak to me."
"Did you not also evince a desire, caballero, to have an interview with
me?"
"I did; I have only one question to ask you, though—will you answer it?"
"On my honour, if it be possible."
The Jaguar reflected, and then continued—
"You hate me, I suppose?"
"What makes you imagine that?"
"How do I know?" the Jaguar replied, with embarrassment; "a thousand
reasons, as, for instance, the obstinacy with which you sought to take my life a
few hours ago."
The captain drew himself up, and his face assumed a stern expression which
it had not worn hitherto.
"I pledge you my word to be frank," he said.
"I thank you beforehand."
"Between yourself and me, personally, no hatred can exist—at any rate, not
on my side; I do not know you, I only saw you yesterday for the first time;
ever to my knowledge have you come across my path before, hence I have no
reason to hate you. But beside the man there is the soldier; as an officer in the
Mexican army—"
"Enough, captain," the young man sharply interrupted him; "you have told me all I wished to know; political hatreds, however terrible they may be, are not eternal. You do your duty as I do mine—that is to say, as well as you possibly can, and to that I have no objection. Unfortunately, instead of fighting side by side, we are in opposite camps; but who knows whether we may not some day be friends?"

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

The latter pressed it vigorously.

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

"Agreed," said the captain.

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

"Speak."

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

"I confess it."

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

"What good will that do?"

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

"I do not understand you; your words appear strange to me. Explain yourself."

A feverish flush suddenly covered the Jaguar’s face.

"Listen, captain; if you only know me to-day for the first time, your name has been ringing in my ears for many months past."

The officer gazed at him strangely.

"Yes, yes," the Jaguar continued; "she ever has your name on her lips—she only speaks of you. Only a few days back—but why recall that? suffice it for you to know that I love her to distraction."

"Carmela," the captain muttered.

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

"I do," the captain replied, simply.

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

"Thank you for your straightforward answer, captain; in loving Carmela you take advantage of your right, just as I do; let this love, instead of separating, form a stronger link between us. Carmela is worthy of the love of an honest man; let us each love her, and carry on an open warfare, without treachery or trickery; all the better for the man she may prefer. She alone must be judge between us; let her follow her heart, for she is too pure and good to deceive herself and make a bad choice."

"Good!" the captain exclaimed. "You are a man after my own heart, Jaguar, and whatever may happen, I shall always feel happy to have pressed your honest hand, and to be counted among your friends. Yes, I love Carmela; for a smile from her rosy lips I would joyfully lay down my life."

"Viva Cristo!" the young man said, "I was sure we should end by coming to an understanding."
"To bring that about," the captain remarked, with a smile, "we only needed an explanation."
"I trust that it will not be repeated under similar conditions, for it is a perfect miracle that we are still alive."
"I am not at all anxious to repeat the experiment."
"Nor I either, that I swear. But the sun is rapidly declining on the horizon: I need not tell you that you are free, and at liberty to go wherever you please, if it is not your intention to remain any length of time with us: I have had a horse got ready which you will permit me to offer you."
"I gladly accept it: I do not wish to have any false pride with you, and afoot in these regions, which are quite strange to me, I should feel greatly embarrassed."
"That need not trouble you, for I will give you a guide to accompany you, till you get in the right road."
"A thousand thanks."
"Where do you propose going? Of course, if my question be indiscreet, I do not expect you to answer."
"I have nothing to hide from you; I intend joining General Rubio as quickly as possible, to whom I must report the accident that has happened to the conducta de plata, about which I do not reproach you."
"Had it been possible to save the conducta by courage and devotion, you would have doubtless done it."
"I thank you for this praise. But now I must be off."
The Jaguar made a signal to a borderer standing a short distance off.
"The captain's horse," he said.
Five minutes later this borderer, who was no other than Ruperto, reappeared, leading two horses, one of which was a magnificent mustang, with delicate limbs and flashing eye. The captain reached the saddle at one leap, and Ruperto was already mounted. The two enemies, henceforth friends, shook hands for the last time, and after an affectionate parting, the captain started.
"Mind, no tricks, Ruperto!" the Jaguar said, in a stern voice to the adventurer.
"All right, all right!" the latter growled in reply.

CHAPTER V.

GENERAL RUBIO.

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

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

He became in a short time, thanks to his courage, energy, and presence of mind, one of the most formidable guerillas. Always the first in attack, the last to retreat, chief of a cuadilla composed of picked men, to whom the most daring and wild expeditions appeared but child’s play, and favoured by constant good luck—for fortune ever loves the rash—Jose Maria soon became a terror to the Spaniards. After serving in turn under all the heroes of the Mexican war of Independence, and fighting bravely by their side, peace found him a brigadier-general.

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

The worthy general looked round him. Everybody was preparing to retire to the bosom of his family, and enjoy a dearly-purchased repose. Don Jose Maria might perhaps have desired nothing better than to follow the example; but his family was the army. During the ten years’ fighting which had just elapsed, the general had completely lost sight of all the relations he ever possessed. His father, whose death he learned accidentally, was the sole person whose influence might have brought him to abandon military career; but the paternal hearth was cold. Nothing attracted him home, and he therefore remained under the banner, though not through ambition. The worthy soldier did himself justice, and recognised the fact that he had attained a position far superior to any he might ever have dared to desire.

At the period when the Texans began agitating and claiming their independence, the Mexican government, deceived at the outset by the agents appointed to watch that state, sent insufficient forces to re-establish order, and crush the insurgents: but the movement soon assumed such a distinctly revolutionary character, that the president found it urgent to make an effective demonstration. Unfortunately it was too late; the dissatisfaction had spread; it was no longer a question of suppressing a revolt, but stifling a revolution.

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

But the war then changed its character: the Texans, nearly all North Americans, skilful hunters, indefatigable marchers, and marksmen of proverbial reputation, broke up into small bands, and instead of offering the Mexican troops a front, which would have enabled them to outmanoeuvre and crush them, they began a hedge war, full of tricks and ambushes, after the manner of the Vendeans.

The position became more and more critical. The rebels, disciplined, hardened, and strong in the moral support of their fellow-citizens, who applauded their successes, and put up vows for them, had boldly raised the flag of Texan independence, and after several engagements, in which they decimated the troops sent against them, compelled the latter to recognise them as the avowed defenders of an honourable cause.
Among the numerous generals of the republic, the president at length chose the only man capable of repairing the successive disasters undergone by the government. General Don José Maria Rubio was invested with the supreme command of the troops detached to act against Texas.

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

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

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

The conducta de plata intrusted to Captain Melendez had an immense importance in the eyes of the needy government of the capital; the dollars must at all hazards reach Mexico in safety.

General Rubio therefore found himself reluctantly compelled to modify the line he had traced; he did not doubt that the insurgents would make the greatest efforts to intercept and seize the conducta, for they also suffered from a great want of money. Hence their plans must be foiled and the conducta saved. For this purpose the general collected a large body of troops, placed himself at their head, and advanced by forced marches to the entrance of the defile, where, from the reports of his spies, he knew that the insurgents were ambuscaded; then, as we have seen, he sent off a sure man (or whom he supposed to be) to Captain Melendez, to warn him of his approach, and put him on his guard.

We have narrated what took place.

The Mexican camp stood in the centre of a beautiful plain, facing the defile through which the conducta must pass, according to the general's instructions. It was evening, and the sun had set for about an hour. Don José Maria, rendered anxious by the captain's delay, had sent off scouts in different directions to bring him news, and a prey to an agitation, which each moment that passed augmented, was walking anxiously about his tent, cursing and swearing in a low voice, frowning and stopping every now and then to listen.

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

Contrary to the habits of Mexican general officers, who make a great display of embroidery, and are gilded and plumed like charlatans, his uniform had a simplicity and severity which added to his military appearance.

A sabre and a pair of holster-pistols were carelessly thrown across a map on the table in the centre of the room. The gallop of a horse, at first distant, but which rapidly drew nearer, was heard. The sentinel outside the tent challenged, "Who goes there?"
The Hunter's Council.

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

It was Captain Don Juan Melendez.

"Here you are, at last!" the general exclaimed.

Then noticing the expression of sorrow spread over the officer's features, the general's face again assumed an anxious look.

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

The officer bowed his head.

"What is the meaning of this, sir?" the general continued angrily; "have you suddenly grown dumb?"

"No, general," answered the captain.

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

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

"Viva Dios!" the general shouted; "the conducta captured, and yourself alive to bring the news?"

"I could not get myself killed."

"By Heaven, I really believe," the general said, ironically, "that you have not even received a scratch."

"It is true."

The general walked up and down the tent. "And your soldiers," he went on, a minute later, "I suppose they fled at the first shot?"

"My soldiers are dead, general."

"What do you say?"

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

"Hum, hum!" the general remarked, "all dead?"

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

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

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

"Yes, general, and it was he who led us into the trap laid by the insurgents."

"A thousand demons! if the scoundrel—"

"He is dead," said the captain; "I killed him."

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

"General," the young man exclaimed, "though the conducta is lost, the fight was glorious for the Mexican name. Our honour has not suffered."

"Come, captain, you are one of those men above suspicion, whom not the slightest stain can affect. If necessary, I would go bail for your loyalty and bravery before the world. Report to me frankly all that has happened, and I will believe you; give me the fullest details about this action, in order that I may know whether I have to pity or punish you."

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

CHAPTER VI.

The Hunter's Council.

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

Immediately after his conversation with the leader of the Freebooters, the hunter rose and left the camp. He then remounted his horse and returned thoughtfully to the spot where his friends were camping. The latter were awaiting him anxiously, and Carmela especially was suffering from a terrible uneasiness.

It was a strange fact, which women alone can explain, that the maiden, perhaps unconsciously, entertained toward the Jaguar and Captain Melendez feelings which she was afraid to analyse, but which led her to take an equal interest in the fate of those two men, and fear a collision between them, whatever the result might have proved.

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

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

Tranquil peacefully dismounted, took the bridle off his horse, and then sat down by the side of Loyal Heart.

"Ouf! " he said, "here I am, back again."

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

"Not at all; on the contrary, the Jaguar received me as a friend; and I have only to complain of his courtesy."

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

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

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

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

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

"Speak, speak, father," she exclaimed eagerly, as she took the seat allotted her. "You seem to take great interest in Captain Melendez?"

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

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

The maiden became serious.

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

The hunter shook his head.

"All that is not clear, Nina," he replied; "I do not at all understand your arguments; but take care, my girl, take care."

Carmela pensively leant her blushing brow on the Canadian's shoulder, and lifted to him her large blue eyes full of tears.
I do not know why, but my heart is contracted, my bosom is oppressed. Oh, I am very unhappy."

And hiding her head in her hand, she burst into tears.

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

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

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

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

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

Tranquil looked at her in alarm; he could not understand these sudden changes of humour.

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

At this exclamation, the laughing girl's gaiety was augmented.

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

"Hum!" the hunter muttered; "I desire nothing more, Nina; but I am no further on than I was before, and on my word, I understand nothing of what is passing through your mind."

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

"Good, good, it must be so since you say it; little one!" Carmela lovingly kissed him.

"And the Jaguar?" she asked.

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

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

"He has given it me."

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

"Your wishes?" the hunter interrupted.

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

"That is true—I was wrong. Go on."

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

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

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

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

"All right; but I am not anxious about my old comrade, for he will return to find us again."

Each then began eating with good appetite, and troubled themselves no further about the negro’s absence.

During the hunters’ meal the sun had set, and night invaded the forest. Carmela, exhausted by the various events of the day, retired almost immediately to a light jacal of leaves which Loyal Heart had built for her.

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

The night was cold and clear; a profusion of light flashed from the millions of stars that studded the dark olive sky, and the moon poured on the earth her silvery rays, which imparted a fantastic appearance to objects. The atmosphere was so pure and transparent, that the eye could distinguish, as in bright day, the surrounding landscape. Several hours passed thus.

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

"That is true," said Loyal Heart; "do you sleep."

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

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

"Speak, my friend," said Loyal Heart.

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

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

"Yes," Lanzi supported him.

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

"It would kill her," said Loyal Heart.

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

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

"It is a difficult point," Lanzi observed.

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

"I am.

"Well, the master of the hacienda," Loyal Heart continued, "will not refuse to receive Carmela in his house."
The hunter snook his head in denial. "No, no," he said; "if I once asked the favour of him, I feel certain he would consent; but it cannot be."

"Why?"

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

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

"Nor I either, and that is what vexes me."

"Listen!" Loyal Heart suddenly exclaimed. "I do not know, Heaven pardon me, where my head was that I did not think of it at once. Do not be alarmed; I know somebody."

"Speak, speak."

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

"For reasons too long to tell you," the young man continued, "I am not alone in the desert, for my mother and an old servant of my family live about three hundred miles from where we now are with a tribe of Comanches, whose chief adopted me a few years back. My mother is kind, she loves me madly, and will be delighted to treat your charming child as a daughter. Coming with me, the Indians will receive you kindly, and my mother will thank you for confiding your daughter to her."

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

"The road is a long one," Loyal Heart answered. "We have more than three hundred miles to ride; Carmela is exhausted by the fatigue she has endured for some time past, and perhaps we should do well to grant her a day or two of rest."

"Yes, you are right; this journey, which would be as nothing to us, is enormous for a girl; let us remain here a couple of days—the camp is good, and the spot well selected."

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

"Very good," Tranquil said, with a smile. "So now, good night, brother."

"Good night!" Loyal Heart answered, and, lying down, was soon sound asleep. Tranquil, however, required to isolate himself for some hours, in order to go over the events which during the last few days had fallen upon him so unexpectedly, and broken up that placidity of life to which he had grown accustomed.

The hours passed away, but the hunter felt no desire for sleep. The stars were beginning to pale, the horizon was crossed by pale bands, the breeze grew colder and colder; all foreboded, in fact, the approach of dawn, when suddenly a slight noise, resembling that produced by the fracture of a dry bough, spoke on the hunter's practised ear, and caused him to start.

CHAPTER VII.

An Old Friend.

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

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

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

At the same moment a noise of footsteps, mingled with the rustling of leaves and the breaking of dry branches, smote his ear.

"Ah, ah!" the Canadian muttered; "it seems they have made up their mind at last."

Then a clear feminine voice rose harmoniously and sonorously from the wood. Tranquil stopped with a start of surprise. This voice was singing an Indian melody.

"I confide my heart to thee in the name of the Omnipotent.
I am unhappy, and no one takes pity on me;
Still God is great in my eyes."

"Oh!" the hunter muttered, "I know that song, it is that of the betrothed of the Snake Pawnees. How is it that these words strike my ear so far from their hunting-grounds? Can a detachment of Pawnees be wandering in the neighbourhood?

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

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

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

The other red-skin was a woman of twenty at the most; she was slim, active, and elegant, and her dress was decorated in accordance with the rules of Indian coquetry: still her worn features, on which only the fugitive traces of a prematurely vanished beauty were visible, showed that, like all Indian squaws, she had been pitilessly compelled to do all those rude household tasks, which the men regard as beneath their dignity.
At the sight of these two persons the hunter felt an emotion for which he could not account; the more he regarded the warrior standing before him the more he seemed to find again in this martial countenance the distant memory of the features of a man he had formerly known, though it was impossible for him to recall how or where this intimacy had existed; but overcoming his feelings, and comprehending that his lengthened silence must appear extraordinary to the persons who had been waiting so long for him to address to them the compliments of welcome which Indian etiquette demands, he at length decided on speaking.

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

"The voice of the pale hunter rejoices the heart of the chief," the warrior said; "he will smoke the calumet of friendship with the pale hunter."

The Canadian bowed politely; the sachem gave his squaw a sign to follow him, and he crouched on his heels in front of the fire, where Loyal Heart and Lanzi were still asleep. Tranquil and the warrior then began smoking silently while the young Indian squaw was busily engaged with the household duties and preparing the morning meal.

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

"The walkon and the maukawis," he said, "always sing the same song; the man who has heard them during the moons of spring recognises them in the moons of winter. It is not the same with man; he forgets quickly; his heart does not bound at the recollection of a friend."

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

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

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

"Singing-bird," the Indian said, addressing the young woman, "you are the chihuatl of a sachem; ask the great pale hunter why he has forgotten his friend?"

"I will obey," she answered, in a melodious voice; "but the chief is deceived; the great pale hunter has not forgotten the Wah-rush-a-menec."

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

"Wah! is the pale-face speaking the truth?" the chief said, with emotion; "has he really retained the memory of his brother, Black-deer?"

"Ah, chief," the hunter said, sadly; "to doubt any longer would be an injustice to me; how could I expect to meet you here, at such a distance from the wig-wams of your nation?"

"That is true," the Indian remarked, thoughtfully.

"And," Tranquil continued, "is that charming squaw I see there, the Singing-bird, that frail child whom I so often tossed on my knee?"

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

"Will the chief permit me to ask how the sachem knew that he would find me here?"

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

Tranquil looked at the warrior in surprise. He smiled.

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

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

At this moment the hunter felt a light hand laid on his shoulder, while a soft and affectionate voice murmured in his ear—"Good morning, father."

And a kiss completed the silence.

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

"Splendidly, father; but I see visitors have arrived."

"Yes, old friends, who, I hope, will soon be yours."

"Red-skins friends?" she whispered.

"All of them are not wicked," he answered with a smile: "these are kind."

Then, turning to the Indian woman, who had fixed her black-velvet eyes on Carmela with simple admiration, he called out, "Singing-bird!"

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

"Singing-bird," the hunter continued, "this girl is my daughter, Carmela. Love one another like sisters."

"Singing-bird will feel very happy to be loved by the White-lily," the Indian squaw replied.

Carmela, charmed at the name which the squaw had given her, bent down and kissed her forehead.

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

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

At this moment the sleepers awoke.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"My brother's mother is still the cherished child of the Wacondah," he answered in a gentle voice.
"Thanks, chief," the young man said with a sigh of relief; "forgive this start of terror which I could not overcome, but on perceiving you I feared lest some misfortune had happened."

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

"Poor No Eusebio," the young man muttered, "he is so devoted to us."

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

"They were right, chief; but why did you not awake me on your arrival?"

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

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

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

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

Tranquil rose, and threw his rifle over his shoulder.

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

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

"The white hunter will remain; Black-deer has nothing to conceal. The wisdom of my brother is great; he was brought up by the red-skins."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Loyal Heart," he said, "you left the Village of Flowers to follow the hunting-path at daybreak of the third sun of the moon of the falling leaves. Well, during that period many things have occurred, which demand your immediate presence in the tribe of which you are one of the adopted sons. The war-hatchet, so deeply buried for ten moons between the prairie Comanches and the Buffalo Apaches, has suddenly been dug up in full council, and the Apaches are preparing to follow the war-trail, under the orders of the wisest and most
experienced chiefs of the nation. Your heart is strong; you will obey the orders of your fathers, and fight for them.”

Loyal heart bowed his head in assent.

“No one doubted you,” the chief continued; “still, for a war against the Apaches, the sachems would not have claimed your help; the Apaches are chattering old women, whom Comanche children can drive off with their dog-whips. The Long Knives of the East and the Yoris have also dug up the hatchet, and both have offered to treat with the Comanches. An alliance with the pale-faces is not very agreeable to red-skins; still, their anxiety is great, as they do not know which side to take, or which party to protect.”

Black-deer was silent.

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

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

“I am very young,” Loyal Heart answered, “to venture to give my advice in such a matter, and settle so arduous a question.”

“My brother is young, but wisdom speaks by his mouth. The Wacondah breathes in his heart the words his lips utter; all the chiefs feel respect for him.”

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

“Wah,” said Black-deer, “the pale hunter is wise; his advice must be good; a chief is listening to him.”

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

“The Comanches are the most terrible warriors of the prairie,” he said; “no one must try to invade their hunting-grounds; if they make war with the Apaches, who are vagabond and cowardly thieves, they are in the right to do so; but for what good object would they interfere in the quarrels of the pale-faces? Whether Yoris or Long Knives, the whites have ever been, at all times and under all circumstances, the obstinate enemies of the red-skins, killing them wherever they may find them, under the most futile pretexts, and for the most time simply because they are Indians. To the red-skins the pale-faces are coyotes thirsting for blood. The Comanches should leave them to devour each other; whichever party may triumph, those who have been killed will be so many enemies the fewer for the Indians. This war between the pale-faces has been going on for two years, implacably and obstinately. Up to the present the Comanches have remained neutral; why should they interfere now? I have spoken.”

“Yes,” Loyal Heart said, “you have spoken well, Tranquil. The opinion you have offered the Comanches ought to follow, an interference on their part would be an act of deplorable folly.”

Black-deer had carefully listened to the Canadian’s speech, and it appeared to have produced an impression; he listened in the same way to Loyal Heart, and when the latter had ceased speaking, the chief remained thoughtful for a while, and then replied—
"I am pleased with the words of my brothers, for they prove to me that I regarded the situation correctly. I gave the council of the chiefs the same advice my brothers just offered.

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

"I think so too. Loyal Heart will accompany the chiefs to the callis of the nation?"

"It is my intention to start on my return to-morrow; if my brother can wait till then, we will start together."

"I will wait."

"Good; to-morrow at daybreak we will follow the return trail in company."

The council was over, yet Tranquil tried vainly to explain to himself how it was that Black-deer, whom he had left among the Snake Pawnees, could now be an influential chief of the Comanche nation; and the connection between Loyal Heart and the chief perplexed him not a bit less. All these ideas troubled the hunter's head, and he promised himself on the first opportunity to ask Black-deer for the history of his life since their separation.

As soon as Lanzi returned, the hunters and Carmela sat down to breakfast, waited on by Singing-bird.

CHAPTER VIII.
QUONIAM'S RETURN.

The meal did not take long; each of the guests, busied with secret thoughts, ate quietly and silently. Tranquil, though he did not like to ask any questions of Black-deer or Loyal Heart, for all that, burned to learn by what concourse of extraordinary events these two men, who had started from diametrically opposite points, had eventually grown into such close intimacy.

But the Tiger-killer was too well acquainted with prairie manners to try and lead the conversation to a topic which might perhaps have displeased his comrades, and which, at any rate, would have displayed a curiosity on his part unworthy of an old wood-ranger.

Carmela felt a great friendship for Singing-bird, and so soon as the meal was ended, led her off to the jacal, where both began chattering. In accordance with the arrangements the hunters had made, Loyal Heart and Tranquil took their rifles, and entered the forest on opposite sides, to go in quest of game. Black-deer and Lanzi remained behind.

The two men, lying on the ground side by side, slept or smoked with that apathy and careless indolence peculiar to men who despise talking for the sake of talking. Several hours passed away thus, nothing occurring to trouble the calmness and silence that reigned over the bivouac, except at intervals the joyous laughter of the two young women, which brought a slight smile to the lips of the hunters.

A little before sunset the others returned, almost simultaneously, bending beneath the weight of the game they had killed. Loyal Heart, moreover, had lassoed a horse, which he brought in for Black-deer, who had not one. The sight of this animal caused the adventurers some alarm, and numerous conjectures. It was not at all wild; it allowed Loyal Heart to approach it
without difficulty, who made a prisoner of it almost without opposition. Moreover, it was completely equipped in the Mexican fashion.

Tranquil concluded from this, after reflection for a moment, that the Freebooters had attacked the conducta de plata, and the animal, whose rider had probably been killed, had escaped during the action.

After a lengthy discussion, it was at last agreed that so soon as night had completely set in, Black-deer should go reconnoitring, while those who remained in the camp redoubled their vigilance.

The sun was just disappearing behind the dense mass of lofty mountains that marked the horizon, when the hurried paces of a horse were heard a short distance off. The hunters seized their weapons, and posted themselves behind the enormous boles of the sumach trees that surrounded them, in order to be ready for any event. At this moment the cry of the blue jay was repeated twice.

"Take your places again at the fire," Tranquil said; "'tis a friend."

In fact, a few moments later, the branches cracked, the shrubs were thrust aside, and Quoniam made his appearance. After nodding to the company, he dismounted, and sat down by the side of the Panther-killer.

"Well, the latter asked him, "what news have you?"

"Plenty," he answered.

"Then, I suppose, you have been reconnoitring?"

"I did not have the trouble to ask questions; I only required to listen in order to learn in an hour more news than I could have discovered in a year."

"Oh, oh," the Canadian said, "eat, and when your appetite is satisfied, you will tell us all you have learnt."

"I wish for nothing better, especially as there are sundry matters it is as well for you to know."

"Eat then without further delay, that you may be able to talk to us all the sooner."

The negro did not let the invitation be repeated, and began vigorously attacking the provisions which Tranquil had put aside, and which Loyal Heart now spread on the ground. The hunters were eager to hear the news of which Quoniam stated himself to be the bearer; after all they had been able to see during the past few days, they must possess considerable importance. Still, however great their curiosity might be, they succeeded in hiding it, and patiently waited till the negro had finished his meal. The latter, who suspected what thoughts were crossing their minds, did not put their patience to a long trial; he ate with the proverbial rapidity of hunters, and had finished in a twinkling.

"Now I am quite at your service," he said, as he wiped his mouth on the skirt of his hunting-shirt, "and ready to answer all your questions."

"We have none to ask you," Tranquil said; "we wish you, gossip, to give us a short narrative of all that has happened to you."

"Well, it is not a long ride from here to the Larch-tree hacienda in a straight line; my horse is good; I went straight ahead, and covered the distance in eight hours. When I reached the Larch-tree, there was a great confusion at the hacienda. The peons and vaqueros collected in the patio were talking and shouting all together, while the Signor Haciendero, pale and alarmed, was distributing arms, raising barricades before the gates, placing cannon on their carriages—in short, taking all the precautions of men who expect an attack at any moment. It was impossible for me to make myself heard at first, for everybody was speaking at once—women crying, children screaming, and men swearing. I might have fancied myself in a mad-house, so noisy and terrified
did I find everybody; at length, however, by going from one to the other, questioning this man, and bullying that one, I learned the following, which enabled me to comprehend the general terror; the affair, I swear to you, was worth the trouble."

"Out with it, friend," Loyal Heart exclaimed.

"Let him tell his story in his own way," he said to Loyal Heart; "if not, it will be impossible for him to reach the end. Quoniam has a way of telling things peculiar to himself; if interrupted, he loses the thread of his ideas, and then he grows confused."

"That is true," said the negro; "when I am stopped, it is all up with me, and I get into such a tangle that I cannot find my way out. But to continue: this is what I learned:—The conducta de plata, escorted by Captain Melendez, was attacked by the Border Rifles, or the Freebooters as they are now called, and after a desperate fight, all the Mexicans were killed."

"Ah!" Tranquil exclaimed, in stupor.

"All," Quoniam repeated; "not one escaped; it must have been rightful butchery."

"Speak lower, my friend," the hunter remarked, "Carmela might hear you." The negro gave a nod of assent.

"But," he continued, in a lower key, "this victory was not very productive, for the Mexicans had been careful to hurl the gold they carried into a barranca."

"Well played, by Heaven!" the Canadian exclaimed; "but go on, my friend."

"This victory fired the mine; the whole of Texas has risen; the towns and pueblos are in full revolt, and the Mexicans are pursued like wild beasts."

"Is it so serious as that?"

"Much more than you suppose. The Jaguar is at this moment at the head of an army; he has hoisted the flag of Texan independence, and sworn that he will not lay down arms till he has restored liberty to his country."

"Is that all?" Tranquil asked.

"Not all," Quoniam made answer. "Considering that you would not be sorry to hear these important news as speedily as possible, I hastened to finish my business with the Capataz. I had some difficulty in finding him, as he was so busy; so soon as I got hold of him, instead of giving me the money I asked him for, he answered me that I must be off at once, and tell you to come to the hacienda as soon as you could."

"Hum!" said Tranquil.

"Seeing," Quoniam went on, "that there was nothing more to expect of the Capataz, I took leave of him and remounted my horse; but just as I was leaving, a great noise was heard outside, and everybody rushed to the gates, uttering shouts of joy. It seems that General Don Jose Maria Rubio, who commands the province, considers that the position of the hacienda is a very important point to defend."

"Of course," Tranquil said; "the Larch-tree commands the entrance of the valley, and, built at the period of the conquest, is a perfect fortress; its thick, battlemented walls, its situation on an elevation which cannot be commanded, and which on one side holds under its guns the mountain passes, and on the other the valley de los Almendrales, render it a point of the utmost importance, which can only be carried by a regular siege."

"That is what everybody said down there; it seems, too, that such is General Rubio's opinion, for the cause of all the disturbance I heard was the arrival of a large body of troops commanded by a Lieutenant Colonel, who had orders to shut himself up in the hacienda, and defend it to the last extremity."
"Civil war, then," Tranquil continued, mournfully, "that is to say, the most odious and horrible of all; a war in which fathers fight against sons, brothers against brothers, in which friend and foe speak the same tongue, issue from the same stem, have the same blood in their veins, and through that very reason are the more inveterate and rend each other with greater animosity and rage; civil war, the most horrible scourge that can crush a people! May God grant in his mercy that it be short."

"Amen!" his hearers replied, in a deep voice.

"But how did you succeed in escaping from the hacienda after the arrival of the troops, Quoniam?" Tranquil continued.

"I saw that, if I amused myself by admiring the uniform and fine appearance of the troops, when order was slightly restored, the gates would be closed, and my hopes of escaping foiled for a long time. Without saying a word, I dismounted, and leading my horse by the bridle, glided through the mob so cleverly, that I at length found myself outside. I then leaped into the saddle, and pushed straight ahead. I was only just in time, I declare, for five minutes later all the gates were closed."

"And then you came straight here?"

"You are mistaken; I did not return straight here: and yet it was not my inclination that prevented it, I assure you."

"What happened, then?"

"You will see, for I have not finished yet. Every man does what he can, and you have no right to ask more of him. Never," the negro continued, "did I gallop in such good spirits. My ride lasted, without interruption, for nearly five hours; at the end of that period I thought it advisable to grant my horse a few minutes' rest, that it might regain its breath. I therefore halted for two hours; then, after rubbing it down, I started again, but had scarcely galloped an hour longer, ere I fell into a large party of horsemen, armed to the teeth, who suddenly emerged from a ravine, and surrounded me ere I had even time enough to notice them. The meeting was anything but agreeable—the more so, as they did not appear at all well disposed toward me; and I do not exactly know how I should have got out of the hobble, had not one of the men thought proper to recognize me, and burst out, 'Why, it is a friend; 'tis Quoniam, Tranquil's comrade!' I confess that this exclamation pleased me; a man may be brave, but there are circumstances in which he feels frightened, and this is what happened to me."

The hunters smiled at the negro's simple frankness, but were careful not to interrupt him.

"At once," he continued, "the manner of these men changed entirely; they became most polite and attentive. 'Lead him to the commandant,' said one of them; the others approved, and I gave in, because resistance would have been folly. I followed without any remark, the man who led me to their chief."

"The Jaguar," the hunter said.

"What!" the negro exclaimed, in amazement, "have you guessed it? Well! I swear to you that I did not suspect it in the least, and was greatly surprised at seeing him. It seems that he is going straight to the Larch-tree hacienda."

"Does he intend to lay siege to it?"

"That is his intention, I believe; but, although he is at the head of nearly twelve hundred determined bandits, I do not think his nails, and those of his comrades will be hard enough to dig a hole in such stout walls."

"Go on, my friend."

"Before sending me away, the Jaguar inquired after you and Dona Carmela with considerable interest. Then he wrote a few words on a piece of paper,
which he handed me, with a recommendation to be sure and give it you so soon as I rejoined you."

"Good heaven!" Tranquil exclaimed, "and you have delayed so long in executing your commission!"

"Was I not obliged to tell you first what happened? But here is the paper."

While saying this, Quoniam drew a paper from his pocket, and offered it to Tranquil, who almost tore it out of his hands. The negro, convinced that he had carried out his commission excellently, did not at all comprehend the hunter's impatience: he looked at him a moment with an air of amazement, then shrugged his shoulders almost imperceptibly, filled his pipe, and began smoking.

The hunter quickly unfolded the paper; he turned it over and over in his hands with an air of embarrassment, taking a side-glance every now and then at Loyal Heart, who had drawn a burning log from the fire, and now held it within reading distance, for night had completely set in.

"Well," said Loyal Heart with a smile, "what does your friend Jaguar write?"

"Hum!" said the hunter.

"Perhaps," the other continued, "it is so badly written that you cannot make out his scrawl. If you permit me, I will try."

The Canadian looked at him. The young man's face was calm; nothing evidenced that he had a thought of making fun of the hunter.

"Deuce take all false shame!" he said as he gave him the letter, "Why should I not confess that I cannot read? A man whose life has been spent in the desert ought not to fear confessing an ignorance which can have nothing dishonouring for him. Read, read, my lad, and let us know what our doubtful friend wishes."

And he took the log from the young man's hands.

Loyal Heart took a rapid glance at the paper. "The letter is laconic," he said, "but explicit. Listen:

"The Jaguar has kept his word. Of all the Mexicans who accompanied the conducta, only one is alive free and unwounded—Captain Don Juan Melendez de Gongora!"

"Well," Tranquil exclaimed, "people may say as they please, but the Jaguar is a fine fellow."

"Is he not, father?" a gentle voice murmured in his ear.

Tranquil started at this remark, and turned sharply round. "Carmela was by his side, calm and smiling."

**CHAPTER IX.**

**HOSPITALITY.**

We have said that night had fallen for some time past, and it was quite dark under covert. In the black sky a chaos of clouds, laden with the electric fluid, rolled heavily along. Not a star glistened in the vault of heaven; an autumnal breeze whistled gustily through the trees, and at each blast covered the ground with a shower of dead leaves.

In the distance could be heard the dull and mournful appeals of the wild
beasts proceeding to the drinking-place, and the snapping bark of the coyotes,
whose ardent eyes at intervals gleamed like incandescent coals amid the shrubs.
At times lights flashed in the forest and ran along the fine marsh grass like
will-o’-the-wisps. Large dried-up sumach trees stood at the corners of the
clearing, in which the bivouac was established, and in the fantastic gleams of
the fire waved like phantoms their winding sheets of moss and lianas. A
thousand sounds passed through the air; nameless cries escaped from invisible
lairs, hollowed beneath the roots of the aged trees; stifled cries descended from
the crests of the quebradas, and our adventurers felt an unknown world living
around them, whose proximity froze the soul with a secret terror.

The news brought by Quoniam had augmented the tendency of the hunters to
melancholy; hence the conversation round the fire, ordinarily gay and careless,
was sad and short. Every one yielded to the flood of gloomy thoughts that
contracted his heart, and the few words exchanged at lengthened intervals
between the hunters generally remain unanswered.

Carmela alone, lively as a nightingale, continued in a low voice her conversa-
tion with Singing-bird, while warming herself, for the night was cold, and not
noticing the anxious side-glances which the Canadian at times gave her. At
the moment when Lanzi and Quoniam were preparing to go to sleep, a slight
crackling was heard in the shrubs. The hunters, suddenly torn from their secret
thoughts, raised their heads quickly. The horses had stopped eating, and with
their heads turned to the thicket, and ears laid back, appeared to be listening.

“Some one is prowling around,” said Loyal Heart.

“A spy, of course,” replied Lanzi.

“Spy or no, the man is certainly a white,” said Tranquil, as he stretched out
his arm to clutch his rifle.

“Stay, father,” Carmela said eagerly, “perhaps it is some poor wretch lost
in the desert who needs help.”

“It may be so,” Tranquil replied after a moment’s reflection; “at any rate,
we shall soon know.”

“What do you intend doing?” the girl exclaimed.

“Go and meet the man, and ask him what he wants.”

“Take care, father.”

“Oh, what, my child?”

“Suppose this man were one of the bandits, and he were to kill you?”

The Canadian shrugged his shoulders.

“Kill me, girl, nonsense! Reassure yourself, my child, whoever the man may
be, he will not see me unless I deem it necessary. So let me alone.”

Freeing himself gently from Carmela’s affectionate clutch, the Canadian
picked up his rifle and disappeared in the chapparal with so light and well-
measured a step, that he seemed rather to be gliding on a cloud, than walking
on the grass of the clearing.

So soon as he reached the centre of the thicket, from which the ill-omened
sound he had heard came, the hunter, ignorant as he was as to how many
enemies he had to deal with, redoubled his prudence and precautions; after an
hesitation which lasted only a few seconds, he lay down on the ground, and
began gently crawling through the grass.

We must now return to the monk, whom we left proceeding toward the
hunters’ bivouac. When he was alone, Fray Ambrosio took a timid glance
around him; his mind was perplexed, for he could not conceal from himself
how delicate and difficult of accomplishment was the mission with which the
chief had entrusted him, especially when dealing with a man so clever and well
versed in Indian tricks as the tiger-killer.
Fortunately for himself, the monk belonged to that privileged class of men whom even the greatest annoyances but slightly affect, and who, after feeling wretched for a few moments, frankly make up their minds, saying to themselves that when the moment arrives in which they run a risk, an accident will perhaps draw them from their trouble, and turn matters to their advantage, in lieu of crushing them.

The monk, therefore, resolutely entered the covert, guiding himself by the light of the fire as a beacon. For some minutes he went on at a tolerable pace, but gradually as he approached, his alarm returned; he remembered the rough correction Captain Melendes had administered to him, and this time he feared even worse.

Still, he was now so near the bivouac that any backsliding would be useless. For the purpose of granting himself a few minutes' further respite, he dismounted, and fastened his horse to a tree with extreme slowness: then, having no further plausible pretext to offer himself for delaying his arrival among the hunters, he decided on starting again, employing the most minute precautions not to be perceived too soon, through fear of receiving a bullet in his chest.

But Fray Ambrosio, unluckily for himself, was extremely obese; he walked heavily, and like a man accustomed to tread the pavement of a town; moreover, the night was extremely dark, which prevented him seeing two yards ahead, and he could only progress with outstretched hands, tottering at every step, and running against every obstacle that came across his path.

Hence he did not go far, ere he aroused the persons he desired so much to surprise, and whose practised ear, constantly on the watch, had at once noticed the unusual sound which he had himself not noticed. Fray Antonio, extremely satisfied with his manner of progression, and congratulating himself in his heart at having succeeded so well in concealing himself, grew bolder and bolder, and began to feel almost entirely reassured, when suddenly he uttered a slight cry of terror, and stopped as if his feet had been rooted in the ground. He had felt a heavy hand laid on his shoulder.

The monk began trembling all over, though not daring to turn his head to the right or left, for he was persuaded in his heart that his last hour had arrived.

"Hilloh, Senor Padre, what are you doing in the forest at such an hour?" a hoarse voice then said to him.

But Fray Antonio was unable to answer; terror had rendered him deaf and blind.

"Are you dumb?" the voice went on a minute after in a friendly voice.

"Come, come, it is not wise to traverse the desert at so late an hour."

The monk did not reply.

"Deuce take me," the other exclaimed, "if terror has not rendered him idiotic. Come, bestir yourself."

And he began shaking him vigorously.

"Eh, what?" the monk said.

"Come, there is some progress, you speak, hence you are not dead," Tranquil went on joyously, for it was he who had so cruelly frightened the monk; "follow me, you must be frozen, don't let us remain here."

And passing his arm through the monk's he led him away. In a few minutes they reached the clearing.

"Ah!" Carmela exclaimed in surprise; "Fray Antonio! by what accident is he here, when he started with the conducta de plata?"

This remark made the hunter prick up his ears; he examined the monk attentively, and then compelled him to sit down by the fire.
"I trust that the good father will explain to us what has happened to him," he muttered.

Everything, however, has an end in this world; and the monk for some time past had seemed destined to pass, with the greatest rapidity and almost without transition, from the extremest terror to the most complete security. When he was a little warmed, the confusion produced in his ideas by the sudden meeting with the hunter gradually yielded to the cordial reception given him; and Carmela's gentle voice breaking pleasantly on his ear, completely re-established the balance of his mind, and dismissed the mournful apprehensions that tormented him.

"Do you feel better, holy Father?" Carmela asked him, with much sympathy.

"Yes," he said, "I thank you."

"Will you eat? Would you like to take any refreshment?"

"Nothing at all, I thank you, for I have not the least appetite."

"Perhaps you are thirsty, Fray Antonio; if so, here is a bota of refino," said Lanzi, as he offered him a skin.

The monk, seizing the bota, drank a hearty draught of the generous fluid. This libation restored him all his coolness and presence of mind.

"There," he said, as he turned the bota to the half-breed, and gave vent to a sigh of relief, "heaven preserve me; were the Evil One to come now in person, I feel capable of holding my own against him."

"Ah, ah!" said Tranquil, "it seems you are now completely restored to your intellectual faculties."

"Yes, and I will give you proof of it."

"You challenge me. I did not like to question you before; but, as it is so, I will no longer hesitate."

"What do you wish to know?"

"A very simple matter: how is it that a monk finds himself at such an hour alone in the desert?"

"Nonsense," Fray Antonio said, gaily. "Who told you that I was alone?"

"Nobody; but I suppose so."

"Do not make any suppositions, brother, for you would be mistaken."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, as I have the honour of telling you."

"Still, when I met you, you were alone."

"Granted."

"Well?"

"The others were further off, that's all."

"What others?"

"The persons who accompanied me."

"Ah! and who are they?"

"That is the question," he said, a minute after, as if holding a conversation with himself, "the most disadvantageous reports are current about me. I am accused of a number of bad actions; suppose I were to try and do a good one. Who knows whether I may not be rewarded at a later date? At any rate, here goes."

Tranquil and his comrades listened in surprise to the monologue of the monk, not knowing exactly what to think of this man, and half inclined to deem him mad. The latter perceived the impression he produced.

"Listen," he said, with a slight frown; "form what opinion of me you like, that is a matter of indifference to me; still I do not wish it to be said that I requested your cordial hospitality by odious treachery."
"What do you mean?" Tranquil exclaimed.

"Listen to me. I uttered the word treachery, and perhaps I was wrong, for nothing proves to me that it is so."

"Explain yourself, in heaven’s name; you speak in enigmas, and it is impossible to understand you."

"You are right, so I will be clear: which of you gentlemen bears the name of Tranquil?"

"It is I."

"Very good. Owing to certain circumstances, the recital of which would not at all interest you, I unluckily fell into the hands of the Apaches."

"Apaches!" Tranquil exclaimed, in surprise.

"Good Lord, yes," the monk continued; "and I assure you that when I found myself in their power, I did not feel at all comfortable. Still, far from inventing for me one of those atrocious tortures which they mercilessly inflict on the whites who are so unhappy as to become their prisoners, they treated me, on the contrary, with extreme gentleness."

Tranquil fixed a scrutinising glance on the monk’s placid face.

"For what purpose did they that?" he asked.

"That I could not comprehend, though I am perhaps beginning to suspect it."

The hearers bent toward the speaker with an expression of impatient curiosity.

"This evening," the monk went on, "the chief of the redskins accompanied me to within a short distance of your bivouac; on coming in sight of your fire he pointed it out to me, saying, ‘Go and sit down at that brasero. You will tell the great pale hunter that one of his oldest and dearest friends desires to see him.’ Then he left me, after making the most horrible threats if I did not obey him at once. You know the rest."

Tranquil and his comrades regarded each other in amazement, but without exchanging a word. There was a rather long silence; but Tranquil at length took on himself to express aloud the thought each had in his heart.

"‘Tis a trap," he said.

"Yes,” Loyal Heart remarked; "but for what purpose?"

"How do I know?" the Canadian muttered.

"You said, Fray Antonio,“ the young man continued, addressing the monk, "that you suspected the motives of the Apaches’ extraordinary treatment of you?"

"I did say so," he replied.

"Let us know that suspicion."

"It was suggested to me by the conduct of the pagans, and by the clumsy snare they laid for you; it is evident to me that the Apache chief hopes, if you consent to grant the interview he asks, to profit by your absence to carry off Dona Carmela."

"Carry me off!“ the maiden exclaimed, with a start of horror.

"The redskins are very fond of white women," the monk continued, coolly; "most of the incursions they make into our territory are undertaken for purpose of carrying off captives of that colour."

"Oh!“ Carmela exclaimed, "I would sooner die than become the slave of one of those demons."

Tranquil shook his head sadly. "The monk’s supposition appears to me correct," he said.

"The more so," Fray Antonio confirmed him, "because the Apaches who made me prisoner are the same that attacked the Venta del Potrero."
"Oh, oh!" said Lanzi; "in that case I know their chief, and his name; he is one of the most implacable enemies of the white men. It is very unlucky that I did not succeed in burying him under the ruins of the venta."

"What is the fellow's name?" the hunter asked, sharply, evidently annoyed at his verbiage.

"Blue-fox!" said Lanzi.

"Ah!" Tranquil said, ironically, and with a dark frown, "I have known Blue-fox for many years, and you, chief?" he added, turning to Black-deer.

The name of the Apache Sachem had produced such an impression on the Pawnee, that the hunter was startled by it.

"Blue-fox is a dog, the son of a coyote," he said, as he spate on the ground disdainfully; "the gipaetes would refuse to devour his unclean carcasse."

"These two men must have a mortal hatred for each other," the Canadian muttered, as he took a side glance at the inflamed features and sparkling eyes of the chief.

"Will my brother kill Blue-fox?" the Pawnee asked.

"It is probable," Tranquil answered; "but in the first place, let us try to play this rogue a trick. Be frank, monk; have you told us the truth?"

"On my honour."

"I should prefer any other oath," the Canadian said ironically, in a low voice.

"Can you be trusted?"

"Yes."

"Is what you said to us about your return to honest courses sincere? Do you really intend to be of service to us?"

"I do."

"Whatever may happen?"

"Whatever may happen, and whatever the consequence may be of what you ask of me?"

"That will do. I warn you that, in all probability, you will be exposed to serious perils."

"I have told you that my resolution is formed; speak, therefore, without further hesitation."

"Listen to me, then."

CHAPTER X.

THE LARCH-TREE HACIENDA.

Though the report made by Quoniam was in every respect true, the negro was ignorant of certain details of which we will now inform the reader, because these events are closely connected with our story, and clearness renders it indispensable that they should be made known. We will, therefore, return to the larch-tree hacienda.

This building, but a short distance from the mountains whose passes it commanded, was of great strategical value to both the parties now disputing the possession of Texas. The insurgent chiefs understood this as well as the Mexican generals did.

After the total destruction of the detachment commanded by Captain Melendez, General Rubio hastened to throw a powerful garrison into the Larch-tree.
He was aware that the inhabitants only awaited the announcement of a success, even though problematical, to rise to a man, and make common cause with the daring partizans, branded by their enemies with the name of Border ruffians, but who in reality were only the forlorn hope of a revolution, and apostles acting under a holy and noble idea.

"You have your revenge to take, Colonel Melendez," he said to the young officer; "your new epaulettes have not yet smelt powder. I propose giving you a splendid opportunity for christening them."

"You will fulfil my wishes, General," the young officer replied, "by entrusting me with a perilous enterprise, my success in which will serve to wipe out the shame of my defeat."

"There is no shame, Colonel," the General replied, kindly, "in being conquered as you were. Let us not despise at an insignificant check, but try to cut the comb of these cocks who, pluming themselves on their ephemeral triumph, doubtless imagine that we are terrified and demoralised by their victory."

"Be assured, General, that I will help you to the best of my ability. Whatever be the post you confide to me, I will die at it before surrendering."

"An officer, my friend, must put off that impetuosity which so well becomes the soldier. Do not forget that you are a head, and not an arm."

"I will be prudent, General, as far as the care for my honour will permit me."

"That will do, Colonel—I ask no more."

Don Juan merely bowed in response.

"By-the-bye," said the General, presently, "have these partizans any capable men at their head?"

"Very capable; thoroughly acquainted with guerilla fighting, and possessing both bravery and coolness."

"All the better, for in that case we shall reap more glory in conquering them. Unfortunately, they are said to wage war like perfect savages, pitilessly massacring the soldiers that fall into their hands."

"You are mistaken, General. Whatever these men may be, and the cause for which they fight, it is my duty to disabuse you on this point, for they have been strangely calumniated; it was only after my repeated refusals to surrender that the action began. Their Chief even offered me my life at the moment when I hurled myself with him into the yawning abyss at our feet. When I became their prisoner they restored my sword, gave me a horse and a guide, who brought me within musket-shot of your outposts; is that the conduct of cruel men?"

"Certainly not, and I am pleased to see you thus do justice to your enemies."

"I merely declare a fact."

"Yes, and an unlucky one for us; these men must consider themselves very strong to act thus. This clemency of theirs will attract a great number of partizans."

"I fear it."

"And I too. No matter, the moment has arrived to act with vigour."

"I await your orders, General."

"Very good. I have prepared three hundred men, cavalry and infantry; the latter will mount behind the horsemen, for the march must be rapid, as my object is that you should reach the hacienda before the insurgents, and fortify yourself."

"I will reach it."

"I count on you. Two mountain guns will follow your detachment, and will.
prove sufficient; for, if I am rightly informed, the hacienda has six in good condition. Still, as ammunition may run short, you will take sufficient with you to last for a fortnight. At all risks, the hacienda must hold out for that period."

The General now walked to the entrance of the tent and raised the curtain.

"Summon the officers told off for the expedition," he said.

Five minutes later the officers appeared; nine in number—two captains of cavalry, two of infantry, two lieutenants, and two alferez or second lieutenants, and a captain, lieutenant, and alferez of artillery. The General looked for a moment searchingly at these men, who stood serious and motionless before him.

"Caballeros," he at length said, "I have carefully chosen you from the officers of my army, because I know that you are brave and experienced; you are about to carry out, under Colonel Don Juan Melendez de Gongora, a confidential mission, which I would not have given to others whose devotion to their country was less known to me. This mission is most perilous. I hope that you will accomplish it like brave men, and return here with glory."

The officers bowed their thanks.

"Do not forget," the General continued, "that you owe your soldiers an example of subordination and discipline; obey the Colonel as myself in all he may order for the good of the service."

"We cannot desire a better Chief than the one your Excellency has selected to lead us," one of the Captains answered.

The General smiled graciously.

"I count on your zeal and bravery. Now, to horse without further delay, for you must have left the camp within ten minutes."

The officers bowed and retired. Don Juan prepared to follow them.

"Stay," the General said to him; "I have one final recommendation to give you."

The young man walked up to him.

"Shut yourself up in the place," the General went on. "If you are invested, do not attempt any of those sallies, which often compromise the fate of a garrison, without advantage. Content yourself with vigorously repulsing attacks, sparing the blood of your soldiers, and not expending your ammunition needlessly. You must resist till then. I will march in person to your help at any cost."

"I have already told you I will do so, General."

"I know that you will. Now, my friend, to horse, and may you be more fortunate."

"Thanks, General."

The Colonel bowed, and immediately withdrew to place himself at the head of the small band which, collected a short distance off, only awaited his arrival to start. The General was standing in the doorway of his tent to witness their departure. Don Juan mounted, and turned towards the motionless detachment.

"Forward!" he commanded.

The squadrons at once started. The General remained in the doorway of his tent for some time, and when the last sound had died away, he pensively re-entered the tent, and let the curtain fall behind him, muttering in a low and sad voice—

"I have sent them to death, for Heaven fights on the side of our adversaries."

Meanwhile, the detachment rapidly continued its march. Thanks to the Mexican fashion of mounting infantry en croupe, the troops carried out their
movements with a rapidity that seemed almost prodigious, the more so as American horses go very quickly, and endure great fatigue without injury.

The Americans of the South are generally very harsh to their horses. Never inland does a horse pass the night, whatever the weather may be, otherwise than in the open air. Every morning it receives its ration for the whole day, marching frequently fourteen, or even sixteen hours, without stopping or drinking; when evening arrives, the harness is removed, and it is left to find its food where it can. On the Indian border, where there is much to fear from the Redskins, who are great admirers of horses, and display admirable skill in stealing them, certain precautions are used at night; the horses are picquetted in the interior of the bivouac, and feed on the pea-vines, the young tree-shoots, and a few measures of maize or other corn, which is given with extreme parsimony. Still, these horses are very handsome, vigorous, remarkably docile, and of great speed.

Colonel Melendez arrived at an early hour in sight of the hacienda, for his troops had made a forced march through the night. With a rapid glance the experienced chief of the Mexicans examined the neighbourhood, but the plain was deserted.

The Larch-tree hacienda stood like an eagle's nest on the top of a hillock, whose abrupt sides had never been smoothed, as the steepness of their ascent was regarded as a means of defence in the event of an attack. Thick walls turned yellow by time, at each angle of which could be seen the threatening muzzles of two guns peering out, gave this strongly-built house the appearance of a real fortress.

The Mexicans increased their already rapid pace, in order to reach the hacienda before the gates were opened, and the ganado let out. When they did, the gates were not opened till the inhabitants were well assured that the new comers were really friends. They had already heard of the general insurrection occasioned by the surprise of the conducta de plata, and hence the major-domo, who commanded in the absence of Don Felipe de Valreal, proprietor of the hacienda, kept on his guard.

This major-domo, whose name was Don Felix Paz, was a man of about five-and-forty at the most, tall, well-built, and powerful; he had, in truth, the appearance of a perfect hombre de caballo, an essential condition for fulfilling his onerous duties. This major-domo came in person to receive the Mexican detachment at the gate of the hacienda. After congratulating the colonel, he informed him that so soon as he received the news of the general revolt of the province, he had brought all his cattle in, armed the servants, and rendered the guns on the platform serviceable.

The colonel complimented him on his diligence, established his troops in the outhouses destined for the peons and vaqueros, took military possession of all the posts, and, accompanied by the major-domo, made a strict inspection of the interior of the fortress. Don Juan Melendez, being well acquainted with the carelessness and sloth of his fellow countrymen, expected to find the hacienda in a wretched state, but was agreeably deceived.

Indeed, the colonel found but very little to alter in the arrangements made by the major-domo; he contented himself with cutting down several clumps of trees which, being situated too near the hacienda, might shelter sharp-shooters, who could annoy their artillerymen. At each entrance of the hacienda barri-cades were erected by his orders, composed of branches interlaced, and outside the walls the arms of all the healthy men were called into requisition, to dig a deep and wide trench, the earth from which, thrown up on the side of the hacienda, formed a breast-work, behind which the best shots in the garrison
were placed. The two guns brought by the colonel remained horsed, so that they might be transported to the point of danger. Finally, the Mexican flag was hoisted on the top of the hacienda.

Counting the servants, to whom Don Felix had distributed arms, the garrison amounted to nearly four hundred men, a sufficient force to resist a coup de main, especially in so good a position as this; there was plenty of ammunition and food.

The works of fortification were carried on with such great activity, that they were completed within twenty-four hours of the colonel's arrival at the hacienda. The scouts, sent out in all directions, came back without any fresh news of the insurgents, whose movements were so cleverly veiled, that, since the affair of the conducta, they seemed to have disappeared without leaving a trace.

It was the second day after the arrival of the Mexicans at the Larch-tree; the sun was disappearing behind the mountains in masses of gold; night would soon set in. Colonel Melendez and the major-domo, leaning on one of the battlements of the platform, were absentively gazing out on the immense landscape unrolled at their feet, while conversing together. Don Juan had in a few minutes appreciated the loyalty and intelligence of the major-domo; hence these two men, who thoroughly understood each other, had become friends.

"Another day past," said the colonel, "and it has been impossible for us yet to learn the movements of the insurgents. Does not that appear extraordinary?"

The major-domo sent forth a cloud of smoke from his mouth and nostril, took his husk cigarette from his mouth, and quietly flipped away the ash.

"Very extraordinary," he said.

"What a singular man you are! nothing disturbs you," Don Juan went on.

"Have our scouts returned?"

"All."

"And still brought no news?"

"None."

"By Heaven! your coolness would make a saint swear! Why are you looking so fixedly at the sky? do you fancy you can find information there?"

"Perhaps so. Look there," the major-domo replied, extending his hand in a north-east direction.

"Well?" the colonel said, looking in the direction indicated,

"Do you see nothing?"

"On my honour, no."

"Not even those fleets of herons and flamingos flying in large circles, and uttering shrill cries?"

"Certainly I see birds; but what have they in common?"

"Colonel," the major-domo interrupted him, "prepare to defend yourself; the enemy is there."

"What—the enemy? you are mad, Don Felix; look out in the last gleams of day, the plain is deserted."

"Colonel, before becoming major-domo at the Larch-tree hacienda, I was a wood-ranger for fifteen years; the desert is to me a book, every page of which I can peruse. Watch the timid flight of those birds, notice the numberless flocks which are constantly, joining those we first perceived; those birds, driven from their nests, are flying hap-hazard before an enemy who will soon appear. That enemy is the insurgent army."

"Rayo de Dios, Don Felix," the colonel suddenly exclaimed; "you are right, look there!"
A red line, momentarily growing wider suddenly appeared on the extreme verge of the horizon.

"Did the flight of the birds deceive us?" the major-domo asked.

"Forgive me, friend, a very excusable ignorance; but we have not a moment to lose."

They went down at once; five minutes later the defenders of the hacienda lined the tops of the walls, and ambushed themselves behind the exterior intrenchments. The Texan army, now perfectly visible, was deploying on the plains in heavy columns.

CHAPTER XI.

A METAMORPHOSIS.

We must now go back to the encampment of the hunters, whom we left in a most awkward position, watched by the vigilant eye of the Apaches, and compelled to trust to Fray Antonio, that is to say, to a man for whom, in his heart, not one of them felt the slightest sympathy. Still, had it been possible to read the monk's mind, their opinion about him would probably have been completely changed.

But a revolution had taken place in this man's mind, and he had been unconsciously overcome by that influence which upright natures ever exert over those which have not yet been entirely spoiled. However, whatever was the cause of the change which had taken place almost suddenly in the monk's ideas, we are bound to state that it was sincere, and that Fray Antonio really intended to serve his new friends.

Tranquil, accustomed, through the desert life he led, to discover with a certain degree of skill the true feelings of persons with whom accident brought him in contact, thought it his duty to appear to trust, under present circumstances, entirely to the monk.

"Are you brave?" he asked him.

Fray Antonio, surprised by the sudden question, hesitated for a moment.

"That depends," he said.

"Good; that is a sensible answer. There are moments when no man can answer for his courage."

The monk gave a sign of assent.

"We have," Tranquil continued, "to cheat the cheater, and play at diamond cut diamond with him; you must return to Blue-fox."

"What?"

"Are you afraid?"

"Not exactly; but I fancy he may proceed to extremities with me. But I will run the risk."

The Canadian looked fixedly at him.

"That will do," he said to him. "Here, take these, and, at any rate, if you are attacked, you will not die unavenged."

And he put a brace of pistols in his hand. The monk examined them attentively for a moment, then he hid them under his gown with a start of joy.

"I fear nothing now," he said; "I am going."

"Still I must explain to you——"
"For what good purpose?" the monk interrupted. "I will tell Blue-fox that you consent to have an interview with him; but, as you do not care to go alone to his camp, you prefer seeing him without witnesses in the middle of the prairie."

That will do, and you will bring him with you to the spot where I shall be waiting. Now, one parting hint. Keep a few paces from the chief, not before or behind, but on his right hand, if possible."

"Very good; I understand."

"Well, I trust you will succeed."

"Oh, now I fear nothing, as I am armed."

After uttering these words, the monk rose and walked away with a quick and firm step. The Canadian looked after him for some time.

"What is your plan?" asked Loyal Heart.

"It is simple: we can only triumph over the enemies who surround us by stratagem; hence, that is the only thing I intend employing. We must escape from these red demons at all hazards."

"That is true. But, when we have succeeded in throwing them out, where shall we go?"

"We must not dream, in the present excited state of the country, of making a long journey across the desert with two females; it would be running certain ruin."

"That is true; but what can we do?"

"It is my intention to proceed to the Larch-tree hacienda. There, I fancy, my daughter will obtain the best protection for the present."

"Permit me to remind you that yourself refused to have recourse to that."

"That is true; hence I only resolve on it when in a fix. As for you—"

"Oh, I will accompany you," said Loyal Heart.

"Thanks," the Canadian exclaimed, warmly. "Still, in spite of all the pleasure your generous offer occasions me, I cannot accept it."

"Why not?"

"Because the nation which had adopted you claims your help, and you cannot refuse it."

"It will wait; besides, Black-deer will make my excuses."

"No," the chief said, distinctly; "I will not leave my pale friends in danger."

"By Jove!" Tranquil exclaimed, "as it is so we shall have some fun; hang it all, if five resolute and well-armed men cannot get the best of a hundred Apaches. Listen to me, comrades: while I go ostensibly to the meeting I have granted Blue-fox, follow me in Indian file, and be ready to appear directly I give you the signal by imitating the cry of the mocking bird."

"All right."

"You, Lanzi and Quoniam, will watch over Carmela."

"We will all watch over her, friend, trust to us," said Loyal Heart.

Tranquil gave his comrades a parting farewell, threw his rifle over his shoulder, and left the encampment. He had hardly disappeared ere the hunters lay down on the ground and crawled on his trail, Carmela guided by Singing-bird forming the rear guard. The maiden felt an involuntary shudder run over her limbs as she entered the forest. This night march, whose issue might prove so fatal, terrified her.

Fray Antonio had gone hardly five hundred yards from the forest when a man suddenly emerged from a thicket and barred his passage. The monk suppressed with difficulty a cry of terror at this unexpected apparition, and started back. But immediately regaining his coolness, he prepared to sustain the terrible
contest that doubtless menaced him, for he had recognised Blue-fox at the first glance. The chief examined him in silence, fixing on him his deep black eye with an expression of suspicion which did not escape the monk.

"My father has been a long time," he at length said.

"I could not be any quicker," the monk answered.

"Wah! my father returns alone; the great pale warrior was afraid; he did not accompany my father."

"You are mistaken, chief; the man you call the great pale hunter, and whom I call Tranquil, was not afraid, and did not refuse to accompany me."

"Och! Blue-fox is a sachem; his eye pierces the darkness; though he may look he sees nothing."

"That is probably because you do not look in the right direction, that's all."

"Blue-fox desires to know how his pale friend carried out the mission the sachem confided to him."

"I took the best advantage possible of my meeting with the hunter, in order to carry out your orders."

"My father will pardon me, I am only a poor Indian without brains. Will the great pale hunter come?"

"I left him over there, at the verge of the forest. He is waiting for the chief."

Blue-fox started, and fixing on the monk a glance which seemed trying to read his most secret thoughts.

"Why did he not accompany my father here?" he said.

The monk assumed the most simple look possible.

"On my faith, I do not know," he answered; "but of what consequence is it?"

"It is pleasanter to converse on the prairie."

"Do you think so? Well, it is possible. For my own part I do not see any difference between here and there."

In spite of his craft the chief was deceived.

"Has the great pale hunter come alone?"

"No," Fray Antonio replied, boldly.

"If that be so, Blue-fox will not go."

"The chief will reflect."

"What is the use of reflecting? The father has deceived his red friend."

"The hunter could not come alone."

"Why not?"

"Because he did not wish to leave in the forest the girl who accompanies him."

The Indian's face suddenly brightened, and assumed an expression of extraordinary cunning.

"Wah!" he said, "and no other person but the young pale virgin accompanies the hunter?"

"No, it seems that the other white warriors who were with him left him at daybreak."

"Does my father know where they are gone?"

"I did not inquire. That does not concern me."

"My father is a wise man."

These words were rapidly exchanged between the two men. Fray Antonio had answered so naturally, and with such well-played frankness, that the Indian, whose secret thoughts the Mexican's answers flattered, felt all his suspicions vanish.

"Och!" he said, "Blue-fox will see his friend."

"The father can return to the camp."
"No, thank you, chief," the monk answered, "I prefer remaining with people of my own colour."

Blue-fox reflected for an instant, and then replied, with an ironical smile playing round his thin lips—

"Good; my father is right. He can follow me, then."

"It is evident," the monk thought to himself, "that this accursed pagan is revising some treachery. But I will watch him, and at the slightest suspicious movement I will blow out his brains like the dog he is."

But he kept these reflections to himself, and followed the chief with an easy and perfectly indifferent air. In the moonbeams, which allowed objects to be distinguished for a considerable distance, they soon perceived on the extreme verge of the forest the dark outline of a man leaning on a rifle.

Blue-fox, though he placed confidence in his companion, only advanced, however, with extreme caution and prudence, examining the shrubs and even the smallest tufts of grass, as if assuring himself that they concealed no enemy. But, with the exception of the man they perceived before them, the place seemed plunged in profound solitude; all was calm and motionless.

"Let us stop here," said Fray Antonio, "it would be imprudent for us to advance further without announcing ourselves, although the hunter has probably recognised us already.

"That is true; it is as well to be cautious."

They stopped at about twenty yards from the covert, where Fray Antonio placed his hands funnel-wise and shouted to the full extent of his lungs—

"Hilloh! Tranquil, is that you?"

"Who calls me?" the latter answered.

"I—Fray Antonio. I am accompanied by the person you are expecting."

"Advance," Tranquil replied. "Those who seek me with no thought of treachery have nothing to fear."

"What shall we do?" asked the monk.

"Go on," Blue-fox replied, laconically.

The distance which separated them from the hunter was soon covered; and the Mexican becoming an impromptu master of the ceremonies, presented the two men to each other. The sachem took a searching glance around him.

"I do not see the young pale girl," he said,

"Did you wish to speak to her or to me?" the Canadian answered, drily.

"I am ready to listen to you."

The Indian frowned; his suspicions were returning; he gave a menacing glance at the monk, who, obeying the advice given him, had insensibly withdrawn a few steps and was preparing to be an apparently calm witness of the coming scene.

"I only wished to speak to my brother," he replied, in an insinuating voice;

"Blue-fox has for many moons desired to see again the face of a friend."

"If it were really as the chief says," the hunter continued, "nothing could have been more easy. Many years have been swallowed up in the immense gulf of the past, since the period when, young and full of faith, I called Blue-fox my friend. At that period he had a Pawnee heart; but now that he has plucked it from his bosom, to exchange it for an Apache heart, I know him not."

"The great hunter of the pale-faces is severe," the Indian answered. "What matter the days that have passed, if the hunter finds again his friend of the olden time?"

"Am I an old woman, to be deceived by the smooth words of a forked tongue?" said the Canadian, as he shrugged his shoulders. "Blue-fox is dead; my eyes only see him as an Apache chief, that is an enemy."
"Let my brother remove the skin from his heart, he will recognise a friend;" the Indian continued.

Tranquil felt impatient at such cynical impudence.

"A truce to fine speeches, whose sincerity I do not believe in," he said. "Was he my friend who a few days ago tried to carry off my daughter, and at the head of his warriors attacked the calli in which she dwelt, and which is now reduced to ashes?"

"My brother has heard the mocking-bird whisper in his ear, and put faith in its falsehoods.

"You are more chattering and lying than the mocker," Tranquil exclaimed, as he violently stamped the butt of his rifle on the ground. "For the last time I repeat to you I regard you not as a friend, but as an enemy. Now, we have nothing more to say to one another, so let us separate."

The Indian took a piercing glance around him, and his eye sparkled ferociously.

"We will not part thus," he said, as he walked two or three steps nearer the hunter, who still remained motionless, attentively following his every movement, while affecting the most perfect confidence.

As for Fray Antonio, he understood that the moment for acting vigorously was fast approaching, and while continuing to feign the most perfect indifference to the interview of which he was witness, he had quietly drawn the pistols from under his gown, and held them cocked in his hand. The situation was growing most awkward between the two speakers; each was preparing for the struggle, although their faces were still calm and their voices gentle.

"Yes," Tranquil continued, "we will part thus, chief, and may heaven grant that we may never find ourselves face to face again."

"But the hunter will answer one question."

"I will not, for this conversation has lasted too long."

And he fell back a pace. The sachem stretched forth his arm to stop him.

"I will not speak to a foe," the Canadian replied.

"Then die, miserable dog of a pale-face," the chief exclaimed, at length throwing off the mask and brandishing his tomahawk with extreme rapidity.

But at the same instant a man rose like a black phantom behind the Apache chief, threw his arms round his body, and lifting him with a wondrous strength, hurled him to the ground, and placed his knee on his chest, ere the sachem, surprised and alarmed by this sudden attack, had attempted to defend himself.

At the yell uttered by Blue-fox, some fifty Apache warriors appeared as if by enchantment, but almost at the same moment the hunter's comrades, who, although invisible, had attentively followed the incidents of this scene, stood by the Canadian's side. Fray Antonio at once brought down two Apaches with his pistols, and rejoined the whites.

Two groups of implacable enemies were thus opposed; unfortunately, the hunters were very weak against the numerous foes that surrounded them on all sides. Still their firm demeanour and flashing eyes evinced their unbending resolution to be killed sooner than surrender.

It was an imposing spectacle offered by this handful of men surrounded by implacable foes, and who yet seemed as calm as if they were peaceably seated round their camp-fire. Carmela and Singing-bird, suffering from sharp pangs of terror, pressed all in a tremor to the side of their friends.

Blue-fox still lay on the ground, held down by Black-deer, whose knee compressed his chest, and neutralised all the tremendous efforts he made to rise. The Apaches, with their long barbed arrows pointed at the hunters, only awaited
a word or a sign to begin the attack. A silence of death brooded over the prairie: it seemed as if these men, before tearing each other to pieces, were collecting all their strength to bound forward and rush on each other. Black-deer was the first to break the silence.

"Wah!" he shouted in a voice rendered hoarse with passion, as he brandished his scalping-knife over his enemy's head; "at length I meet thee, dog, thief, chicken-heart; I hold my vengeance in my hands; at last thy scalp will adorn my horse's mane."

"Thou art but a chattering old woman; thy insults cannot affect me, so try something else. Blue-fox laughs at thee; thou canst not compel him to utter a cry of pain or make a complaint."

"I will follow thy advice," Black-deer shouted, passionately, and seized his enemy's scalp-lock.

"Stop," the Canadian shouted, in a thundering voice, as he seized the arm of the vindictive chief. "Let that man rise."

Black-deer gave him a ferocious glance, but made no reply.

"It must be so," the hunter said.

The Comanche chief bent his head, restored his enemy to liberty, and fell back a pace. With one bound Blue-fox sprang up; but, instead of attempting flight, he crossed his arms on his chest, resuming that mask of impenetrable stoicism which Indians so rarely doff. Tranquil regarded him for a moment with a singular expression, and then said:

"I was wrong just now, and my brother must pardon me. No, the memories of youth are not effaced like clouds which the wind bears away. When I saw the terrible danger that menaced Blue-fox, my heart was affected, and I remembered that we had been friends. I trembled to see his blood flow before me. Blue-fox is a great chief, he must die as a warrior in the sunshine, he is free to rejoin his friends."

The chief raised his head.

"On what conditions?" he said drily.

"On none. If the Apache warriors attack us, we will fight them; if not, we will continue our journey peacefully. The chief must decide."

Tranquil, in acting as he had done, had given a proof of the profound knowledge he possessed of the red-skin character, among whom any heroic action is immediately appreciated at its full value. It was a dangerous game to play, but the situation of the hunters was desperate, despite their courage; if the fight had begun, they must have been naturally crushed by numbers, and pitilessly massacred. For the success of his plan the Canadian could only calculate on a good feeling on the part of Blue-fox, and he staked his all.

After carefully listening to Tranquil's remarks, Blue-fox remained silent for some minutes, during which a violent combat went on in his heart; he felt he was the dupe of the snare into which he had tried to draw the hunter by reminding him of their old friendship; but the murmurs of admiration which his warriors were unable to suppress, on seeing the Canadian's noble deed, warned him that he must dissimulate.

The power of an Indian chief is always very precarious; and he is often constrained, in spite of himself, to bow before the demands of his subordinates, if he does not wish to be overthrown and have a new chief set up immediately in his place. Blue-fox, therefore, slowly drew his scalping-knife from his belt, and let it fall at the hunter's feet.

"The great white hunter and his brothers can continue to follow their path," he said; "the eyes of the Apache warriors are closed, they will not see them. The pale-faces can depart, they will find no one on their road till the second
“...from this; but then they must take care; an Apache chief will set himself on their trail, in order to ask back from them the knife he leaves them, and which he will require.”

“When Blue-fox asks me for it, he will find it,” said the Canadian, as he stooped down and picked up the knife.

“Och! I will manage to take it again. Now, we are even. Farewell!”

The chief then bowed courteously to his enemies, made a prodigious bound back, and disappeared in the lofty grass. The Apache warriors uttered their war-yell twice, and almost immediately their black outlines disappeared in the gloom.

“Now, we will set out,” said Tranquil, “the road is free.”

“You got out of the scrape cleverly,” Loyal Heart said to him; “but it was a terrible risk.”

The Canadian smiled, but made no further reply... Then they started.

CHAPTER XI.

THE SUMMONS.

Europeans, accustomed to the gigantic wars of the Old World, have a difficulty in forming an idea of the way in which war is waged in certain parts of America.

Texas, at the period when it claimed its independence, in a contest of ten years, so obstinately, counted over its entire territory only a population of less than one hundred thousand—a very weak and modest amount, when compared with the seven millions of the Mexican confederation. But the Texan population was composed, in a great measure, of North Americans—energetic, enterprising men, of known courage, who, annoyed by the long-lasting tyranny the Federal government exercised over them, through jealousy and narrowness of views, had sworn to be free at any price, and took up arms in order to guarantee the possession of their estates, and their personal security.

The struggle had been going on for ten years; at first timid and secret, it had gradually widened, holding in check the Mexican power, and at length attained that final and supreme period when the alternative is victory or death.

The surprise of the conducta, so skilfully managed by the Jaguar, had been the electric spark destined to definitely galvanise the country, and make it rise as one man for this modern Thermopylae. The independent chieftains, who were fighting all along the border, had, at the unexpected news of the decisive success obtained by the Jaguar, assembled their cuadrillas, and, by common agreement, and through an heroic impulse, ranged themselves under the banners of the youthful chieftain, and pledged him obedience, in order to carry through the liberation of their country.

The Jaguar’s army was composed of men hardened by lengthened fighting, who burned to cope with the Mexicans, and who, before all, wished to be free! No more was needed for them to accomplish miracles. The Jaguar was thoroughly acquainted with the character of his soldiers; he knew that he must only ask one thing of them—an impossibility—and this he had, consequently, determined to attempt.

Through the wish of the new commander-in-chief, all the captains of cuadrillas assembled in a council of war, in order to draw up a plan of campaign.
Each party gave his opinion. The debate was short, for all entertained the same idea—and that was, to seize on the Larch-tree hacienda, in order to cut off the communications of the Mexican army, prevent it from receiving reinforcements from the other states of the confederation, and, once masters of the fortress, to defeat in detail the different Mexican detachments scattered over Texan territory. As this plan was remarkably simple, the Jaguar resolved to carry it out immediately. After leaving a detachment of five hundred horsemen to cover his rear, and avoid any surprise, he advanced with his main body by forced marches on the Larch-tree, with the intention of investing and carrying it by assault ere the Mexicans had found time to put a garrison in it and throw up intrenchments.

Unfortunately, despite all the diligence the Jaguar had displayed in the execution of his plan, the Mexicans, owing to the lengthened experience and infallible glance of General Rubio, had been more prompt than he, and the place had been in a perfect state of defence two days ere the Texan army appeared at the foot of its walls.

This disappointment greatly annoyed the Jaguar, but did not discourage him; he saw that he would have to lay siege to the Larch-tree, and bravely made his preparations. The Americans dug up the soil with wondrous rapidity, and a night was sufficient for them to finish the preparatory works, and make breastworks and parapets. The Mexicans gave no signs of life, and allowed the insurgents to establish themselves in their lines without opposition; by sunrise all was finished.

It was a strange spectacle offered by this handful of men, who, without artillery or siege material of any description, boldly traced lines round a stoutly-built fortress, admirably situated for resistance, and defended by a numerous garrison, which was determined not to surrender. But what in this heroic madness produced admiration, and almost stupor, was the conviction these men had that they would eventually take the place.

As they arrived after sunset, when the night had all but set in, the Texans had formed an imperfect idea of the defenceless state of the place which they proposed to besiege; hence, when day broke, they eagerly proceeded to see what enemy they would have to deal with. The surprise was anything but agreeable to them, and they were compelled to confess to themselves in their hearts that the job would be a tough one. This surprise was changed almost into discouragement when the fortress hoisted the Mexican flag, saluting it with several rounds of grape-shot, which fell into the centre of the camp, and killed and wounded some fifteen men.

But this movement of weakness was but short; a reaction speedily took place, and it was with hurrahs and shouts of joy that they displayed the colours of Texan independence. For valid reasons they did not accompany the hoisting of their flag by cannon-shots, but they saluted it with salvos of musketry, whose well-sustained fire gave back to the besieged the death they had scattered through the camp.

The Jaguar, after examining the fortifications, resolved to proceed according to rule, and summon the place to surrender before beginning the siege. Consequently, he hoisted a white flag on the top of the intrenchments, and waited; a few moments later, a flag of the same colour appeared on the breastwork outside the place.

The Jaguar, preceded by a trumpeter, followed by two or three officers, left the camp and ascended the hill on which the hacienda was situated. A number of officers equal to his own had left the place and advanced to meet him. On arriving at about an equal distance from the two lines, the Jaguar halted, and in
a few minutes the Mexican officers, commanded by Don Felix Paz, joined him. After the usual compliments had been exchanged with extreme politeness, the major-domo asked—

"With whom have I the honour of speaking?"
"With the commander-in-chief of the Texan army."
"We do not recognise any Texan army," the major-domo said drily. "Texas forms an integral portion of Mexico.
"If you do not know the one I have the honour of commanding," the Jaguar said with a smile, "ere long, please Heaven, it will have made so much noise that you will be compelled to recognise it."
"That is possible; but for the present we do not know it."
"Then, you do not wish to parley?"
"With whom?"
"Come, caballero, suppose we are frank with one another—are you willing?"
"I wish for nothing better."
"You know as well as I do that we are fighting for our independence."
"Very good. In that case you are insurgents?"
"Certainly, and feel proud of the title."
"Hum! we do not treat with insurgents, who are placed beyond the pale of the law."
"Caballero," the Jaguar exclaimed, "I have the honour of remarking that you insult me."
"I am very sorry for it; but what other answer than that can I give you?"
"Are you the commandant?" asked the Jaguar.
"No."
"Hum! and who is the governor of the place?"
"A colonel."
"Why did he not come in person to meet me?"
"Because he probably did not think it worth while."
"Hum! that way of behaving seems to me rather lax, for war has laws which every man is bound to follow."
"May be, but it is not war in this case, but insurrection."
"Well, I wish to speak with your commandant, for I can only treat with him. Are you disposed to let me see him?"
"That does not depend on me, but on him."
"Can I trust to your delivering my message?"
"I do not see why I should not."
"Be kind enough, then, to return at once to him, and I will wait for you here."
"Very well."

The two men bowed courteously, and took leave of each other. Don Felix Paz re-entered the fortress, while the Jaguar, sitting on the trunk of a felled tree, examined with the greatest attention the fortifications of the hacienda, the details of which he could easily survey from the spot where he now was. The young man leaned his elbow on his knee, and let his head rest on his hand; his eyes wandered over the surrounding objects with an expression of indefinable melancholy; gradually a gloomy sadness seized on his mind; while indulging in his thoughts, external objects disappeared from his sight, and isolating himself completely, he gave way to the flood of bitter recollections which rose from his heart to his brain, and removed him from the pre-occupations of his present situation.

For a long time he had been plunged in this species of prostration, when a friendly voice smote his ear. The Jaguar, suddenly drawn from his reverie by
the sound of a voice which he fancied he recognised, threw up his head sharply, and gave a start of surprise on recognising Don Juan Melendez de Gongora, for it was really the colonel who was now addressing him.

"Back, gentlemen," said the Texan chief; "this gentleman and myself have private matters to talk about."

The Texans withdrew out of ear-shot. The colonel was alone, for on recognising the Jaguar, he had ordered his escort to await him at the base of the intrenchments.

"I meet you here again then, my friend," the Jaguar said sadly. "Yes," the young officer answered; "fatality seems determined to keep us in constant opposition."

"On examining the height and strength of your walls," the Independent continued, "I had already recognised the difficulties of the task forced on me; these difficulties have now grown almost into impossibilities."

"Alas! my friend, fate wills it so; we are forced to submit to its caprices; and while in my heart deploring what takes place, I am yet resolved to do my duty as a man of honour."

"I know it, brother; for I too am resolved to carry out the difficult task imposed on me."

"Such are the terrible exigencies of civil war."

"Heaven and our country will judge us, friend, and our consciences will absolve us; men are not combating, but principles fatally placed in opposition."

"I was not aware that you were the chief of the insurrectionary bands that have invested the place, although a secret foreboding warned me of your presence."

"That is strange," the Jaguar muttered, "for I also felt the same foreboding; that is why I so strongly insisted on having an interview with the commandant."

"The same reason urged me, on the contrary, not to show myself; but I thought I must yield to your entreaty, and hence here I am; but I could have wished to avoid this interview."

"It is better that it should have taken place; now that we have had a frank explanation."

"You are right; it is perhaps better that it should be so; let me press your honest hand for the last time."

"Here is my hand, friend," the young chief made answer.

The two men shook hands, and then fell back a few paces, making a signal to their respective escorts to rejoin them. When the officers were ranged behind the chiefs, the Jaguar ordered his bugler to sound the summons; the latter obeyed, and the Mexican trumpet immediately replied. The Jaguar then advanced two paces, and courteously took off his hat to the colonel.

"With whom have I the honour of speaking?" he asked.

"I am," the officer replied, returning the salute, "Colonel Don Juan Melendez de Gongora, invested by General Don José-Maria Rubio, commander-in-chief of the Mexican forces in Texas, with the military government of the Larch-tree hacienda, which present circumstances have raised to the rank of a first-class fortress; and who may you be, caballero?"

"I," the Jaguar answered, as he placed his hat again on his head, "am the supreme chief of the Confederated Army of Texas."

"The men who take that name, and the person who commands them, can only be regarded by me as traitors."

"We care little, colonel, what name you give us. We have taken up arms to render our country independent, and shall not lay them down till that noble task is accomplished. I have proposals I think it my duty to make you."
"I cannot treat with rebels," the colonel said.
"You will act as you please, colonel; but humanity orders you to avoid bloodshed, if possible, and your duty imperiously commands you to listen to what I have to say to you."
"Be it so, caballero, I will listen to you, and then will see what answer I have to give you."

The Jaguar leaned the point of his sabre on the ground, and continued, in a loud and firm voice—
"I, the commander-in-chief of the Liberating Army of Texas, summon you, a colonel in the service of the Mexican Republic, whose sovereignty we no longer recognise, to surrender to us this Larch-tree hacienda, of which you call yourself the governor. If, within twenty-four hours, the said hacienda is put into our hands, with all it contains—guns, ammunition, material of war, and otherwise, the garrison will quit the place with the honours of war, under arms, with drums and fifes playing. Then, after laying down their arms, the garrison will be free to retire to the interior of Texas, after making oath that during a year and a day they will not serve in Texas against the Liberating Army."
"Have you ended?" the colonel asked.
"Not yet," the Jaguar coldly answered.
"I must ask you to make haste."

On seeing these two men exchange savage glances, and placed in such a hostile position face to face, no one would have supposed that they groaned in their hearts at the painful part fate compelled them to play against their will. The truth was, that in one military fanaticism, in the other an ardent love of his country, had imposed silence on every other feeling, and only permitted them to listen to one, the most imperious of all—the sentiment of duty. The Jaguar continued in the same resolute accent—
"If, against my expectations, these conditions are refused, and the place obstinately defends itself, the Army of Liberation will immediately invest it, carry on the siege with all the vigour of which it is capable, and when the hacienda is captured, it will undergo the fate of towns taken by assault; the garrison will be decimated, and remain prisoners till the end of the war."
"Very good," the colonel replied, ironically; "however harsh these conditions may be, we prefer them to the former.

The Jaguar bowed ceremoniously.
"I have only to withdraw," he said.
"One moment," the colonel said. "You have explained your conditions, now hear mine."
"What conditions can you have to offer us, since you refuse to surrender?"
"You shall hear."
"I," he said, in a sharp and sarcastic voice, "Don Juan de Melendez de Gongora, colonel in the service of the Mexican Republic, considering that the majority of the individuals assembled at this moment at the foot of my walls are poor, ignorant men, whom bad example and bad counsel have led into a revolt, which they detest in their hearts—employing the prerogative given me by my title of governor of a first-class fortress, and a field officer in the Mexican army, I promise that if they immediately lay down their arms, and, as a proof of sincere repentance, surrender to me the chiefs who deceived them and led them into revolt—I promise them, I repeat, complete pardon and oblivion of the faults they may have committed up to to-day, but only on this condition. They have till sunset of the present day to make their submission; when that period is passed, they will be regarded as inveterate rebels, and treated as such—that is to say, hanged without trial, after their identity has been proved, and
deprived, in their last moments, of the consolations of religion, as being unworthy of them. As for the chiefs, as traitors, they will be shot in the back, and their bodies fastened by the feet on gibbets, where they will remain as food for birds of prey, and serve as an example to those who may venture in their track.

His hearers had listened with increasing surprise to this strange address, uttered in a tone of sarcasm and haughty contempt, which had filled the hearts of the Jaguar's comrades with gall, while the Mexican officers looked at each other with a laugh. By a sign, the Jaguar imposed silence on his comrades, and bowed respectfully to the colonel.

"Your will be done," he said to him; "the blood shed will fall on your head."

"I accept the responsibility," the commandant remarked, disdainfully.

"We will fight, then," the Jaguar exclaimed, enthusiastically. "Hurrah for Texas!"

This cry, repeated by his comrades, was heard in the camp, and taken up with extraordinary enthusiasm.

"Viva Mejico!" the colonel said.

He then retired, followed by his officers. On his side, the Jaguar returned to his camp, resolved to attempt a vigorous hand-stroke on the place. On both sides preparations were made for the implacable struggle that was about to begin between members of the same family and children of the same soil.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SIEGE.

While all this was going on, the hunters resumed their journey, so soon as the Apaches disappeared. The night was clear, and the hunters marched in Indian file, that is to say, one after the other; still, through a prudential motive, Carmela was placed pillion-wise behind Tranquil, while Singing-bird rode with Black-deer.

The Canadian had whispered a few words to Lanzi and Quoniam, upon which the two men, without replying, spurred their horses, and started at a gallop.

"When you have ladies with you," Tranquil said, "it is necessary to take precautions."

The hunter, however, did not ask him for any explanation, and the four men continued their march in silence. During the whole night nothing occurred to disturb their journey; the Apaches kept their word faithfully. Tranquil had not for a moment doubted their promise. At times the hunter turned to the maiden, and asked her with ill-disguised anxiety if she felt fatigued, but Carmela constantly replied in the negative. A few minutes before sunrise he bent down to her for the last time.

"Courage," he said, "we shall soon be there."

The girl attempted to smile, but this long night spent on horseback had crushed her; she could not even find the courage to answer, so annihilated was she, and Tranquil, anxious for his daughter, hurried on. Still in the sunbeams, whose warmth caressed her, the maiden felt new-born, her courage returned, and she drew herself up with a sigh of relief. Two hours later they reached the base of a hill, half-way up which was a natural grotto.
Our friends are expecting us there," said Tranquil.

A few moments later the little band entered the grotto on horseback, without leaving any traces of its passage. This grotto, like many others in that country, possessed several entrances, and through this peculiarity it often served as a refuge to the wood-men. It was divided into several compartments, without visible communication with each other, and formed a species of maze under the whole of the hill. On the prairie the name of the Jaguar's grotto had been given it.

The two hunters, sent forward by the Canadian, were seated by an enormous fire of heather, and quietly roasting a magnificent haunch of venison, as they silently smoked their pipes. Although they must have been waiting a long time for their friends, on the arrival of Tranquil and his comrades they contented themselves with a slight bow, and did not evince the slightest desire to know what had occurred since their departure. Tranquil led the two females into a grotto a considerable distance from the principal one.

"Here," he said in a gentle whisper, "you must speak as little as possible, and as low as you can, for you never know what neighbours you may have; pay great attention to this piece of advice, for your safety depends on it. If you require me, or have an inclination to join us, you know where we are, and it is an easy matter for you to come; good-by.

His daughter caught him by the arm for a moment, and whispered in his ear. He bowed in reply, and went out. When the two females found themselves alone, their first impulse was to fall into each other's arms. This first emotion past, they lay on the ground with that feeling of comfort which is experienced when you have sighed during a long period for a rest, the want of which you greatly feel. At the expiration of about an hour Tranquil returned.

"Are you going to start again?" Carmela asked.

"On the contrary, I expect to remain here till sunset."

"Heaven be praised!" the maiden exclaimed.

"I have come to tell you that breakfast is ready, and that we are only awaiting your presence to begin."

"Eat without us, papa," Carmela answered; "at this moment we have more need of sleep than anything else."

"Sleep if you like; I have brought you, however, male clothing, which I must ask you to put on."

"What, father! dress ourselves as men?" Carmela said, in surprise and with a slight repugnance.

"You must, child—it is indispensable."

"In that case I will obey you, father."

"Thank you, my daughter."

The hunter withdrew, and the two young women soon fell asleep. Their sleep lasted a long time, for the sun was beginning to sink beneath the horizon, when they awoke, completely recovered from their fatigue. Carmela, fresh and rosy, felt no effects of the long sleeplessness of the preceding night; and the Indian girl, stronger or more hardened, had not suffered so much as her companion. The two girls then began, while chattering and laughing, to prepare everything necessary for their disguise.

"Let us begin our toilette," Carmela said gaily to Singing-bird.

At the moment when they were removing their dresses, they heard the noise of footsteps near them, and turned like two startled fawns, thinking that Tranquil was coming to see whether they were awake; but a few words distinctly pronounced, caused them to listen, and stand quivering with emotion, surprise, and curiosity.
"My brother has been a long time," the voice had said, which seemed to belong to a man standing scarce three paces from them; "I have been expecting him for two hours."

"By Heaven, chief, your remark is perfectly correct; but it was impossible for me to come sooner," another person immediately answered.

"My brother will speak without loss of time."

"That is what I intend doing."

At this moment Tranquil came up. The young women laid the fore-finger on their lips; the hunter understood, and advanced on tip-toe to listen.

"The Jaguar," the second speaker continued, "desires most eagerly that, in accordance with the promise you made him, you should join his army."

"Up to the present that has been impossible."

"Blue-fox!" Tranquil muttered.

"I warn you, that he accuses you of breach of faith."

"The pale chief is wrong; a sachem is not a chattering old woman. This evening I shall join him with two hundred picked warriors."

"We shall see, chief."

"At the first song of the manakwis, the Apache warriors will enter the camp."

"All the better. The Jaguar is preparing a general assault on the fort, and
only awaits your arrival."

"I repeat, that the Apaches will not fail."

"Those confounded Mexicans fight like demons; the man who commands them seems to have galvanised them, they second him so well. There was only one good officer in the Mexican army, and we were obliged to fight against him. It is really most unlucky."

"The chief of the Yoris is not invulnerable. The arrows of the Apaches are long—they will kill him."

"Nonsense," the other said; "this man seems to have a charm that protects him, no bullet can hit him."

"While coming to this grotto, Blue-fox raised the scalp of a chief who was the bearer of a necklace."

"A letter, by Heavens!" the other exclaimed anxiously; "what have you done with it? You have not destroyed it, I trust?"

"No, the chief has kept it."

"Show it to me, perhaps it is important."

"Wah! it is some medicine of the pale-faces; a chief does not want it; my brother can take it."

"Thanks!"

There was a moment's silence, during which the hearts of the three hearers might have been heard beating in unison, so great was their anxiety.

"By Jove!" the white man suddenly burst out; "a letter addressed to Colonel Don Juan Melendez de Gongora, commandant of the Larch-tree, by General Rubio. You were in luck's way, chief. Are you sure that the bearer of this letter is dead?"

But while speaking thus, the two men had withdrawn, and the sound of their voices was lost in the distance, so that it was impossible to hear the answer.

The two women turned round. Tranquil had disappeared, and they were again alone. Carmela, after listening to this strange conversation, of which accident allowed her to catch a few fragments, had fallen into a profound reverie, which her companion, with that sense of propriety innate in Indians, was careful not to disturb.
In the meanwhile time slipped away, the gloom grew denser in the grotto, for night had set in; the two young women, afraid to remain alone in the obscurity, were preparing to rejoin their companions, when they heard the sound of footsteps, and Tranquil entered.

"Come," the Canadian said, after examining them for a moment; "we are going to try and enter the Larch-tree hacienda. Now follow me, and be prudent."

The eight persons left the grotto, gliding along in the darkness like phantoms.

No one, unless he has tried the experiment, can imagine what a night-march on the desert is, when you are afraid each moment of falling into the hands of invisible enemies, who watch you behind every bush. Tranquil had placed himself at the dead of the little party, who marched in Indian file, at times stooping to the ground, going on his hands and knees, or crawling on his stomach so as to avoid notice.

Fortunately the Indians keep very bad guard, and most generally only place sentries to frighten the enemy. On this occasion, as they knew very well, they had no sortie to apprehend on the part of the Larch-tree garrison, the sentinels were nearly all asleep; but the slightest badly-calculated move, the merest false step, might arouse them, for these men, who are habituated in keeping their senses alive, can hardly ever be taken unawares.

At about two hundred yards at the most from the adventurers were the advanced works of the Larch-tree, gloomy, silent, and apparently, at least, abandoned or plunged in sleep. Tranquil had only stopped to let his comrades fully understand the imminent danger to which they were exposed, and urge them to redouble their caution, for, at the slightest weakness, they would be lost. After this they started again. They advanced thus for one hundred yards, or about half the distance separating them from the Larch-tree, when suddenly, at the moment when Tranquil stretched out his arms to shelter himself behind a sand-hill, several men, crawling in the opposite direction, found themselves face to face with him. There was a second of terrible anxiety.

"Who goes there?" a low and menacing voice asked.

"Oh!" he said; "we are saved! It is I—Tranquil the Tigero."

"Who are the persons with you?"

"Wood-rangers, for whom I answer."

"Very good; pass on."

The two parties separated, and crawled in opposite directions. The band with which the hunters exchanged these few words was commanded by Don Felix Paz, who, more vigilant than the Texans, was making a round of the glacis to assure himself that all was quiet, and no surprise need be feared. It was very lucky for Tranquil and his companions that the Jaguar, in order to do honour to Blue-fox, had this night entrusted the camp-guard to his warriors, and that, confiding in the red-skins, the Texans had gone to sleep.

Ten minutes after their encounter with Don Felix, which might have turned out so fatally for them, the hunters reached the gates, and at the mention of Tranquil's name a passage was at once granted them. They were at length in safety within the hacienda, and it was high time that they should arrive; a few minutes longer, and Carmela and her companion would have fallen by the wayside. In spite of all their courage and good-will, the girls could no longer keep up, their strength was exhausted. Hence so soon as the danger had passed, and the nervous excitement, which alone sustained them, ceased, they fell down unconscious.

Tranquil raised Carmela in his arms, and carried her to the interior of the
hacienda; while Black-deer, who, in spite of his apparent insensibility, adored his squaw, hurried up to restore her to life.

The unexpected arrival of Tranquil caused a general joy among the inhabitants of the hacienda, who all had a deep friendship for this man, whose glorious character they had had so many opportunities of appreciating. The hunter was still busied with his daughter, who was just beginning to recover her senses, when Don Felix Paz, who had finished his rounds, entered the cuarto, with a message from the colonel to the Canadian, begging the latter to come to him at once.

Tranquil obeyed, for Dona Carmela no longer required his assistance—the maiden had scarce regained her senses, ere she fell into a deep sleep, the natural result of the enormous fatigue she had endured during several days. While proceeding to the colonel's apartments, Tranquil questioned the major-domo, with whom he had been connected for several years, and who had no scruples about answering the hunter's queries.

Matters were far from being well at the Larch-tree; the siege was carried on with an extraordinary obstinacy on both sides, and with many strange interludes. The insurgents greatly annoyed by the artillery of the fort, which killed a great many of them, and to which they could not reply, owing to their absolute want of cannon, had adopted a system of reprisals, which caused the besieged considerable injury. This simple system was as follows: The insurgents, who were mostly hunters, were exceedingly skilful marksmen and renowned as such in a country where the science of firing is carried to its extreme limits. A certain number of these marksmen sheltered themselves behind the epaulments of the camp; and each time a gunner attempted to load a piece, they infallibly shot away his hands.

This had been carried so far, that nearly all the gunners were hors de combat, and it was only at very long intervals that a gun was fired from the fort. This isolated shot, badly aimed, owing to the precipitancy with which the men laid the gun, through their fear of being mutilated, caused but insignificant damage to the insurgents.

On the other hand, the fort was so closely invested, and watched with such care that no one could enter or quit it. It was impossible for those in the fort to understand how it was that our adventurers had managed to slip in after traversing the whole length of the enemy's camp.

The garrison of the hacienda lived, then, as if they had been roughly cut off from the world, for no sound transpired without, and no news reached them. This situation was extremely disagreeable to the Mexicans; unfortunately for them it was daily aggravated, and threatened to become, ere long, completely intolerable. Colonel Melendez, since the beginning of the siege, had proved himself what he was, that is to say, an officer of rare merit, with a vigilance nothing could foil, and the coolest bravery. Seeing his gunners so cruelly decimated by the Texan bullets, he undertook to take their place, loading the guns at his own peril, and firing them at the insurgents.

Such courage struck the Texans with so great admiration, that although it would several times have been easy for them to kill their daring foe, their rifles had constantly turned away from this man, who seemed to find a delight in braving death. The Jaguar, too, while closely investing the fort, and eagerly desiring to carry it, had given peremptory orders to spare the life of his friend, whom he could not refrain from pitying and admiring, as much for his courage as for his devotion.

Although it was near midnight, the colonel was still up; at the moment when the hunter was brought to him, he was walking thoughtfully up and down, considering from time to time a detailed plan of the fortifications.
Tranquil's arrival caused him great satisfaction, for he hoped to obtain from him news from without. Unfortunately, the hunter did not know much about the political state of the country, owing to the isolated life he led in the forests. Still, he answered with the greatest frankness all the questions the colonel thought proper to ask him, and gave him the little information he had been enabled to collect; then he told him the various incidents of his own journey. At the name of Carmela the young officer was slightly troubled, and a vivid flush suffused his face; but he recovered, and listened attentively to the hunter's story. When the latter came to the incident in the grotto, and the fragment of conversation he had overheard between the Apache chief and the Texan, his interest was greatly excited, and made him repeat the story.

"Oh, that letter," he muttered several times, "that letter; what would I not give to know its contents!"

Unhappily, that was impossible. After a moment, the colonel begged Tranquil to continue his story. The hunter then told him in what way he had managed to cross the enemy's lines. This bold action greatly struck the colonel.

"You were more fortunate than prudent," he said, "in thus venturing into the midst of your enemies."

The hunter smiled good-temperedly.

"I was almost certain of succeeding," he said.

"How so?"

"I have had a long experience of Indian habits, which enables me to make nearly certain with them."

"Grante!; but in this case you had not Indians to deal with."

"Pardon me, colonel."

"I do not understand you, so be kind enough to explain."

"That is an easy matter. Blue-fox entered the Texan camp this evening, at the head of two hundred warriors."

"I was not aware of it," the colonel said.

"The Jaguar, to do honour to his terrible allies, confided to them the camp-guard for this night."

"Hence?"

"Hence, colonel, all the Texans are sleeping soundly at this moment, while the Apaches are watching, or, at least, ought to be watching."

"What do you mean by ought to be watching?"

"I mean that the red-skins do not at all understand our manner of carrying on war, are not accustomed to sentinel duty, and so everybody is asleep in the camp."

"Ah!" said the colonel, as he resumed, with a thoughtful air, his promenade.

The latter waited, taking an interrogative glance at Don Felix, who had remained in the room till it pleased the commandant to dismiss him. A few minutes passed, and not a syllable was exchanged; Don Juan seemed to be plunged in serious thought. All at once he stopped before the hunter, and looked him full in the face.

"I have known you for a long time by reputation," he said. "You pass for a man who can be trusted."

The Canadian bowed, not understanding to what these preliminaries tended.

"I think you said the enemy's camp was plunged in sleep?" the colonel continued.

"That is my conviction," Tranquil answered; "we crossed their lines too easily for it to be otherwise."
Don Felix drew nearer.

"Yes," the young officer muttered, "we might give them a lesson."

"A lesson they greatly need," the major-domo added.

"Ah, ah!" the colonel said, with a smile; "then you understand me, Don Felix?"

"Most undoubtedly."

"It is one in the morning," the colonel went on, as he looked at a clock standing on a console; "at this moment sleep is the deepest. Well, we will attempt a sortie; have the officers of the garrison aroused."

The major-domo went out: five minutes later, the officers, still half-asleep, obeyed their chief's orders.

"Caballeros," the latter said to them, so soon as he saw them all collected round him, "I have resolved to make a sortie against the rebels, surprise them, and fire their camp, if it be possible. Select from your soldiers one hundred and fifty men in whom you can trust; supply them with inflammable matters, and in five minutes let them be drawn up in the patio."

The officers bowed, and at once left the room. The colonel then turned to Tranquil.

"Are you tired?"

"I am never so."

"Very good. You will serve as our guide; unfortunately, I want two others."

"I can procure them for your excellency."

"You?"

"Yes, a wood-ranger and a Comanche chief, who entered the fort with me, and for whom I answer with my head; Loyal Heart and Black-deer."

"Let all three wait for me in the patio."

Tranquil hastened to call his friends.

"If that hunter has spoken the truth, and I believe he has," the colonel continued, addressing the major-domo, "I am convinced we shall have an excellent opportunity for repaying the rebels the harm they have done us. Do you accompany me, Don Felix?"

"I would not for a fortune leave you one inch under such circumstances."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE PROPOSAL.

On the same night, almost at the same hour, the Jaguar, seated on a modest oak equipal in his tent, and with his elbow leaning on the table and his head on his hand, was reading, by the light of a candle that emitted but a dubious light, some important despatches. Absorbed in the perusal, the young commander of the insurgents paid no attention to the noises without, when suddenly a rather sharp puff of wind caused the flame of the candle to flicker, and the shadow of a man was darkly defined on the canvas of the tent.

The young man, annoyed at being disturbed, raised his head angrily, and looked toward the entrance of the tent, with a frown that promised nothing very pleasant for his inopportune intruder. But at the sight of the man who stood in the door-way, leaning on a long rifle, and fixing on him eyes that sparkled
like carbuncles, the Jaguar restrained with difficulty a cry of surprise, and made a move to seize the pistols placed within reach on the table.

This man, whom we have already had occasion to present to the reader under very grave circumstances, had nothing in his appearance that spoke greatly in his favour. His stern glance, his harsh face, his long white beard, his tall stature and strange attire, all about him inspired repulsion and almost terror. The Jaguar's movement produced a sinister smile on his pale lips.

"Why take up your weapons?" he said, in a hoarse voice; "had I intended to kill you, you would have been dead long ago."

The young man wheeled round his equipal, which brought him face to face with the stranger. The two men examined each other for a moment with the most minute attention.

"Have you looked at me enough?" the stranger at length asked.

"Yes," the Jaguar answered; "now tell me who you are, what brings you here, and how you entered?"

"Those are a good many questions at once, still I will try to answer them. Who am I? No one knows, and there are moments when I am myself ignorant; I am an accused, and a reprobate, prowling about the desert like a wild beast in search of prey; the red-skins, whose implacable enemy I am, and in whom I inspire a superstitious terror, call me the Klein Stoman, is this information sufficient for you?"

"What?" the young man exclaimed; "the White Scalper!"

"I am the man," the stranger quietly answered; "I am also known at times by the name of the Pitiless."

The Jaguar gave a start of repulsion at the sight of this sinister man, whose mournful reputation had reached him with all its horrors. His memory immediately recalled all the traits of ferocity and cruelty imputed to this man, and it was under the impression of this recollection that he said to him, with an accent of disgust he did not wish to conceal—

"What is there in common between you and me?"

The old man smiled sarcastically.

"God," he answered, "connects all men to each other by invisible bonds which render them responsible one for the other; He willed it so, in His supreme omniscience, in order to render society possible."

On hearing this wild, solitary man utter so strange an argument, the Jaguar felt his surprise redoubled.

"I will not discuss the point with you," he said; "every one in life follows the path destiny has traced for him, and it does not belong to me to judge you either favourably or unfavourably; still I have the right of denying any connection with you, whatever may be your feelings toward me, or the motives that brought you hither; up to the present we have been strangers to each other, and I desire to remain so for the future."

"What do you know of it? What certainty have you that this is the first time we have been face to face? Man can no more answer for the past than for the future; each is in the hands of One more powerful than him, for whom there is only one weight and one measure."

"I am astonished," the Jaguar answered, "that the name of Deity should be so often on your lips."

"Because it is deeply engraved on my heart," the old man said, with an accent of gloomy sorrow, "you said yourself that you would not judge me; retain, if you will, the evil impression which the probable false statements of others have made on you. I care little for the opinion of men; I recognise no judge of my actions but my conscience,"
"Be it so; but permit me to remark that time is rapidly slipping away, night is advancing. I have serious business to attend to, and need to be alone."

"In a word, you show me the door; unluckily I am not disposed for the present to accede to your request, or, if you prefer it, obey your orders; I wish first to answer all your questions, and then, if you still insist on it, I will retire."

"Take care, for this obstinacy on your part may lead to dangerous consequences for you."

"Why threaten a man who does not insult you?" the old man replied. "Do you fancy that I put myself out of the way for nothing? No, no, serious motives bring me here; and if I am not mistaken, ere long you will allow that the time you are unwilling to grant me could not be better employed.

"Speak then," said the Jaguar a moment after, in the tone of a man who resigns himself to endure a thing that displeases him, but which he cannot elude; "but pray be brief."

"I am not so used to speaking as to find pleasure in making long harangues," the Scalper replied; "I will only say things strictly indispensable."

"Do so, then, without further preamble."

"Be it so. I now return to the third question—How I got here?"

"In truth," the Jaguar exclaimed, ",that seems to me extraordinary."

"Not so extraordinary as you suppose; I might tell you that I am too old a hand on the prairies not to foil the most vigilant sentries; but I prefer confessing the truth, as it will be more profitable to you. You have this night confided the guard of the camp to Apache dogs, who, instead of watching, as they pledged themselves to do, are asleep on their posts, so thoroughly that the first comer can enter your lines as he thinks proper; and this is so true, that scarce two hours back a party of eight went through the whole length of your camp, and entered the hacienda, without encountering opposition."

"Viva Dios!" the Jaguar exclaimed, turning livid with passion; "can it possibly be so?"

"I am the proof of it, I fancy," the old man answered.

The young chief seized his pistols and made a movement to rush out, but the stranger restrained him.

"What good will it do," he said, "to pick a quarrel with your allies? Still, let it serve you as a lesson to take better precautions another time."

"But these men who crossed the camp?" the Jaguar said sharply.

"You have nothing to fear from them; they are poor devils of hunters, who were probably seeking a refuge for the two women they brought with them."

"Two women?"

"Yes, a white and an Indian; although they were dressed in male attire, I recognised them easily."

"Ah," said the Jaguar thoughtfully, "do you know any of these hunters?"

"Only one, who is, I believe, tigero to the hacienda."

"Tranquill!" the Jaguar exclaimed.

"Yes."

"In that case, one of the females is his daughter Carmela."

"Probably."

"She is now, then, at the Larch-tree?"

"Yes."

"Oh," he burst out, "I must at all hazards carry that accursed hacienda."

"That is exactly what I came to propose to you," the Scalper said quietly.

"What do you say?" asked the young man.

"I say," the old man replied, "that I have come to propose to you the capture of the hacienda."
"Because it is impossible," the Jaguar went on with agitation; "the hacienda is well fortified: it is defended by a numerous and brave garrison, commanded by one of the best officers of the Mexican army, and for the seventeen days I have been investing these accursed walls, I have been unable, despite all my efforts, to take one forward step."

"I repeat my proposition."

"But how will you effect it?"

"When force does not avail, stratagem must be employed. I will introduce you into the interior—the rest is your affair."

"Oh, once inside, I will not leave it again."

"Then you accept?"

"But explain. It is not admissible that you have come to make such a proposal for my sake, or that of the cause I serve."

"Perhaps not."

"Let us deal frankly. Whatever your character may be, you have a manner of looking at things which renders you perfectly indifferent to the chances, good or bad, of the struggle going on at this moment in this unhappy country."

"You are quite correct."

"Am I not? You care little whether Texas be free or in slavery?"

"I admit it."

"You have, then, a reason for acting as you are now doing?"

"A man always has a reason."

"Very good; well, I wish to know that reason."

"And suppose I refuse to tell it you?"

"I shall not accept your proposition."

"You are a suspicious and headstrong boy," the old man said, "who, through a false feeling of honour, risk losing an opportunity which you will probably never find again."

"I will run the risk; I wish to be frank with you; I only know you from very ill reports; your reputation is execrable, and nothing proves to me that, under the pretext of serving me, you may not be laying a snare."

The old man's pale face was covered by a sudden flush at these words, a nervous tremor agitated all his limbs; but, by a violent effort, he succeeded in mastering his emotion, and after a few minutes, he replied in a calm voice, in which, however, there remained some traces of the tempest that growled hoarsely in his heart—

"I forgive you," he said; "you had a right to speak to me as you did, and I should not be angry. Time is slipping away, it is nearly one in the morning; it will soon be too late to execute the bold plan I have formed; I will, therefore, only add one word—reflect before answering me, for on that answer my resolution depends. The motive that urges me to offer to introduce you to the hacienda is personal, and in no way affects or concerns you."

"But what guarantee can you offer me of the sincerity of your intentions?"

The old man stepped forward, drew himself up to his full height, and said—

"My word, the word of a man who, whatever may be said about him, has never failed in what he owes himself; I swear to you on my honour, before that God in whose presence you and I will probably soon appear, that my intentions are pure and loyal. Now, answer, what is your resolve?"

While uttering these words, the old man's attitude, gestures, and face, were imprinted with such nobility and grandeur, that he seemed transfigured. In spite of himself, the Jaguar was affected; he felt himself led away by this accent, which seemed to come straight from the heart.

"I accept," he said in a firm voice.
"I expected it," the old man replied; "in young and generous natures good feelings always find an echo."

"Here is my hand," the young man said passionately; "press it without fear, for it is that of a friend."

"Thanks," the old man said, as a burning tear beaded on his eyelashes; "that word repays me for much suffering and sorrow."

"Now, explain your plan to me."

"I will do so in two words; but, ere we discuss the plan we shall adopt, collect noiselessly three or four hundred men, so that we may be able to start immediately we have come to an understanding."

"You are right."

"I need not advise you to be prudent; your men must assemble in absolute silence. Take no red-skins with you, for they would be more injurious than useful."

"I will act as you wish."

The Jaguar went out, and remained away for about a quarter of an hour; during that time the White Scalper remained motionless in the centre of the tent, leaning pensively on his rifle-barrel, the butt of which rested on the ground. Soon could be heard outside something like the imperceptible buzzing of bees in a hive. It was the camp awakening. The Jaguar came in again.

"The order is given," he said. "In a quarter of an hour four hundred men will be under arms."

"That is a longer period than I need for what I have to say; my plan is most simple, and if you follow it point for point we shall enter the hacienda without striking a blow; listen to me attentively."

"Speak."

"For very many years I have known the Larch-tree hacienda. Owing to events too long to tell you, I was resident in it for nearly a year as major-domo. At that period the father of the present owner was still living, and for sundry reasons had the greatest confidence in me. You are aware that at the period of the conquest, when the Spaniards built these haciendas, they made them fortresses rather than farm-houses. Now, you must know that in every such fortress there is a masked gate, a secret sallyport, which, if necessary, the garrison employ, either to receive reinforcements or provisions, or to evacuate the place, should it be too closely invested."

"Oh," the Jaguar said, smiting his forehead, "can the hacienda have one of these sallyports?"

"Patience, let me go on."

"But look," the young man objected, "here is the detailed plan of the Larch-tree, made by a man whose family have lived there for three generations, from father to son, and there is nothing of the sort marked on it."

"Because," replied the old man, "the secret is generally known to the owner of the hacienda alone. These sallyports, so useful at the time of the conquest, became neglected, owing to the long peace that reigned in the country; then, by degrees, as they served no purpose, the recollection of them was lost, and I am convinced that the majority of the hacendados at the present day are ignorant of the existence of these secret gates in their habitation; the owner of the Larch-tree is one of the number."

"How do you know? perhaps the gate is blocked up, or at least defended by a strong detachment."

"No," said the old man, "the gate is not stopped up, nor is it guarded."

"Are you certain?"

"Did I not tell you that I have been prowling about the neighbourhood for
some days? I wished to assure myself of the existence of this gate, which an accident led me to discover in former days. I have sought it, found it, and opened it."

"Viva Dios!" the Jaguar shouted joyfully, "in that case the hacienda is ours."
"I believe so, unless a fatality or a miracle occur."
"But where is the gate situated?"
"As usual, at a spot where it is the most unlikely to suspect its existence. Look," he added, bending over the plan, "the hacienda, being built on a height, runs a risk in the event of a long siege of seeing its wells dry up—does it not?"
"Yes,"
"Very good. The river on this side runs along the foot of the rocks on which its walls are built."
"Yes, yes," said the young man.
"Judging rightly," he went on, "that on this side the hacienda was impregnable, you contented yourself with establishing on the river-bank a few outposts, intended to watch the enemy's movements."
"Any flight on that side is impossible—in the first place, owing to the height of the walls; and next, through the river, which forms a natural trench."
"Well, the gate by which we shall enter is among those very rocks, almost on a level with the water; it opens into a natural grotto, the entrance of which is so obstructed by creepers, that from the opposite bank it is impossible to suspect its existence."
"At length," the Jaguar exclaimed, "this redoubt, which has hitherto been one of the links of the heavy chain riveted round Texas, will be to-morrow one of the most solid barriers of her independence!"
"I hope to see you master of the place before sunrise."

With which words they left the tent. According to the Jaguar's orders, John Davis had roused four hundred men, chosen from the boldest and most skilful fellows of the force. They were drawn up a few paces from the tent, motionless and silent. Their rifles, whose barrels were bronzed lest they might emit any denunciatory gleams in the moonbeams, were piled in front of them.

The officers formed a group apart. They were conversing together in a low voice, with considerable animation, not at all understanding the orders they had received, and not knowing for what reason the chief had them awakened. The Jaguar advanced toward them, and the officers fell back. The young man followed by the Scalper, entered the circle, which at once closed up again John Davis, on perceiving the old man, uttered a stifled cry of surprise.

"Caballeros," the Jaguar said, in a low voice, "we are about to attempt a surprise, which, if it succeed, will render us masters of the hacienda almost without a blow."

A murmur of surprise ran round the circle.

"A person in whom I have the most entire confidence," the Jaguar continued, "has revealed to me the existence of a secret gate, not known to the garrison, which will give us access to the fort. Each of you will now take the command of his men. Our march must be as silent as that of Indian warriors on the war-path. You have understood me fully, so I count on your aid. In the event of separation, the watchword will be Texas and liberty. To your posts."

The circle was broken up, and each officer placed himself at the head of his men.

"One word," said John Davis, bending to his ear to speak. "Do you know who that man is, standing close to you?"

"It is the White Scalper."

"Was it he who revealed to you the existence of the sally-port by which we are to enter?"
"Yes; and I fully trust him."

"Well, you may be right," John replied; "but for all that, I will watch him."

"As you please."

"Well, let us be off."

The American followed his chief, casting a parting look of suspicion on the old man. The latter did not seem to trouble himself at all about this aside. Apparently indifferent to what went on around him, he waited, quietly leaning on his rifle, till it pleased the Jaguar to give the command for departure. At length, the word "march" ran from rank to rank, and the column started.

These men, the majority of whom were accustomed to long marches in the desert, placed their feet so softly on the ground, that they seemed to glide along like phantoms, so silent was their march. At this moment, as if the sky wished to be on their side, an immense black cloud spread across the heavens and interrupted the moonbeams, substituting, almost without transition, a deep obscurity for the radiance that previously prevailed, and the column disappeared in the gloom. A few paces ahead of the main body, the Jaguar, White Scalper, and John Davis marched side by side.

"Bravo!" the young man muttered; "everything favours us."

"Let us wait for the end," the American growled.

Instead of leaving the camp on the side of the hacienda, whose gloomy outline was designed, sinister and menacing, on the top of the hill, the Scalper made a long circuit, which skirted the rear of the camp. The deepest silence prevailed on the plain, the camp and hacienda seemed asleep, not a light gleamed in the darkness, and it might be fancied, on noticing so profound a calm, that the plain was deserted.

These men, who walked on tip-toe, sounding the darkness around them, and with their finger placed on the rifle-trigger, felt their hearts beat with impatience. It was a singular coincidence, a strange fatality, which caused the besieged and besiegers to attempt a double surprise at the same hour, almost at the same moment, and send blindly against each other men who on either side advanced with the hope of certain success, and convinced that they were about to surprise asleep the too confident enemy whom they burned to massacre.

So soon as they had left the camp, the insurgents drew near the river, whose banks, covered with thick bushes and aquatic plants, would have offered them, even in bright day, a certain shelter from the Mexicans. On coming within about half a league of the intrenchments, the column halted; the Scalper advanced alone a few yards, and then rejoined the Jaguar.

"We shall have to cross the river here," he said, "where there is a ford."

And, giving the example, the old man stepped into the bed of the river. The others followed immediately. They passed threes in front, and closing up the ranks, so as to resist the rather strong current, which, without these precautions, might have carried them away. Five minutes later, the whole band was collected in the interior of the grotto, at the end of which was the secret door.

"The moment has arrived," the Jaguar then said, "to redouble our prudence; let us avoid, if it be possible, bloodshed. Not a word must be uttered, or a shot fired, without my orders, under penalty of death." Then, turning to the White Scalper, he said, in a firm voice, "Now, open the door!"

There was a moment of supreme anxiety for the insurgents, who awaited with a quiver of impatience the downfall of the frail obstacle that separated them from their enemies.
CHAPTER XV.

A THUNDERBOLT.

The colonel and the major-domo meanwhile went down to the patio, where they found assembled the one hundred and fifty men selected for the execution of the surprise. Tranquil, according to the orders he had received, after assuring himself that Carmela was enjoying a sound and refreshing sleep, hastened to tell Loyal Heart and Black-deer what the colonel expected from them. The two men immediately followed their friend into the patio.

The colonel divided his men into three detachments, each of fifty men: he took the command of the first, keeping the Canadian with him; Don Felix, having Loyal Heart for guide, had the command of the second; and the third, at the head of which was placed a captain, an old soldier of great experience, was directed by Black-deer. These arrangements made, the colonel gave the order for departure.

The colonel's plan was extremely simple: descend unheard to the rebels' camp, enter it, and fire it on three different sides; then, profiting by the disorder and tumult occasioned by this surprise, rush on the rebels with shouts of "Viva Mejico!" prevent them rallying or extinguishing the fire, massacre as many as possible, and afterwards effect an orderly retreat on the hacienda.

At the moment when the Mexicans left the hacienda, the same thing happened to them as to the insurgents, who left their camp at the same moment, that is to say, they were suddenly enveloped in thick darkness.

"This is a good omen for the success of our expedition," said the colonel.

The Jaguar was saying the same thing to White Scalper almost simultaneously.

The three detachments descended the hill, marching in Indian file, and taking the greatest care to stifle the sound of their footsteps on the ground. On coming within a certain distance of the Texan intrenchments, they halted, with one accord, to take breath, like tigers which, at the moment of leaping on the prey they covet, draw themselves up, in order to take a vigorous impetus. The soldiers wheeled, so as to present a rather extensive line; then each lay down on the sand, and at the signal, muttered in a low voice by the guides, they began crawling like reptiles through the tall grass, cutting passages through the bushes, advancing in a straight line, and clearing obstacles, without thinking of turning them.

We have said that White Scalper had objected to the Apache sentries being aroused, for he considered their vigilance quite unnecessary—not supposing for a moment that the Mexicans would dare to leave their lines of defence and take the initiative in a sally. The direction the old man had given to the detachment he guided, by drawing it away from the approaches of the fortress, had also favoured the colonel's plans, which, without that, would have been, in all probability, foiled.

Still the Canadian hunter was too prudent and accustomed to the tricks of Indian war not to assure himself previously that there were no traps to apprehend. Hence, on arriving about fifteen yards from the breastworks, he ordered a halt. Then, gliding like a serpent through the shrubs and dead trees that covered the ground at this spot, he pushed forward a reconnaissance. Loyal
Heart and Black-deer, to whom he had given detailed instructions how to act before leaving the hacienda, executed the same manoeuvre. The absence of the scouts was long, or at least appeared so to all these men, who were so impatient to bound on the enemy and begin the attack. At length Tranquil returned, but he was anxious and frowning, and a gloomy restlessness seemed to agitate him.

"What is the matter with you?" the colonel asked him. "Are the rebels alarmed? Have you noticed any signs of agitation in their camp?"

"No," he replied, with his eyes obstinately fixed before him; "I have seen nothing, noticed nothing; the deepest calm, apparently, prevails in the camp."

"Apparently, do you say?"

"Yes; for it is impossible that this calm can be real, for most of the Texan insurgents are old hunters, accustomed to the rude fatigues of a desert life. I can just understand that, during the first part of the night, they might not notice the gross neglect of the Apache sentries; but what I cannot in any way admit is, that during the whole night not one of these partizans, to whom prudence is so imperiously recommended, should have got up to make the rounds and see that all was in order.

"And you conclude from this?"

"I conclude that we should return at full speed to the hacienda; for, unless I am greatly mistaken, this gloomy night covers some sinister mystery which we shall see accomplished ere long, and of which we may fall the victims, unless we take care."

"From what you say to me," the colonel made answer, "I see that you rather give me the expression of your own personal opinions than the result of facts."

"That is true, colonel; but if you will permit me to say so, I would observe that these opinions emanate from a man for whom the desert possesses no secrets, and whom his presentiments rarely deceive."

"Yes; all that is true; and perhaps I ought to follow your advice. My resolution has possibly been premature, but now, unfortunately, it is too late to recall it. Withdrawing is an impossibility, for that would prove to my soldiers that I was mistaken, which is not admissible. We must, at any cost, accept the consequences of our inprudence, and push on, no matter what happens."

"I am at your orders, colonel."

"Forward, then, and may heaven be favourable to us!" the young officer said, resolutely.

The order was whispered along the line, and the soldiers, whom this long conference had perplexed, and who were afraid they should be obliged to turn back, received it joyfully, and advanced with renewed ardour. The ground that separated them from the breastwork was soon covered, and the intrenchments were escaded ere a single Apache sentry had given the alarm.

Suddenly, from three different points of the camp an immense flame shot up, and the Mexicans rushed forward, shouting "Viva Mejico!" The insurgents, hardly awake, ran hither and thither, not understanding these flames which surrounded them, and these terrible yells which sounded in their ears like a funeral knell.

For nearly an hour the contest was a chaos; smoke and noise covered everything else. According to the American custom, most of the insurgents had their wives and children with them; hence, from the first moment the enclosure was covered with a confused medley of women. Apache horsemen galloped among the terrified foot soldiers and overthrown tents, from which rose the
groans of the wounded. All around the camp an immense line of smoke bordered the flames kindled by the Mexicans, who bounded like wild beasts, uttering fearful yells.

Still, when the first feeling of surprise had passed, the insurgents began gradually rallying, in spite of the incessant efforts of the Mexicans, and resistance was organised to a certain extent. Colonel Melendez had gained his object, the success of his plan was complete, the losses of the Texans in men and ammunition were immense; he did not wish, with the few troops he had under him, to advance further into a blazing camp, where they walked under a vault of flames, running the risk of being struck at each moment by the ruins of the powder magazines, which exploded one after the other with a terrible noise.

The colonel triumphantly glanced at the ruins piled up around him, and then ordered the retreat to be sounded.

The three detachments formed in a semi-circle, firing on the insurgents, who profited by the moment of respite chance afforded them to become constantly more numerous. They then noticed the small strength of their assailants, and rushed resolutely upon them. The Mexicans, now united, wished to effect their retreat, but at each instant their position became more difficult, and threatened to become even critical.

Colonel Melendez, seeing the danger of the position, collected forty resolute men, and placing himself at their head, rushed on the insurgents with an irresistible impetuosity. The latter, surprised in their turn by this vigorous attack, which they were far from expecting, recoiled, and at length fell back some hundred yards to re-form, closely pursued by the colonel.

This lucky diversion gave the main body of the Mexicans time to gain ground, and when the Texans returned to the charge with fresh ardour, the propitious moment had passed.

"Viva Dios!" the colonel said; "the affair was hot, but the advantage remains with us."

"I did not see the Jaguar during the whole action," the Canadian muttered.

"That is true," the young man replied, "and is most strange."

"His absence alarms me," the hunter said sadly.

"Where can he be?" the colonel remarked, suddenly turning thoughtful.

"Perhaps we shall learn only too soon," the Canadian replied with a shake of the head foreboding misfortune.

All at once, and as if chance had wished to justify the hunter's sad forebodings, an immense noise was heard in the hacienda, amid which could be distinguished cries of distress, and a well-sustained musketry fire. Then, a sinister glare rose above the Larch-tree, which it coloured with the hues of fire.

"Forward! forward!" the colonel cried; "the enemy have got into the fort!"

At the first glance, the young officer understood what had taken place, and the truth at once struck his mind. All rushed toward the hacienda, inside which an obstinate contest seemed to be raging. They soon reached the gates, and rushed into the patio, where a horrible spectacle offered itself to their sight. This is what had happened.

At the moment when White Scalper prepared to break in the door, the clamour made by the Mexicans in firing the camp reached the ears of the Texans.

"Rayo de Dios!" the Jaguar shouted; "what is the meaning of that?"

"Probably the Mexicans are attacking your camp," the old man quietly answered.

The young chief gave him an ugly look.
"We are betrayed," said John Davis, as he cocked a pistol, and pointed it at the old man.
"I am beginning to believe it," the Jaguar muttered.
"By whom?" the White Scalper asked with a smile of contempt.
"By you, you villain!" the American answered.
"You are mad," the old man said with a disdainful shrug; "if I had been false, should I have led you here?"
"That is true," said the Jaguar; "but it is strange, and the noise is unceasing. The Mexicans are doubtless massacring our companions; we must hurry to their assistance."
"Do nothing of the sort," the Scalper sharply exclaimed. "Hasten inside the fortress, which I doubt not is abandoned by the greater part of its defenders; your companions, so soon as they have rallied, will be strong enough to repulse their assailants."
"What is to be done?" muttered the Jaguar, with an undecided air, as he bent an inquiring glance on the men as they pressed round him.
"Act without loss of a moment," the old man eagerly exclaimed, and with a vigorously-dealt stroke he broke in the door, which fell in splinters to the ground; "here is the way open, will you recoil?"
"No! no!" they shouted impetuously, and rushed into the gaping vault before them.
This vault formed a passage wide enough for four persons to march abreast, and of sufficient height for them not to be obliged to stoop; it rose with a gentle incline, and resembled a species of labyrinth, owing to the constant turns it took. The darkness was complete, but the impulse had been given, and no other noise was audible save that of the panting breathing of these men, and their hurried footsteps, which sounded hollow on the damp ground they trod. After twenty minutes' march, which seemed to last an age, the Scalper's voice rose in the gloom, and uttered the single word, "Halt!"
"Here we shall have to make our final arrangements," he continued; "but in the first place let me procure you a light, so that you may know exactly where you are."
The old man, who seemed gifted with the privilege of seeing in the dark, walked about for some minutes in various directions, doubtless collecting the ingredients necessary for the fire he wished to kindle; then he struck a light, lit a piece of tinder, and almost immediately a brilliant flame seemed to leap forth from the ground, and illumined objects sufficiently for them to be distinguished. The Scalper had simply lighted a fire of dry wood, probably prepared beforehand.
The Texans looked curiously around. They found themselves in a very large, almost circular vault, somewhat resembling a crypt; the walls were lofty, and the roof was rounded in the shape of a dome. The ground was composed of a very fine dry sand, as yellow as gold. This room seemed cut out of the rock.
In the background, a staircase of some twenty steps, wide, and without bannister, mounted to the roof, where it terminated, and it was impossible to distinguish whether there were any trap-door or opening. This trap doubtless existed, but time had covered its openings with dust. After attentively examining the vault by the aid of a blazing log, the Jaguar returned to the old man, who had remained by the fire.
"Where are we?" he asked him.
"We are," he said, "exactly under the patio of the hacienda; this ends in an opening I will point out to you, and which leads into a lon
corral, in which, if I am not mistaken, the wood stores of the hacienda are now kept."

"Good," the Jaguar answered; "but before venturing into what may be an adroitly-laid trap, I should like, myself, to visit the corral of which you speak, in order to see with my own eyes."

"I ask nothing better than to lead you to it."

"Thank you; but I do not see exactly how we shall manage to open the passage of which you speak, without making a noise, which will immediately bring down on us the whole of the garrison, of which I am excessively afraid, as we are not at all conveniently situated for fighting."

"That need not trouble you; I pledge myself to open the trap without making the slightest noise."

"That is better; but come, time presses."

"That is true. Come."

The two men then proceeded to the flight of stairs. On reaching the top, the White Scalper thrust his head against the ceiling, and after several attempts a slab slowly rose, turned over, and fell noiselessly on its side, leaving a passage large enough for two men to pass together. White Scalper passed through this opening. With one bound the Jaguar stood by his side, pistol in hand, ready to blow out his brains at the first suspicious movement. But he soon perceived that the old man had no intention of betraying him, and, ashamed at the suspicion he had evinced, he hid his weapon.

As the Scalper had stated, they found themselves in an abandoned corral—a sort of vast stall, open to the sky, in which the Americans keep their horses; but this one was quite empty.

"Good," muttered the Jaguar, "you have kept your word; thank you."

The Scalper did not seem to hear him; his eyes were fixed on the door with a strange intensity, and his limbs trembled. Without attempting to discover the cause of his comrade's extraordinary emotion, the Jaguar ran to the opening, over which he bent down. John Davis was standing on the top step.

"Well?" he asked.

"All goes well. Come up, but do not make any noise."

The four hundred Texans then rose one after the other from the vault. Each, as he came out of the trap, silently fell in. When all had entered the corral, the Jaguar returned the slab to its place.

"Our retreat," he said, in a low voice, "is now cut off; we must either conquer or die."

The insurgents made no answer; but their eyes flashed such fire, that the Jaguar comprehended that they would not give way an inch. It was a moment of terrible suspense while White Scalper was forcing the door.

"Forward!" the Jaguar shouted.

All his comrades rushed after him with the irresistible force of a torrent that is bursting its dykes.

Very different from the Texans, whose camp had so easily been invaded, the Mexicans were not asleep. By orders of the commandant, so soon as he had left the hacienda the whole garrison got under arms, and fell in in the patio, ready, if need was, to go immediately to the aid of the expeditionary corps. Still, they were so far from expecting an attack, especially in this manner, that the sudden apparition of this band of demons, who seemed to have ascended from the infernal regions, caused them extraordinary surprise and terror.

The Texans, skilfully profiting by the terror their presence caused, redoubled their efforts to render it impossible for their enemies to offer any lengthened resistance. But, shut up as they were in a court without an outlet, the very
impossibility of flight gave the Mexicans the necessary courage to rally and fight courageously. Collected round their officers, who encouraged them by voice and example, they resolved to do their duty manfully, and the combat began with terrible obstinacy.

It was at this moment that Colonel Melendez and the soldiers who followed him burst into the patio, and by their presence were on the point of restoring to their party the victory which was slipping from them. Unfortunately, this success arrived too late: the Mexicans, surrounded by the Texans, were compelled, after a desperate resistance and prodigies of valour, to lay down their arms, and surrender at discretion.

For the second time Don Juan Melendez was prisoner to the Jaguar. As on the first occasion, he was compelled to break his sword, conquered by fatality rather than by his fortunate enemy.

The preliminaries of the surrender had scarce been agreed on between the two leaders ere piercing cries were suddenly heard from the building occupied by the women. Almost immediately the White Scalper, who had been lost out of sight during the excitement of the combat, emerged from these buildings bearing across his shoulders a woman whose long hair trailed on the ground. The old man's eyes flashed, and foam came from his mouth. In his right hand he brandished his rifle, which he held by the barrel, and fell back step by step, like a tiger at bay, before those who tried in vain to bar his passage.

"My daughter!" Tranquil shrieked.

He had recognised Carmela; the poor child had fainted, and seemed dead. The colonel and the Jaguar had also recognised the maiden, and by a common impulse hurried to her aid.

The White Scalper, recoiling step by step before the cloud of enemies that surrounded him, did not reply a word to the insults poured upon him. He laughed a dry laugh, and whenever an assailant came too near him, raised his terrible club, and the man rolled to the ground.

The hunters and the two young men, recognising the impossibility of striking this man without running the risk of wounding her they wished to save, contented themselves with gradually narrowing the circle round him, so as to drive him into a corner of the court, where they would be enabled to seize him. But the ferocious old man foiled their calculations; he suddenly bounded forward, overthrew those who opposed his passage, and climbed with headlong speed up the steps leading to the platform. On reaching the latter, he turned once again to his startled enemies, burst into a hoarse laugh, and leaped over the breastwork into the river, bearing with him the young girl, of whom he had not loosed his hold.

When the witnesses of this extraordinary act had recovered from the stupor into which it threw them, and rushed on the platform, their anxious glances in vain interrogated the river—the waters had resumed their ordinary limpidness. White Scalper had disappeared with the unhappy victim whom he had so audaciously carried off. To accomplish this unheard-of deed he had surrendered the Larch-tree hacienda to the Texan army. What motive had impelled the strange man to this extraordinary action?
CHAPTER XV.

THE CONSPIRATORS.

We will now momentarily quit the Indian border, on the skirt of which our story has hitherto passed, and leaping over about two hundred miles, beg the reader to follow us to Galveston, four months after the events we chronicled in our last chapter.

At the period when our story is laid, that city, in which General Lallemand wished to found the Champ d'Asyle—that sublime Utopia of a noble and broken heart—was far from that commercial prosperity which the progress of civilisation, successive immigrations, and, most of all, the speculations of bold capitalists, have caused it to attain during the last few years.

Galveston is built on the small sandy islet of St. Louis, which closes up the mouth of the Rio Trinidad. At that time the houses were low, built of wood, and surrounded by gardens planted with fragrant trees, which impregnated the atmosphere with delicious odours.

Unfortunately there is one thing that cannot alter—the climate and the nature of the soil. The suffocating heat that in summer prevails in the town corrodes the earth and changes it into an impalpable dust, in which you sink up to the knees, and which, at the least breath of air, penetrates into the eyes, mouth, and nostrils; myriads of mosquitos, whose stings are extremely painful, and, above all, the bad quality of the water, which the inhabitants collect with great difficulty in plank reservoirs during the rainy season, and which the sun renders boiling—these grievous occurrences, especially for Europeans, render a residence at Galveston insupportable at times.

About four in the afternoon, at the moment when the rising sea-breeze began to refresh the atmosphere, a little Indian canoe, made of beech bark, left the mainland, and, vigorously impelled by two men supplied with wide sculls, proceeded toward the city and pulled alongside the plank quay, which served at the time as the landing-place. So soon as the canoe was stationary, a third person, carelessly reclining in the stern sheets, rose, looked round him as if to recognise the spot where he was; then, taking a spring, landed on the quay. The canoe immediately turned round, though not a syllable had been exchanged between the scullers and the passenger they had brought.

The latter then pulled his hat over his eyes, wrapped himself carefully in the folds of a wide zarapé of Indian fabric and striking colour, and proceeded hastily towards the centre of the city. After a walk of a few minutes the stranger stopped in front of a house, whose comfortable appearance and well-tended garden showed that it belonged to a person who, if not rich, was in easy circumstances. The door was ajar; the stranger pushed it, entered, and closed it after him; then, without any hesitation, like a man sure of what he was about, he crossed the garden, in which he met nobody, entered the passage of the house, turned to the right, and found himself in a room modestly though comfortably furnished.

On reaching this room the stranger fell into a butacca with the air of a tired man delighted to rest after a long journey, took off his zarapé, which he placed on the equipal, threw his hat upon it, and then, when he had made himself comfortable, he rolled a husk cigarette, struck a light with a gold
mechero he took from his pocket, lit his papelito, and was soon surrounded
by a dense cloud of bluish and fragrant smoke, which rose above his head and
formed a species of halo.

The stranger threw his body back, half closed his eyes, and fell into that
gentle ecstasy which the Italians call the dolce, für raen’e, the Turks, kief, and for
which we northerns, with our more powerful constitutions, have found no name,
for the simple reason that we do not know it.

The stranger had reached about the half of his second cigarette when another
person entered the room. This man, who did not appear to take the slightest
notice of the previous arrival, behaved, however, precisely as he had done: he
also took off his zarapé, reclined on a butacca, and lit up a cigarette. Presently
the garden sand creaked beneath the footsteps of a third visitor, followed
immediately by a fourth, and then by a fifth: in short, at the end of an hour
twenty persons were assembled in this room. They all smoked with apparent
carelessness, and since their arrival had not exchanged a syllable.

Six o’clock struck from a clock standing on a sideboard. The last stroke of
the hour had scarce ceased vibrating ere the company, as if by common agree-
ment, threw away their cigars, and rose with a vivacity that certainly was little
to be expected after their previous carelessness. At the same moment a secret
door opened in the wall, and a man appeared on the threshold.

This man was tall, elegant, and aristocratic, and appeared to be young. A
half-mask of velvet concealed the upper part of his face; as for his attire, it was
exactly similar to that of the other persons in the room, but a brace of long
pistols and a dagger were passed through the girdle of red China crêpe which
was wound tightly round his waist. At the appearance of the stranger a quiver
ran, like an electric current, through the lines of visitors. The masked man,
with head erect, arms crossed on his chest, and body haughtily thrown back,
gave his audience a glance, which could be seen flashing through the holes in
the velvet.

"It is well," he at length said, in a sonorous voice; "you are faithful to your
promise, not one of you has kept us waiting. This is the eighth time I have
assembled you during the month, and each time I have found you equally
prompt and faithful; thanks, in the name of our country."

His auditors bowed silently, and the stranger continued, after a slight pause—
"Time presses, gentlemen; the situation is growing with each moment more
serious; the hour has arrived to stake our heads resolutely in a glorious and
decisive game. Are you ready?"

"We are," they all answered unanimously.
"Reflect once more before pledging yourself further," the mask continued in
a thrilling voice: "this time I repeat to you, we shall take the bull by the horns,
but of one hundred chances, ninety-eight are against us."

"No matter," the person who first entered the room said, haughtily; "if two
chances are left us, they will be sufficient."

"I expected no less from you, John Davis," the stranger said; "you have ever
been full of devotion and self-denial; but, perhaps among our comrades some
may not think as you do. I do not regard this as a crime, for a man may love
his country and yet not consent to sacrifice his life to it without regret; still, I
must have perfect confidence in those who follow me; they and I must have
but one heart and one thought. Let those, then, who feel a repugnance to share
in the task we have to perform to-night withdraw."

There was silence, but no one stirred.

"Come," the stranger said, with an expression of joy, "I was not mistaken;
you are brave fellows."
“By heaven!” said John Davis, “the trial was useless; you ought to have
known long ago what we are.”

“Certainly I knew it, but my honour commanded me to act as I have done. 
Now, all is said: we shall succeed or perish together.

“Very good, that is what I call speaking,” the ex-slave-dealer said, with a
hearty laugh; “the partizans of Santa Anna must have to hold their own;
for, if I am not greatly mistaken, ere long we shall cut them into stirrup-
leathers.”

At this moment a shrill whistle, although rather remote, was heard: a second 
whistle, still nearer, replied.

“Gentlemen,” the stranger said, “we are warned of the approach of an
enemy; and the interest of the cause we defend imperiously ordains prudence.
Follow John Davis, while I receive the fellow who is intruding on us.”

“Come,” said the American.

The conspirators, for they were no other, displayed some hesitation, for they
felt a repugnance to hide.

“Leave me,” the stranger went on; “you must.”

All bowed and left the room after John Davis by the secret door, which had
offered passage to their chief, and which closed upon them without displaying
a sign of its existence, as it was so carefully hidden in the wall. A third whistle,
close by, was heard at this moment.

“Yes, yes,” the chief said, with a smile, “whoever you may be, you can come
now; if you possessed the craft of the opossum and the eyes of the eagle, I
defer you to discover anything suspicious here.”

He took off his mask, concealed his weapons, and lay back in a butacca.
Almost immediately the doors opened, and a man appeared. It was Lanzí, the
half-breed; he was dressed like the sailors of the port, with canvas trousers
drawn in round the hips, a white shirt, with a blue turned-down collar with a
white edging, and a tarpaulin hat.

“Well,” the chief asked, without turning, “why did you warn us, Lanzí?”

“The governor is coming hither with several officers and a company of
soldiers.”

“Hang it!” the conspirator said; “are we threatened with a domiciliary
visit?”

“You will soon know, for I hear him.”

“Very good; we shall see what they want of us. In the meantime take this
mask and these weapons.”

“The weapons too?” the other said in surprise.

“What shall I do with them? That is not the way in which I must fight
them at this moment. Be off.”

The man took the mask and the pistols, pressed a spring, and disappeared.
The gravel could now be heard creaking under the footsteps of several persons.
at length the door of the saloon was thrown open, and the general entered,
followed by four or five officers, who, like himself, were in full dress. The
general stopped on the threshold, and took a piercing glance around; the chief
was standing motionless in the centre of the apartment.

General Rubio was a thorough man of the world. He bowed politely, and
apologised for having thus entered the house without being announced.

“These excuses are useless, caballero,” the young man answered; “the
Mexican government has for a long time accustomed us to its uncivilised
way of behaving.”

“Your remarks, caballero,” the general answered, “breathe an irritation that
must be regretted. The state of effervescence in which Texas is at this
moment would be more than sufficient to justify the unusual steps I am taking at present.

"I know not to what you are pleased to allude, senor general," the young man remarked, coldly; "it is possible that Texas may be in a state of er-"vence, and the annoyances the government have put on it would completely justify this; but as concerns myself, personally, I might perhaps have a right to complain of seeing my house invaded by an armed force."

"Are you quite sure that I have not the right to act as I am doing? Do you consider yourself so free from suspicion that you regard this measure as arbitrary?"

"I repeat to you, caballero," the young man continued, haughtily, "that I do not at all understand the language you do me the honour of addressing to me. I am a peaceable citizen; nothing in my conduct has, as far as I know, aroused the jealous solicitude of the government; but you have force on your side, general, so do as you think proper; I am alone here, and shall not attempt in any way to resist the measures you may think proper to take."

"That language, caballero, evidently comes from a man assured of his safety."

"It is that of a free man, unjustly insulted."

"It may be so, but I shall not discuss the point. You will permit me, however, to remark, that for a man so justly indignant, and apparently solitary, you are very carefully guarded; for if the house be empty, as you state, the environs are guarded by friends of yours, who, I must allow, perform admirably the commission with which they were intrusted, by warning you sufficiently early of unexpected visits."

"Instead of speaking in enigmas, general, it would be better, perhaps, to have an explanation; then I might attempt to defend myself."

"Nothing is more easy, caballero; still, you will allow me to remark that we have been talking together for some time, and you have not yet offered me a chair."

"Why should I employ toward you those conventional forms of politeness, general? From the moment when, without my authority, and against my will, you introduced yourself into this house, you should have considered yourself as quite at home."

"Caballero," the general answered, "I am grieved to find in you this stiffness and determination to quarrel. When I entered this house, my intentions with respect to you were, perhaps, not so hostile as you suppose; but, since you force me to a clear and categorical explanation, I am prepared to satisfy you, and prove to you that I am acquainted not only with your conduct, but with the plans you entertain and are carrying out, with a tenacity and boldness which, if I did not take measures to stop them, would inevitably lead to their speedy realisation."

The young man started, and a flash burst from his wild eye at this insinuation, which revealed to him the danger with which he was menaced; but immediately regaining his presence of mind, he replied, coolly—

"I am listening to you, general."

The latter turned to his officers.

"Do as I do, senores," he said, as he sat down; "take seats, as this caballero refuses to offer them to us."

The officers bowed, and seated themselves comfortably on the butaccas with which the apartment was furnished. The general continued—

"And in the first place, to proceed regularly, and prove to you that I am well-informed of all that concerns you," he said, purposely laying a stress on the words, "I will begin by telling you your name."
"In truth, you should have begun with that."
"You are," the general went on, "the chief whom the insurgents have christened the Jaguar."
"Ah. ah!" he remarked, ironically, "so you know that, senor governor?"
"And a good many more things, as you shall see."
"Go on," he said, smiling.
"After giving a powerful organisation to your revolt on the Indian border by seizing the Larch-tree hacienda, and allying yourself with certain Comanche and Apache tribes, you understood that, to succeed, you must give up that guerilla warfare, which I confess you had carried on for some time with considerable success."
"Thanks," said the Jaguar, with ironical bow.
"You therefore entrusted the temporary command of your bands to one of your faithful associates, in order to revolutionise the coast, and deal a great blow by seizing a seaport. Galveston, by its position, is a strategical point of the utmost importance for your plans. For two months past you have been concealed in this house, which you have made your head-quarters, and where you are making all the preparations for the audacious enterprise you wish to attempt. You have at your disposal numerous emissaries and faithful conspirators; the government of the United States supply you with abundance of arms and ammunition, which you think you will soon have need of. Your measures have been so well taken, and your machinations carried on with such great skill; you fancy yourself so nearly on the point of success, that hardly an hour back you convened here the principal members of your party, in order to give them their final instructions. Is it so? Am I correctly informed?"
"What would you have me answer, caballero," the young man said, "since you know all?"
"Then, you confess that you are the Jaguar, the chief of the freebooters!"
"Canarios, I should think so."
"You also allow that you came here with the intention of seizing the city?"
"Incontestably," the other said, with an air of mockery; "it does not allow the shadow of a doubt."
"Take care," the general remarked drily; "it is a much more serious matter than you seem to think."
"What the deuce would you have me do, general? it is not my fault that I am beginning to doubt my own identity, and I ask myself if I have not been hitherto deceived in believing myself Martin Gutierrez, the ranchero of Santa Aldegonida, in the state of Sonora, and if I am not, on the contrary, the ferocious Jaguar, of whom you speak to me, and for whom you do me the honour of taking me, I confess to you, general, that all this perplexes me in the highest degree."
"Then, caballero, up to the present you have been jesting!" the general said hastily.

The Jaguar began laughing.
"Cuerpo de Cristo!" he replied, "I should think so. What else could I do in the face of such accusations? Discuss them with you? You know as well as I do, general, that it is useless to attempt to overthrow a conviction. Instead of telling me that I am the Jaguar, prove it to me, and then I will bow to the truth."
"I hope to be able to satisfy you."
"Very good; but till then, I would observe that you entered my house in a
way contrary to law, that the domicile of a citizen is inviolable, and that what you have done to-day, only a juez de letras, armed with a legal warrant, was empowered to do."

"You would possibly be correct, caballero, if we lived in ordinary times; but the state is in a state of siege, the military power has taken the place of the civil authority, and alone has the right to command and have carried out those measures that relate to the maintenance of order."

The young man, while the general was speaking, had taken a side glance at the clock.

"Be kind enough," he said, "to explain to me categorically, and without further circumlocution, the motives for your presence in my house; we have been talking a long time, and I have not yet been able to read your intentions. I should therefore feel obliged by your making them known to me without delay, as important business claims my presence abroad."

"Oh, oh! you will soon change your tone," the general said, with a little irony; "I will tell you what you desire to learn; as for your leaving the house without my sanction, I fancy you will find it rather difficult."

"Which means, I presume, that you look upon me as a prisoner, general?"

"Nearly so, caballero. When your house has been searched, I may, perhaps, permit you to be put aboard a ship, which will carry you far away from the territory of the Mexican confederation."

"Canarias, senor general, I see that your government has preserved the healthy Spanish traditions, and is deliciously arbitrary," the Jaguar said mockingly; "the only question is, whether I shall voluntarily submit to such treatment."

"You must have already perceived that force is not on your side, at least for the present."

"Then you will employ force to coerce a single, unarmed man in his own house?"

"That is my intention."

"Oh! if that be so, I thank you, for you leave me free to act."

"What do you mean by that remark, caballero?"

"What do you mean by yours, senor governor? I consider that all means are good to escape arbitrary arrest, and I shall employ them without hesitation."

"Try it," the officer said, ironically.

"When the moment for action arrives, I shall not wait for your permission to do so," the Jaguar replied.

The tone in which the Jaguar uttered his last words caused the general a moment's anxiety; but after taking a glance round him, he was reassured. In fact, owing to the precautions taken by the old soldier, it seemed materially impossible that his prisoner could escape, for he was alone, unarmed, in a house surrounded by soldiers, and watched by several resolute officers.

"I absolve you beforehand," he said disdainfully, "for any efforts you may make to escape."

"I thank you, general," the Jaguar answered, with a ceremonious bow.

"I expect nothing else from your courtesy; I make a note of your promise."

"Be it so. Now, with your permission we are about to make our domiciliary visit."

"Do so, general, pray do so; if you desire it, I will myself act as your guide."

"In my turn, I thank you for this obliging offer, but I do not wish to put your kindness to a trial; the more so, as I am thoroughly acquainted with this house."
"Do you think so, general?"
"Judge for yourself."
The Jaguar bowed without replying, and carelessly leant his elbow on the couch upon which the clock stood.
"We will first begin with this saloon," the general continued.
"You mean that you will finish with it," the young man remarked, with an ironical smile.
"Let us look first at the secret door in the wall."
"I see, you are better informed than I supposed."
"You do not know all yet."
"I hope so; judging from the commencement, I expect some extraordinary discoveries."
"Perhaps so. Will you make the spring work yourself, caballero, or would you prefer me doing it?"
"On my word, general, I confess that all this interests me so hugely that, until fresh orders, I desire to remain a simple spectator."
"Pay attention, caballero," the general said in a menacing tone; "I know that when I arrived you had a large party here; on my entrance your comrades fled."
"That is true," the young man said.
"Take care," the general continued; "if assassins are concealed, the blood will fall on your head."
"General," the Jaguar said seriously, "press the spring; the passage is empty; I require no aid but my own to deliver myself from your clutches."
The governor no longer hesitated; he walked resolutely to the wall, and pressed the spring; his officers had followed him, ready to aid him if any danger presented itself. The Jaguar did not stir. The door opened, and displayed a long and completely deserted corridor.
"Well, general, have I kept my word?" the Jaguar said.
"Yes, senor, I must concede it. Now, caballeros, " the general continued, addressing his officers, "draw swords, and forward!"
"One moment, if you please," said the Jaguar.
"What do you want, senor?"
"You will remember that I warned you you would end your domiciliary visit with this room?"
"Well?"
"I will keep that second promise as I did the first."
At the same instant, and ere the general and his officers could account for what was happening, the flooring gave way beneath their feet, and they rolled to the bottom of a vault.
"A pleasant journey!" the Jaguar said with a laugh, as he closed the trap again.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE SPY.

While these events were occurring, the sun had set, and night almost immediately succeeded day. So soon as the Jaguar had closed the trap, he proceeded towards the masked door to rejoin his comrades; but a sound of footsteps out-
side made him change his plans; he shut the door again, and returned to his old position. The stranger did not delay long. Although the night was too dark to allow the Jaguar to recognise his features, by the sparkling of his gold lace, and the clank of his spurs and steel scabbard on the pavement, he saw that he was once more in the presence of a Mexican officer of rank. At the end of a moment, however, the Jaguar's eyes, gifted possibly with that precious quality possessed by animals of the feline race to see through the darkness, appeared to have recognised the stranger.

The young man frowned, and gave a start of disappointment.

"Is there no one here?" the officer asked.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" the Jaguar answered, disguising his voice.

"That is a curious question," the officer continued; "first have this room lighted up, which looks like a cut-throat's den, and then we will talk."

"It is not necessary for what we have to say to each other; you can leave your sabre at rest; although this house is dark, it is no cut-throat den."

"What has become of General Rubio and the officers who accompanied him?"

"Am I their keeper, Colonel Melendez?"

"Who are you, who appear to know me and answer so strangely?"

"Perhaps a friend, vexed at seeing you here, and who would be glad were you elsewhere."

"A friend would not hide himself."

"Why not, if circumstances compel him?"

"A truce to this exchange of peurile speeches; will you answer my question, yes or no?"

"Suppose I refuse?"

"I shall know how to compel you."

"That is haughty language, colonel."

"Which I shall support by deeds."

"I do not think so: not that I doubt your courage—Heaven forbid, for I have long known it."

"Well! what will prevent me?"

"You have not the means to carry out your wishes."

"They are easily found."

"Try it."

While speaking, the colonel had mechanically taken a couple of steps into the room.

"I shall soon return," he said, as he laid his hand on the door-latch.

The Jaguar only answered by a hoarse laugh. The door was closed; in vain did the colonel try to open it.

"I am your prisoner, then?" he said, addressing the young man.

"Perhaps so; it will depend on yourself."

"You wish me to fall into the same snare into which the general and his officers probably fell before me. Try it, senor; still, I warn you that I am on my guard, and will defend myself."

"Your words are harsh, colonel. You gratuitously insult a man of whom, up to the present, you have no cause to complain, and whom you will regret having attacked when you know him."

"Tell me the fate of my companions, and what your intentions are with regard to myself."

"My intentions are better than yours, colonel; for, if you had me in your power, as I have you in mine, it is probable that your general, if not yourself,
would make me pay dearly for the imprudence I have committed. General Rubio and his officers are my prisoners, and you feel in your heart that I can do what I please with you; withdraw the soldiers who surround my house, pledge me your word of honour that no attempt shall be made on me for four-and-twenty hours, and I will immediately restore you all to liberty."

"I know not who you are, senor; the conditions you wish to impose upon me are those of a conqueror."

"What else am I at this moment?" the young man interrupted violently.

"Be it so; but I cannot take it on myself to accept or decline these conditions, as the general alone has the right to form a determination and pledge his word."

"Then ask himself what his intentions are, and he will answer you."

"Is he here, then?" the colonel exclaimed eagerly.

"It is of little consequence to you where he is, provided he hear and answer you; do not stir from where you are; one step further, and you are a dead man; what is your resolve?"

"I accept."

"In that case speak to him."

The Jaguar worked the spring that opened the trap, and displayed the entrance of the vault into which the Mexican officers had been so suddenly hurled; but the darkness was so intense that the colonel could perceive nothing, in spite of his efforts to try and distinguish a gleam; he merely heard a slight sound produced by the grating of the trap in its groove. The colonel understood that he must get out of the difficulty as well as he could.

"General," he said, "can you hear me?"

"Who speaks?" the general answered immediately.

"I, Colonel Melendez de Gongora."

"Heaven be praised!" the general shouted; "in that case all goes well."

"On the contrary; like yourself, I am in the hands of the accursed insurges."

"Mil demonios!" the old soldier shouted angrily.

"Are you all right?"

"Bodily, yes; my officers and myself have received no wounds; I must confess that the demon who played us this trick was so far civil."

"Thanks, general," the Jaguar said.

"Ah, salteador," the angry general exclaimed; "I swear by Heaven to settle our accounts some day."

"I hope so too; but at present, believe me, you had better listen to what Colonel Melendez has to say to you."


"General, we are offered our liberty on condition," the colonel immediately replied, "that we pledge our word of honour to attempt nothing against the man whose prisoner we are."

"Or against his adherents, whoever they may be."

"Be it so; or against his adherents, during the next twenty-four hours, and that the house shall be left free."

"But supposing I do refuse?"

"In that case, I will treat you and yours exactly as you intended to treat me and mine."

"That is to say?"

"You will be all shot within a quarter of an hour."

There was a mournful silence. No other sound could be heard but the dry
and monotonous one produced by the escapement of the clock. These men, collected without seeing each other, in so narrow a space, felt their hearts beat as if to burst their chests; they trembled with impotent rage, for they recognised that they were really in the hands of an implacable foe.

"Viva Dios!" the colonel shouted; "better to die than surrender thus!"

And he rushed forward with uplifted sabre. Suddenly a hand of iron clutched him, threw him down, and he felt the point of his own sword, which he had let fall, slightly prick his throat.

"Surrender, or you are a dead man," a rough voice shouted in his ear.

"No; mil demonios!" the colonel said, furiously: "I will not surrender to a bandit; kill me."

"Stop," the Jaguar said: "I insist."

The man who held the colonel down left him at liberty, and the latter rose, ashamed and partly stunned.

"Well," the young man continued, "do you accept, general?"

"Yes, demon," the latter replied passionately; "but I shall revenge myself.

"Then, you give me your word as a soldier that the conditions I impose on you will be carried out by you?"

"I give it; but who guarantees me that you will act honourably on your side?"

"My honour, general," the Jaguar answered; "my honour, which, as you know, is as unsullied as your own.

"Very good, senor; I trust to you as you do to me. Must we surrender our swords?"

"General," the Jaguar answered nobly, "a brave soldier never separates from his weapons; I should blush to deprive you of yours."

"Thanks for that courtesy, caballero, for it proves to me that every good feeling is not dead in your heart. Now I am waiting for you to supply me with the means for leaving the place into which you made me fall."

"You shall be satisfied, senor general. As for you, colonel, you can retire, for the door is now open."

"Not before I have seen you," the officer answered.

"What good would that do, since you have not recognised me?" the young man said.

"The Jaguar!" the colonel ejaculated in surprise. "Ah! I might have expected that; I shall certainly remain now," he added, with a singular inflection in his voice.

"Very good," said the chief, "remain."

He clapped his hands, and four peons entered with lighted candelabra. Soon as the saloon was lit up, the young officer perceived the general and his aides-de-camp standing up in the vault. A criado brought a ladder to the trap, and the Mexicans ascended—half-pleased, half-ashamed.

"Gentlemen," the insurgent continued, "you are free. Any other in my place would, doubtless, have profited by the bad position in which you were, to impose on you conditions far harder than those I demanded of you; but I only understand a fair fight, steel against steel, chest against chest. Go in peace."

"One word before separating," said the general.

"I listen, caballero."

"Whatever may be the circumstances under which we may meet at a later date, I shall not forget your conduct of this day."

"I dispense you from any gratitude on that account, general; the more so, because if I acted thus it was for reasons entirely strange to you."

"Whatever be the motive of your conduct, my honour urges me to remember your conduct."
"As you please; I only ask you to remember our conditions."
"They shall be punctually carried out."

The Jaguar, upon this, bowed to the general; the latter returned his salute, and making a sign to his officers to follow him, left the room. The young chief listened attentively to the sound of the retiring footsteps, and then drew himself up.

"What!" he exclaimed with surprise, on perceiving the colonel, "are you still here, Senor Don Juan?"
"Yes, brother," the latter answered, in a sad voice, "I am still here."

The Jaguar walked rapidly up to him, and took his hand.

"Listen, brother; this situation cannot endure long; whatever happens, it must cease. Time fails me at this moment to explain to you certain matters you ought to know; but we will meet to-morrow."

"Where, and at what hour?"

"At the Salto del Frayle, at two in the afternoon."

"Why so far and so late, brother?"

"Because between this and then something will happen, which I cannot tell at present, but which will doubtless oblige me to cross the bay and seek shelter on the mainland."

"'Tis a long way off, but I will keep the appointment. Good-bye, brother, until to-morrow."

"Death alone can prevent me being at the place of meeting I have selected."

The two political enemies, so cordially attached, shook hands and separated. The colonel wrapped himself in his cloak, and immediately left the room and the house. The Jaguar, as soon as he was alone, closed the trap-door, touched the spring of the secret door, and left the saloon in his turn, to enter the dark corridor through which, on the general's entrance, his friends had disappeared at the heels of John Davis. This passage, after several turnings, opened into a rather large room, in which all the conspirators were assembled, silent and gloomy, waiting, with their hands on their weapons.

Lanzi was standing sentry in the doorway, to prevent any surprise: the Jaguar resumed his mask, thrust his pistols in his girdle, and entered. On seeing him, the conspirators gave a start of joy, which was immediately suppressed, however, at a signal from the young man.

"My comrades," he said, in a saddened voice, "I have evil tidings to communicate to you. Had not my measures been so well taken, we should all have been prisoners at this moment. A traitor has slipped in among us, and this man has given the governor the most detailed and positive information about our projects. A miracle has alone saved us."

A shudder of indignation ran through the ranks of the conspirators; by an instinctive movement they separated, giving each other sinister glances, and laying their hands on their weapons. The vast hall, only lighted by a smoky lamp, whose reddish light threw strange reflections at each breath of air on the energetic faces of the conspirators, had a mournful and yet striking aspect.

At this moment a man burst through the conspirators, thrusting back right and left those who barred his passage, and placed himself opposite the young chief.

"Listen," he said, turning to his comrades, "and let what you are about to hear form a profitable lesson to you:—The man who revealed the secret of your meetings to the governor, the man who sold you, the man, in a word, who wished to give you up, I know!"

"His name, his name!" all the conspirators shouted.

"Silence!" the Jaguar ordered; "allow our comrade to speak."

"Do not give me that name, Jaguar, for I am not your comrade, and never
was. I am your enemy, not your personal enemy; for I do not know you; but the enemy of every man who tries to tear from the Mexican Republic that Texas where I was born, and which is the most brilliant gem of the union. It was I, I alone who sold you, I, Lopez Hidalgo d'Avila, but not in the cowardly way you suppose, for when the moment arrived for me to make myself known to you, I had sworn to do so; now you know all, and I am in your power. There are my weapons," he added, as he threw them disdainfully on the ground; "I shall not resist, and you can do with me as you please."

After uttering these words with a haughty accent impossible to render, Don Lopez Hidalgo proudly crossed his arms on his chest, drew up his head, and waited. The conspirators had listened to this strange revelation with an indignation and rage that attained such a pitch of violence that their will was, so to speak, paralysed, and in spite of themselves they remained motionless. But so soon as Don Lopez had finished speaking, their feelings suddenly burst out, and they rushed upon him with tiger-yells.

"Stay, stay!" the Jaguar shouted, as he rushed forward and made of his own person a rampart for the man on whom twenty daggers were lifted; "stay, brotters; as this man has said, he is in our power, and cannot escape us; although his blood be that of a traitor, let us not commit an assassination, but try him."

"Yes, yes," the conspirators yelled; "let us try him."

"Silence," the Jaguar ordered; and then, turning to Don Lopez Hidalgo, who, during their proceedings, had remained as calm and quiet as if he were a stranger to what was going on; "will you answer frankly the questions I ask you?" he inquired.

"Yes," Don Lopez simply replied.

"Was it pure love of your country, as you call it, that urged you to pretend to be one of us in order to betray us more securely, or was it not rather the hope of a rich reward?"

The Mexican shrugged his shoulders with disdain.

"I am as rich as the whole of you put together," he replied; "who does not know the wealthy Don Lopez Hidalgo d'Avila?"

"That is true," one said; "this man, I am bound to allow, for I have been acquainted with him for years, does not know the amount of his fortune."

The Jaguar's forehead was wrinkled by the effect of a little thought.

"Then that noble and revered feeling, the love of one's country, instead of elevating your soul and making generous feelings spring up in it," he continued, "has made you a coward. Instead of fighting honestly and loyally in the daylight against us, you followed the gloomy path of espionage to betray us."

"I only picked up the weapon yourselves offered me. Did you fight, pray, in the open day? No, you conspired craftily in the darkness; like the mole, you dug the underground mine that was to swallow us up, and I counteracted you. But what use is discussion? for you will no more comprehend my assertions than I can yours.—Now to the business, for I am convinced that is the only point on which we shall agree."

"One moment, Don Lopez; explain to me the reason why, when no suspicion pointed to you, you denounced yourself, and trusted to our mercy?"

"Although unseen, I overheard what passed between you and your governor," the Mexican coldly answered; "I saw in what way the perilous position in which I had succeeded in placing you turned to your advantage; I understood that all was lost, and did not wish to survive our defeat."

"Then you know the conditions I imposed on General Rubio?"

"And which he was constrained to accept. Yes, I know them; I am aware
also, that you are too clever and determined a man not to profit by the twentyfour hours' respite which you have so adroitly gained."

"Good! That is all I wished to know. When you entered our association you accepted all the laws?"

"I did so."

The Jaguar turned to the conspirators, who had listened, panting with fury and impatience, to this singular dialogue.

"Brothers," he said, "you have heard all that passed between Don Lopez Hidalgo d'Avila and myself?"

"Yes," they answered.

"On your soul and conscience, is this man guilty?"

"He is guilty," they burst forth.

"What punishment does he deserve?"

"Death!"

"You hear, Don Lopez; your brethren condemn you."

"I thank them; that favour is the only one I hoped and desired to receive from them."

There was a moment of supreme silence; all eyes were fixed on the Jaguar, who, with his head hanging on his breast, and frowning brows, seemed plunged in serious thought. Suddenly the young man raised his head; a lightning glance flashed from his eyes, a strange smile curled his lip, and he said, with a tone of bitter irony—

"Your brethren have condemned you to die; well, I, their chief, condemn you to live!"

Don Lopez, despite all his courage, felt himself turn pale at these cutting words; he instinctively stooped to pick up the weapons he had previously hurled at his feet; but the Jaguar guessed his thoughts.

"Seize that man!" he shouted.

John Davis and two or three other conspirators rushed on the Mexican, and, in spite of his active resistance, soon rendered him powerless.

"Bind him," the Jaguar next ordered.

"Don Lopez Hidalgo d'Avila," the Jaguar continued, when he was obeyed, in a hollow voice, "traitor to your brothers, your false tongue will be plucked out and your ears cut off. Such is the sentence which I, the chief of the Freebooters, pass on you; and in order that everybody may know that you are a traitor, a T will be cut on your forehead, between your eyebrows."

This sentence caused a momentary stupefied among the company; but soon a tiger-like yell burst from all their panting chests, and it was with a tremor of ferocious joy that these men prepared to carry out the atrocious sentence pronounced by their chief. The prisoner struggled in vain to burst the bonds that held him. In vain he demanded death with loud cries. As the Jaguar had said, the lion's paw was on him; the conspirators were inexorable, and the sentence was carried out in all its rigour.

An hour later Don Lopez Hidalgo d'Avila, bleeding and mutilated, was deposited at the door of the governor's palace. On his chest was fastened a large placard, on which were written in blood the two words—

Cobarde! Traidor!

After this fearful execution, the conspirators continued their meeting as if nothing extraordinary had interrupted them. But the Jaguar's revenge was foiled—at least partially; for when the unhappy victim was picked up at daybreak, he was dead. Don Lopez had found the strength and courage to dash out his brains against the wall.
CHAPTER XVIII.

THE PULQUERIA.

The same day on which we resume our narrative, on the firing of the cannon from the fort that commands the entrance to the port of Galveston, to announce the setting of the sun, whose glowing disc had just disappeared in the sea, colouring the horizon with a ruddy hue for a long distance, the town, which had during the day been plunged into a mournful torpor owing to the heat, woke up all at once with lengthened and joyous clamour.

The streets, hitherto solitary, were peopled as if by enchantment by an immense crowd, which emerged in disorder from all the houses, so eager were they to breathe the fresh air of evening which the sea-breeze brought up on its humid wing. The shops were opened, and lit up with an infinite number of coloured paper lamps.

Two young gentlemen, dressed in the simple but graceful uniform of officers of the United States navy, who were coming from the interior of the town, forced their way with some difficulty through the crowd that impeded their every step on the port, as they proceeded toward the pier, where a large number of boats of all shapes and sizes were tied up. They had scarce reached the landing-place ere they were surrounded by some twenty boatmen, who offered their services, while exaggerating in their praiseworthy fashion the surprising qualities and unparalleled speed of their boats.

After giving a careless glance at the numerous skiffs dancing before them, the officers abruptly dismissed the boatmen by peremptorily declining their services; but they did not get rid of them till they had told them they had a boat of their own, and scattered some small change among them.

We have said that the sun had set for some time, and hence the night was gloomy. Still the two officers, in order doubtless to assure themselves that the darkness concealed no spy, walked several times up and down the jetty, while conversing together in a low voice, and examining with the most scrupulous attention those spots which might have afforded shelter to any one. They were certainly alone. One of them then drew from his breast one of those silver whistles such as boatswains employ on board ships, and then produced a soft and prolonged note thrice repeated. A few moments passed, and nothing proved to the officers that their signal had been heard. At last, a soft whistle traversed the air and expired on the ears of the two men who were listening, with bodies bent forward, and faces turned to the sea.

"They are coming," said one.

"We will wait," his companion answered laconically.

They carefully wrapped themselves in their cloaks to guard themselves against the damp sea-breeze; they leant against an old gun that served to tie boats up, and remained motionless as statues, without exchanging a syllable.

At length a remote sound, scarcely perceptible, but which practised ears could recognise, rose from the sea. This sound became gradually more and more distinct; and it was easy, especially for sailors, to recognise the sharp and cadenced sound of oars striking against the holes and dipping into the sea; although these oars were muffled, and employed with the utmost caution.

In fact, the boat itself ere long became visible. Its long black outline stood out in the luminous line traced by the moon on the waves, as it approached the
jetty at great speed. The two officers had bent forward curiously, but did not leave the post of observation they had selected. On coming within pistol-shot, the boat stopped. Suddenly, a rough voice, lowered prudently, said—

"The night is dark, it is imprudent to wander hap-hazard on the sea-shore."

"Yes, when a man is alone, and feels his heart die out in his bosom," one of the officers answered.

"Who can flatter himself with possessing a firm heart?" the voice went on.

"The man whose arm is ever ready to support his words for the defence of a good cause," the other at once replied.

"Come, come," the sailor exclaimed gaily, "lay on your oars, lads, the jaguars are out hunting."

"Take care of the coyotes," the officer said again.

The boat pulled up alongside the jetty; the officers had by this time left their place of shelter, and hurried to the end of the jetty. There a man, dressed in sailor's garb, with an oil-skin sou'wester, whose large brim concealed his features, was standing motionless, with a pistol in either hand.

"Patria!" he said sharply, when the officers were only two paces from him.

"Libertad!" they answered, without hesitation.

"Viva Dios!" the sailor said, "it is a good wind that brings you, Don Serapio, and you too, Don Cristoval."

"All the better, Ramirez," said the officer addressed as Serapio.

"Have you any news, then?" his comrade asked, curiously.

"Excellent, Don Cristoval, excellent," Ramirez answered, as he rubbed his hands gleefully.

"Oh, oh!" the two officers muttered; "tell us it, then, Ramirez."

The latter took a suspicious glance around.

"I should like to do so," he said, "but the place where we are does not seem at all propitious for conversation."

"That is true," said Don Serapio; "but what prevents us getting into your boat?"

"But," said Ramirez, "but then we should have to push off; and I am no more anxious than I presume you to be, to be discovered and hailed by some guard-boat."

"That is true," Don Cristoval objected; "we must find other and less perilous means for conversing."

"What o'clock is it?" Ramirez asked.

Don Serapio struck his repeater.

"Just ten," he answered.

"Good: in that case we have time, since the affair does not come off till midnight. Follow me. I know a pulqueria where we shall be as safe as on the top of the Coffre de Perote."

"But the boat?" Don Cristoval objected.

"Be at your ease—it is commanded by Lucas. However clever the Mexicans may be, he is the man to play at hide-and-seek with them for the entire night."

The officers bowed, but made no further remark. The three men then set out, Ramirez walking a few paces in advance of his companions. Although the night was so dark that it was impossible to distinguish objects ten paces off, the sailor proceeded through the narrow and winding streets of the town with as much certainty and ease as if traversing it in broad daylight, in the bright sunshine.

Close to the cabildo, at the corner of the Plaza Mayor, stood a species of cabin, built of ships' planks, clumsily nailed together, which offered, in the
stifling midday hours, a precarious shelter to the lepers and idlers of all sorts. It was in front of this unclean pothouse, from the broken door of which escaped a reddish steam, laden with pestilential emanations, that Ramirez stopped.

"Where the deuce are you taking us?" Don Serapio asked him, with an expression of disgust.

The sailor laid a finger on his lip.

"Silence!" he said, "you shall know. Wait for me here an instant, but be careful to keep in the shade, so as not to be seen; the customers of this honest establishment have such numerous reasons to distrust spies, that if they saw you suddenly appear among them, they might be capable of playing you a trick."

"Why enter such a den as this?"

"You will soon know; but I can tell you nothing at this moment."

"Go on, then, as it is so; still, I beg you not to keep us too long at the door of this disgusting house."

"All right, I will go in and come out again."

Then, after again recommending the officers to be prudent, he pushed the door of the pulqueria, which at once opened, and he went in. In the darkest corner of the room two men, almost completely hidden by the dense cloud of smoke that rose over the heads of the gamblers, carefully wrapped in their zarapés of Indian manufacture, with the brim of their hats pulled down over their eyes (a very needless precaution in the darkness where they were), and leaning on their long rifles, whose butts rested on the floor of the room, were whispering in each other's ear, while taking, at intervals, anxious glances at the lepers assembled a few paces from them.

The gamblers, fully engaged, did not dream of watching the strangers, who, however, from their martial demeanour, and the cleanliness of their attire, formed a striking contrast to them, and evidently did not belong to the company that usually assembled at this rancho; hence the strangers had very unnecessarily taken their precautions to escape from inquisitive looks, supposing such were their object.

Eleven o'clock struck from the cabildo; at the same moment a form appeared in the doorway. This man stopped, took a sharp glance round the room, and then, after a slight hesitation, doubtless caused by the difficulty of recognising in the crowd the persons he wished to see, he entered the rancho, and walked hastily toward the strangers. The latter turned at the sound of his footsteps, and gave a start of joy on recognising him. We need hardly say that it was Ramirez.

"Well," Ramirez asked, "what have you done?"

"Nothing," one of the men answered, "but wait."

"And those scoundrels?"

"Are already more than three parts ruined."

"All the better; they will march with greater impetuosity."

"They must soon see the bottom of their purses."

"Do you think so?"

"I am sure of it; they have been playing since eight in the morning, so the pulquero says."

"Without leaving off?" the sailor said, in surprise,

"They have not ceased for an instant."

"All the better."

"By-the-bye," one of the strangers remarked, "where are the men you promised to bring?"

"They are here, and you will see them in a moment."

The Freebooters.
**The Pulqueria.**

"Very good, then it is still for this night?"
"You must know that better than I."
"Why did you not bring them in at once?"
"I should be very sorry to do so, at least for the present. They are cool and steady naval officers, whose smile, under all circumstances, resembles a grimace, so close do they keep their lips. The free-and-easy manner of our worthy associates," he added, "might possibly displease them."
"But when the master arrives?"
"Oh, then the affair will rest with him alone."

At the same moment a sharp whistle was heard outside, and the gamblers sprang up as if they had received an electric shock.
"Here he is," said Ramirez; "I shall be back directly."
"Where are you going?" one of the strangers asked.
"To join those who are waiting for me."

And winding through the groups, the sailor left the pulqueria unnoticed. Ramirez had hardly left the room, ere the door was burst open by a violent blow, and a man rushed in. All present took off their hats, as if by common agreement, and bowed respectfully.

The stranger seemed to be twenty, or two-and-twenty at the most, though he was probably older; he was slim and delicate, but perfectly proportioned, and all his movements were marked by indescribable grace and nobility. His beardless face was surrounded by magnificent black ringlets, which escaped in profusion from under his hat, and fell in large clusters on his shoulders.

This man had a lofty and wide forehead, intelligent and pensive, and a deep and well-opened eye, an aquiline nose with flexible nostrils, and a disdainful and mocking lip. All his features made up a strange, but commanding countenance. He might be loved, but he must be feared.

Who was he?

His best friends, and he counted many such, could not say.

He was commonly called El Alferez by his friends and enemies. This word, which in Spanish literally signifies sub-lieutenant, had become the name of this singular person, which he had accepted, and to which he answered.

After taking a haughty and assured glance at the persons collected in disorderly groups around him, the young man leant against a barrel, and, with affected carelessness, said to the individuals who surrounded him—"Well, my scamps, have you amused yourselves properly?"

A murmur of general satisfaction ran along the ranks.
"Good, my coyotes," he continued, with the same mocking tone; "now, I suppose, you would like to smell a little blood?"
"Yes," these sinister persons answered unanimously.
"Well, console yourselves; I will let you smell it ere long, and in a satisfactory manner. But I do not see Ramirez among you; can he have been so awkward as to get himself hung? Although he has deserved it a long time, I do not think him such a fool as to let himself be apprehended by spies."

These words were uttered in a soft voice, harmoniously modulated, but at the same time sharp and rather shrill.
"I heard my name," said Ramirez, appearing.
"Yes; are they both here?"
"Both."
"That is excellent. Now, if the Jaguar be as true to his word as I am to mine, I answer for success."
"I hold your promise. Senor Alferez," said a man who had entered the room some moments previously.
"Rayo de Dios! you and your comrades are welcome; for, of course you are not alone."

"I have twenty men, worth a hundred."

"Bravo! I recognise the Jaguar in that."

"They only await a signal from me to come in."

"Let them come; time is precious, so let us not waste it in trifling."

The Jaguar walked to the door, and threw away the lighted cigarette he held in his hand. The twenty conspirators entered, and ranged themselves silently behind their chief. Ramirez came in immediately after, followed by the two naval officers.

"All is clearly understood between us, Jaguar?"

"All."

"We act toward each other with all frankness and honesty of purpose?"

"Yes."

"You swear it?"

"Without hesitation, I swear it."

"Thanks, my friend. On my side I swear to be a faithful comrade."

"How many men have you?"

"As you see, thirty."

"Who, added to the twenty I bring, give the respectable amount of fifty men; if the affair be properly managed, they are more than we require."

"Now, let us divide our parts."

"Nothing is changed, I think; I will surprise the fort, while you board the corvette."

"Agreed; where are the guides?"

"Here," the two men said, with whom Ramirez conversed when he entered the pulqueria the first time. El Alferez examined them attentively.

"You can start, I fancy."

"How many men do you keep with you?"

"Take them all; I will only keep Ramirez and the two persons to whom he has to introduce me."

"That is true," said the sailor.

"Come, my coyotes," El Alferez continued, "follow your new chief. I place you temporarily under the orders of the Jaguar, to whom I surrender all my claims."

The men bowed, but made no reply.

"And now, brothers," the young man continued, "remember that you are about to fight for the liberty of your country, and that the man who commands you will not grudge his life for the success of the daring stroke he is about to attempt with your aid; that ought to render you invincible. Go."

"Do not forget the signal—one rocket, if we fail."

"Three if we succeed; and we shall do so, brother."

"May heaven grant it."

"Till we meet again."

The two men shook hands, and the Jaguar quitted the pulqueria, followed by these savage men, who marched silently behind him, like wild beasts going in quest of prey. Ere long, none remained in the room but the two naval officers, Ramirez, and the pulquero, who, with eyes dilated by terror, looked and listened to all this, without understanding anything. El Alferez remained motionless, with his body bent forward, so long as it was possible for him to hear the slightest sound of retiring footsteps; when all had become silent again, he drew himself up, and turned to his comrades, who were as attentive as himself.
"May heaven favour us!" he said, as he piously crossed himself. "Now caballeros, it is our turn."

"We are ready," the three men answered.

El Alferez took a rapid glance round the room. The pulquero was standing motionless in a distant corner of the room.

"Hillo!" El Alferez said to him; "come hither."

The pulquero obsequiously doffed his straw hat, and hastened to obey.

"What do you desire, excellency?" he asked.

"Are you fond of money?"

"Well, tolerably so, excellency," he replied, with a crafty grimace.

"Very good, here is an onza: when we go away, we will give you a second; but bear in mind that you must be deaf and blind."

"That is easy," he replied, as he pocketed the gold.

Since the Jaguar's departure, the two officers had been suffering from an anxiety they did not attempt to conceal, but which El Alferez did not appear to notice, for his face was quite radiant. In fact, the expedition they were going to attempt in the company of the daring partizan seemed to them not only rash but mad.

"Come, come, senors," the young man said, with a smile, after attentively watching them for some moments, "regain your courage; hang it all, you look as if you had been buried and dug up again; and we are not dead yet, I suppose."

"That is true; but we are not much better," Don Serapio said significantly.

El Alferez frowned. "Can you be frightened?"

"We are not afraid of dying; but only of failing."

"That is my business: I answer for success."

"We are perfectly aware of what you are capable, senor; but we are only four men, and after all—"

"And the boat's crew?"

"That is true; but they are only sixteen men."

"They will be enough."

El Alferez appeared to reflect for a moment, and then addressed the pulquero, who was standing anxiously near him—"Has anything been left with you for me?" he asked him.

"Yes, excellency; this evening, at oracion, a man brought a trunk on his shoulders."

"Where is it?"

"As the man assured me that it contained articles of value, I had the chest placed in my bedroom."

"Lead me to your room."

"Whenever you please, excellency."

"Senors," El Alferez said, addressing the two naval officers and Ramirez, "wait for me in this room."

And without awaiting a reply, he made a sign to the pulquero to lead the way, and left the room with a rapid step. There was a momentary silence with the three men; they seemed to be engaged in sad thoughts, and looked anxiously around them. Time, which never stands still, had rapidly advanced during the course of the events we have narrated. Nearly the whole night had passed away, the first gleams of dawn were beginning to whiten the smoky walls of the pulqueria, and already some inhabitants, who had risen earlier than the others, were venturing into the streets.

"Day will soon be here," Don Serapio remarked, as he shook his head anxiously.
“What matter?” Ramirez answered.

“What matter, do you say?” Don Serapio replied in amazement; “but it seems to me that one of the most important conditions for the enterprise we are about to attempt is darkness.”

“Certainly,” Don Cristoval supported him; “if we wait till the sun has risen, any surprise will be impossible.”

Ramirez shrugged his shoulders.

“You do not know the man under whose orders you have voluntarily placed yourselves,” he answered.

“You know him better than we do then, as you speak thus of him?”

“Better than you or any one,” the sailor said with considerable animation; “I have the greatest faith in him.”

“Ah,” the two officers said, walking quickly up to him, “who is he, then?”

An ironical smile curled Ramirez’s delicate lip.

“You know as well as I do: a warm patriot, and one of the most renowned chiefs of the movement.”

“Hum!” Don Cristoval remarked, “that is not what we want to know.”

“What then?” he asked with almost imperceptible irony.

“Hang it! you say that you have lived ten years with this man,” Don Serapio went on: “you must know certain peculiarities about him which no one else is acquainted with, and which we should not be sorry to know.”

“That is possible; unfortunately, I am utterly unable to satisfy your curiosity on that point; if El Alferez has not thought proper to give you details about his private life, it is not my place to reveal them to you.”

Don Serapio was about to reply rather sharply to the sailor, when the door opened through which Don Alferez had gone out, and the pulquero entered, followed by a lady. The two officers could scarce refrain from a cry of surprise on recognising beneath this dress El Alferez himself.

The costume of El Alferez, though not rich, was elegant, and in good taste; his face, half concealed beneath the silken folds of his rebozo, partly hid his haughty expression; in his right hand he held a pretty sandal-wood fan, with which he played with graceful nonchalance.

“Well, caballeros,” the young man said mincingly, “do you not recognise me? I am the daughter of your friend Dona Leonora Salcedo, Dona Mencia.”

The three men bowed respectfully.

“Pardon me, senorita,” Don Serapio replied as he gravely kissed the tips of El Alferez’s fingers; “we know you perfectly well, but were so far from anticipating the happiness of meeting you here, that—”

“Even at this moment, after hearing you speak, we dare not believe in the reality of what we see.”

The pulquero looked on in alarm. The worthy man understood nothing of what was going on.

“I do not understand your surprise, caballeros,” the feigned Dona Mencia said; “was it not arranged some days back between yourselves and my husband, that we should go this morning and breakfast with Commandant Rodriguez, on board the Libertad corvette?”

“Of course,” Don Serapio quickly exclaimed; “excuse me, senorita, but I really do not know where my head is. How could I have forgotten that?”

“I will excuse you,” El Alferez replied with a smile, “but on condition that you repair your inexplicable forgetfulness, and rather un gallant behaviour, by offering me your arm to go on board the corvette at once.”

“The more so,” Don Cristoval added, “as we have rather a long distance to go, and I have no doubt the commandant is expecting us.”
"I should think he was," Ramirez ejaculated; "why he sent me with a boat to take you aboard."

"Since that is the case, I think we shall do well by starting without further delay."

"We are at your orders, senorita."

"Stay, my good man," El Alferez added in a soft voice, and addressing the pulquero, "take this in recollection of me."

The good man, half stunned by what he saw, mechanically held out his right hand, into which the mysterious adventurer carelessly let a gold onza fall; then, taking Don Serapio's arm, he went out, preceded by Don CristoVal and Ramirez, who hurried to get the boat ready.

CHAPTER XIX.

AT SEA.

It was about four in the morning; the dawn was beginning to mark the horizon with wide white bands; on the extreme line of the water, a bright red reflection, the harbinger of sunrise, announced that the sun would soon appear. At this moment a light brig gradually emerged from the dense fog that hid it, and could be seen sailing close to the wind along the dangerous and rugged coast which forms the entrance of Galveston Bay, at the mouth of the Rio Trinidad.

It was a neat vessel of three hundred tons at the most, with a gracefully-built hull, and its tall masts coquetishly raking. The rigging was carefully painted and tarred, the yards symmetrically square, and more than all, the menacing muzzles of four eight-pounder carronades which peered out of the bulwarks on either side, and the long thirty-two pounder swivel in the bows, indicated that, although a man-of-war pennant might not be flying from the mainmast, it was not the less resolved, in case of necessity, to fight energetically against the cruisers that might attempt to check its progress.

At the moment when we first notice the brig, with the exception of the man at the wheel and an individual walking up and down the poop smoking his pipe, at the first glance the brig's deck seemed deserted; still, on examining it carefully, fifteen men constituting the watch might have been seen sleeping in the bows.

"Halloh!" the walker said suddenly, as he halted near the binnacle, and addressed the helmsman; "I fancy the wind is shifting."

"Yes, Master Lovel," the sailor answered, as he raised his hand to his woollen cap; "it has veered round two points."

Lovel was a man of about fifty, nearly as broad as he was tall, and bearing a striking resemblance to a barrel mounted on feet, but for all that gifted with far from common strength and activity; his violet nose, his thick lips, and highly-coloured face, with large red whiskers, gave him a jovial appearance, to which, however, two small grey and deep-set eyes, full of fire and resolution imparted something sceptical and mocking.

Morally, he was an honest, worthy man, open-hearted and loyal, an excellent sailor, and loving only two things, or rather beings, in the world: his captain, who had brought him up, and, as he often said, had taught him to make his first splice by administering tobacco to him, and his ship, which he had seen
built, which he had gone aboard when ready for sea and had never quitted since.

Master Lovel had never known father or mother; hence he had made the brig and his captain his family. All his loving faculties, a long time driven back and slumbering in his heart, were so fully concentrated on them, that what he felt for both went beyond the limits of a reasonable affection, and had acquired the veritable proportions of a gigantic fanaticism. However, the captain, of whom we shall soon speak, amply requited the old sailor's friendship.

"By the way, lieutenant, I ask your pardon," the helmsman continued; "do you know that we have been navigating queerly the last few days?"

"Do you think so, lad?"

"Hang it! sir, these continued tacks, and that boat we sent ashore yesterday has not yet returned—all that is rather singular."

"Hum!" the officer said, without any other expression of his opinion.

"Where may we now be going, lieutenant?" the sailor went on.

"Are you very anxious to know?" Lovel asked him.

"Well," the other said, as he turned his quid in his mouth, and sent forth a stream of blackish saliva, "I confess that I should not be sorry to know."

"Really now?—well, my boy," the old sailor said, with a crafty smile, "if you are asked, you will answer that you do not know; in that way you are certain of not compromising yourself."

Then, after looking for an instant at the helmsman's downcast face on receiving this strange answer, he added—"Strike eight bells, my boy; there is the sun rising over there behind the mountains; call the watch."

And, after restoring his pipe to the corner of his mouth, he resumed his walk. The sailor seized the cord fastened to the clapper of the bell, and struck four double strokes. At this signal they knew so well, the men lying in the forecastle sprang up tumultuously, and rushed to the hatchway, shouting—

"Up with you, starboard watch; up, up, it is eight bells. Starboard watch, ahoy!"

So soon as the watch was changed, the master gave the necessary orders to trim the vessel. Then, as the sun was beginning to rise above the horizon in a flood of ruddy vapour, which gradually dispersed the dense fog that had enveloped the brig throughout the night like a winding-sheet, he set a man to the foretop to look seaward, and examine the coast they were sailing along. When all these various duties had been discharged, the old sailor resumed his walk, taking a look every now and then at the masts, and muttering between his teeth—"Where can we be going? He would be very kind, if he would tell me: we are making a regular blind man's traverse, and we shall be very lucky if we get out of it safe and sound."

All at once his face brightened, and a glad smile spread over it. The captain had just left his cabin and come upon deck. Captain Johnson was at this period a man of hardly three-and-thirty years of age, and above the middle height; his gestures were simple, graceful, and full of natural elegance; his features were masculine and marked, and his black eyes, in which intelligence sparkled, gave his countenance an expression of grandeur, strength, and loyalty.

"Good morning, father," he said to Master Lovel, as he cordially offered him his hand.

"Good morning, lad," the other replied; "did you sleep well?"

"Very well, thank you, father. Is there anything new?"

At this question, apparently so simple, the lieutenant drew himself up, raised his hand to his hat, and answered deferentially—

"Captain, there is nothing new on board. I tacked at three o'clock, and,
According to your orders, we have been sailing as close to the wind as we could, at a rate of six three-quarter knots an hour, under fore-top sails, and always keeping Galveston Point on the larboard quarter.

"That is well," the captain answered.

In all matters connected with duty, Master Lovel, in spite of the reiterated remarks of his chief, constantly maintained toward the latter the tone and manner of a subordinate to his superior. The captain, seeing that the old sailor could not be turned from this, ended by paying no attention to it, and left him free to speak as he thought proper.

"By the way, captain," the lieutenant continued, with some hesitation, "we are drawing near the gut; do you intend to pass through it?"

"I do."

"But we shall be sunk."

"Not such fools."

"Hum! I do not see how we shall escape it."

"You will see; besides, must we not go and pick up our boat, which has not yet returned?"

"That is true; I did not think of it."

"Well, you see; and our passengers?"

"I have not seen them yet this morning."

"They will soon come on deck."

"A ship in sight," the watch shouted.

"That is what I was waiting for," said the captain.

"To tack?"

"On the contrary, to pass without a shot in front of the fort that commands the entrance of the bay."

"I do not understand."

"All right; you soon will."

And speaking to the look-out man, he said—

"In what direction is that ship?"

"To starboard, to windward of us; it is coming out of a creek, in which it was hidden, and steering straight down on the brig."

"Very good," the captain answered; then, turning to Lovel, he continued: "This ship is chasing us; we shall, by constant short tacks, pass the fort and the battery which crosses fire with it. The Mexicans, who are watching us, feeling convinced that we cannot escape their cruiser, will not take the trouble to fire at us, but let us pass through without offering any obstacle."

And, leaving his lieutenant astounded at this singular line of argument, which he did not at all comprehend, the captain went on the quarter-deck, and leaning over the gangway, began carefully watching the movements of the ship signalled by the look-out.

The men had been quietly beaten to quarters, and thirty powerful sailors, armed to the teeth, were holding the running rigging, ready to obey the slightest signal from their captain. For more than an hour the brig had been approaching the coast, and the captain, being now compelled to skirt a submarine reef, whose situation was not positively known to him, ordered sail to be reduced, and advanced, sounding-lead in hand. The cruiser, on the contrary, was literally covered with canvas, and grew momentarily larger, while assuming the imposing proportions of a first-class corvette; its black hull could be clearly distinguished, along which ran a long white stripe, containing sixteen port-holes, through which passed the muzzles of her guns. On the shore, to which the brig was now close, could be seen a great number of persons of both sexes, who, shouting, yelling, and clapping their hands, eagerly followed the incidents of
this strange chase. Suddenly a light cloud of smoke rose from the bow of the corvette, the sound of a gun was dully heard, and a Mexican flag was hoisted.

"Ah, ah!" Captain Johnson said; "she has at length decided on throwing off her incognito. Come, lieutenant, politeness deserves the same; show her our colours."

A minute later, a large star-spangled flag was majestically fluttering at the stern of the brig. At the appearance of the United States colours, so audaciously hoisted, a shout of fury was raised aboard the Mexican corvette, which was taken up by the crowd assembled at the point, though it was impossible to tell, owing to the distance, whether they were shouts of joy or anger.

In the meanwhile the sun was beginning to rise, the morning was growing apace, and there must be an end to the affair, especially as the corvette, confiding in her strength, and now almost within gun-shot, would not fail to open fire on the American vessel.

The captain gave his lieutenant a sign to come to him, and bending down his ear, whispered something.

"Ah, eh!" the lieutenant said with a hearty laugh, "that is an idea. By Jove! we may have some fun."

And, without saying another word, he proceeded forwards. On reaching the swivel gun he had it unlashcd and carefully loaded, adding a ball and a grape shot to the ordinary charge. Bending over the sight he seized the screw placed under the breech, then making a sign to the men who stood on either side with handspikes, he began laying the gun slowly and with the utmost precaution, scrupulously calculating the distance that separated the two ships, and the deviation caused by the rolling. At length, when he believed he had attained the desired result, he seized the lanyard, fell back, and made a signal to the captain, who was impatiently awaiting the termination of his proceedings.

"Attention!" the latter shouted; "stand by, all."

There was a moment of supreme expectation.

"Is all clear?"

"Yes," the lieutenant replied.

"Ready about," the captain ordered; "down with the helm! Ease off the jib sheets! Sheet home top sails! Sheet home lower sails! Haul the bowlines taut!"

The sailors hurried to the running rigging, and the ship, obedient to the impulse given it, majestically swung round. At the moment when it fell off, and had its bows turned toward the broadside of the corvette, Master Lovel, who was watching for a favourable opportunity to carry out the orders he had received, sharply pulled the lanyard and fired. The Mexicans, confounded by this sudden aggression, which they were far from anticipating from an enemy apparently so weak, replied furiously, and a shower of iron and lead hurtled over the deck and through the rigging of the American ship. The fort and battery continued to preserve the strictest neutrality, and Captain Johnson did not take the trouble to reply.

"Brace up closer to the wind!" he shouted. "Haul down the sheets! we have had fun enough, lads."

The brig continued its course; and when the smoke had dispersed, the Mexican corvette could be perceived in a pitiable condition. The shot fired by Master Lovel had carried away her bowsprit close by the head, which naturally entailed the fall of the foremast, and the poor corvette bore up to repair hastily the worst of the damage.

On board the brig, owing to the hurry in which the Mexicans had returned
the fire, only one man had been killed and three slightly wounded. As for the damage, it was trifling; only a few ropes were cut, that was all.

"Now," the captain said, as he came down from the quarterdeck, "in ten minutes, father, you will tack, and when we are abreast of the fort you will let down a boat, and let me know."

"What!" the lieutenant could not refrain from saying, "you mean to go ashore?"

"Hang it!" said the captain; "why, I only came here for that purpose."

"Are you going to the fort?"

"Yes. Still, as it is always as well to be on the right side, you will send into the boat the ten most resolute men of the crew, with axes, cutlasses, muskets, and pistols. Let all be in order, and ready for fighting."

"I fancy those precautions will be unnecessary," said a man who had just come on deck.

"Ah! it is you, Master Tranquil," the captain replied, as he shook hands with the old hunter; for it was he who had so unexpectedly interfered in the conversation. "What do you say?"

"I say," the Canadian replied, in his calm voice, "that your precautions will probably be unnecessary."

"Why so?"

"Hang it! I don't know, for I am not a sailor. But look for yourself. Do you not think as I do—that something extraordinary is taking place on board the corvette?"

The captain quickly opened his telescope, and fixed it on the Mexican ship.

"It is true," he said, a moment later. "Oh, oh! Can our audacious attempt have proved successful?"

"All leads to the supposition," said the hunter with his old stoicism.

"By heavens! I will ascertain."

"What will you do?"

"By Jupiter! convince myself of what is taking place."

"As you please."

"Bear up!" the captain ordered.

The manœuvre was executed. The sheets were let go, and the brig, catching more wind in its sails, advanced rapidly toward the corvette, on board which a strange scene was taking place at this moment, which must interest Captain Johnson in the highest degree. But, in order to make the reader understand this scene, we must now return to El Alferez and his comrades.

At the moment when the four men reached the jetty, although it was about seven in the morning, the beach was nearly deserted; only a few ships' boats were fastened up and landing the men who were going to buy provisions. It was, therefore, an easy matter for the conspirators to embark without attracting attention to their movements. At a signal given by Ramirez, the boat, which had been pulling back and forwards during the night, came nearer land, and when the four men were seated in the stern sheets, and Ramirez had taken the tiller, the boat started for a small creek situated a little distance beyond the roadstead.

The breeze, which during the night had been rather weak, had gradually risen; the boat was easily got out to sea, sail was hoisted, and it soon entered the creek, where the "Libertad" was riding gently on her anchors. Still, it was easy for a sailor to see that this ship, apparently so quiet, was ready to slip out at a moment's notice. The sails, though furled, were cast off, and the anchor, aprak only needed a turn of the capstan to be tripped. Posted craftily in this creek, like a bird of prey in the hollow of a rock, the corvette could easily
expand its sails, and dart out on any suspicious vessel signalled by the look-out.

The boat had scarce come within hail ere a sentry, standing in the starboard gangway, hailed it in Spanish. Ramirez replied, and, leaning on the tiller, made the boat describe a graceful curve, and brought her up to the starboard ladder. The officer of the watch was standing at the top to receive the visitors. On perceiving a lady, he hurried down the ladder to offer his hand, and to do her the honours of the ship she was about to enter.

To the right and left of the entrance, sailors, drawn up in file, saluted by raising their hands to their caps, while a boatswain gave the accustomed whistle. As we have already mentioned, the "Libertad" was a first-class corvette. Don Manuel Rodriguez, her commandant, was an old sailor, brought up in the Spanish navy, and had retained its healthy traditions; hence, his ship was kept with great care and coquetishness. Don Serafio and Don Cristoval, themselves naval officers, could not refrain from expressing to the officer of the watch the satisfaction they experienced at seeing a vessel in such splendid order.

Commandant Rodriguez hastened on deck to receive his guests; the boat was fastened astern of the corvette, while its crew went forward.

Like the other Spanish American republics, the Mexican confederation has but few vessels; its navy is composed of but a dozen ships at the most—consisting of corvettes, brigs, and schooners.

Commandant Rodriguez, an energetic man and excellent sailor, had been chosen to keep supplies from the Texas rebels; for two months he had been cruising off the coast of Texas, where he had established a rigorous blockade, and owing to his intelligent arrangements, he had managed, up to the period we have arrived at, to stop or turn back all vessels sent from the United States to the help of the insurgents. The latter, reduced to their own resources, and understanding that the decisive hour would soon strike for them, had resolved to get rid of this corvette at all risks.

The chiefs of the insurgents had formed their plans to this effect. During Commandant Rodriguez's rare visits to Galveston, he was adroitly surrounded by persons who ostensibly professed a deep hatred for the revolution, while in secret they were the active and devoted agents of the insurgent chiefs. Almost involuntarily the commandant had been induced to invite several persons to visit his corvette, and breakfast on board; but the old sailor was a true Mexican, that is to say, accustomed to all the tricks and treachery of a country where revolutions have been counted by hundreds during the twenty years since it proclaimed its so-called independence, and his prudence did not fail him under the circumstances. Being not at all anxious to run the risk of seeing his ship boarded, he left the roads, and anchored in a solitary creek, in order to have his elbows at liberty; and then, instead of inviting many persons at the same time, he merely requested Dona Mencia, her father, and two of her cousins, officers in the United States' service, to pay him a visit.

The captain frowned on seeing the number of the boat's crew; but, reflecting that he had two hundred and fifty men aboard, he did not think for a moment that sixteen men, apparently unarmed, would try to seize his ship, and it was with the most smiling and affectionate air that he received Dona Mencia and the persons who accompanied her.

After showing them all over the corvette, he led his guests to the stern gallery, where a table had been laid, and a magnificent breakfast awaited them. Only five persons sat down, the supposed young lady, her pretended cousins, the commandant, and his first lieutenant, an old sailor like himself, full of ex-
experience and bravery. The breakfast began in the most cordial and frank manner; the commandant regretted that Dona Mencia’s father had been unable to accompany her, as he had promised, and a most gallant conversation went on. Presently a warrant officer opened the door, and, at a sign from the commandant, whispered a few words in his ear.

“Senora,” the commandant said, leaning over to the young lady seated by his side, “are you afraid of the sea?”

“I?” she replied with a smile, “why do you ask, commandant?”

“Because,” he answered, “unless you immediately leave my vessel, which, I confess, would greatly annoy me, you will be compelled to take a trip to sea for some hours.”

“I am the daughter and cousin of sailors, commandant; that is as good as saying that a trip to sea would be most pleasing to me under any circumstances.”

“Very good,” the commandant said gaily; “you are a true heroine, Dona Mencia; you fear nothing.”

“Or, at any rate, very little,” she replied.

“Will you permit me to ask, commandant,” said Don Serapio, “whether you are starting simply to afford us the pleasure of a trip, or whether a more serious motive obliges you to leave your anchorage?”

“I have no secrets from you,” he said, “and for about a fortnight I have been playing a game of chess with a brig, whose appearance is most suspicious. Its rig lead us to believe that it is a North American privateer, trying to land arms and men for the insurgents.”

“Do you imagine,” Don Cristoval objected, “that a privateer brig, knowing you to be in these parts, would venture to force a passage?”

“Yes, I do. These privateers are afraid of nothing; and, besides, during the war of independence, I myself carried out more daring adventures than this.”

“Then we are about to witness a sea-fight?” Dona Mencia asked timidly.

“Oh, do not feel alarmed, senorita; it will not go so far as that, I hope; this brig, which I had lost out of sight for two days, has just reappeared, but this time with the apparent object of getting close enough to land to send a boat ashore. I will chase it vigorously, and do not doubt I shall compel it to put out to sea again.”

“Really, that is delightful!” Dona Mencia exclaimed; “the fête will be complete; a trip to sea, a chase, and, perhaps, the capture of a vessel. You are kind.”

While the conversation became more and more friendly and lively in the state cabin, the corvette had started, and, with all sail set, was pursuing Captain Johnson’s brig.

“Halloh!” Don Cristoval suddenly asked, “what has become of our boat?”

“It was left fastened to a buoy,” the commandant said; “we will pick it up again when we return to our anchorage.”

“Well,” Don Serapio remarked laughingly, “if the privateer should feel inclined to fight, our sixteen men are quite at your disposal.”

“I thank you, but do not think I shall require their assistance.”

“Who knows? no one can foresee events. Our sailors are brave, and, if it should come to fighting, be assured they will do their share.”

Only one of the guests had remained silent during the breakfast, contenting himself with eating and drinking, while attentively listening. This guest was the lieutenant. So soon as the ship had started, he left the table, bowed to the company, and went on deck.
"Your lieutenant is no talker, commandant," Dona Mencia observed; "he only opened his lips to eat and drink."

"That is true, senorita; but pray excuse him, he is an old sailor, but little accustomed to society."

At this moment a loud detonation made the vessel quiver. "Ah!" said Dona Mencia with a cry of terror, "what does that mean?"

"Less than nothing, senorita; we have merely hoisted our flag, and fired a blank shot, to oblige the brig to show her colours."

"Would there be any danger in going on deck?" Dona Mencia asked with curiosity.

"Not the least."

"In that case, with your permission, we will go up and see what is happening."

"I am at your orders, senorita."

The breakfast was over; they left the table and went up on the quarter-deck. At about a gun-shot and a half distant, the brig could be seen, from whose peak haughtily floated a large American flag.

"I suspected it," said the commandant. "It is a privateer, and has hoisted American colours to deceive us."

"Do you think, then, that ship is not American?" Don Serapio asked.

"No more than you are; it is an Argentine or Brazilian privateer."

"Still, it appears American built."

"That proves nothing; our ships, bought in different countries, have nothing that causes them to be recognised, for we have no docks."

"That is true; but look, she is going to tack."

"Yes, the sails are beginning to shiver."

The Mexicans fancied themselves so secure from an attack, that most of the crew had left their quarters to follow the manoeuvres of the brig; the sailors, perched on the yards, or leaning out of the ports, were curiously looking on, without dreaming of the danger such a breach of discipline might entail. In the meanwhile the brig came round, as Don Serapio had said. Suddenly, at the moment when it completed the manoeuvre, a detonation was heard, a shrill whistle cut through the air, and the corvette's bowsprit, pierced by a ball, fell into the sea, dragging with it the foremast.

This produced extraordinary confusion on board the corvette; the terrified sailors ran about in all directions, listening to nothing. At length the commandant succeeded in overcoming the tumult; the crew recognised his voice, and at the order to fire, fifteen guns thundered at once in reply to the aggression of the privateer.

CHAPTER XX.

THE PRIZE.

The damage sustained by the corvette was serious; the bowsprit is the key of the ship's rigging; its loss entailed that of the foremast, which the main-topmast, no longer stayed, speedily followed. The utmost disorder prevailed on board, as nearly always under such circumstances.

The deck was encumbered with fragments of every description, yards, spars, sails, stunsail-booms, and entangled rigging, in the midst of which the sailors
ran about distractedly, abandoning their posts, deaf to the exhortations equally
with the menaces of their officers, and having only one thought; to escape from
the death they believed suspended over their heads.

A fresh incident occurred suddenly, which rendered the situation of the ship,
if possible, more critical and desperate. Commandant Rodriguez had not left
the quarter-deck: motionless at his post during the events we have described,
he had continued to give his orders in a firm voice, apparently not noticing
the symptoms of insubordination which, since the catastrophe had happened, were
manifest amongst the crew. With pale face, frowning brow, and clenched teeth,
the old sailor mechanically played with the hilt of his sword, taking every now
and then a cold and resolute glance around him, while exerting his officers to
redouble their efforts to do their duty bravely.

Dona Mencia and the two supposititious officers of the American navy were
standing silent and attentive by his side, probably awaiting the moment for ac-
tion. At the tumult which suddenly broke out on the forecastle, they all three
started and drew nearer to the commandant. When the brig had so skilfully
carried away the bowsprit of the Libertad, Ramirez and his sailors were the first
to sow and propagate terror among the crew by uttering cries of terror, and
running in all directions. Their example was promptly followed. Then they
changed their tactics, and began openly accusing the commandant, by asserting
that he was a traitor, who wished to ruin them, and surrender the corvette to
the insurgents.

There is nothing, however stupid it may be, a thinker has said, which people
may not be led to believe by a certain mode of treating them. This remark is
strictly true, and this time again received perfect application. The sailors of
the Libertad forgot in an instant all they owed to the commandant, whose
constant solicitude watched over them with paternal care, for they were urged
on and excited by the perfidious insinuations of Ramirez and his comrades, and
rushed tumultuously toward the quarter-deck, uttering menaces and cries of
revolt.

The officers, justly alarmed, and not knowing what means to employ to bring
these men back to their duty, collected round their commandant, resolved to
save themselves or perish with him. The old sailor was still apparently just
as calm and stoical; nothing revealed on his stern face the agony that secretly
crushed his heart. With his arms folded on his chest, his head erect, and a
steady glance, he awaited the mutineers.

The latter soon invaded the after-part of the vessel; but, after passing the
mainmast, they stopped, through a remnant of that respect which is innate in
sailors for their superiors.

On reaching the foot of the mainmast, then, the mutineers hesitated, for they
no longer felt on their own ground, and at length stopped: for the mere fact of
their invading this part of the deck constituted a grave infraction of naval
discipline. We have said that they stopped; but they were like an angry sea
which breaks against the foot of a dyke it cannot dash over; that is to say,
yelling and gesticulating furiously, but yet without going an inch further. At
the same time, however, they did not fall back.

There was a momentary truce between the two parties, who, like practised
duellists, had tried to discover their adversary's vulnerable point before crossing
swords. A deep silence prevailed on the deck of this ship, where so many
passions were fermenting in these hearts of bronze; no other sound was audible
save the hollow and monotonous moaning of the sea, as it broke against the
sides of the corvette, and the indistinct sound of weapons clutched by eager
hands.
This hesitation had something sinister and startling about it, and the commandant resolved to put an end to it at all hazards. He understood that he was the only person who could make an appeal to these misguided men, who might possibly not remain dumb to the voice of duty speaking through the lips of a man whose noble character they had enjoyed many opportunities of appreciating, and whom they had been so long accustomed to respect and love.

Commandant Rodriguez looked slowly and sadly, but yet firmly, round him, and extending his arm in the direction of the brig, said, in a loud and marked voice—

"My men, here comes the enemy. We have our revenge to take upon him: then why are you not at your quarters? What do you want of me? Are you afraid that I shall fail you when the hour for fighting arrives?"

At this direct appeal a strange quiver ran along the ranks of the mutineers; some of them were even going to reply, when a voice was heard from the rear:

"Who tells you that we regard that vessel as an enemy?"

Immediately hurrahs and shouts of joy, mingled with oaths and hisses, burst forth on all sides.

"The man who dares to speak so," the commandant shouted, "is a traitor and a coward. He does not form part of my ship's crew."

An indescribable tumult then broke out. The sailors, forgetting all respect and discipline, rushed toward the quarter-deck with frightful yells and vociferations. The commandant, not at all disconcerted by this hostile manifestation, seized a pistol, which a faithful sailor handed him, coolly cocked it, and addressing the mutineers, said: "Take care. The first who advances one step further I will blow out his brains."

Some men are gifted with so great a magnetic power, and their influence over the lower classes is so real, that the two to three hundred mutineers, at the sight of this man, who alone withstood and threatened them with a pistol, hesitated, and finally stopped, with a vague movement of alarm. It was evident that this pistol was little to be feared, even under the hypothesis that the commandant carried out his threat, since it would only kill or wound one man; still, we repeat, all these men stopped, surprised, perhaps terrified. A smile played round the commandant's lips; he understood that these rough and rebellious natures had been subdued.

"Every man to his quarters," he said; "the topmen will get the ship clear while the carpenters rig up a jury bowsprit."

And leaving the quarter-deck, the commandant advanced resolutely toward the mutineers. The latter fell back as he advanced, without speaking or gestuating, but only opposing that final resistance, the most dangerous of all, the force of inertia. It was all over with the mutiny.

We have said that Dona Mencia and her two companions attentively followed the incidents of this scene, in readiness to interfere when the moment arrived. Commandant Rodriguez had scarcely left the quarterdeck ere the young woman, or young man, whichever it may please the reader to call this mysterious being, rushed forward, and seizing a telescope, fixed it on the brig, as if to feel certain of the privateer's position, and be assured of support if required. The brig was now only two cables' lengths from the corvette, and within a few minutes would be within hail.

Then Dona Mencia, throwing off her feminine character, hurriedly tore off her dress, removed her bonnet, and appeared in the masculine attire El Alferrez had worn at the pulqueria. This transformation had been so rapid that the officers and crew had not recovered from the astonishment this strange metamorphosis caused them, when the young man, drawing a pistol from his belt.
cocked and pointed it at a number of cartridges the boys had brought on deck when the captain beat to quarters, and which they had left lying pell-mell at the foot of the mizenmast during the disorder that followed the fall of the spars.

"Surrender!" El Alferez shouted in a thundering voice; "surrender, or you are dead men!"

Don Cristoval and Don Serapio were standing on the right and left of the young man, holding a pistol in either hand. Ramirez, for his part, had lost no time; by his care two of the bow carronades had been dragged from their ports and trailed on the stern, and two sailors, match in hand, were standing motionlessly by them, only awaiting the signal to fire. Ramirez and the fourteen men left him were aiming at the Mexican sailors. The crew was taken between two fires.

The events had occurred with such rapidity, this coup-de-main, prepared long beforehand, had been carried out with such coolness and skill, and all had been so thoroughly foreseen, that the commandant, after taking a despairing glance along the deck, was obliged to allow that he had only one chance of escape—laying down his arms.

"We are not pirates," El Alferez said, "Commandant Rodriguez, we are Texans; you can lay down your arms without shame—not to save your life, to which the defeat you have just suffered causes you to attach but slight value, and which you would doubtless readily sacrifice to expiate your misfortunes—but you are responsible before Heaven for the two hundred and fifty men forming your crew. Why needlessly shed precious blood! For the last time I invite you to surrender."

At this moment a thick shadow covered the deck of the corvette; the brig, which every one had forgotten, had continued to advance; it had come within pistol-shot, and its lofty sails stretched out over the vessel and intercepted the sunshine.

"Halloh the ship!" a voice shouted from the stern of the cruiser; "send a boat aboard us with your captain."

This voice sounded like a thunder-clap in the ears of the Mexicans. There was a moment of intense silence, during which all eyes were instinctively turned on the privateer; her yards were lined with topmen armed with muskets and hand-grenades, through the open ports the men could be seen standing by the guns, and it literally held the corvette under its fire.

"Well," El Alferez continued, stamping his foot impatiently, "have you made up your mind; yes or no?"

"Sir," the commandant answered, "by an infamous act of treachery you have become master of my vessel; as any resistance is henceforth useless, I surrender."

And with a gesture full of dignity the old sailor drew his sword, snapped the blade asunder, and after throwing the pieces into the sea, retired to the stern.

"Captain Johnson," El Alferez shouted, "your corvette is ours; send a boat's crew on board."

A whistle was heard from the brig's deck; a boat was let down, and a few minutes after, twenty privateer's men, armed to the teeth, and commanded by the captain in person, stepped on the corvette's deck. The disarmament of the crew was effected without the slightest resistance, and Commandant Rodriguez and his staff were at once transferred to the brig, in order that the Mexican sailors, who were much more numerous than their visitors, might be without a leader in the event of their attempting to regain possession of the corvette by a desperate effort. But most of them were natives of Texas, who found among
the sailors of the brig many of their old friends and acquaintances; in a few moments the two crews were on the most cordial terms.

Captain Johnson resolved to profit by this fortunate circumstance; the privateer was in a very difficult position, and literally experienced at this moment an embarrassment of wealth; he had, without striking a blow, captured a first-class corvette, but that corvette required a crew, and the sailors he could dispose of by taking them from his own ship to put them aboard the prize were insufficient; the good understanding that had almost suddenly sprung up between the two crews, therefore, supplied him with the means of escape from the difficulty.

Captain Johnson was too old a hand not to know how he should act under the present circumstances. So soon as the disarmament was effected he mounted the quarterdeck, took up the speaking-trumpet, and making no distinction among the sailors scattered about the deck, he ordered a series of manoeuvres, intended to habituate the men to the sound of his voice, and prove to them that he was a thorough sailor, which all recognised in a few minutes.

The orders were then executed with such rapidity and eagerness that the corvette, almost unserviceable an hour previously, was soon under jury masts, and in a condition to sail for any port to which it pleased its new commander to take it. The deck had been completely cleared, the running rigging cut during the action spliced—in short, an hour before sunset any stranger whom accident brought aboard the Libertad could have formed no idea of what had really taken place.

When he had obtained this result, Captain Johnson smiled, and ordered Master Lovel, who had followed him on board, to pipe all hands on deck. At this familiar signal the sailors, who were now quite submissive, gaily ranged themselves at the foot of the mainmast, and waited patiently for their new captain's orders. The latter knew how to address rude fellows like these; after complimenting them on the intelligent way in which they had comprehended his orders, he told them that he had no intention of keeping them prisoners, for the majority of them were Texans like himself, and as such had a claim to his entire sympathy. Consequently, those sailors who did not wish to serve the Texan Republic would be landed at the first place on Mexican territory the corvette touched at; as for those who consented to remain aboard and serve their country, their pay would be raised to twenty-five piastres a month, and in order to prove to them the good intentions of the Texan government towards them, a month's pay would be distributed on the spot in the shape of bounty.

This proposition was greeted with shouts of joy by those men who began at once to calculate how many glasses of tayafia and measures of pulque they could consume for this fabulous sum of twenty-five dollars.

The captain saw the effect he had produced, and continued in the midst of a religious silence—

"Then, that is settled, my men. You are free not to remain on board, where I have no desire to retain you as prisoners. Still, reflect on the propositions I make you, in the name of the government I have the honour of serving; for I consider them in every way advantageous for you. Now, let those who wish to enter on board the corvette pass to the larboard, while those who wish to be put ashore can remain where they are. The purser will draw up the agreement, and pay the bounty at once."

The captain had installed the purser at the foot of the mizen-mast, with a table before him, and bags of dollars at his feet. This display met with the greatest success; nothing more was wanting, and the sight of the piastres decided even the most irresolute.
The enlistment lasted two hours. All the sailors entered—all now joyously clinked in their horny hands the handsome piastres they had received; and assuredly, if a Mexican ship had come up at the moment, the new crew would have given it a rude reception. The result obtained by Captain Johnson was easy to foresee; in every sailor there is something of the privateer, and ready money is the only available argument with him.

The various events we have described, and the incidents that followed them, had occupied a considerable period; the whole day had slipped away, and the organisation was not completed till an hour before sunset. Captain Johnson gave the command of the corvette to Don Serapio, with Don Cristoval as first lieutenant, and Ramirez as master; while he himself retained the command of the brig. Then, when all was in order, the captain had the Mexican flag hoisted at the peak of the corvette, which immediately started for Galveston.

The captain returned on board his own vessel, taking with him El Alférez, to whose determination and coolness the Texan revolutionary government owed the possession of a naval force. The result was grand, and surpassed even the expectations of the insurgents. But that was not enough; on getting aboard his brig, the captain ordered the Texan flag to be struck, turned upside down, and hoisted again with the Mexican colours above it. The brig set sail and kept up with the corvette, being careful to keep under her guns, as if really captured by her.

The sailors did not at all comprehend this singular manœuvre; but, as they had seen the captain laugh, they suspected some stratagem, and, in spite of the shame they felt at seeing their colours beneath those of Mexico, they repressed their murmurs, in the hope of a speedy revenge.

In the meanwhile, the whole population of Galveston had since morning been plunged in the greatest anxiety. Assembled on the jetty, they had watched the obstinate pursuit until the vessels disappeared; the sound of cannon, repeated by the echo of the cliffs, had reached the city; a fight had, therefore, taken place, but what the result was everybody asked the other, and no one could answer.

The silence of the fort had also seemed inexplicable; they could not understand why it had not sunk the brig as it passed. Suddenly there was an outburst of shouts and cheers, for the brig and corvette re-appeared at the entrance of the passage, with the Mexican colours proudly flying on the two ships over the Texan flag, which was disgracefully reversed. This delight knew no bounds when the ships were seen to anchor beneath the guns of the battery; the Mexicans were victors, and the Texan insurgents had suffered a defeat, from which they would not so easily recover.

CHAPTER XXI

THE PREPARATION.

We will now return to the Jaguar, whom we left departing from the pulquería and proceeding at the head of his bold companions toward the fort of the Point which he had resolved to carry by surprise. The task, if not impossible, was at the least very difficult, and it needed all the audacious rashness of the young chief merely to conceive the thought of undertaking it.
The night was dark; heavy clouds laden with electricity coursed across the sky, and by intercepting the moonbeams rendered the gloom denser still. The conspirators passed silently through the deserted streets of the town like a legion of phantoms. They went on thus for a long time, with watchful eye and finger on the rifle trigger, ready to fire at the slightest suspicious sound; but nothing disturbed their march to the sea-shore, which they reached after making a thousand windings, in order to foil the spies who might have attempted to follow them in the darkness. The spot where they were was a small sandy creek. Here, at a word from the Jaguar, they halted, for the difficulties of the expedition were about to begin. The young chief assembled his comrades round him, and said—

"The Fort of the Point is impregnable, or, at least, passes as such; I have resolved to deprive it of the haughty boast, and for that purpose have counted on you, comrades. Owing to the opinion the Mexicans have of the strength of this citadel, they have considered it unnecessary to keep up a numerous garrison there, convinced as they are that its position will defend it; and that it is impossible to carry it, save by treachery. The garrison, therefore, is only composed of thirty soldiers, commanded by a lieutenant; it is small, and yet enormous; small, if we force them into a hand-to-hand fight; enormous, if we are compelled to remain at a distance. On the land side, the rock on which the fort is built is so perpendicular, that we could not hope to ascend beyond one half of it; for, excepting the path cut in the rock, which is defended at regular distances by barricades, escalading is impracticable. We cannot, therefore, think of attacking it on that side. But the sea is left to us, if the land fails us; if we can succeed in landing on the narrow strip of earth which is left uncovered at low water for about an hour at the foot of the fortress, it is probable that we shall succeed in our enterprise; for it will never occur to the garrison that any attempt to attack them by sea will be made on such a night as this. That is not all—we must reach that strip of land, and speedily too; the sea is beginning to ebb, and the moment is favourable. This is what I propose doing."

The conspirators collected round their chief paid the most earnest attention to his words. It was for them a question of life or death.

"Now, my companions," the Jaguar continued, "we have no boat in which to reach the base of the fort; the sound of oars would give the alarm, excite the suspicion of the garrison, and reveal our presence; we must, therefore, cross by swimming; but it is nearly a league to go; the tide runs out fast, and we shall have to cross it at right-angles; moreover, the night is dark, and the sea rough. I will only remind you of the sharks we run a risk of meeting on the way. You see, comrades, that it is a rude affair, and it is certain that we shall not all reach the sand strip. Some of us will remain on the road; but what matter, so long as we succeed? You are brave men, so I have preferred to speak openly with you.

"Now," the Jaguar continued, "it is time to get ready. Listen to me. We are about to attempt a surprise, and must therefore act accordingly. Let us leave here our fire-arms, which would not only be useless, but might prove dangerous, if a shot were fired imprudently and revealed our presence; hence each will undress, only keeping on his trousers, and carrying his dagger between his teeth; that will be sufficient, as further clothing would only embarrass us in our long swim."

"Take your daggers between your teeth," he ordered. "Heaven protect us, forward, brothers, and long live liberty!"

"Long live liberty!" the conspirators shouted, as they dashed into the sea.
CHAPTER XXII.

THE SURPRISE.

They swam on without a cry, moan, or sigh. At the head of the gloomy line formed by the energetic heads of the conspirators, the Jaguar progressed alone.

Three-quarters of an hour passed, during which all the strength and courage the human will possesses were expended in this struggle of giants by these men, whom nothing could quell. Not one had broken down; the line was still compact, and they advanced with the same vigour. Before them, at about a musket-shot distance, was the fortress they were approaching.

At length, after superhuman efforts, they succeeded in cutting through the current that dashed with extreme rapidity and strength into the straits. The hardest work was over; from this moment they needed only to let themselves drift gently ashore. So soon as the Jaguar had reached land, his first care was to count his comrades; nine were missing. These had died without venting a cry or complaint; who fatigued them, they had sunk sooner than claim assistance.

The conspirators were at the very foot of the rock, at the top of which the fort was built. It was a great step made, but it was as nothing so long as the rock was not escaladed. But how to attempt that feat on a dark night and with a nor'-wester, which every moment blew with greater force, and threatened to hurl to destruction the man who was so rash as to attempt such an ascent?

The persons who have read the early scenes of this story will doubtless remember the portrait we drew of the Jaguar. Although still very young; or at least appearing so, he joined exceptional strength to marvellous agility and skill; his adventurous character found delight in extraordinary things, and impossibilities alone offered any attraction to him. After reflecting for a few moments, he advised his comrades to lie down at the foot of the rock, lest they should be blown away by the nor'-wester, which was raging at the moment, passed two daggers through his belt, and began examining with the most scrupulous attention the rock he wished to attack.

He found that which at a distance seemed to form an almost perpendicular wall was hollowed out at several points, and fissures had been opened by time—that great demolisher, which wears away the hardest granite. Though the ascent was still extremely difficult, it was not impossible.

"It is all right, brothers," said the Jaguar, "so take courage; now, I entertain firm hopes of success."

And he prepared to mount. Lanzi followed him.

"Where are you going?" the Jaguar asked him.

"With you," the half-breed answered, laconically.

"For what good? one man is sufficient."

"Yes," he answered; "but two are better."

"Well, come on, then." And then, turning to his attentive comrades, he added, "So soon as the rope falls, cling on to it without fear."

"Yes," the conspirators said.

The Jaguar then planted his dagger in a crevice above his head, and with the help of his hands and feet, raised himself sufficiently to thrust a second dagger above the first. The first step was taken; the dagger to dagger the Jaguar reached, in a few minutes, a species of platform about two square yards in area, where it was possible to draw breath.
"Hilloa!" he said, with that magnificent coolness which never deserted him, "what's this?"

"Why, it is a grotto. Viva Dios!" the Jaguar exclaimed a moment later.

"It looks to me very like one," said the half-breed, with his old coolness. "Por Dios! whatever this cave may be, and no matter where it ends, it is certain that it will, at any rate, offer us an excellent shelter. Supposing, at any rate, as is possible, that we cannot succeed in effecting the ascent of the rock this night, we will hide ourselves here during to-morrow, and be ready to finish on the following night what we shall not have time to effect during the present one."

"That is an excellent idea," the Jaguar remarked, "and we will immediately carry it into effect."

The young man unfastened the rope round his hips, and after securely attaching one end round a point of rock, and a stone to the other end, that the wind might not blow it away, he let it fall. In a few minutes the rope stiffened—the conspirators watching on the beach had seized it. Ere long a man made his appearance, then a second, and so on till all reached the platform. As they arrived, Lanzi sent them into the grotto.

"And John Davis?" the Jaguar asked.

"He has slipped, and injured his shoulder."

"Have you abandoned him?"

"Certainly not," the cool conspirator said. "Upon leaving I was careful to put the rope several times round his body, in spite of his objections. I only succeeded in overcoming his obstinacy by persuading him that the weight of his body would keep the rope taut."

"Thank you," said the Jaguar. "Now, lads, to work: we must not abandon our brother."

At the chief's order, eight or ten men seized the rope, and the American was soon hoisted to the platform.

"What is the use of taking so much trouble about me?" he said. "I can be of no service to you: on the contrary, I shall only be in the way, and impede your operations."

The Jaguar made no answer, but had him conveyed into the grotto, where he was laid down on the ground. The young chief then collected his comrades, and explained to them how, by a providential accident, Lanzi had discovered the entrance of the grotto. Still it had not yet been explored, and it was of urgency to find out in what direction it ran. So, striking a light, the young man shouted, "Follow me."

All rushed after the Jaguar. The cave took several windings, but, contrary to what is generally found in most natural grottos, it did not appear to have any other arteries save the one in which the conspirators found themselves.

The latter went on, following their leader step by step. The deeper they got into the cavern, the ruder became the ascent. The Jaguar advanced with extreme caution and doubt, for it seemed to him impossible that this passage should be unkn0wn to the commandant of the garrison.

He soon obtained a proof that his surmises were correct, for after marching for a few minutes longer, the conspirators were arrested by an iron-bound door which barred their way. At a sign from the Jaguar, they remained motionless, with their hands on their dagger-hilts. The moment for action had arrived.

The Jaguar examined the lock for an instant, and then ordered the lights to be put out, which was immediately obeyed, and the conspirators were again in darkness. This door, which was very old, and probably had not been opened for a series of years, could not offer any serious resistance. The young chieftain
thrust the point of his dagger between the bolt and the staple, and pressed on it. The staple fell to the ground, and the door swung open.

It was now about half-past four in the morning, and day was beginning to break. At the end of the passage the Jaguar perceived a motionless shadow leaning against the wall. At an order from his chief, the half-breed glided like a serpent up to this shadow, which was nothing less than a sentry, who was quietly asleep, with his musket by his side, and on coming within reach, the half-breed bounded like a tiger at the throat of the sleeper, whom he threw down without giving him time to utter a cry. The poor fellow was bound and gagged ere he was awake; but the noise, slight as it was, had roused the guard-room. The conspirators, however, had partly armed themselves.

"Fire," the jaguar thundered, "and then forward!"

Ten muskets were discharged, three officers fell, and the Texans rushed ferociously on the soldiers. The latter, terrified at the attack, and seeing their leaders dead, offered but a weak resistance; after a few minutes of hand-to-hand fighting, sustained rather to save their military honour than in hope of conquering the assailants, they asked leave to capitulate.

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CHAPTER XXIII.

EL SALTO DEL FRAYLE.

The Jaguar's first care, so soon as he was in possession of the fortress, was to have John Davis installed in a comfortable and airy room; then he sent several men to the creek whence the expedition had started, to fetch the clothes and anything the conspirators had left there.

During the works necessitated by the occupation and an exact inspection of the important fortress the Texans had succeeded in seizing, day had broke, and the sun risen. The Jaguar, after taking all the necessary precautions to prevent himself being surprised in his turn, took a telescope, and went up to the platform of the castle. From this point the eye surveyed an immense landscape, and a magnificent panorama was unrolled.

"Lanzi!" the Jaguar suddenly said, as he hurried to him.

"Well!" he answered, raising his head.

"Fetch me the Mexican flag we found in the commandant's room, and hoist it on that staff; but, in order that our comrades may not mistake our meaning, mind and fasten a dagger to the top of the flag. The inhabitants of Galveston will not notice this addition, while our friends will immediately understand what it signifies."

Lanzi punctually carried out the order given him, and five minutes later the Mexican banner, surmounted by a dagger, was majestically floating from the flag-staff. The Jaguar soon obtained the certainty that his signal was understood, for the brig, closely pursued by the corvette, waited till it had come within pistol-shot of the fort ere it tacked, which it assuredly would not have done had there been any cause for fear.

During the greater part of the day the Jaguar followed with the greatest interest the progress of the two ships, and witnessed the final incidents from his observatory. At about two in the afternoon, however, he went down into the interior of the fort, and, after recommending the greatest vigilance to his
friends, he armed himself, threw a zarapé over his shoulders, and quitted the castle. The Jaguar was proceeding to the Salto del Frayle, where, on the previous evening, he had appointed to meet Don Juan Melendez de Gongora.

Not far from Galveston, on the sea-shore, there is a road, whose capricious windings follow the sandy shore.

This road led to the spot called the Monk’s Leap, and it was here that the Jaguar had given the meeting to Colonel Don Juan Melendez. The sun had sunk almost level with the horizon when the young man reached the gap. He looked around him, the road was deserted, so he dismounted, hobbled his horse, lay down on the ground, and waited.

He had been there about a quarter of an hour, when the sound of a horse galloping reached his ear; he rose and looked round. He soon saw a horseman turning a corner of the road, and recognised the colonel. On reaching the Jaguar, he bowed and leaped to the ground.

“Pardon me, my friend,” he said, “for having kept you waiting, but it is a long distance from Galveston to this spot; and you and your comrades give us so much to do that we have not an instant to ourselves.”

“Well, before we part, I will give you some news which, if I am not mistaken, will deeply annoy you.”

“What do you mean, my friend? explain yourself.”

“Not at this moment. Let us proceed regularly. We shall always have time enough to return to politics.”

“That is true; but answer me one question first.”

“What is it?”

“Is the news you have to tell me really serious?”

The Jaguar frowned and stamped his foot on the ground with suppressed violence.

“Extremely serious,” he said.

For some minutes the colonel’s eyes had been fixed on the sea.

“Why,” he suddenly said, “look there, my friend.”

“What is it?”

“Hang it! I see the Libertad corvette, which has first anchored under the guns of the Point Fort, bringing with her a privateer brig, which she has, in all probability, captured off the coast.”

“Do you think so?” the Jaguar asked, sarcastically.

“Look for yourself.”

“My friend, I am rather like St. Thomas.”

“What do you mean?”

That as long as I am not completely convinced, I shall attach but very slight faith to the testimony of my eyesight.”

“What can you mean?” asked the colonel.

“Nothing but what I say,” the Jaguar answered.

“Still, I fancy I cannot be mistaken. I can see the Mexican flag over the reversed Texan colours.”

“It is true,” the Jaguar said, coldly, “but what does that prove?”

“What do you say?—‘What does that prove?”’

“Yes.”

“Are you so ignorant of naval matters, then, as not to know what takes place on board a vessel after an engagement?”

“I beg your pardon, friend, but I know all about it. But I know, too, that what we see may be the result of a stratagem, and that the brig, after capturing the corvette, may have an interest in concealing the fact.”

“Come, come,” the colonel said, with a laugh, “that is carrying optimism
a little too far. Let us leave the corvette and brig, and return to our own affairs."

"Well, I think you are in the right; for, judging from the turn the conversation has taken, we should presently be unable to understand one another at all."

The young men yielded involuntarily to the intoxicating charm of this exquisite evening; yielding to their thoughts, neither dreamed of resuming a conversation suddenly broken off by a bitter remark. For a long time they walked on thus, till they reached an angle in the road, where the track they were following divided into several branches. Here they halted.

"We must separate here, Don Juan," the Jaguar said, "for we probably do not follow the same road."

"That is true, friend, and I regret it," the colonel answered, sadly, "for I should be so happy if I had you constantly by my side."

"Thanks, friend, but you know that is impossible; let us, therefore, profit by the few moments left us to be together. Well, what have you done?"

"Nothing, alas! for a soldier is the slave of discipline. I have, therefore, been unable to obtain any information. Have you been more fortunate?"

"I can hardly say, yet; still I hope. Tranquil has this very night to give me certain information, which will perfect that I have myself obtained."

"And is Tranquil here?"

"He arrived to-day, but I have not yet been able to see him."

"Then you imagine——?" the colonel said, eagerly.

"This is what I have succeeded in finding out. Remark that I assert nothing; I am at this moment merely the echo of certain rumours."

"No matter; speak, my friend, in Heaven's name."

"About six weeks ago, according to what my spies tell me, a strange man arrived in this country, bringing a girl with him. This man has purchased a rancho, of no great value, situated a few leagues from here, nearly on the seashore. He paid cash for it, shut himself up in the rancho with the girl, and since then no one has seen them. The man has immured himself in his property, to which nobody has admission; but whether this man be the White Scalper, and the maiden Carmela, no one is able to state positively. Several times I have prowled round the abode of this mysterious being, but have not succeeded in seeing him: windows and doors are constantly closed, nothing is heard of what takes place in this strange house, which, through its isolated position, is, to a certain extent, protected from indiscreet visitors. This is what I had to tell you, perhaps to-morrow I shall have learned more."

"No," Don Juan answered, pensively, "that man cannot be the White Scalper, or the maiden Carmela. Only one man, in my opinion, could put you on the trail of her we have so unfortunately lost."

"Whom do you mean?"

"Loyal Heart."

"That is true. He was brought up by the Indians, and one of their tribes has adopted him. He would be better able than anybody to supply us with information."

"Why have you not applied to him, then?"

"For the very simple reason that, on the day after the capture of the Larch-tree hacienda, Loyal Heart left us to return to his tribe."

"That is annoying," the colonel said thoughtfully. "I know not why, but I feel convinced that this hunter may prove extremely useful to us in our search for the unfortunate Carmela."

"Perhaps you are right, colonel. This night, as I told you, I am to see Tranquil, and shall have a serious explanation with him."
"Insist, I beg, friend, on establishing a friendly connection with Loyal Heart."

"I shall not fail; besides, Tranquil is sure to know where to find him."

"That is probable. Now, I can speak to you with open heart, my friend. Honour alone has hitherto kept me at my post; I desire to recover my liberty, and only await an honourable occasion to send in my resignation. On the day when I am free, and that day is approaching, I hope, I will join you, and then we shall find Carmela again, even at the risk of my life."

The colonel uttered these words with a fire and animation which made his friend start involuntarily, and aroused in his heart a deep feeling of jealousy. Still, the Jaguar had sufficient power over himself to conceal the emotion he felt.

"May Heaven grant that it may speedily be so, my friend. What could we two not do?"

"Then you intend to make the expedition you told me of this night?" the colonel continued.

"I shall be present, but another person will direct it."

"Tranquil is Carmela's father, and I must yield to his wishes."

"That is true. Now, when and how shall we meet again? I have the greatest desire to learn what may occur to-night; whatever be the result of the expedition, I trust to be informed of what you have done. Unfortunately, I fear it will be very difficult for us to meet."

"Why so?"

"Why, my friend, you know the truce made between you and General Rubio expires to-night."

"I defy him to come and take me at the spot where I shall be within an hour, and where I shall be delighted to welcome you, if you are inclined to pay me a visit."

"And where is this privileged spot, my friend?"

"The Fort of the Point."

"What!" the colonel said, suddenly stopping and looking him in the face; "of course you are joking."

"Not the least in the world."

"What! you give me the meeting at the fort? Oh, you must be mad, my friend!"

"Remember that the fort has been in my hands for the past twelve hours," the Jaguar coldly interrupted him. "I surprised it last night."

"Ah!" the colonel exclaimed, in stupor.

"Did I not tell you that I had serious news to impart to you?" the young man continued; "would you like, now, to learn the second item?"

"The second!" the colonel repeated, utterly astounded; "and what can the second item be?"

"The second item is this: the Libertad corvette has been boarded by the privateer brig, with which it anchored at sunset beneath the guns of the fort."

At this unexpected revelation the colonel staggered like a drunken man.

"Woe, woe!" he exclaimed in a choking voice.

"Alas! my friend," said the Jaguar, gently, "it is the fortune of war."

"Galveston!" the colonel said in despair, "that city which the general has sworn never to surrender."

After a moment's silence, the colonel mounted his horse.

"Let me go," he said; "I must immediately impart these frightful news to the governor."

"Go, my friend," the Jaguar answered; "but, remember that you will find me at the Fort of the Point."
CHAPTER XXIV.

THE LANDING.

Immediately on reaching his anchorage, Captain Johnson, after conversing for a moment privately with El Alferez, gave orders that Commandant Rodriguez and his officers should be brought into his presence. The commandant, despite the politeness with which he had been treated, and the kindness the privateer's men had shown him, could not forgive them the way in which they had seized his vessel; he was sad, and had hitherto only answered the questions asked him by disdainful silence, or insulting monosyllables. When the officers of the corvette were assembled in the cabin, Captain Johnson, turning politely to the Mexicans, said:

"Gentlemen, I am really most sorry for what has occurred. I should be glad to set you at liberty immediately, but your commandant's formal refusal to pledge himself not to serve against us for a year and a day obliges me, to my great regret, to keep you prisoners, at least temporarily. However, gentlemen, be assured that you will be treated as caballeros, and everything done to alleviate this temporary captivity."

The officers, and even the commandant, bowed their thanks, and the captain continued:

"All your property has been placed in the boat I have ordered to convey you ashore. If nothing retains you here, be kind enough to get ready to land."

"Would it be indiscreet, captain, to ask you whither you have given orders to have us taken?" Commandant Rodriguez asked.

"Not at all, commandant," the captain replied; "you are about to be taken to the Fort of the Point, whose walls will serve as your prison, until fresh orders."

"What!" the old sailor exclaimed in astonishment; "the Fort of the Point?"

"Yes," the captain answered with a smile; "the fort which some of my friends seized, while I had the honour of boarding your fine corvette, commandant."

The captain could have gone on talking thus for some time: the old officer, confounded by what he had just heard, was incapable of connecting two ideas. At length, he let his head fall wearily on his chest, and making his officers a sign to follow him, went on deck. A boat, with a crew of ten men, was balancing at the starboard accommodation ladder, which the commandant, still silent, entered, and his staff followed his example.

"Push off!" El Alferez ordered, who was holding the yoke lines.

The boat started and speedily disappeared. For some minutes the cadenced sound of the oars dipping in the water could be heard, and then all became silent again. The captain had watched the departure of his prisoners; when the boat had disappeared in the gloom, he gave Master Lovel orders to weigh and stand out to sea, and then returned to his cabin, where a man was waiting for him. It was Tranquil, the old tigreño.

"Well!" the hunter asked.

"They have gone, thank Heaven!" the captain said.

"When shall we land?"

"This night; but is your information positive?"

"I believe so."
"Well, we shall soon know how matters stand."
"May Heaven grant that we succeed!"
"Let us hope it. Do you think the coast is guarded?"
"I fear it, for your vessel must have been signalled all along the shore."
"Do you know whether the Mexicans have other ships observing the ports, in addition to the corvette?"
"I think they have three more, but smaller than the Libertad."
"Hang it all! we must act prudently, then; however, whatever may happen, I will not desert so old a friend as yourself when unfortunate. We have still three hours before us, so try and sleep a little, for we shall have a tough job."

Tranquil smiled at this recommendation; but to please his friend, who had already laid himself down in his bunk, in the position of a man preparing to sleep, he wrapped himself in his zarapé and closed his eyes.

The night, which at the beginning had been very bright and clear, had suddenly become dark and stormy; black clouds surcharged with electricity covered the whole of the sky; the breeze moaned sadly in the rigging, and mingled with the dash of the waves against the sides of the vessel. The brig was sailing slowly close to the wind, the only sails it carried being double-reefed topsails, the fore staysail, and the spanker.

At the moment when the helmsman struck the two double strokes on the bell, indicating ten o'clock, Captain Johnson and Tranquil appeared on deck. The captain was dressed in a thick blue pilot-coat, a leathern belt, through which were passed a cutlass, a pair of pistols, and an axe, was fastened round his waist; a cloak was thrown over his shoulders, and a broad-brimmed felt hat completely concealed his features. The Canadian wore his hunter's garb, though, through the dangerous nature of the affair, he had added a brace of pistols to his ordinary armament.

The captain's orders have been carried out with that minute consciousness which Master Lovel displayed in everything connected with duty. The boarding-netting was braced up, and the running rigging secured as if for action. At the starboard ladder the long boat was tossing with its crew of thirty men, all armed to the teeth, and holding their oars aloft ready to dash into the water. They were, however, muffled, so as to stifle the sound of rowing, and foil the vigilance of the Mexicans.

"That is well, lads," the captain said, "let us be off. Mind, father," he added, turning to Father Lovel, "that you keep a good watch. If we are not on board again by four in the morning, stand out to sea, and do not trouble yourself further about us; for it will be useless to wait for us longer, as we shall be prisoners of the Mexicans; and any lengthened stay in the waters might compromise the safety of the brig. Be of good cheer, though, for I have hopes of success."

And after kindly pressing the old sailor's hand, he went down to the boat, seated himself in the stern sheets by the side of the hunter, took up the yoke lines, and said in a low voice, "Push off!"

At this command the painter was cast off, the oars dashed together into the sea, and the boat started. When it had disappeared in the fog, Master Lovel ran at full speed to the stern of the brig, and leaned over the taffrail. "Are you there?" he said.

"Yes," a suppressed voice answered him.

"Get ready," the master added, and then said to an old sailor, "You know what I have to tell you, Wells; I count on you thoroughly."

"All right, master," the sailor replied, "you can cut your cable without fear, I will keep a look-out."
"All right; get in, men, and double-bank the oars."

Some forty sailors, who were well armed, like their predecessors, let themselves down, one after the other, by a rope that hung over the taffrail, and got into a second boat, which Master Lovel had ordered to be got ready, and of which he took the command. He started at once, and steered after the captain's pinnace, whose direction he was pretty well acquainted with, saying every now and then to the rowers, in order to increase their speed, "Give way, my lads, give way, all!" and he added, as he chewed his enormous quid, with a cunning smile, "It was very likely I should let my old fellow have his face scored by those brigands of Mexicans, who are all as crafty as caimans."

So soon as he had left the ship, the captain, leaving on his right hand a small fishing-village, whose lights he saw flashing through the darkness, steered for a jutting-out point, where he probably hoped to disembark in safety. After rowing for about three-quarters of an hour, a black line began to be vaguely designed on the horizon in front of the boat. The captain gave his men a sign to rest on their oars for a moment, and taking up a long night-glass, he carefully examined the coast. In two or three minutes he shut up the glass again, and ordered his men to give way.

All at once the keel of the pinnace grated on the sand: they had reached land. After hurriedly exploring the neighbourhood, the crew leaped ashore, leaving only one man as boat-keeper, who at once pushed off. The captain having assured himself that, for the present at any rate, he had nothing to fear, concealed his men behind some rocks, and then addressed Tranquil.

"It is now your turn, old hunter," he said.

"Good!" the latter replied, not adding another word.

He left his hiding-place, and walked forward, with a pistol in one hand and a tomahawk in the other, stopping at intervals to look around him. On getting about one hundred yards from the spot where the landing was effected, the hunter stopped, and began gently whistling the first bars of a Canadian air. Another whistle answered his, and finished the tune he had purposely broken off. Footsteps were heard, and a man showed himself. It was Quoniam the negro.

"Here I am," he said. "Where are your men?"

"Hidden behind the rocks close by."

"Call them up, for we have not a moment to lose."

Tranquil clapped his hands twice, and a moment later the captain and his men had rejoined him.

"Where is the person we have come to deliver concealed?" the captain asked.

"At a rancho about two miles from here. I will lead you to it."

There was a moment's silence, during which the captain studied the negro's noble face, his black flashing eye, which glistened with boldness and honour; and he asked himself whether such a man could be a traitor? Quoniam seemed to read his thoughts, for he said to him, as he laid his hand on the Canadian's shoulder—

"If I had intended to betray you, it would have been done ere now. Trust to me, captain, I owe my life to Tranquil. I almost witnessed the birth of the maiden you wish to save. My friendship and gratitude answer to you for my fidelity. Let us start."

And without saying anything further, he placed himself at the head of the band.

While the incidents we have just described were taking place on the beech, two persons, male and female, seated in a room, modestly though comfortably
furnished, were holding a conversation, which, judging from the angry expression of their faces, seemed to be most stormy. These two persons were Carmela and the White Scalper.

Carmela was half reclining in a hammock; she was pale and suffering, her features were worn, and her red eyes showed that she had been weeping.

"Take care, Carmela!" he said, as he suddenly halted in front of the young woman, "you know that I crush all who resist me. For the last time I ask you Will you tell me the reason of your constant refusals?"

"Come," she continued, "this farce wearies me, so let us bring it to a finale. I know you too well now, not to be aware that you would not hesitate to proceed to odious extremities, if I would not submit to your wishes. Since you insist on it, I will explain my thoughts to you. You ask me if I hate you? No, I do not hate you, I despise you!"

"Silence, wretched girl!"

"Yourself ordered me to speak, and I shall not be silent till I have told you all. Yes, I despise you, because, instead of respecting a poor girl, whom you, coward as you are, carried off from her relations and friends, you torture her, and become her executioner. I despise you, because you are a man without a soul; an old man who might be my father, and yet you do not blush to ask me to love you, under some wretched pretext of my resemblance with some woman I have no doubt you killed."

"Carmela!"

"Lastly, I despise you because you are a furious brute, who only possess one human feeling, 'the love of murder!' because there is nothing sacred in your sight, and if I were weak enough to consent to your wishes, you would make me die of despair, by taking a delight in breaking my heart."

"Take care, Carmela!" he exclaimed furiously.

"I defy you, coward who threatens a woman!"

"Help!" the White Scalper exclaimed, with a yell. All at once the window was noisily burst open and Tranquil entered.

"I think you called, senor?" he said, as he leaped into the room.

"My father! my father!" the poor girl shrieked, as she threw herself into his arms; "you have come at last!"

The White Scalper, utterly astonished and startled by the unexpected appearance of the hunter, looked around him in alarm, and could not succeed in regaining his coolness. The Canadian, after lovingly replying to the maiden's warm greeting, laid her gently on the hammock, and then turned to the White Scalper.

"I ask your pardon, senor," he said with perfect ease, "for not having advised you of my visit; but you are aware we are not friends, and, as it is possible that if I had written, you would not have received me, I preferred bringing matters to the point."

"One moment, senor," the Scalper exclaimed; "you have learned how to enter this house, but you do not know how to leave it."

And seizing two pistols lying on a table, he pointed them at the hunter, while shouting—"Help! help!"

Tranquil quietly raised his rifle to his shoulder.

"I should be delighted by your showing me the road," he said peaceably.

A dozen blacks and Mexicans rushed into the room.

"Ah, ah!" said the Scalper, "I fancy I have you at last, old Tiger-killer."

"Nonsense," a mocking voice replied; "not yet."

At this moment the captain and his men dashed through the window which had afforded the Canadian a passage into the room, and uttered a fearful yell.
An indescribable medley and confusion then began: the lights were extinguished, and the servants, mostly unarmed, and not knowing with how many enemies they had to deal, fled in all directions. The Scalper was carried away by the stream of fugitives. The Texans took advantage of the stupor of their enemy to evacuate the rancho, and effect their retreat.

"Make haste! make haste!" the captain shouted; "who knows whether we may not be crushed by superior forces in an instant?"

At his orders, the sailors, taking the maiden in their midst, ran off in the direction of the sea-shore. In the distance, drums and bugles could be heard calling the people under arms, and on the horizon the black outline of a large body of troops hurrying up, with the evident intention of cutting off the retreat of the Texans, could be distinguished. Panting and exhausted, the latter still ran on; they could see the coast; a few minutes more and they would reach it. All at once a band, commanded by the White Scalper, dashed upon them, shouting—"Down with the Texans! kill them! kill them!"

"Oh, my God!" Carmela exclaimed, "will you abandon us?"

"Lads," the captain said, addressing his sailors, "we cannot talk about conquering, but we can die."

"We will, captain," the sailors answered.

"Father," said Dona Carmela, "will you let me fall alive into the hands of that tiger?"

"No," said Tranquil, as he kissed her pale forehead; "here is my dagger."

"Thanks!" she replied. "Oh, now I am certain of dying free."

Lest they should be surrounded, the Texans leant their backs against the rock, and awaited with levelled bayonets the attack of the Mexicans.

"Surrender, dogs!" shouted the Scalper.

"Nonsense!" the captain answered; "you must be mad, senor. Do men like us surrender?"

"Forward!" the Scalper shouted.

The Mexicans rushed on their enemies with indescribable rage. An heroic and gigantic struggle then began, a combat of three hundred men against thirty: a horrible and merciless carnage, in which none demanded quarter, while the Texans, certain of all falling, would not succumb till buried under a pile of hostile corpses. After twenty minutes, that seemed an age, only twelve Texans remained on their legs. The captain, Tranquil, Quoniam, and nine sailors, remained alone, accomplishing prodigies of valour.

"At last!" the Scalper shouted, as he dashed forward.

"Not yet," Tranquil said, as he dealt a blow at him with his axe.

The Scalper avoided the blow by leaping on one side, and replied with his machete; Tranquil, wounded, fell on his knee, crying, "She is lost! my God, she is lost!"

CHAPTER XXV.

F O R W A R D !

In the meanwhile Master Lovel made his men row vigorously, in order to reach land as soon as possible. But when he at last reached the shore the captain had landed long before.

The old sailor had his boat tied up to the captain's, in order that they could be used if required, and then advanced cautiously inland. He had not proceeded
many yards, however, ere a tremendous noise reached his ears, and he saw the sailors who accompanied the captain debouch from the hollow way in disorder, and closely pursued by Mexican soldiers.

Master Lovel did not lose his head under these circumstances: instead of rushing into the medley, he ambushed his men behind a clump of trees that stood a short distance off.

The Texans, with their back to the rock, not ten yards from the sea, were fighting desperately against an immense number of enemies. A minute later, and all would have been over, but suddenly the cry of “Forward! Texas y Libertad!” was raised in the rear of the Mexicans, accompanied by a tremendous shout, and a deadly discharge, almost at point-blank range, scattered terror and disorder through their ranks. It was Master Lovel effecting his diversion, in order to save his captain.

The Mexicans, who already believed themselves victors, were terrified at this unforeseen attack, which, owing to the vigour with which it was carried out, they supposed to be made by a considerable body of these freebooters, commanded by the Jaguar, whose reputation was already immense in the ranks of the American army. They were finally seized with a panic terror which their officers could not succeed in mastering, and broke and fled in all directions, throwing their arms away.

The Texans, revived by the prudential arrival of the old sailor, and excited by their captain's voice, redoubled their efforts. Tranquil tied a handkerchief round his thigh, and supported by Quoniam, who, during the action, had not left him for an instant, he retreated to the boats, leading Carmela, and followed by the captain and his brave sailors. The latter, like lions at bay, turned at each instant to dash with axes and bayonets at the few soldiers their officers had succeeded in rallying.

Still fighting, the sailors at length reached the boats prepared for their reception. Captain Johnson ordered the wounded to be placed in the launch, and getting into the other boat with Tranquil and Quoniam, and the sound men, he put off from the shore, towing the boat that served as an ambulance. This daring retreat, effected under the enemy's fire, was carried out with admirable precision and skill.

Ere long the coast disappeared in the fog, the shouts of the enemy became less distinct, the shots ceased, the light flashing on the shore died out, and all grew silent again.

"Are we really out of danger, father?" the maiden asked with a shudder of fear.

"Yes, my child; keep your spirits up," the hunter answered, "we are now in safety."

At this very moment the sailors, as if wishing to confirm the Canadian's assurance, or perhaps with the wish to mock the enemies they had so barely escaped, struck up one of those songs which serve to mark time, and the words of which each repeats as he lays out on his oars. Master Lovel, after turning and returning several times the enormous quid that swelled his right cheek, made a signal to the crew of the pinnace, and struck up in a rough voice a stanza, which all repeated in chorus after him. This song, which was as interminable as a sailor's yarn, would, in all probability, have lasted much longer, if the captain had not suddenly ordered silence.

"Some new danger?" Tranquil inquired anxiously.

"Perhaps so," the captain replied, who had for some time been scanning the horizon with a frowning brow.

"What do you mean?" the hunter asked.
"Look!" the captain said, extending his hand in the direction of the fishing-village.

Tranquil hastily took up the night-glass: a dozen large boats, crowded with soldiers, were leaving a small creek, and pulling out to sea. The water was lumpy, the breeze blew strongly, and the over-crowded long-boat advanced but slowly, as it was compelled to tow the pinnace. The peril which they fancied they had escaped burst out again in a different shape, and this time assumed really terrific proportions.

The brig, whose tall masts were visible, was, it is true, only two cables' length, at the most, from the Texan boats, but the few men left on board were not nearly sufficient to make the requisite manœuvres to enable the brig to help its boats effectually. The position grew with each moment more critical.

"Lads," said the captain, "the ten best swimmers among you will jump into the sea, and go to the ship with me."

"Captain," the hunter exclaimed, "what do you propose doing?"

"To save you," he simply answered.

"Oh, oh!" Master Lovel said hastily, "I will not allow such an act of madness."

"Silence, sir," the captain interrupted him rudely. "I am the sole commander."

"But you are wounded!" the master objected. In fact, Captain Johnson had received an axe-stroke.

"Silence! I tell you. I allow no remarks."

The old sailor bowed his head, and wiped away a tear. After squeezing the hunter's hand, the captain and his ten sailors leaped boldly into the sea, and disappeared in the darkness. At the news of fresh danger, Carmela had fallen, completely overwhelmed, in the bottom of the boat. Master Lovel, leaning out, tried to discover his chief. Heavy tears coursed down his bronzed cheeks, and all his limbs were agitated by a convulsive quivering. The Mexicans approached nearer and nearer; they were already close enough for the number of their boats to be distinguished, and a schooner was already leaving the creek, and coming up under press of canvas, to ensure the success of the attack.

The sailors burst into a shout of joy, and laying on their oars, redoubled their efforts. A frightful discharge answered them, and the balls flattened against the sides of the pinnace and dashed up the water around. The Mexicans, who had come within range, opened a terrible fire on the Texans, but the latter did not reply.

A dull noise was heard, followed by cries of despair and imprecations, and a black mass passed to windward of the long-boat. It was the brig coming to the assistance of its crew, and in passing it sunk and dispersed the enemy's boats.

When she set foot on the deck of the brig, Carmela fainted, succumbing to her emotions. Tranquil raised her in his arms, and, aided by Quoniam and the captain, carried her down to the cabin.

"Captain," a sailor shouted, "the Mexicans!"

While the Texans were engaged in taking their wounded aboard, feeling convinced that the Mexican boats had been all, or, at any rate, the majority of them, sunk by the brig, they had not dreamed of watching an enemy they supposed crushed. The latter had cleverly profited by this negligence to rally, and collecting beneath the bows of the brig, had boldly boarded her, by climbing up the main-chains, the sprit-sails, and any ropes' ends they had been able to seize. Fortunately, Master Lovel had the boarding nettings triced up on the previous evening, and through this wise precaution the desperate surprise of the Mexicans did not meet with the success they anticipated for it.
The Texans, obeying the voice of their captain, resumed their weapons, and rushed on the Mexicans, who were already all but masters of the fore-part of the ship. Tranquil, Quoniam, Captain Johnson, and Lovel, armed with axes, had flown to the front rank, and by their example excited the crew to do their duty properly. There, on a limited space of ten square yards at the most, one of those fearful naval combats without order or tactics began, in which rage and brutal strength represent science. A horrible struggle, a fearful carnage, with pikes, axes, and cutlasses; a struggle in which each wound is mortal, and which recalls those hideous combats of the worst days of the middle ages, when brute strength alone was the law.

The White Scalper had never before fought with such obstinacy. Furious at the loss of the prey he had so audaciously carried off, half mad with rage, he seemed to multiply himself, rushing incessantly with savage yells into the densest part of the fight, seeking Carmela, and longing to kill the man who had so bravely torn her from him. Accident seemed for a moment to smile on him, by bringing him face to face with the captain.

"Now for my turn," he exclaimed, with a ferocious shout of joy.

The captain raised his axe.

"No! no!" said Tranquil, as he threw himself hurriedly before him; "this victim is reserved for me! I must kill this human-faced tiger. Besides," he added, "it is my profession to kill wild beasts."

"Ah!" the White Scalper said; "it is really fatality which brings you once more face to face with me. Well, be it so! I will settle with you first, the others after."

"It is you who will die, villain!" the Canadian replied. "Ah! you carried off my daughter and fancied yourself well concealed, did you? But I was on your trail; for the last three months I have been following you step by step, and watching for the favourable moment for vengeance."

On hearing these words the Scalper rushed furiously on his enemy. The latter did not make a movement to avoid him; on the contrary, he seized him in his powerful arms, and tried to throw him down, while stabbing him in the loins with his dagger. These two men, with flashing eyes and foaming lips, animated by an implacable hatred, intertwined breast to breast, face to face, each trying to kill his adversary, caring little to live provided that his enemy died, resembled two wild beasts determined to destroy each other.

Texans and Mexicans had ceased fighting as if by common accord, and remained horrified spectators of this atrocious combat. At length the Canadian, who had been severely wounded before, fell, dragging his enemy down with him. The latter uttered a yell of triumph, which was soon converted into a groan of despair. Quoniam rushed madly upon him, but, unfortunately, he had miscalculated his distance, and they both fell into the sea, which closed over them with a hollow and ill-omened sound.

The Mexicans, deprived of their chief, now only thought of flight, and rushed in mad disorder to their boats; a moment later they had all quitted the brig. Quoniam reappeared, but exhausted and dripping with water. He tottered a few paces, and fell by the side of Tranquil, to whom Carmela and the captain were paying the most assiduous attention. A few minutes later the hunter felt strong enough to try and rise.

"Well," he asked Quoniam, "is he dead?"

"I believe so," the negro replied, as he offered him a small object he held in his hand.

The Canadian uttered a cry of surprise on seeing it.

"Where did you find this?" he asked anxiously.
“When I rushed on that man, I know not how it was, but this chain and the articles attached to it were placed, as it were, in my hand. When I fell into the sea I clung to the chain; there it is.”

Tranquil, after again examining the mysterious object, concealed it in his breast, and gave vent to a profound sigh. All at once Carmela started up in horror.

“Oh, look, look, father!” she shrieked; “woe, woe, we are lost!”

The hunter started at the sound of the girl’s voice, and his eyes filled with tears.

“What is the matter?” he asked, in a weak voice.

“The matter is,” the captain said rudely, “that unless a miracle take place, we are really lost this time.”

And he pointed to some thirty armed boats, which were pulling up and converging round the brig, so as to enclose it in a circle, whence it would be impossible for it to escape.

“Oh, fate is against us!” Carmela exclaimed in despair.

“No, it is impossible,” Tranquil said quickly; “God will not abandon us thus.”

“We are saved!” Master Lovel shouted; “we are saved! Look, look! the boats are turning back!”

The crew burst into a shout of joy and triumph; in the beams of the rising sun, the Libertad corvette could be seen passing through Galveston Straits, hardly two cannon-shots’ distance from the brig. The Mexican boats pulled at full speed in the direction of land, and soon all had disappeared. The brig drifted down to the corvette, and both returned to their old anchorage.

The two ships had scarce let their anchors fall, ere a boat came alongside the brig, from the fort, containing the Jaguar and El Alférez.

The success of the two hazardous expeditions attempted by the Texans had given the cause they defended a great impulse. In a few hours the revolt had become a revolution, and the insurgent chiefs men whose existence must henceforth be recognised. The Jaguar desired to push matters on actively, and wished to profit by the probable discouragement of the Mexicans to secure the surrender of the town without a blow.

In his conversation with Colonel Melendez, the young chief had purposely startled him with the news of the success of the two expeditions, calculating for the success of future operations on the stupor General Rubio would experience on being told of them. But ere undertaking anything, the Jaguar desired a conference with his friends, in order to settle definitively the way in which he must behave under such serious circumstances, as he was not at all anxious to assume the responsibility of the whole undertaking. This was acting not only with prudence, but also with perfect self-denial.

But as the heart of even the purest and most honourable man is never exempt from those weaknesses inherent in human nature, the Jaguar, though perhaps not daring to avow it to himself, had another motive that urged him to go aboard the brig so speedily. This motive, of a thoroughly private nature, was the desire to learn as soon as possible the result of the expedition attempted by Captain Johnson and Tranquil against the rancho of the White Scalper.

Hence, the young man had scarce reached the deck, ere, without returning the salutes of his friends who hurried to greet him at the ladder, he inquired after Tranquil. The captain gave him no other answer than a sign to follow. The young man, not understanding this reserve, though feeling seriously alarmed, went below, where he saw Tranquil reclining in a berth, and a weeping female seated on a chair by his side. The Jaguar turned pale, for in the female bo
recognised Dona Carmela. At the sound of his approaching footsteps, the maiden raised her head.

“Oh!” she exclaimed, clasping her hands with joy, “it is you! you have come at last, then!”

“Thanks, Carmela,” he replied in a gasping voice; “thanks for this kindly greeting; it proves to me that you have not forgotten me.”

“Forgot you, to whom, next to my father, I owe everything! Oh, you know that was impossible.”

“Thank you, once again. You do not, you cannot know how happy you render me at this moment, Carmela. My whole life, employed in your service, would not suffice to repay the good you do me. Brave Tranquil, I felt sure that he would succeed!”

“Alas, my friend, this success costs him dear.”

“What do you mean? I trust that he is not dangerously wounded?”

“I fear the contrary, my friend.”

“Oh! we will save him.”

“Come hither, Jaguar,” the hunter said in a low voice; “give me your hand, that I may press it in mine.”

The young man walked quickly up to him.

“Oh, with all my heart!” he said.

“The affair was a tough one, my friend,” the Canadian went on; “that man is a lion.”

“Yes, yes, he is a rude adversary; but you got the better of him at last?”

“Thanks to Heaven, yes; but I shall keep his mark all my life, if God permit me to rise again.”

“Nonsense, who knows? any wound that does not kill is soon cured, the Indians say, and they are right. And what has become of that man?”

“In all probability he is dead,” Tranquil said.

“That is all for the best.”

At this moment Captain Johnson opened the door.

“A boat, bearing a flag of truce, is hauling the brig; what is to be done?” he asked.

“Receive it, Sangre de Dios! my dear Johnson. This boat, if I am not mistaken, is a bearer of good news.”

“Our friends would like you to be present to hear the proposals which will doubtless be made.”

“What do you say, Tranquil?” the young chief asked, turning to the old hunter.

“Go, my boy, where duty calls you,” the latter answered; “you will not be away long.”

“Certainly not, and so soon as I am at liberty again I will return to your side, but merely to have you carried ashore; your condition demands attention you cannot obtain here.”

“I accept, my friend; the more so as I believe the land air will do me good.”

“That is settled, then,” the Jaguar said, joyously.

“All right,” Tranquil replied, and fell back in his berth.

The young man, after bowing to Carmela, who returned the salute with a gentle and sad glance, left the cabin with the captain, and returned on deck.

[In our next volume, “The White Scalper,” we shall again come across all the characters of this history, and many mysteries will be cleared up.]
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