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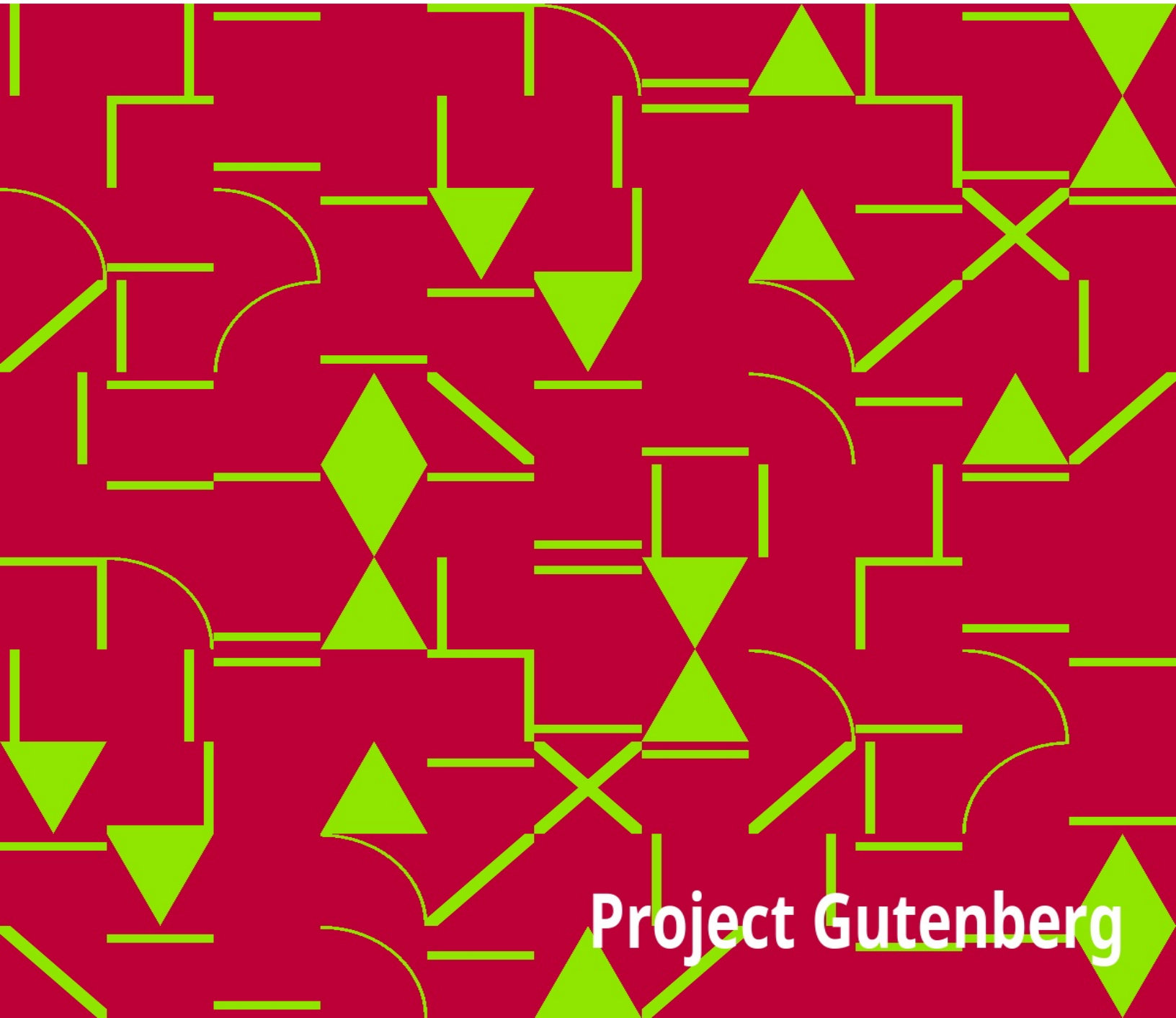

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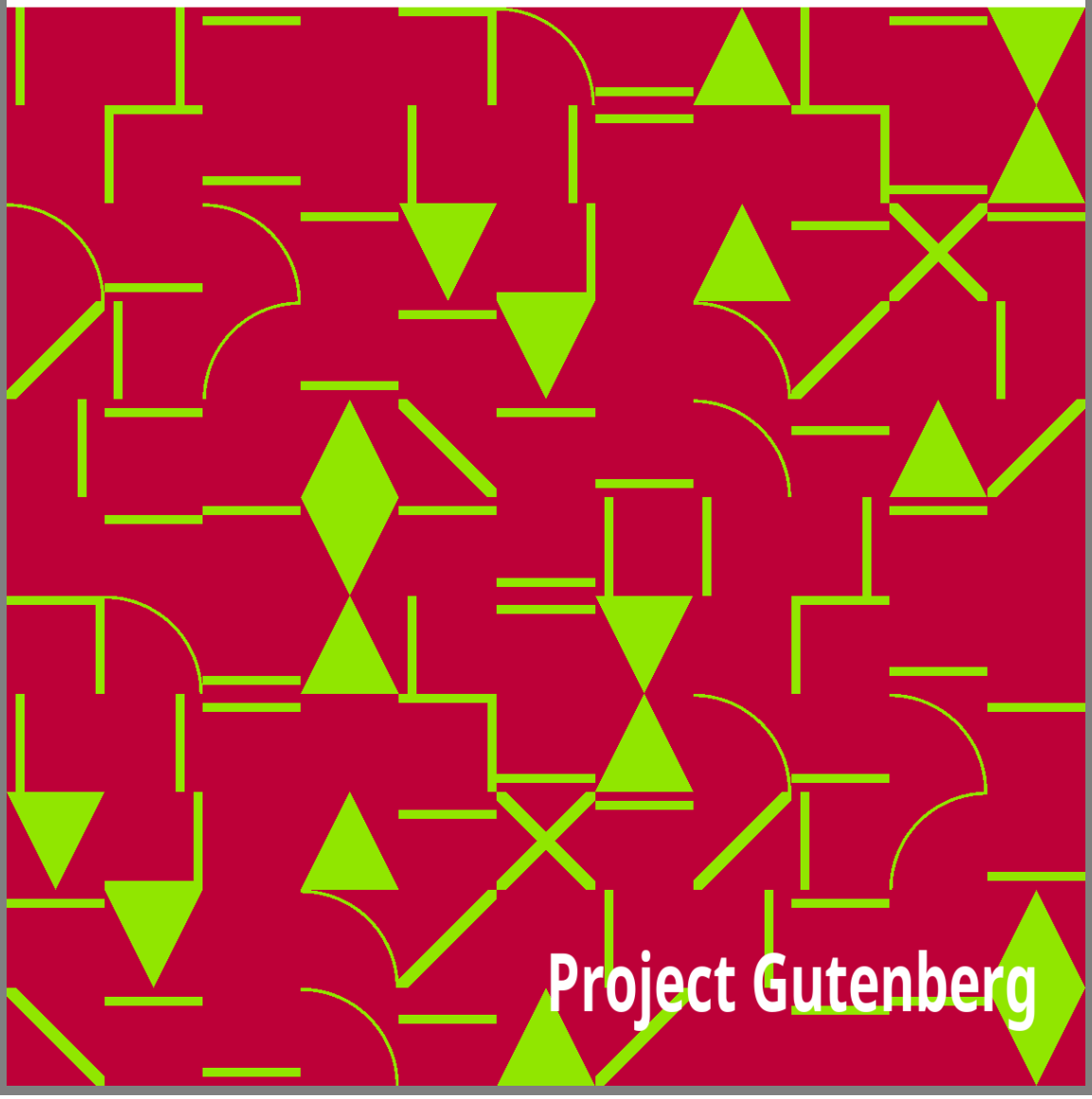

The Project Gutenberg eBook of The Pirates of the Prairies: Adventures in the American Desert

Title: The Pirates of the Prairies: Adventures in the American Desert

Author: Gustave Aimard

Translator: Sir Lascelles Wraxall

Release date: February 17, 2013 [eBook #42117]
Most recently updated: April 3, 2024

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Camilo Bernard and Marc D'Hooghe (Scans at the Internet Archive by Google)

THE PIRATES OF THE PRAIRIES

ADVENTURES IN THE AMERICAN DESERT,

BY

GUSTAVE AIMARD

AUTHOR OF "THE TRAIL HUNTER," "THE TIGER SLAYER," "THE INDIAN CHIEF," ETC.

LONDON

WARD AND LOCK

158, FLEET STREET

MDCCCLXII

Contents

PREFACE

The present is the second of the series of Indian tales, commencing with the "Trail-Hunter," and which will be completed in one more volume, entitled the "Trapper's Daughter." It must be understood, however, that each of these volumes is complete in itself, although the characters already introduced to the reader are brought on the stage again, and continue their surprising adventures through succeeding works. For this, Gustave Aimard can quote the example of his predecessor, Fenimore Cooper, whose "Deer Slayer," appears in a long succession of volumes, not necessarily connected, but which all repay perusal. I believe that few who have commenced with one volume of Cooper's Indian tales, but have been anxious to follow the hero through the remainder of his adventures; and I sincerely trust that a perusal of the "Pirates of the Prairies" may lead to a demand for the other volumes by the same author, which have already appeared, and for those which have still to follow.

LASCELLES WRAXALL.

CHAPTER I.

THE CACHE.

Two months have elapsed since we left the Trail-Hunter commencing his adventurous journey, and we are in the heart of the desert. Before us immensity is unfolded. What pen, however eloquent, would venture to describe those illimitable oceans of verdure to which the North Americans have in their imagery, given the poetic and mysterious name of the Far West? That is to say, the truly unknown region, with its scenes at once grand and striking, soft and terrible; unbounded prairies in which may be found that rich and luxuriant Flora, against whose magic growth only the Indian can successfully struggle.

These plains, at the first glance, offer the dazzled eye of the rash traveller who ventures on them a vast carpet of verdure embossed with flowers, furrowed by large streams; and they appear of a desperate regularity, mingling in the horizon with the azure of the sky.

It is only by degrees, when the sight grows accustomed to the picture, that, gradually mastering the details, the visitor notices here and there rather lofty hills, the escarped sides of the water courses, and a thousand unexpected accidents which agreeably break that monotony by which the eye is at first saddened, and which the lofty grass and the giant productions of the Flora completely conceal.

How can we enumerate the products of this primitive nature, which form an inextricable confusion and interlacement, describing majestic curves, producing grand arcades, and offering, in a word, the most splendid and sublime spectacle it was ever given to man to admire through its eternal contrasts and striking harmony?

Above the gigantic ferns, the *mezquite*, the cactuses, nopales, larches, and fruit-laden arbutuses, rise the mahogany tree with its oblong leaves, the *moriche*, or pine tree, the *abanijo*, whose wide leaves are shaped like a fan, the *pirijao*, from which hang enormous clusters of golden fruit, the royal palm whose stem is denuded of foliage, and balances its majestic and tufted head at the slightest breath; the Indian cane, the lemon tree, the guava, the plantain, the *chinciroya*, or intoxicating fruit, the oak, the pine tree, and the wax palm, distilling its resinous gum.

Then, there are immense fields of dahlias, flowers whiter than the snows of the Caffre de Perote or the Chimborazo, or redder than blood, immense lianas twining and circling round the stems of trees and vines overflowing with sap; and in the midst of this inextricable chaos fly, run, and crawl, in every direction, animals of all sorts and sizes, birds, quadrupeds, reptiles, amphibious, singing, crying, howling and roaring with every note of the human gamut, some mocking and menacing, others soft and melancholy.

The stags and deer bounding timidly along, with ear erect and eye on the watch, the bighorn leaping from rock to rock, and then resting motionless on the verge of a precipice, the heavy and stupid buffaloes with their sad eyes; the wild horses, whose numerous *manadas* make the earth re-echo in their purposeless chase; the alligator, with its body in the mud, and sleeping in the sun; the hideous *iguana* carelessly climbing up a tree; the puma, that maneless lion; the panther and jaguar cunningly watch their prey as it passes; the brown bear, that gluttonous honey-hunter; the grizzly, the most formidable denizen of these countries; the *cotejo*, with its venomous bite; the chameleon, whose skin reflects every hue; the green lizard, and the basilisk crawling silent and sinister beneath the leaves; the monstrous boa, the coral snake, so small and yet so terrible; the *cascabel*, the *macaurel*, and the great striped serpent.

The feathered flock sing and twitter on the branches, hidden beneath the dense foliage; the tanagers, the curassos, the chattering *lloros*, the *haras*, the flycatcher, the toucans, with their enormous beaks, the pigeons, the *trogons*, the elegant rose flamingos, the swans balancing and sporting in the streams, and the light and graceful gray squirrels leaping with unimaginable speed from creeper to creeper, from shrub to shrub.

In the highest regions of air, hovering in long circles over the prairie, the eagle of the Sierra Madre, with wide-spread wings, and the bald-headed vulture, select the prey on which they dart with the rapidity of lightning.

Then, suddenly, crushing under his horse's hoofs the sand and gold-studded pebbles sparkling in the sun, appears, as if by enchantment, an Indian, with his red skin glistening like new copper, robust limbs, gestures stamped with majesty and grace, and a commanding eye; a Navajo, Pawnee, Comanche, Apache or Sioux, who, whirling his lasso or *lakki* round his head, drives before him a herd of startled buffaloes or wild horses, or else a panther, ounce, or jaguar, that fly his presence with hoarse roars of rage and terror.

This child of the desert, so grand, so noble, and so disdainful of peril, who crosses the prairies with incredible speed, and knows its thousand turnings, is truly the king of this strange country, which he alone can traverse night and day, and whose countless dangers he does not fear. He struggles inch by inch with that European civilisation which is slowly advancing, driving him into his last intrenchments and invading his lands on all sides.

Hence, woe to the trapper or hunter who ventures to traverse these prairies alone! His bones will bleach on the plain, and his scalp adorn the shield of an Indian chief, or the mane of his horse.

Such is the sublime, striking, and terrible spectacle the Far West offers even at the present day.

The day on which we resume our story, at the moment when the sun attained its zenith, the mournful silence brooding over the desert was suddenly troubled by a slight sound, which was heard in the tufted clumps that border the Rio Gila, in one of the most unknown districts of this solitude.

The branches were cautiously parted, and amid the leaves and creepers a man displayed his face dripping with perspiration, and marked with an expression of terror and despair.

This man, after looking around him anxiously, and assuring himself that no one was on the watch, slowly disengaged his body from the grass and shrubs that conceal it, walked a few steps in the direction of the river, and fell to the ground, uttering a profound sigh.

Almost simultaneously an enormous mastiff, with a cross of the wolf and Newfoundland, bounded from the shrubs and lay down at his feet.

The man who appeared so unexpectedly on the banks of the Rio Gila was Red Cedar.[1]

His position appeared most critical, for he was alone in the desert, without weapons or provisions. We say without weapons, for the long knife passed through his deerskin girdle was almost useless to him. In the Far West, that infinite ocean of verdure, an unarmed man is a dead man!

The struggle becomes impossible for him with the numberless enemies who watch his passing, and only await a favourable moment to catch him. Red Cedar was deprived of those inestimable riches of the hunter, a rifle and a horse. Moreover he was alone!

Man, so long as he can see his fellow, even though that fellow be an enemy, does not believe himself abandoned. In his heart there remains a vague hope for which he cannot account, but which sustains and endows him with courage.

But, so soon as every human form has disappeared, and man, an imperceptible grain of dust in the desert, finds himself face to face with God, he trembles, for the feeling of his weakness is then revealed to him; he comprehends how insignificant he is before these colossal works of nature, and how insensate is the struggle he must carry on, in order to raise only a corner of the winding sheet of sand gradually settling down on him, and which assails him from all sides at once.

Red Cedar was an old wood ranger. Many times, during his excursions in the prairies, he had found himself in almost desperate situations, and he had always got out of them by his boldness, patience, and above all, his firm will.

Still, he had never before been so denuded of everything as he was at this moment.

Still, he must make up his mind to something. He arose, stifling an oath, and whistling to his dog, the only being that remained faithful in his misfortunes, he set out, not even taking the trouble to find out his direction.

In fact, what need had he to choose one? Were not all good for him, and would they not all lead within a given period to the same end—death?

He walked on thus for several hours with drooping head, seeing the bighorns and asshatas bounding round, as if mocking him. The buffaloes scarce deigned to raise their heads as he passed, and looked at him with their large melancholy eyes, as if comprehending that their implacable foe was disarmed, and they had nothing to fear from him. The elks, balanced on the points of the rocks, leaped and sported round him, while his dog, who did not at all comprehend this very novel affair, looked at its master, and seemed to ask him what it all meant.

The day passed thus, without producing the least change for the better in the squatter's position; but, on the contrary, aggravating it. At nightfall he fell on the sand, exhausted by fatigue and hunger. The sun had disappeared, and the darkness was already invading the prairie. The howling of the wild beasts could be heard as they emerged from their lair to quench their thirst and go in search of food. The disarmed squatter could not light a fire to keep them at bay.

He looked around him; a last instinct of preservation, perhaps, or the final gleam of hope, that divine spark which is never extinguished in the heart of the most unfortunate man, urged him to seek a shelter. He climbed up a tree, and after tying himself securely, through fear of a fall, if, as was very improbable, he fell asleep, he closed his eyes and sought slumber, in order to cheat for a few moments, at any rate, that hunger which devoured him, and forget his deplorable position.

But sleep does not thus visit the unfortunate, and obstinately refused to come, when most earnestly invoked. No one, who has not experienced it, can imagine the horror of a sleepless night in the desert! The darkness is peopled with mournful spectres, the wild beasts roar, the serpents twine round the trees, and at times clasp in their cold and viscous coils the wretched man half-dead with terror.

No one can say of how many centuries a minute is composed in this terrible situation, or the length of this nightmare, during which the sickly mind creates the most monstrous lucubrations. Especially when the stomach is empty, and, through that very circumstance, the brain is more easily invaded by delirium.

At sunrise the squatter breathed a sigh of relief. And yet, of what consequence to him was the appearance of light, for it was only the beginning of a day of intolerable suffering and frightful torture? But, at any rate, he could see, he could notice, what went on around him; the sun warmed and restored him some slight strength. He came down from the tree in which he had passed the night, and continued his journey.

Why did he go on? He did not know himself; still, he walked as if he had a point to reach, although he was perfectly well aware he had no help to expect from anyone, and that, on the contrary, the first face he perceived would be that of an enemy.

But the man whose mind is powerfully constituted is so. He never gives up; he struggles to the last moment, and if he cannot trust to Providence, he hopes in accident, without daring to confess it to himself.

It would be impossible for us to explain the thoughts that crossed the squatter's brain while, with uncertain step he crossed silently and sadly the vast solitudes of the prairie.

Toward midday, the heat became so intense, that, overcome by so much moral and physical suffering, he sank exhausted at the foot of a tree. He remained for a long time extended on the ground; but, at length, impelled by want, he rose with an effort, and sought for roots and herbs which might lull the hunger that gnawed his vitals. His search was long in vain, but at last he found a species of *yucca*, a pasty root somewhat like manioc, which he devoured with delight. He laid in a stock of this root, which he shared with his dog, and, after a deep draught from the stream, he prepared to continue his journey, slightly re-invigorated by this more than frugal meal; when all at once his eye emitted a flash, his face grew animated, and he murmured in a voice trembling with emotion:

"Suppose it was one!"

This is what had caused Red Cedar's exclamation. At the moment he was setting out again after looking mechanically around him, he fancied he noticed at a certain spot that the grass was closer and taller than anywhere else. This difference, visibly only to a man long accustomed to the prairie, did not escape him.

The Indians and hunters, often compelled to make a hurried journey, either to avoid a hostile ambuscade or follow up the game, are necessitated to abandon a large portion of their plunder or merchandise they carry with them for trading purposes. As they are not at all inclined to lose it, however, they make what is called in trapper language a *cache*.

It is effected in the following way.

They begin by spreading blankets and buffalo skins round the spot where they intend making the cache: then they remove large sods of grass, square, round, or oval, and dig out the soil, being careful to lay it on the blankets or skins. When the hole is deep enough, the sides are lined with buffalo hides, for fear of damp, and the articles are laid in it: the soil is then put in again, and the grass laid over it, which is watered to make it grow, and the rest of the earth is carried to the river, into which every particle is thrown, in order to hide any trace of the cache, which is so closely concealed, that a man must have an extraordinary skilful eye to discover one, and he often only finds old caches which have been ransacked and have nothing left in them.

The objects placed in the caches will keep for five or six years without deteriorating. How many things concealed in this way have been lost through the death of their owners who bear with them in the tomb the secret of the spot where they have deposited their wealth!

We have said, that the squatter imagined he had found such a cache. In his position, such a discovery was of inestimable value to him: it might offer him articles of primary necessity he wanted, and restore him, as it were, to life, by supplying him with means to recommence his existence of hunting, plunder, and vagabondage.

He stood for some minutes with his eye fixed on the spot where he suspected the cache, his mind agitated by undefinable feelings. At length he moderated his emotion, and his heart palpitating with fear and hope, carefully laid his blanket and buffalo robe by the cache to hold the earth, with that honesty innate in men accustomed to a prairie life, who, though they may be bandits and plunder the property of others unscrupulously, still consider it a point of honour not to squander it, or deprive the legal owner of anything but what is absolutely necessary to themselves; then he knelt down and with his knife removed a sod of grass.

It is impossible to describe the quiver and anxiety of this man when he first plunged his knife into the ground. He then carefully removed all the turf that seemed to him to form the outline of the cache. This first task ended, he rested for a moment to take breath, and at the same time to indulge in that emotion so full of pleasure and pain felt on accomplishing an act from which life or death depends.

After a quarter of an hour, he passed his hand over his dank forehead, and set to work resolutely, digging up the ground with his knife, and removing it with his hands to the blanket. It was really a rude task, especially for a man exhausted by fatigue and weakened by privations. Several times he was compelled to stop through the exhaustion of his strength: the work advanced slowly, and no sign as yet corroborated the squatter's belief.

Several times he was on the point of abandoning this vain search, but it was his only chance of safety; there alone, if he succeeded, would he find the means to become once more a wood ranger: hence he clung to this last plank of safety which chance offered him, with all the energy of despair, that Archimedean lever, which finds nothing impossible.

Still, the unhappy wretch had been digging for a long time; a large hole was gaping before him, but nothing offered him a prospect of success; hence, in spite of the invincible energy of his character, he felt despair invading his mind once again. A tear of impotent rage brooded in his fever-inflamed eyelids, and he hurled his knife into the hole, uttering an oath, and giving heaven a bitter look of defiance.

The knife sprung back with a metallic sound; the squatter seized it and examined it closely—the point was broken clean off.

He began digging again frenziedly with his nails, like a wild beast, disdaining the use of his knife any longer, and he soon laid bare a buffalo hide. Instead of lifting this skin at once, which doubtless covered all the treasures whose possession he coveted, he began gazing at it with terrible anxiety.

Red Cedar had not deceived himself: he had really discovered a cache. But what did it contain? Perhaps it had already been ransacked, and was empty. When he had only one movement to make, in order to assure himself, he hesitated—he was afraid!

During the three hours he had been toiling to reach this point, he had formed so many chimeras, that he instinctively feared to see them vanish suddenly, and fall back rudely into the frightful reality which held him in its iron claws.

For a long time he hesitated in this way; at length suddenly forming a resolve, with hands trembling with emotion, palpitating heart and bloodshot eye, he tore away the buffalo skin, with a movement rapid as thought. He felt dazzled, and uttered a roar like a wild beast—he had hit upon a thorough hunter's cache!

It contained iron traps of every description, rifles, double and single pistols, powder horns, bags filled with bullets, knives, and the thousand objects suitable for wood rangers.

Red Cedar felt himself born again: a sudden change took place in him, he became again the implacable and indomitable being he had been prior to the catastrophe, without fear or remorse, ready to recommence the struggle with all nature, and laughing at the perils and snares he might meet with on the road.

He selected the best rifle, two pairs of double-barrelled pistols, and a knife with a blade fifteen inches in length. He also took the necessary harness for a horse; two powder horns, a bag of bullets, and an elk skin game pouch richly embroidered in the Indian fashion, containing a tinderbox and all the necessaries for bivouacking. He also found pipes and tobacco, which he eagerly clutched, for his greatest privation had been the inability to smoke.

When he had loaded himself with all he thought he needed, he restored all to its primitive condition, and skilfully removed the traces which might have revealed to others the cache which had been so useful to himself. This duty of an honest man performed, Red Cedar threw his rifle over his shoulder, whistled to the dog, and went off hurriedly muttering:

"Ah, ah! You fancied you had forced the boar in its lair; we shall see whether it can take its revenge."

By what concourse of extraordinary events was the squatter, whom we saw enter the desert at the head of a numerous and resolute troop, reduced to such a state of urgent peril?

[1] See the Trail-hunter.

CHAPTER II.

THE AMBUSCADE.

We said at the close of the "Trail-Hunter," that another band entered the desert at the heels of the troop commanded by Red Cedar. This band, guided by Valentine Guillois, was composed of Curumilla, General Ibañez, Don Miguel Zarate, and his son. These men were not seeking a placer, but vengeance.

On reaching the Indian territory, the Frenchman looked inquiringly round him, and stopping his horse, turned to Don Miguel.

"Before going further," he said, "I think we had better hold a council, and settle a plan of campaign from which we will not deviate."

"My friend," the hacendero answered "you know that all our hopes rest on you: act, therefore, as you think advisable."

"Good," Valentine said; "this is the hour when the heat compels all living creatures in the desert to seek shelter under the shade of the trees, so we will halt; the spot where we now are is admirably suited for a day's bivouac."

"Be it so," the hacendero answered laconically.

The horsemen dismounted, and removed their horses' bits, so that the poor creatures might obtain a little nourishment by nibbling the scanty and parched grass which grew on this ungrateful soil. The spot was really admirably chosen: it was a large clearing traversed by one of those many nameless streams which intersect the prairie in every direction, and which, after a course of a few miles, go to swell the rivers in which they are lost. A dense dome of foliage offered the travellers an indispensable shelter against the burning beams of a vertical sun. Although it was about midday, the air in the clearing, refreshed by the exhalations of the stream, invited them to enjoy that day sleep so well called the siesta.

But the travellers had something more serious to attend to than sleep. As soon as all the precautions were taken against any possible attack, Valentine

sat down at the foot of a tree, making his friends a sign to join him. The three whites immediately acquiesced, while Curumilla, according to his wont, went rifle in hand to the skirt of the clearing, to watch over the safety of all. After a few moments' reflection, Valentine took the word:

"Caballeros," he said, "the moment has arrived for a frank explanation: we are at present on the enemy's territory; the desert extends for more than two thousand miles around us. We shall have to fight not only with the white men or redskins we meet on our road, but also contend with hunger, thirst, and wild beasts of every description. Do not try to give my words any other meaning than that I myself attach to them. You have known me a long time, Don Miguel, and the friendship I have vowed to you."

"I know it, and thank you," Don Miguel said, gratefully.

"In short," Valentine continued, "no obstacle, of whatever nature it may be, will be powerful enough to check me in the mission I have undertaken."

"I am convinced of it, my friend."

"Good, but I am an old wood ranger; desert life, with its privations and perils, is perfectly familiar to me; the trail I am about to follow will only be child's play to me and the brave Indian, my companion."

"What are you coming to?" Don Miguel interrupted him anxiously.

"To this," the hunter frankly answered. "You caballeros, accustomed to a life of luxury and ease, will perchance not be able to endure the rude existence to which you are about to be condemned: in the first moment of grief you bravely rushed, without reflecting, in pursuit of the ravishers of your daughter, and without calculating the consequences of your deed."

"That is true," Don Miguel murmured.

"It is, therefore, my duty," Valentine went on, "to warn you: do not be afraid to withdraw; but be frank with me as I am with you: Curumilla and myself will suffice to carry out the task we have undertaken. The Mexican frontier stretches out about ten miles behind you; return to it, and leave to us the care of restoring your child to you, if you do not feel capable of braving, without giving way, the innumerable dangers that menace us. A sick man, by delaying our pursuit, would not only render it impossible for us to succeed, but might expose us all to the risk of being killed and scalped.

Hence, reflect seriously, my friend, and putting away any question of self-esteem, give me an answer that allows me full liberty of action."

During this species of sermon, whose justice he recognised in his heart, Don Miguel had remained with his head bowed on his chest, and with frowning eyebrows. When Valentine ceased, the hacendero drew himself up and took the hunter's hand, which he pressed warmly, as he said—

"My friend, what you have said to me it was your duty to say: your remarks do not at all offend me, because they were dictated by the friendship you bear me. The observations you have made to me, I had already made to myself; but, whatever may happen, my resolution is immovable. I shall not turn back till I have found my daughter again."

"I knew that such would be your reply, Don Miguel," the hunter said. "A father cannot consent to abandon his daughter in the hands of bandits, without attempting all means to deliver her; still, it was my duty to make the remark I did. Hence we will not speak about it again, but prepare on the spot to draw up our plans of action."

"Oh, oh," the general said, with a laugh, "I am anxious to hear that."

"You will excuse me, general," Valentine answered; "but the war we carry on is completely different from that of civilised people; in the desert craft alone can triumph."

"Well, let us be crafty: I ask nothing better, especially as, with the slight forces we have at our disposal, I do not see how we could act otherwise."

"That is true," the hunter continued, "There are only five of us; but, believe me, five determined men are more dangerous than might be supposed, and I soon hope to prove it to our enemies."

"Well spoken, friend," Don Miguel said, gladly. "*Cuerpo de Dios*, those accursed Gringos shall soon realise that fact."

"We have," Valentine continued, "allies who will second us valiantly when the moment arrives: the Comanche nation proudly calls itself the 'Queen of the Prairies,' and its warriors are terrible enemies. Unicorn will not fail us, with his tribe; and we have also a friend in the enemy's camp in the Chief of the Coras."

"What are you saying?" the General gaily remarked. "Why, our success is insured."

Valentine shook his head.

"No," he said; "Red Cedar has allies too: the Pirates of the Prairies and the Apaches will join him, I feel convinced."

"Perhaps so," Don Miguel observed.

"Doubt is not admissible under the circumstances; the scalp hunter is too well used to a desert life not to try and get all the chances of success on his side."

"But, if that happen, it will be a general war," the hacendero said.

"Doubtless," Valentine continued; "that is what I wish to arrive at. Two days' march from where we now are there is a Navajo village; I have done some slight services to Yellow Wolf, the principal chief; we must proceed to him before Red Cedar attempts to see him, and insure his alliance at all risks. The Navajos are prudent and courageous warriors."

"Do you not fear the consequences of this delay?"

"Once for all, caballeros," Valentine answered, "remember that in the country where we now are the straight line is ever the longest."

The three men bowed resignedly.

"Yellow Wolf's alliance is indispensable to us: with his support it will be easy for us to—"

The sudden appearance of Curumilla interrupted the hunter. "What is the matter now?" he asked him.

"Listen!" the chief answered laconically.

The four men anxiously stopped talking.

"By Heavens!" Valentine said, as he hurriedly arose, "What is the matter here?"

And, followed by his comrades, he stepped into the thicket. The Mexicans, whose senses were dulled, had heard nothing at the first moment; but the noise which had struck the hunter's practised ear now reached them. It was

the furious galloping of several horses, whose hoofs re-echoed on the ground with a noise resembling that of thunder. Suddenly, ferocious yells were heard, mingled with shots.

The five travellers, hidden behind trees, peered out, and soon noticed a man mounted on a horse lathered with foam, who was pursued by some thirty mounted Indians.

"To horse!" Valentine commanded in a low voice. "We cannot let this man be assassinated."

"Hem!" the general muttered, "We are playing a dangerous game, for they are numerous."

"Do you not see that the man is of our own colour?" Valentine went on.

"That is true," said Don Miguel. "Whatever happens, we must not allow him to be massacred in cold blood by those ferocious Indians."

In the meanwhile, the pursuers and pursued had come nearer the spot where the hunters were ambushed behind the trees. The man the Indians were so obstinately following drew himself up haughtily in his saddle, and, while galloping at full speed, turned from time to time to fire his rifle into the thick of his enemies. At each discharge a warrior fell; his comrades then uttered fearful yells, and answered by a shower of arrows and bullets. But the stranger shook his head disdainfully, and continued his career.

"*Caspita!*" the general said with admiration; "That is a brave fellow."

"On my soul," Don Pablo exclaimed, "it would be a pity to see him killed."

"We must save him," Don Miguel could not refrain from saying.

Valentine smiled gently.

"I will try it," he said. "To horse!"

Each leaped into the saddle.

"Now," Valentine continued, "remain invisible behind the shrubs. These Indians are Apaches; when they come within range, you will all fire without showing yourselves."

Each set his rifle, and held in readiness. There was a moment of supreme expectation, and the hunters' hearts beat violently.

The Indians still approached, bowed over the necks of their panting steeds, brandishing their weapons furiously, and uttering at intervals their formidable war cry. They came up at headlong speed, preceded about one hundred yards by the man they were pursuing, whom they must soon catch up, for his wearied horse stumbled continually, and was sensibly diminishing its speed.

At length the stranger passed with lightning speed the thicket which concealed those who were about to try a diversion in his favour, that might ruin them.

"Attention," Valentine commanded in a low voice. The rifles were lowered on the Apaches.

"Aim carefully," the Trail-hunter added. "Every bullet must, kill its man."

A minute elapsed—a minute an age in length.

"Fire!" the hunter suddenly shouted; "Fire now."

Five shots were discharged, and the same number of Apaches fell.

CHAPTER III.

AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE OF THE READER.

On this unforeseen attack the Apaches uttered a yell of terror; but, before they could pull up their horses, a second discharge made four fresh victims in their ranks. A mad terror then seized on the Indians, and they turned and fled in every direction; ten minutes later they had disappeared. The hunters did not dream for a moment of pursuing them; but Curumilla had dismounted, and crawling out to the scene of action, conscientiously finished and scalped the Apaches who had fallen under his comrades' bullets. At the same time he lassoed a riderless horse which passed a few paces from him, and then rejoined his friends.

"To what tribe do those dogs belong?" Valentine asked him.

"The Buffalo," Curumilla made answer.

"Oh, oh," the hunter went on; "we were in luck's way then. Stanapat, I believe, is the chief of the Buffalo tribe."

Curumilla nodded an assent; and after hobbling the horse he had lassoed by the side of the others, quietly seated himself on the river bank.

The stranger had been quite as much surprised as the Apaches by the unforeseen help that had so providentially arrived at the moment when he believed himself hopelessly lost. At the sound of the firing he checked his horse, and, after a moment's hesitation, slowly turned back.

Valentine watched all his movements. The stranger, on reaching the thicket, dismounted, pulled back with a firm hand the brambles that barred his way, and boldly proceeded to the clearing where the hunters were ambushed. This man, whom the reader already knows, was no other than the person Red Cedar called Don Melchior, and of whom he seemed so terribly afraid.

When he found himself in the presence of the Mexicans, Don Melchior took off his hat and bowed courteously; the others politely returned his salute.

"*Viva Dios!*" he exclaimed. "I do not know who you are, caballeros; but I thank you sincerely for your interference just now. I owe my life to you."

"In the Far West," Valentine answered nobly, "an invisible bond connects all the individuals of one colour, who only form a single family."

"Yes," the stranger said, with a thoughtful accent, "it should be so; but unfortunately," he added, shaking his head in denial, "the worthy principles you enunciate, caballero, are but very slightly put in practice: but I ought not at this moment to complain of them being neglected, as it is to your generous intervention that I owe my being among the living."

The listeners bowed, and the stranger went on:

"Be kind enough to tell me who you are, gentlemen, that I may retain in my heart names which will ever be dear to me."

Valentine fixed on the man who thus spoke a piercing glance, that seemed to be trying to read his most secret thoughts. The stranger smiled sadly.

"Pardon," he then said, "any apparent bitterness in my words: I have suffered much, and, in spite of myself, gloomy thoughts often rise from my heart to my lips."

"Man is sent on the earth to suffer," Valentine gravely replied. "Each of us has his cross to bear here: Don Miguel de Zarate, his son and General Ibañez are a proof of my assertion."

At the name of Don Miguel, a vivid blush purpled the stranger's cheeks, and his eye flashed, despite all his efforts to remain unmoved.

"I have often heard of Don Miguel de Zarate," he said, with a bow. "I have been informed of the dangers he has incurred—dangers from which he only escaped by the aid of a man—an honest hunter."

"That hunter is before you," Don Miguel said. "Alas! We have other and greater dangers still to incur."

The stranger looked at him attentively for an instant—then stepped forward, and crossed his arms on his chest.

"Listen!" he said, in a deep voice. "It was truly Heaven that inspired you to come to my help—for from this moment I devote myself, body and soul, to your service; and I belong to you as the haft does to the blade. I know the reason that compelled you to break up all old habits to visit the frightful solitudes of the Far West."

"You know it?" the hunter exclaimed, in surprise.

"Everything," the stranger firmly answered. "I know the treachery which cast you into the power of your enemies. I know, too, that your daughter has been carried off by Red Cedar."

"Who are you, then, to be so well informed?" Valentine asked.

A sad smile played for a second round the stranger's lips.

"Who am I?" he said in a melancholy voice. "What matters, since I wish to serve you?"

"Still, as we answered your questions, we have a right to expect the same from you."

"That is just," the stranger said, "and you shall be satisfied. I am the man with the hundred names: in Mexico I am called Don Luis Arroyal, partner in the firm of Simpson, Carvalho, and Company—in the northern provinces of Mexico, where I have long rendered myself popular by foolish squandering, El Gambusino—on the coasts of the United States, and in the

Gulf of Mexico, where I sometimes command a cutter, and chase the slavers, I am called the Unknown—among the North Americans, the Son of Blood—but my real name, and the one men give me who know the little about me I think proper to tell them—it is la Venganza (Vengeance). Are you satisfied now, gentlemen?"

No one replied. The hunters had all heard of this extraordinary man, about whom the strangest rumours were rife in Mexico, the United States, and even on the prairie. By the side of heroic deeds, and acts of kindness deserving all praise, he was branded with crimes of unheard-of cruelty and unexampled ferocity. He inspired a mysterious terror in the whites and redskins, who equally feared to come in contact with him, though no proof had ever yet been brought forward of the contradictory stories told about him.

Valentine and his comrades had frequently heard talk of Bloodson; but this was the first time they had found themselves face to face with him; and, in spite of themselves, they were surprised to see so noble and handsome a man. Valentine was the first to regain his coolness.

"For a long time," he said, "your name has been familiar to me. I was anxious to know you. The opportunity offers, and I am pleased with it, as I shall be at length able to judge you, which was hitherto impossible, through the exaggerated stories told about you. You say that you can be useful to us in the enterprise we are meditating, and we accept your offer as frankly as you make it. On an expedition like this, the help of a brave man must not be despised—the more so, as the man we wish to force in his lair is dangerous."

"More than you imagine," the stranger interrupted him in a gloomy voice. "I have been struggling with Red Cedar for twenty years, and have not yet managed to crush him. Ah! He is a rough adversary! I know it, for I am his most implacable enemy, and have in vain tried all the means at my command to take an exemplary vengeance on him."

While uttering these words, the stranger's face had assumed a livid tint; his features were contracted, and he seemed to be suffering from an extraordinary emotion. Valentine looked at him for an instant with a mingled feeling of pity and sympathy. The hunter, who had suffered so

much, knew, like all wounded souls, how to feel for the grief of men who, like himself, bore their adversity worthily.

"We will help you," he said, as he cordially offered him his hand, "Instead of five, we shall be six, to fight him."

The stranger's eye flashed forth a strange gleam. He squeezed the offered hand, and answered in a dull voice, but with an expression impossible to render:

"We shall be fifty; for I have comrades in the desert."

Valentine bent a joyous glance on his companions at this news, which announced to him a valuable support, that he was far from anticipating.

"But fifty men are not sufficient to contend against this demon, who is associated with the Pirates of the Prairies, and allied with the most dangerous Indians."

"Do not trouble yourself about that," Valentine observed. "We will also ally ourselves with Indian tribes. But I swear to you that I shall not quit the prairie till I have seen the last drop of that villain's blood run out."

"May heaven hear you!" the stranger muttered. "If my horse were not so tired, I would ask you to follow me; for we have not a moment to lose if we wish to force the wild beast. Unfortunately, we are compelled to wait some hours."

Curumilla stepped forward. "Here is a horse for my pale brother," he said, as he pointed to the animal he had lassoed a few minutes previously.

The stranger uttered a cry of joy.

"To horse!" he loudly exclaimed, "To horse!"

"Where are you taking us?" Valentine asked.

"To join my comrades in the hiding place I have selected for them. Then we will arrange the means we must employ to destroy our common enemy."

"Good," Valentine remarked, "that is excellent reasoning. Are we far from the place?"

"No, twenty to twenty-five miles at the most; we shall be there by sunset."

"We will start then," Valentine added.

The gentlemen leaped into their saddles, and started at a gallop in the direction of the mountains. A few minutes later, the spot had returned to its usual calmness and silence. Nothing was left to prove that man had passed that way, save a few mutilated corpses over which the vultures were already beginning to circle with hoarse croaking before they settled upon them.

CHAPTER IV.

RED CEDAR AT BAY.

The six men rode one after the other, following one of those inextricable tracks made by the wild beasts, which cross the desert in every direction. Bloodson served as guide to the little party, followed immediately by Curumilla. The Indian chief, with the genius peculiar to his race, advanced silently as usual, but casting right and left peering glances, which nothing escaped, and which render the redskins peculiar beings.

All at once Curumilla dismounted, and bent over the ground, uttering an exclamation of surprise. This was so extraordinary a fact, and so contrary to the habits of the Ulmen of the Araucanos, that Valentine hurried up to enquire what had happened.

"What's the matter with you, chief?" he asked, as soon as he came up with him.

"My brother can look," Curumilla said simply.

Valentine dismounted and stooped to the ground. The Indian showed him a half-effaced footstep, which still bore, however, the shape of a horseshoe. The hunter looked at it for some time with the utmost attention, then began walking cautiously in the direction the hoof marks seemed to go. Others soon presented themselves to him. His comrades had stopped, and silently awaited his explanation.

"Well!" Don Miguel at length said.

"There is no doubt possible," Valentine answered, as if speaking to himself, "Red Cedar has passed along here."

"What," the general observed, "do you believe it?"

"I am sure of it. The chief has just shown me the perfectly formed mark of his horse's hoof."

"Oh! Oh!" Don Miguel objected, "a horseshoe is a very slight sign; all are alike."

"Yes, as one tree resembles the other," Valentine answered quickly. "Listen: the chief has observed that the squatter, I know not by what accident, is mounted on a horse shod on all four feet, while the men composing his band have theirs only shod on the front feet; in addition, this horse in stepping throws back its feet, which causes the mark to be indistinct."

"In truth," Bloodson remarked, "the observation is correct, and only an Indian could make it; but Red Cedar is at the head of a numerous party, which cannot have passed along this way, or we should notice the trail."

"That is true," the general said; "what do you conclude from that?"

"A very simple thing; it is probable that Red Cedar has, for reasons unknown to us, left his men encamped some miles from here, and has ridden this way alone."

"I have it," Bloodson said; "not far from the spot where we now are, there is a nest of pirates, and Red Cedar has probably gone to ask their assistance in case of need."

"That's it," Valentine added; "the track is quite fresh, so our man cannot be far from us."

"We must pursue him," Don Pablo quickly said, who had, till this moment, maintained a gloomy silence.

"What do you say, gentlemen?" Valentine asked, turning to the rest.

"Pursue him," they answered unanimously.

Then, without further deliberation, they began following the trail, under the guidance of Valentine and Curumilla.

What the hunter stated had really happened. Red Cedar, when he entered the desert, after installing his band in a strong position, remounted his horse and set out, warning all his comrades that he should return within four days at the most, and leaving them temporarily under the orders of the monk.

Red Cedar did not fancy himself so closely pursued by Valentine, and hence had taken but slight precautions to conceal his track.

As he proceeded alone, in spite of the trail found by Curumilla, he would doubtless have escaped pursuit, had not a dog followed him from camp without his knowledge. The track left by that animal served as a guide to the pursuers at the moment when they had completely lost his trail. Valentine and Curumilla had dismounted, and were advancing slowly and examining the sand and soil over which they passed.

"Take care," the Trail-hunter said to his comrades, who followed him step by step; "do not come on so quickly; when picking up a trail you must mind where you put your foot down, and not look on both sides. Stay," he added, suddenly stooping and stopping Don Pablo; "here are traces you were just about to efface. Let us have a look at this: they are the marks of the horseshoe we have lost for some time. Red Cedar's horse has a peculiar way of putting down its feet, which I guarantee to recognise at the first glance. Hum, hum," he continued, "now I know where to find him."

"You are sure of it?" Don Miguel interrupted.

"It is not difficult, as you shall see."

"Forward, forward!" Don Pablo and the general shouted.

"Caballeros," the hunter observed, "be good enough to remember that on the prairies you must never raise your voice. The branches have eyes and the leaves ears here. Now, to remount and cross the river."

The six men, combined in a compact body, in order to afford a greater resistance to the current, which was very powerful at this spot, forced their horses into the Gila. The passage was executed without any obstacle, and the horses soon landed on the other bank.

"Now," Valentine said, "open your eyes, for the hunt begins here."

Don Pablo and the general remained on the bank to guard the horses, and the remainder of the party set out, forming a line of tirailleurs sixty feet

long. Valentine had recommended his companions to concentrate their researches on a space of one hundred and fifty yards at most, in a semicircle, so as to reach an almost impenetrable thicket, situated at the foot of the hill by the riverside.

Each man advanced cautiously, with his gun thrust forward, looking on all sides at once, and not leaving a bush, a pebble, or a blade of grass unexamined. Suddenly Curumilla imitated the cry of the jay, the signal for assembling in the event of any important discovery. All rushed toward the spot whence the signal came; in the midst of the lofty grass, the ground was trampled and the lower branches broken.

"Red Cedar's horse was tied up here," Valentine said. "Attention! We are about to catch the bear in his den. You know with what sort of men we have to deal; be prudent: if not, there will soon be broken bones and punctured skins among us."

Without adding a word further, the hunter again took the head of the file. He carefully parted the bushes, and unhesitatingly entered the thicket. At this moment the furious barking of a dog could be heard.

"Hilloh!" a rough voice shouted: "What's the matter, Black? Did not the redskins have a sufficient lesson last night, that they want to try it again?"

These words were followed by the grating sound of a rifle being cocked. Valentine made his comrades a sign to stop, and boldly advanced.

"They are not Indians," he said, in a loud and firm voice: "it is I, Koutonepi, an old acquaintance, who wishes to have a chat with you."

"I have nothing to say to you," Red Cedar, still invisible, answered. "I know not why you have followed me to this place: we never were such good friends, I fancy, that you should desire the pleasure of my company."

"That's true," the hunter remarked: "you may be fully assured that we were always very bad friends: but no matter; call off your dog."

"If your intentions are good, and you are alone, you can advance, and will be received as a friend."

And he whistled to his dog, which rejoined him.

"As regards my intentions, I can assure you that they are good," the Trail-hunter replied, as he drew back the branches.

He suddenly found himself in front of Red Cedar, who was standing, rifle in hand, in the narrow entrance of a grotto. The two men were scarce fifteen yards apart, examining each other suspiciously. This is, however, the custom of the prairies, where all meetings are the same: distrust always holds the first place.

"Stop," the squatter shouted. "For what we have to say to each other, we need not be ear to ear. What do we care if the birds and serpents hear our conversation? Come, speak! What have you come here for? Empty your wallet, and make haste about it; for I have no time to listen to your stories."

"Hum!" the other answered; "my stories are as good as yours, and perhaps you would have done better by spending your time in listening to them, rather than acting as you have done."

"What do you mean?" Red Cedar said, as he struck the ground with the butt of his rifle: "You know I am not fond of sermons. I am a free hunter, and act as I think proper."

"Come, come," the huntsman went on in a conciliatory tone, while quietly drawing nearer; "do not take up that tone: all may be arranged. Hang it, what is the question, if we come to that? Only about a woman you have carried off!"

The bandit listened to Valentine without attaching much importance to his remarks. For some instants his attentive ear appeared to be catching vague sounds; his eye sounded the depth of the woods; his nostrils dilated; and all the instincts of the wild beast were revealed. A presentiment told him that he was incurring some unknown danger.

On his side, the hunter watched the slightest movements of his adversary: not one of the changes on his face had escaped him, and though apparently unmoved, he kept on his guard.

"Traitor!" the squatter suddenly shouted, as he raised his rifle to his shoulder; "You shall die!"

"What a fellow you are!" Valentine retorted, as he dodged behind a tree. "Not yet, if you please."

"Surrender, Red Cedar!" Don Miguel shouted, as he appeared, followed by the stranger and Curumilla: "Surrender!"

"What do you say? I surrender! First try and force me to do so. I swear that I will kill you first," the bandit answered with a terrible accent: "I hold your life in my hands. Are you aware of that?"

"Come," Valentine retorted, "don't be so rough! There are four of us, and I suppose you do not intend to kill us all."

"For the last time, will you retire?" the bandit said, with a furious gesture.

"Come, come," Bloodson shouted in a loud voice, "do not attempt any useless resistance. Red Cedar, your hour has arrived."

At the sound of this voice, the bandit's face was suddenly covered by a livid pallor, and a convulsive tremor passed over his limbs.

"Look out, he is going to fire!" Valentine shouted.

Two shots were fired so closely together, that they sounded as one. The squatter's gun, shattered in his hands, fell to the ground. Valentine, who wished to capture the bandit alive, could only hit on this way of turning his bullet, which, in fact, whistled harmlessly past his ear.

"*Con mil demonios!*" the scalp hunter yelled, as he rushed madly into the grotto, closely followed by his enemies, with the exception of Curumilla.

There they found him armed with his pistols, like a boar tracked to its lair. The bandit struggled with all the frenzy of despair, not yet giving up the hope of escape. His dog, standing by his side, with bloodshot eyes and open jaws, only awaited a signal from its master to rush on the assailants. The squatter suddenly fired four shots, but too hurriedly to wound anybody. He then hurled the useless weapons at his foemen's heads, and, bounding like a panther, disappeared at the end of the grotto, shouting with a sinister grin:—

"I am not caught yet!"

During all the incidents of this scene, the bandit had preserved his coolness; calculating the chances of safety left him, so that he might profit by them immediately. While occupying his enemies, he remembered that the grotto had a second outlet.

Suddenly he stopped, uttering a ghastly oath: he had forgotten that the swollen Gila at the moment inundated this issue. The villain walked several times round the grotto with the impotent rage of a wild beast that has fallen into a trap. He heard, in the windings of the cavern, the footsteps of his pursuers drawing closer. The sands were counted for him. One minute later, and he was lost.

"Malediction!" he said, "All fails me at once."

He must escape at all risks, and try to reach his horse, which was fastened up a short distance off on a small islet of sand, which the water, continually rising, threatened soon to cover. The bandit took a parting look round, bounded forward, and plunged into the abyss of waters, which hoarsely closed over him.

Valentine and his comrades almost immediately appeared, bearing torches; but the bandit had wholly disappeared. All was silent in the grotto.

"The villain has committed suicide," the hacendero said.

The hunter shook his head.

"I doubt it," he said.

"Listen!" the stranger hurriedly interrupted.

A shot echoed through the cave, and the three men rushed forward. This is what had happened:—

Instead of following his comrades, the Indian chief, certain that the bandit had not been such a fool as to enter a cave without an outlet, preferred watching the banks of the river, in case Red Cedar tried to escape in that way. The chiefs previsions were correct. Red Cedar, as we have seen, attempted to fly by the second outlet of the grotto. After swimming for some distance, the squatter landed on a small islet, and almost immediately disappeared in a dense clump of trees.

Not one of his movements had escaped Curumilla, who was hidden behind a projecting rock. Red Cedar reappeared on horseback. The Indian chief took a careful aim at him, and at the moment the animal put its hoof in the water it fell back, dragging down its rider with it. Curumilla had put a bullet through the horse's skull. Red Cedar rose with the rapidity of lightning, and

dashed into the water. The hunters looked at each other for a moment in disappointment.

"Bah!" Valentine said, philosophically. "That bandit is not to be feared now; we have clipped his nails."

"That is true," said Bloodson; "but they will grow again!"

CHAPTER V.

THE GROTTO.

We will now resume our narrative at the point where we left it at the end of our first chapter, and rejoin Red Cedar, who thanks to the weapons found in the cache, had regained all his ferocity and was already dreaming of revenge.

The bandit's position, however, was still very perplexing, and would have terrified any man whose mind was not so strong as his own. However large the desert may be—however perfect a man's knowledge may be of the prairie refuges—it is impossible for him, if alone, to escape for any length of time the search of persons who have an interest in catching him.

This had just been proved to Red Cedar in a peremptory way: he did not conceal from himself the numberless difficulties that surrounded him, and could not dream of regaining his encampment. The enemies on his track would not fail to catch him, and this time they would not allow him to escape so easily.

This position was intolerable, and it must be put an end to at all risks. But Red Cedar was not the man to remain crushed by the blow that had struck him: he drew himself together again, in order to prepare his vengeance promptly. Like all evil natures, Red Cedar regarded as an insult all attempts persons made to escape from his perfidity. At this moment he had a rude account to settle with whites and redskins. Alone as he was, he could not think of rejoining his comrades and attacking the enemies, who would have crushed him under their heel like a venomous serpent: he needed allies.

His hesitation was but short, and his plan was formed in a few minutes. He resolved to carry out the project for which he had left his comrades, and proceeded toward an Apache village, situate a short distance off.

Still, he did not intend to go there, for the present at least, for, after a rapid walk of more than three hours, he suddenly turned to his right, and retiring from the banks of the Gila, which he had hitherto followed, he left the road to the village, and entered a mountainous region, differing entirely in its character from the plains he had hitherto traversed.

The ground rose perceptibly, and was intersected by streams that ran down to the Gila. Clumps of the ferns, drawing closer together, served as the advanced guard of a gloomy virgin forest on the horizon. The landscape gradually assumed a more savage and abrupt aspect, and spurs of the imposing Sierra Madre displayed here and there their desolate peaks.

Red Cedar walked along with that light and springy step peculiar to men accustomed to cover long distances on foot, looking neither to the right nor left, and apparently following a direction he was perfectly acquainted with. Smiling at his thoughts, he did not seem to notice that the sun had almost entirely disappeared behind the imposing mass of the virgin forest, and that night was falling with extreme rapidity.

The howling of the wild beasts could be heard echoing in the depths of the ravines, mingled with the miauwling of the carcajous and the barking of the prairie wolves—bands of which were already prowling at a short distance from the bandit. But he, apparently insensible to all these hints about getting a resting place for the night, continued his advance in the mountains, among which he had entered some time previously.

On reaching a species of crossroad, if such a term can be employed in speaking of a country where no roads exist, he stopped and looked all around him. After a few moments' hesitation, he buried himself in a narrow path running between two hills, and boldly climbed up a very steep ascent. At length, after a fatiguing climb, that lasted nearly three-quarters of an hour, he reached a spot where the path, suddenly interrupted, only presented a gulf, in the bottom of which the murmurs of invisible waters could be just heard.

The precipice was about twenty yards in width, and over it lay an enormous log, serving as a bridge. At the end of this was the entrance of a natural grotto, in which the flames of a fire flashed up at intervals. Red Cedar stopped—a smile of satisfaction curled his thin lips at the sight of the flames reflected on the walls of the grotto.

"They are there," he said, in a low voice, and as if speaking to himself.

He then put his fingers in his mouth, and imitated with rare skill the soft and cadenced note of the *maukawis*. An instant after, a similar cry was heard from the grotto; and Red Cedar clapped his hands thrice.

The gigantic shadow of a man, reflected by the light of the fire, appeared in the entrance of the grotto, and a rude and powerful voice shouted in the purest Castilian—

"Who goes there?"

"A friend," the bandit answered.

"Your name, *caray*," the stranger continued; "there are no friends in the desert at this hour of the night."

"Oh, oh!" Red Cedar continued; bursting into a hoarse laugh, "I see that Don Pedro Sandoval is as prudent as ever."

"Man or demon, as you know me so well," the stranger said, in a somewhat softer tone, "tell me what your name is, I say once again, or, by heaven, I'll lodge a couple of slugs in your skull. So do not let me run the risk of killing a friend."

"Come, come, calm yourself, hidalgo; did you not recognise my voice, and have you so short a memory that you have already forgotten Red Cedar."

"Red Cedar!" the Spaniard repeated in surprise, "then you are not hung yet, my worthy friend?"

"Not yet; to my knowledge, gossip. I hope to prove it to you ere long."

"Come across, in the devil's name; do not let us go on talking at this distance."

The stranger left the bridgehead, where he had stationed himself, probably to dispute the passage in case of necessity, and drew off, uncocking his rifle.

Not waiting for a second invitation, Red Cedar bounded on to the tree and crossed it in a few seconds; he affectionately shook the Spaniard's hand, and then they entered the grotto together.

This grotto or cavern, whichever you please to call it, was wide and lofty, divided into several compartments by large frames of reeds, rising to a height of at least eight feet, and forming ten rooms or cells, five on either side the grotto, beginning at about twenty paces from the entrance—a space left free to act as kitchen and dining room. The entrance to each cell was formed by a zarapé, which descended to the ground after the fashion of a curtain door.

At the extremity of the passage that ran between the two rows of cells was another compartment, serving as storehouses; and beyond this a natural passage ran through the mountain, and terminated almost a league off, in an almost inaccessible ravine.

All proved that this grotto was not a bivouac chosen for a night or two, but an abode adopted for many years past, in which all the comfort had been collected which it is possible to procure in these regions remote from any centre of population.

Round the fire, over which an enormous quarter of elk meat was roasting, nine men, armed to the teeth, were sitting and smoking in silence. On Red Cedar's entrance, they rose and came up to shake his hand eagerly, and with a species of respect. These men wore the garb of hunters or wood rangers: their marked features, their ferocious and crafty faces, on which the traces of the most disgraceful and ignoble passions were marked in indelible characters, strongly lighted up by the fantastic flashes of the fire, had something strange and gloomy about them, which inspired terror and revulsion.

It could be guessed at the first glance that these men, the unclean scum of adventurers of all nations, lost in sin and compelled to fly to the desert to escape the iron hand of justice, had declared an obstinate war against those who had placed them beyond the pale of the common law of nations, and were, in a word, what are called, by common consent, pirates of the prairies.

Pitiless men, a hundredfold more ruffianly than the most ferocious redskins, who conceal a soul of mud and a tiger's heart under a human appearance, and who, having adopted the savage life of the Far West, have assumed all the vices of the white and red races, without retaining one of their qualities. Villains, in a word, who only know murder and robbery, and for a little gold are capable of the greatest crimes. Such was the company Red Cedar had come so far to seek.

We are bound to add, and the reader will easily believe it, that he was not out of his place, and that his antecedents, on the contrary, gained him a certain degree of consideration from these bandits, with whom he had been long acquainted.

"Caballeros," Sandoval said, bowing with exquisite politeness to the brigands, his comrades, "our friend, Red Cedar, has returned among us; let us greet him like a jolly companion whom we have missed too long, and whom we are delighted to see again."

"Señores," Red Cedar answered, as he took a seat by the fire, "I thank you for your cordial reception, and hope soon to prove to you that I am not ungrateful."

"Well!" one of the bandits said, "Has our friend any good news to impart to us? It would be welcome, deuce take me! For a whole month we have had to scheme a living."

"Are you really in that state?" the squatter asked, with interest.

"Quite so," Sandoval confirmed him; "and Perico has only spoken the exact truth."

"Hang it all!" Red Cedar went on, "I have come at the right moment, then."

"Eh?" the bandits said, pricking up their ears.

"And yet I fancy that, for some time past, caravans have been becoming more numerous in the desert: there is no lack of white or red trappers, who every now and then can be saved the trouble of carrying their beaver skins. I have even heard speak of several parties of gambusinos."

"The gambusinos are as badly off as ourselves," Sandoval replied; "and as for trappers, they are the very men who injure us. Ah! My friend, the desert is not worth a hang now; the white men are drawing too close together, they

are gradually invading the territory of the redskins, and who knows whether, in ten years from this time, we shall not have towns all round the spot where we now are?"

"There is some truth in your remark," Red Cedar observed, as he shook his head thoughtfully.

"Yes," Perico said; "and, unfortunately, the remedy is difficult, if not impossible to find."

"Perhaps so," Red Cedar went on, tossing his head in a way which caused the Pirates to wonder what he was driving at. "In the meanwhile," he added, "as I have made a long journey, feel very tired, and have a tremendous appetite, I will feed, with your permission, especially as it is late, and the meal is admirably cooked."

Without further ceremony, Red Cedar cut a large slice of elk, which he placed before him, and began incontinently devouring. The pirates followed his example, and for some time the conversation was naturally suspended. A hunter's meal is never long; the present one was soon over, owing to the impatience of the band, whose curiosity was aroused to the highest degree by the few words dropped by the squatter.

"Well," Sandoval began again, as he lit a cigarette, "now that supper is over, suppose we have a chat. Are you agreeable, comrade?"

"Willingly," Red Cedar replied, as he settled himself comfortably, and filled his pipe.

"You were saying then—" Sandoval remarked.

"Pardon me," the squatter interrupted him; "I was saying nothing. You were complaining, I believe, about the whites destroying your trade by coming closer and closer to your abode."

"Yes, that was what I was saying."

"You added, if my memory serves me right, that the remedy was impossible to find?"

"To which you answered, perhaps."

"I said so, and repeat it."

"Explain yourself, then."

"The affair I have come to propose to you is extremely simple: For some years past the whites have been gradually invading the desert, which, in a given time which is not remote, will end by disappearing before the incessant efforts of civilisation."

"It is true."

"Well, if you like, within a month you shall be rich men."

"We will, *caray*," the bandits exclaimed in a formidable voice.

"I will tell you the affair in two words: I have discovered a placer of incalculable wealth; twenty leagues from here, I have left one hundred men devoted to my fortunes. Will you imitate them and follow me? I promise each of you more gold than he ever saw in his life or ever dreamed of possessing."

"Hum!" said Sandoval; "It is tempting."

"I thought of you, my old comrades," Red Cedar continued with hypocritical simplicity, "and have come. Now, you know my plan; reflect on what I have said to you; tomorrow, at sunrise, you will give me your answer."

And, without mingling further in the conversation, Red Cedar rolled himself up in a zarapé, and fell asleep, leaving the bandits to discuss among themselves the chance of success his magnificent proposal offered.

CHAPTER VI.

THE PROPOSITION.

Red Cedar, immediately that he entered the Far West, had, with the experience of old wood rangers which he possessed in the highest degree, chosen a suitable site for his band to encamp. He did not wish to enter the desert without ensuring allies on whom he could count, in the event of his being attacked.

The Pawnee ambuscade, prepared with the skill characteristic of the savages, which had been on the point of succeeding, and from which he had only escaped by accident, was a warning to him of the snares that would be laid for him, and the dangers that would menace him at every step daring the long journey he was about to undertake across the prairies.

Red Cedar was one of those men who make it a principle to neglect nothing that can insure the success of their plans; he, therefore, resolved to protect himself from any attack as speedily as possible. His first care was to choose a spot where he could encamp his band, so as to be protected from all Indian marauders, and offer an advantageous resistance, in the case of a serious attack.

The Rio Gila forms a multitude of wooded islets, some of which rising in a conical form, are very difficult of access owing to the escarpment of their banks, and especially through the rapidity of the current. It was on one of these islands that Red Cedar bivouacked his men. Peru trees, mezquites, and cottonwood trees, which grew abundantly on this island, mingled with creepers that twined round their stems in inextricable confusion, formed an impenetrable thicket, behind which they could boldly sustain a siege, while offering the immense advantage of forming a wall of verdure, through whose openings it was easy to watch both banks of the river, and any suspicious movements on the prairie.

So soon as the gambusinos had landed on the island, they glided like serpents into the interior, dragging their horses after them, and being careful to do nothing that might reveal their encampment to the sharp-sighted Indians. So soon as the camp was established, and Red Cedar believed that, temporarily at least, his band was in safety, he assembled the principal leaders, in order to communicate his intentions to them.

They were, first, Fray Ambrosio, then Andrés Garote, Harry and Dick, the two Canadian hunters, and, lastly, the squatter's two sons, Nathan and Sutter, and the Chief of the Coras. Several trees had been felled to form a suitable site for the fires and the tents of the women, and Red Cedar, mounted on his steed, was soon in the centre of the chiefs collected around him.

"Señores," he said to them, "we have at length entered the Far West: our expedition now really commences, and I count on your courage, and, above

all, your experience, to carry it out successfully; but prudence demands that on the prairies, where we run the risk of being attacked by enemies of every description at any moment, we should secure allies who, in case of need, could protect us efficiently. The ambuscade we escaped, scarce eight and forty hours ago, renders it a duty to redouble our vigilance, and, above all, hasten to enter into communication with the friends we possess in the desert."

"Yes," said the monk; "but I do not know these friends."

"But I know them, and that is enough," Red Cedar replied.

"Very good," Fray Ambrosio went on; "but where are they to be found?"

"I know where to find them. You are here in an excellent position, where you can hold your own for a long time, without any fear of it being carried. This is what I have resolved on."

"Come, gossip, explain yourself; I am anxious to know your plans," said the monk.

"You shall be satisfied: I am going to start at once in search of my friends, whom I am certain of finding within a few hours: you will not stir from here till my return."

"Hum! And will you be long absent?"

"Two days, then, at the most."

"That is a long time," Garote remarked.

"During that period you will conceal your presence as far as possible. Let no one suspect you are encamped here. I will bring you the ten best rifles in the Far West, and with their protection, and that of Stanapat, the great Apache Chief of the Buffalo tribe, whom I expect to see also, we can traverse the desert in perfect safety."

"But who will command the band in your absence?" Fray Ambrosio asked.

"You, and these caballeros. But remember this: you will under no pretext leave the island."

"'Tis enough, Red Cedar, you can start; we shall not stir till you return."

After a few more words of slight importance, Red Cedar left the clearing, swam his horse over the river, and on reaching firm ground, buried himself in the tall grass, where he soon disappeared.

It was about six in the evening, when the squatter left his comrades, to go in search of the men whom he hoped to make his allies. The gambusinos had paid but slight attention to the departure of their chief, the cause of which they were ignorant of, and which they supposed would not last long. The night had completely fallen. The gambusinos, wearied by a long journey, were sleeping, wrapped in their zarapés, round the fire, while two sentries alone watched over the common safety. They were Dick and Harry, the two Canadian hunters, whom chance had so untowardly brought among these bandits.

Three men leaning against the trunk of an enormous ungquito were conversing in a low voice. They were Andrés Garote, Fray Ambrosio, and Eagle-wing. A few paces from them was the leafy cabin, beneath whose precarious shelter reposed the squatter's wife, her daughter Ellen, and Doña Clara.

The three men, absorbed in the conversation, did not notice a white shadow emerge from the cabin, glide silently along, and lean against the very tree, at the foot of which they were.

Eagle-wing, with that penetration which distinguishes the Indians, had read the hatred which existed between Fray Ambrosio and Red Cedar; but the Coras had kept this discovery in his heart, intending to take advantage of it when the opportunity presented itself.

"Chief," the monk said, "do you suspect who the allies are Red Cedar has gone to seek?"

"No," the other replied, "how should I know?"

"Still it must interest you, for you are not so great a friend of the Gringo as you would like to appear."

"The Indians have a very dense mind; let my father explain himself so that I may understand him, and be able to answer him."

"Listen," the monk continued, in a dry voice and with a sharp accent, "I know who you are: your disguise, clever and exact though it be, was not

sufficient to deceive me: at the first glance I recognised you. Do you believe that if I had said to Red Cedar, this man is a spy or a traitor; he has crept among us to make us tall into a trap prepared long beforehand: in a word, this man is no other than Moukapec, the principal Cacique of the Coras? Do you believe, I say, that Red Cedar would have hesitated to blow out your brains, eh, chief? Answer."

During these words whose significance was terrible to him, the Coras had remained unmoved; not a muscle of his face had quivered. When the monk ceased speaking, he smiled disdainfully, and contented himself with replying in a haughty voice, while looking at him fixedly:

"Why did not my father tell this to the scalp hunter? He was wrong."

The monk was discountenanced by this reply, which he was far from expecting; he understood that he had before him one of those energetic natures over which threats have no power. Still he had advanced too far to draw back: he resolved to go on to the end, whatever might happen.

"Perhaps," he said, with an evil smile, "at any rate, I have it in my power to warn our chief in his return."

"My father will act as he thinks proper," the chief replied drily, "Moukapec is a renowned warrior, the barking of the coyotes never terrified him."

"Come, come, Indian, you are wrong," Garote interposed, "you are mistaken as to the Padre's intentions with respect to you; I am perfectly convinced that he does not wish to injure you in any way."

"Moukapec is not an old woman who can be cheated with words," the Coras said; "he cares little for the present intentions of the man, who, during the burning of his village, and the massacre of his brothers, excited his enemies to murder and arson. The chief follows his vengeance alone, he will know how to attain it without allying himself to one of his foes to get it. I have spoken."

After uttering these words, the Indian chief rose, dressed himself in his buffalo robe, and withdrew, leaving the two Mexicans disconcerted by this resistance which they were far from anticipating. Both looked after him for a while with admiration mingled with anger.

"Hum!" the monk at length muttered; "Dog of a savage, Indian, brute, beast, he shall pay me for it."

"Take care, señor Padre," the Gambusino said, "we are not in luck at this moment. Let us leave this man with whom we can effect nothing, and seek something else. Every man reaches his point who knows how to wait, and the moment will arrive to avenge ourselves on him; till then, let us dissimulate—that is the best thing, I believe, for us to do."

"Did you notice that, on leaving us, Red Cedar did not say a syllable about his prisoner?"

"For what good? He knows she is in perfect safety here, any flight from this island is impossible."

"That is true; but why did he carry off this woman?"

"Who knows? Red Cedar is one of those men whose thoughts it is always dangerous to sound. Up to the present, we cannot read his conduct clearly enough; let him return, perhaps then the object he has in view will be unfolded to us."

"That woman annoys me here," the monk said in a hollow voice.

"What's to be done? Down there at Santa Fe I did not hesitate to serve you in trying to get rid of her; but now it is too late—it would be madness to dream of it. What matter to us, after all, whether she be with us, or not? Believe me, make up your mind to it, and speak no more about it. Bah! She will not prevent us reaching the placer."

The monk shook his head with a dissatisfied air, but made no reply. The Gambusino wrapped himself in his zarapé, lay down on the ground, and fell asleep. Fray Ambrosio, for his part, remained plunged in gloomy thoughts. What was he thinking of? Some treachery, doubtless.

When the woman who had been leaning against the tree, perceived that the conversation was at an end, she glided softly away, and re-entered the cabin.

CHAPTER VII.

ELLEN AND DOÑA CLARA.

Since she had fallen again into the power of Red Cedar, Doña Clara, a prey to a gloomy sorrow, had yielded unresistingly to her abductors, despairing ever to escape from them; especially since she had seen the men in whose power she was, definitely take the road to the desert.

For a maiden, accustomed to all the refinements of luxury, and all those little attentions which a father's love continually lavished on her, the new existence commencing was an uninterrupted succession of tortures, among half savage ruffians, whose brutal ways and coarse language constantly made her fear insults she would have been too weak to repulse.

Still, up to this moment, Red Cedar's conduct had been—we will not say respectful, for the squatter was ignorant of such refinements—but, at any rate, proper, that is to say, he had affected to pay no attention to her while ordering his men not to trouble her in any way.

Doña Clara had been entrusted by the scalp hunter to his wife Betsy and his daughter Ellen.

The Megera, after giving the maiden an ugly look, had turned her back on her, and did not once address her—conduct which was most agreeable to the young Mexican. As for Ellen, she had constituted herself, on her private authority, the friend of the prisoner, to whom she rendered all those small services her position allowed her, with a delicacy and tact little to be expected from a girl educated in the desert by a father like hers.

At the outset, Doña Clara, absorbed in her grief, had paid no attention to Ellen's kindness, but gradually, in spite of herself, the young American's unchanging gentleness, and her patience, which nothing rebuffed, affected her; she had felt the services which the other occasionally rendered her, and had gradually learned to feel for the squatter's daughter a degree of gratitude which presently ripened into friendship.

Youth is naturally confiding; when a great grief oppresses it, the need of entrusting that grief to a person who seems to sympathise with it, renders it expansive. Alone among the bandits, to whom chance had handed her over,

Doña Clara must inevitably—so soon as the first paroxysm of suffering had passed—seek for someone to console her, and help her in enduring the immense misfortune that crushed her.

And this had occurred much more rapidly than under ordinary circumstances, thanks to the sympathising kindness of the young American, who had in a few hours found the way to her heart.

Red Cedar, whom nothing escaped, smiled cunningly at the friendship of the two maidens, which, however, he feigned not to perceive. It was a strange thing, but this scalp hunter, this man that seemed to have nothing human about him, who perspired crime at every pore, whose ferocity was unbounded, had in his heart one feeling which attached him victoriously to the human family, a profound, illimitable love for Ellen—the love of the tiger for its cubs.

This frail girl was the sole creature for whom his heart beat more violently. How great, how powerful was the love Red Cedar experienced for this simple child! It was a worship, an adoration. A word from her little mouth caused the ferocious bandit to feel indescribable delight; a smile from her rosy lips overwhelmed him with happiness. By her charming caresses, her gentle and insinuating words, Ellen had power to govern despotically that gathering of birds of prey which was her family. The chaste kiss his daughter gave him every morning, was the sunbeam that for the whole day warmed the heart of the terrible bandit, before whom everybody trembled, and who himself trembled at a slight frown from her, who combined all the joy and happiness of his life.

It was with extreme satisfaction that he saw his daughter become his innocent accomplice by acquiring the confidence of his prisoner, and gaining her friendship. This gentle girl was in his sight the securest gaoler he could give Doña Clara. Hence, in order, to facilitate, as far as possible, all that could enhance the friendship, he had completely closed his eyes, and feigned to be ignorant of the approximation between the two girls.

It was Ellen who had listened to the conversation between the monk and the Gambusino. At the moment she was re-entering the hut, the stifled sound of voices induced her to listen. Doña Clara was speaking in a low voice to a man, and that man was the Sachem of the Coras. Ellen, surprised in the

highest degree, listened anxiously to their conversation, which soon greatly interested her.

After leaving the two Mexicans, Eagle-wing had, for some minutes, walked about the camp with an affected carelessness, intended to remove the suspicions of any who might have been tempted to watch his movements.

When he fancied he had dispelled any suspicions, the Indian chief insensibly drew nearer to the cabin, which served as a refuge to the maidens, and entered it, after assuring himself by a glance, that no one was watching.

Doña Clara was alone, at this moment. We have told the reader where Ellen was; as for the squatter's wife, faithful to her husband's instructions not to annoy the prisoner in any way, she was quietly asleep by the fire, in the clearing.

The maiden, with her head bowed on her bosom, was plunged in deep and sad thought. At the sound of the Indian's steps, she raised her head, and could not restrain a start of terror on seeing him.

Eagle-wing immediately perceived the impression he produced on her, he stopped on the threshold of the cabin, folded his arms on his chest, and bowed respectfully.

"My sister need not be alarmed," he said in a gentle and insinuating voice, "it is a friend who is speaking to her."

"A friend!" Doña Clara murmured, as she took a side glance at him; "the unfortunate have no friends."

The Indian drew a few steps nearer to her, and went on, as he bent over her:

"The jaguar has been forced to put on the skin of the crafty serpent, in order to introduce himself among his enemies, and gain their confidence. Does not my sister recognise me?"

The Mexican girl reflected for a moment, and then answered with hesitation, and looking at him attentively:

"Although the sound of your voice is not unfamiliar to me, I seek in vain to remember where, and under what circumstances I have already seen you."

"I will help my sister to remember," Eagle-wing continued. "Two days ago, at the passage of the ford, I tried to save her, and was on the point of succeeding, but before that my sister had seen me several times."

"If you will mention a date and a circumstance, I may possibly succeed in remembering."

"My sister need not seek, it will be useless; I prefer telling her my name at once, for moments are precious. I am Moukapec, the great Chief of the Coras, of the Del Norte. My sister's father and my sister herself often helped the poor Indians of my tribe."

"That is true," the maiden said, sadly. "Oh! I remember now. Poor people! They were pitilessly massacred, and their village fired by the Apaches. Oh! I know that horrible story."

A sardonic smile played round the chief's lips at these words.

"Coyote does not eat coyote," he said, in a hollow voice; "the jaguars do not wage war on jaguars. They were not Indians who assassinated the Coras, but scalp hunters."

"Oh!" she said, in horror.

"Let my sister listen," the Coras continued quickly; "now that I have told her my name, she must place confidence in me."

"Yes," she answered, eagerly, "for I know the nobility of your character."

"Thanks! I am here for my sister's sake alone. I have sworn to save her, and restore her to her father."

"Alas!" she murmured sadly, "that is impossible. You are alone, and we are surrounded by enemies. The bandits who guard us are a hundredfold more cruel than the ferocious beasts of the desert."

"I do not know yet in what way I shall set about saving my sister," the chief said, firmly; "but I shall succeed if she is willing."

"Oh!" she exclaimed with febrile energy, "If I am willing! Whatever requires to be done, I will do without hesitation. My courage will not fail me, be assured of that, chief."

"Good!" the Indian said with joy; "My sister is truly a daughter of the Mexican kings. I count on her when the moment arrives. Red Cedar is absent for a few days; I will go and prepare everything for my sister's flight."

"Go, chief; at the first sign from you I shall be ready to follow you."

"Good! I retire; my sister can take courage, she will soon be free."

The Indian bowed to the maiden, and prepared to leave the hut. Suddenly, a hand was laid on his shoulder. At this unexpected touch, in spite of his self-command, the chief could not repress a start of terror. He turned, and Red Cedar's daughter stood before him, with a smile on her lips. "I have heard all," she said in her pure and melodious voice.

The chief bent a long and sad look on Doña Clara.

"Why this emotion," Ellen continued, "which I read on your features? I do not mean to betray you, for I am a friend of Doña Clara. Reassure yourself; if accident has made me mistress of your secret, I will not abuse it—on the contrary, I will help your flight."

"Can it be so? You would do that?" Doña Clara exclaimed, as she threw her arms round her neck, and buried her face in her bosom.

"Why not?" she simply answered; "You are my friend."

"Oh! Oh! I love you, for you are good. You had pity on my grief, and wept with me." Eagle-wing fixed on the maiden a glance of undefinable meaning.

"Listen," Ellen said; "I will supply you with the means you lack. We'll leave the camp this very night."

"We?" Doña Clara asked; "What do you mean?"

"I mean," Ellen continued, quickly, "that I shall go with you."

"Can it be possible?"

"Yes," she said, in a melancholy voice; "I cannot remain here longer."

On hearing these words, the Coras Chief quivered with joy; a sinister ray flashed from his dark eyes; but he immediately resumed his stoical appearance, and the maidens did not notice his emotion.

"But what shall we do to procure means of flight?"

"That is my affair, so do not trouble yourself about it. This very night, I repeat, we shall start."

"May Heaven grant it!" Doña Clara sighed.

Ellen turned to the chief and said:

"Does my brother know, at a short distance from the spot where we now are, any Indian pueblo where we can seek shelter?"

"Two suns from here, in a northwestern direction, there is a pueblo, inhabited by a tribe of my nation. It was thither I intended to lead my white father's daughter after her escape."

"And we shall be in safety with that tribe?"

"The daughter of Acumapicthzin will be as safe as in her father's hacienda," the Indian answered, evasively.

"Good! Can my father leave the camp?"

"Who is strong enough to arrest the flight of the condor? Moukapec is a warrior, nothing stops him."

"My brother will set out."

"Good!"

"He will proceed by the shortest road to the pueblo of his nation, then he will return to meet us with the warriors he has collected, in order that we may defend ourselves, in the event of being followed by the Gambusinos."

"Very good," the Indian answered joyfully. "My sister is young, but wisdom dwells in her heart; I will do what she desires—when may I start?"

"At once."

"I go. What hour will my sister quit the camp?"

"At the hour when the owl sings its first hymn to the rising sun."

"My sister will meet me at the most four hours after her departure. She must remember in her flight always to go in a northwestern direction."

"I will do so."

Eagle-wing bowed to the maidens and left the cabin.

The gambusinos were in a deep sleep round the fire; only Dick and Harry were awake. The Coras glided like a phantom through the trees, and reached the edge of the water unnoticed, which was the more easy to effect, because the Canadians were not watching the island, from which they had no danger to apprehend, but had their eyes fixed on the prairie. The chief took off his clothes and made them into a parcel, which he fastened on his breast; he slipped into the water, and swam silently in the direction of the mainland.

So soon as the Indian left the cabin Ellen bent over Doña Clara, gave her a loving kiss on the forehead, and said softly—"Try to sleep for a few hours, while I prepare everything for our flight."

"Sleep!" the Mexican answered, "How can I with the restlessness that devours me."

"You must!" Ellen insisted, "For we shall have great fatigue to endure tomorrow."

"Well," Doña Clara said, softly, "I will try, as you wish it."

The maidens exchanged a kiss and a shake of the hand, and Ellen left the hut in her turn, smiling to her friend, who followed her with an anxious glance. When left alone, Doña Clara fell on her knees, clasped her hands, and addressed a fervent prayer to God. Then, slightly tranquilised by her appeal to Him, who is omnipotent, she fell back on the pile of dry leaves that served as her bed, and, as she had promised Ellen, attempted to sleep.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FLIGHT.

The night covered the tranquil desert with its dark blue sky, studded with dazzling stars. A majestic silence brooded over the prairie; all were asleep in the island save the two Canadian sentries, who, leaning on their rifles,

followed with absent eye the tall shadows of the wild beasts that slowly came down to drink in the river.

At times a mysterious quiver ran over the trees, and shook their tufted crests, whose leaves rustled with a strange sound.

Dick and Harry, the two worthy hunters, interchanged a few words in a low voice to while away the tedium of their long sentry go, to which they were condemned, when suddenly a white shadow glided through the trees, and Ellen stood by their side.

The young men started on seeing her; but the maiden greeted them with a smile, sat down on the grass, and with a graceful gesture made them a sign to seat themselves by her side. They hastened to obey her.

The hunters looked at the maiden, who smiled on them with that infantile grace which no expression can render.

"You were talking when I came up."

"Yes," Harry answered, "we were talking of you."

"Of me?" she said.

"Was it not for your sake alone that we joined this troop of bandits?" Dick said, in an ill-humoured tone.

"Do you regret being here?" she asked, with a soft smile.

"I did not say that," the young man continued; "but we are not in our place among these villains. We are free and loyal hunters, honourable wood rangers; the life we lead oppresses us."

"Were you not talking of that when my presence interrupted you?"

They remained silent.

"Answer boldly!" she went on.

"Good heavens! You know that such a life is as oppressive to me as it is to you."

"What do I know?" Harry said. "Many times I have proposed to you to fly, and leave these men whose hands are constantly polluted with blood, but you have ever refused."

"That is true," she said sadly; "alas! Although these men are criminal, one of them is my father."

"For two years that we have been following you everywhere, you have given us the same answer."

"It was because I hoped that my father and brother would abandon this career of crime."

"And now?"

"I have no hope left."

"In that case?" Harry exclaimed sharply.

"I am ready to follow you," she answered, sharply.

"Is that the truth? Is it your heart that is speaking, Ellen? Do you really consent to abandon your family and trust to our honour?"

"Listen," she answered, sorrowfully; "for two years I have thought deeply, and the more I reflect the more does it appear to me that Red Cedar is not my father."

"Can it be possible?" the hunter exclaimed, in amazement.

"I can say nothing certain; but when I go back I fancy (though this is vague and surrounded by shadows in my mind) I can remember another existence, very different from the one I am leading at present."

"You can remember nothing positive?"

"Nothing: I see pass, as in a vision, a lovely pale lady, a man with a proud glance, and of tall stature, who takes me in his arms, and covers me with kisses, and then—"

"Well, and then?" the hunters exclaimed, in a panting voice.

"And then I see flames, blood, and nothing more, but a man carrying me off through the night on an impetuous steed."

The maiden, after uttering these words in a broken voice, hid her head in her hands. There was a lengthened silence, during which the Canadians attentively observed her: at length they drew themselves up, and Harry laid his hand on her shoulder: she raised her head.

"What would you of me?" she said.

"Ask you a question."

"Speak!"

"Since you have grown up have you never tried to clear up your doubts by questioning Red Cedar?"

"Yes," she answered, "once."

"Well?"

"He listened to me attentively, let me say all I had to say, and then gave me a glance of undefinable meaning, shrugged his shoulders, and answered, 'You are silly, Ellen; you must have had a bad dream. That story is absurd.' Then he added, in an ironical voice, 'I feel sorry for you, poor creature, but you are really my daughter.'"

"Well," Dick said, in a tone of conviction, as he struck the butt of his rifle fiercely on the ground, "I tell you that he lied, and that man is not your father."

"Doves do not lay their eggs in the nests of vultures," Harry added. "No, Ellen, no, you are not that man's daughter."

The maiden rose, seized each of the hunters by the arm, and, after looking at them for a moment, said:

"Well, and I believe so too. I know not why, but for some days past a secret voice has cried in my heart and told me that this man cannot be my father; that is why I, who, up to this day, have always refused your offers, have come to trust myself to your honour, and ask you if you will protect my flight."

"Ellen," Harry answered in a grave voice, and with an accent full of respect, "I swear to you before that God who hears us, that my companion and myself will risk death to protect or defend. You shall always be a sister to us, and in that desert we are about to traverse in order to reach civilised countries, you shall be as safe and treated with as much respect as if you were in Quebec Cathedral, at the foot of the high altar."

"I swear that I will do all Harry has just said; and that you can, in all confidence, place yourself under the safeguard of our honour," Dick added,

raising his right hand to Heaven.

"Thanks, my friends," the maiden answered. "I know your honour. I accept without reservation, persuaded as I am that you will fulfil your promise."

The two men bowed.

"When shall we start?" Harry asked.

"It will be better to take advantage of Red Cedar's absence to fly," said Dick.

"That thought is mine, too," Ellen remarked, but added, with some hesitation, "I should not like to fly alone."

"Explain yourself," Dick said.

"It is needless," Harry quickly interrupted him. "I know what you desire. Your thought is an excellent one, Ellen, and we gladly assent to it. The young Mexican lady can accompany you. If it be possible for us to restore her to her family, who must feel in despair about her, we will do it."

Ellen gave the young man a look, and slightly blushed.

"You are a noble-hearted fellow, Harry," she replied. "I thank you for having guessed what I did not know how to ask of you."

"Is there anything else you want of us?"

"No."

"Good! Then bring your companion here as speedily as possible, and, when you return, we shall be ready. The gambusinos are asleep. Red Cedar is absent. We have nought to fear, but you had better make haste, so that before sunrise we may be far enough from here not to fear those who will doubtless pursue us when they observe your flight."

"I only ask you for a few minutes," the maiden said, and soon disappeared in the shrubs.

In vain had Doña Clara sought sleep, in obedience to her friend's recommendations. Her mind, agitated by hopes and fears, had not allowed her to enjoy a moment's rest. With eye and ear on the watch, she listened to the voices of the night, and strove to distinguish, in the gloom, the shadows that at times glided through the trees.

Ellen found her awake, and ready to start. The maidens' preparations for flight were not lengthy, for they only took with them a few indispensable articles.

In rummaging an old box, which Red Cedar and his family employed to keep their clothes in, Ellen discovered a small coffer, about the size of her hand, of carved rosewood, inlaid with silver, which the squatter hardly ever left out of his possession, but which he had not thought it necessary to take with him on the present expedition.

The maiden examined this coffer for a moment, but it was closed. By an intuitive movement, for which she could not account, but which completely mastered her, she seized it, and put it in her bosom.

"Let us go," she said to Doña Clara.

"I am ready," the young Mexican replied, laconically, though her heart bounded.

The maidens left the hut, holding each other's hand. They crossed the clearing, and proceeded in the direction of the Canadians. The gambusinos lying ground the fire did not stir. They were all fast asleep.

For their part, the two hunters had made their preparations for flight. While Dick fetched out to the riverside the four sturdiest horses he could find, Harry collected the saddles and bridles of the other horses, and threw them into the river, where they immediately disappeared in the current. The Canadian had reflected that the time the gambusinos would occupy in making up their loss would be so much gained to them.

The maidens reached the riverbank at the moment when Dick and Harry were finishing saddling the horses. They mounted at once, the Canadians placed themselves at their side, and the fugitives forced their horses into the river. Fortunately, the water was low; and hence, although the current was rather powerful in the centre, the horses managed to cross the Gila without obstacle.

It was about eleven in the evening when the fugitives landed. So soon as they were concealed in the tall grass, so as not to be seen from the island, they drew bridle to let their horses breathe after the rude passage they had just made.

"Let us profit by the hours we have before us to travel the whole night," Harry said, in a low voice.

"Our absence will not be observed till sunrise," Dick observed. "The time spent in seeking us on the island, and in providing some substitute for the bridles, will give us twelve or fourteen hours which we must profit by to get away as far as possible."

"I ask nothing better," Harry said; "but, before starting, we must choose our road."

"Oh!" Ellen said, "the direction we must follow is easily settled: we must only go straight to the northwest."

"Be it so," the hunter went on; "one direction is as good as another. Our principal object is to get off as soon as possible: but why northwest rather than any other quarter of the wind?"

Ellen smiled.

"Because," she said, "a friend you know—the Indian chief who formed part of the band—left the camp before us, in order to warn his warriors, and bring us help in the event of an attack."

"Well thought of," the hunter said. "Let us be off, and not spare our horses, for on their speed our safety depends."

Each bowed over the neck of the horses. The little party started with the speed of an arrow in a northwestern direction, as had been agreed on. The four riders soon disappeared in the darkness; the footsteps of their horses ceased to re-echo on the hardened ground, and all fell back into silence.

The gambusinos were peacefully sleeping on the island.

CHAPTER IX.

THE TEOCALI.

We will now return to Valentine and his companions.

The six horsemen were still galloping in the direction of the mountains; and, about midnight, they stopped at the base of an enormous granite mass, which rose solitary and glowing in the prairie.

"This is the spot," said Bloodson, as he dismounted. His companions followed his example, and Valentine took a scrutinising glance around.

"If what I suppose be true," he said, "your dwelling might be an eagle nest."

"Or a vulture's," the stranger hoarsely answered. "Wait a few seconds."

He then imitated the cry of the tiger-serpent. Suddenly, as if by enchantment, the mass of granite was illumined from top to bottom, and torches, shaken by vague and indistinct forms, ran rapidly along the slopes, bounding with extreme velocity until they arrived close to the astonished travellers, who found themselves all at once surrounded by some fifty men in strange garbs and with sinister faces, rendered even more sinister by the reflection of the torches which the wind drove in every direction.

"These are my men," the stranger said, laconically.

"Hum!" Valentine remarked, "You have a formidable army."

"Yes," Bloodson went on; "for all these men are devoted to me. On many occasions, I have put their attachment to rude trials. They will let themselves be killed at a signal from me."

"Oh, ho!" the hunter went on, "The man who can speak thus is very strong, especially if he wish to gain an honourable end."

The stranger made no answer, but turned his head away.

"Where is Shaw?" he asked.

"Here I am, master," the man he had asked after said as he showed himself.

"What!" Valentine exclaimed, "Red Cedar's son!"

"Yes: did I not save his life which his brother sought to take? By that title he belongs to me. Now," he added "come, my guests, do not remain any longer outside. I will show you my domain. Shaw, do you take the horses."

The travellers followed the stranger, who, preceded by several torch-bearers, was already escalading the abrupt sides of the granite block. The ascent was ruder still. It was easy to recognise the steps of a staircase,

beneath the roots, creepers, and brambles that overgrew them. The travellers were plunged in the utmost astonishment. Valentine and Curumilla alone affected an indifference which caused their host to ponder.

When about one-third up the mountain, Bloodson stopped before an excavation made by human hands, through whose gaping entrance a thread of light emerged.

"You did not, perhaps, expect," said Bloodson, as he turned to his friends, "to find in the Far West a keep as strong as this."

"I confess, Don Miguel, that I did not expect it."

"Oh, my friends, your memory fails you, I fancy," Valentine said with a smile; "this mountain, if I am not mistaken, is nothing but a Teocali."

"It is true," Bloodson said, with an air of annoyance he tried in vain to hide, "I have placed my abode in the interior of an ancient Teocali."

"There are a good many about here, history relates that it was in this country the Aztecs assembled before finally invading the plateau of Anahuac."

"For a stranger, Don Valentine," Bloodson remarked, "you were well acquainted with the history of this country."

"And with that of its inhabitants; yes, señor caballero," the hunter replied.

They went in, and found themselves in an immense hall, with white walls, loaded with sculpture, which, as Valentine had stated, must date back to the epoch of the Aztecs. A great number of torches, fixed in iron sockets, spread a fairylike light over this hall. Bloodson did the honours of this strange abode, as a man perfectly versed in the habits of civilised life. A few minutes after their arrival, the hunters enjoyed a meal which, though served in the desert, left nothing to be desired as regarded the delicacy of the dishes or the order in which it was served.

The sight of Shaw had involuntarily inspired Valentine with a secret distrust of their host; the latter, with the penetration and knowledge of mankind he possessed, at once noticed it, and resolved to get rid of it by a frank explanation between the hunter and himself.

As for Curumilla, the worthy Indian ate with good appetite, as was his wont, not uttering a word, though he did not lose a syllable of what was said around him, and his piercing eye had already scrutinised the most secret nooks of the spot where he was.

When the supper was ended, Bloodson gave a signal, and his comrades suddenly disappeared at the end of the hall, where they stretched themselves on piles of dry leaves which served them as beds. The hunters remained alone with their host, and at a sign from the latter, Shaw took a place by his side. For some time they smoked in silence, until Bloodson threw far from him the end of the cigarette he had been smoking, and took the word.

"Señores caballeros," he said, with a tone of frankness that pleased his hearers, "all that you see here may reasonably surprise you, I allow. Still, nothing is more simple; the men you, have seen belong to all the Indian tribes that traverse the desert; only one of them is a white man, and that is Shaw. If Don Pablo will be kind enough to reflect, he will tell you that the man found in the streets of Santa Fe with a knife in his chest was saved by me."

"In truth," the young man said, "Father Seraphin and myself picked up the poor wretch, who gave no sign of life. You only could recall him to existence."

"All the others are in the same case; proscribed by tribes, menaced with instant death by their enemies, they have sought a refuge with me. There is now another point, I desire to clear up, in order that no cloud may exist between us, and that you may place the most perfect confidence in me."

His hearers bowed respectfully.

"For what good?" Valentine said; "Every man in this world has his secret, caballero, and we do not ask for yours. We are connected by the strongest bond that can attach men, a common hatred for the same individual, and the desire to take a striking revenge on him—what more do we want?"

"Pardon me, in the desert, as in the civilised life of towns," Bloodson said with dignity, "men like to know those with whom accident has brought them into relationship. I am anxious you should know that the force I have at my service, and which is really formidable, Don Valentine, as you were

good enough to observe, is employed by me to act as the police of the desert; repulsed by the world, I resolved to revenge myself on it by pursuing and destroying those pirates of the prairies who attack and plunder the caravans that cross the desert. It is a rude task I have undertaken, I assure you, for the villainies are numerous in the Far West, but I wage an obstinate war on them, and so long as Heaven permits, I will carry it on without truce or mercy."

"I have already heard what you say spoken of," Valentine replied, as he held out his hand sympathisingly; "the man who thus comprehends his mission on earth must be one in a thousand, and I shall ever be happy to be counted in the number of his friends."

"Thanks," Bloodson answered with emotion, "thanks for your remark, which compensates me for many insults and much miscomprehension. And now, caballeros, I place at your disposal the men who are devoted to me; do with them whatever you please, and I will be the first to offer the example of obedience."

"Listen," Valentine replied, after a moment's reflection; "we have to deal with a thorough-paced villain, whose principal weapon is cunning, and we shall only succeed in conquering him by employing the same. A considerable party is soon tracked on the prairie; Red Cedar has the eye of a vulture and the scent of a dog; the more we are, the less chance we have of catching him."

"What is to be done then, my friend?" Don Miguel asked.

"This," Valentine went on: "surround him, that is to say, enclose him in a circle whence he cannot emerge, by securing allies among all the desert Indians; but it is understood that these allies will act separately, until we have so well succeeded in tracking the villain that he must surrender."

"Yes, your idea is good, though difficult and dangerous in its execution."

"Not so much as you suppose," Valentine responded warmly. "Listen to me: tomorrow, at daybreak, Curumilla and myself will go in search of Red Cedar's trail, and I swear to you that we shall find it again."

"Good," said Don Miguel; "and afterwards?"

"Wait; while one of us remains to watch the bandit, the other will return to warn you of the spot where he is. During that time you will have formed alliances with the *pueblos* Indians, and be in a condition to force the boar in its lair."

"Yes," Bloodson remarked, "that plan is simple, and for that very reason must succeed. It is a struggle of cunning, that is all."

"Yes," General Ibañez objected; "but why should we not go on his trail also?"

"Because," Valentine answered, "though you are as brave as your sword, general, you are a soldier—that is to say, you understand nothing of the Indian warfare we are about to carry on, a war composed entirely of ambushes and treachery. You and our friends, in spite of your well-known courage, and I might almost say, on account of it, would prove more injurious than useful, owing to your ignorance of the country in which we are, and the manners of the men we have to fight."

"That is true," Don Miguel said; "our friend is in the right, leave him to act; I am convinced that he will succeed."

"And so am I," Valentine exclaimed, with an accent of conviction; "that is why I wish to be free, so that I may act as I please."

"In short," the general went on, "in a game so serious as that we are playing with men so clever and determined as those we have to fight with, nothing must be left to accident. I resign myself to inaction; carry out your schemes as you think proper, Don Valentine."

"Pardon me," Don Pablo exclaimed, hotly. "My father and you may consent to remain here, for I can understand that your age and habits render you but little fitting for the life you would be obliged to lead; but I am going. I am strong, able to stand fatigue, and long accustomed by Valentine himself to the terrible demands of the desert life you are ignorant of. My sister's safety is at stake: we wish to rescue her from the hands of her ravishers; and hence I must join the men who are going in search of her."

Valentine gave him a glance full of tenderness. "Be it so," he said to him. "You will come with us, Pablo: this will complete your initiation into desert life."

"Thanks, my friend, thanks," the young man said gladly. "You have removed an immense weight from my heart. Poor sister! I shall coöperate, then, in her deliverance!"

"There is another man you must take with you, Don Valentine," Bloodson said.

"Why so?" Valentine asked.

"Because," the other answered, "as soon as you have departed, I shall go and visit the Indian villages: when the moment arrives, we must know where to meet."

"Yes, but how is it to be managed?"

"Shaw will accompany you."

A flash of joy passed into the young man's eye, although his face remained unmoved.

"So soon as you have found the trail, Shaw, who knows my hiding places, will be sent off by you to advise me, and he will find me, wherever I may be."

"Yes," the squatter's son said, laconically. Valentine examined him for a moment attentively, and then turned to Bloodson:

"Be it so," he said; "he shall come. I am greatly mistaken, or this young man has a greater interest than we suppose in the success of our plans; and we can trust entirely to him."

Shaw lowered his eyes with a blush.

"And now," Bloodson said, "it is late: we have hardly four hours of night left. I believe that we have come to a perfect understanding, and that we shall do well to sleep. We do not know what the morrow reserves for us."

"Yes, let us sleep," Valentine said, "for I intend starting at sunrise."

"Will your horses be rested?"

"Let them rest, for we do not want them; a trail can only be properly followed on foot."

"You are right; a man on foot can pass anywhere."

After exchanging a few more words, each rose to go and throw himself on a pile of dry leaves.

Don Miguel seized Valentine's arm and clutched it firmly, as he said, with tears in his voice,—

"Friend, restore me my daughter."

"I will do so," the hunter said, with emotion, "or die."

The hacendero went away a few paces, but then hurriedly returned to the Frenchman's side.

"Watch over my son," he said in a choking voice.

"Do not be alarmed, my friend," the hunter answered.

Don Miguel warmly pressed the hunter's hand, uttered a sigh, and retired.

A few moments later, and all were sound asleep in the Teocali, with the exception of the sentries that watched over the common safety.

CHAPTER X.

THE WHITE GAZELLE.

Red Cedar's proposition was too advantageous for the Pirates to hesitate about accepting it. This was the reason:—

For some years past a man had appeared on the prairies, at the head of fifty or sixty determined companions, and had waged such a rude war on the adventurers or pirates, that it had become almost impossible to carry on their old trade with impunity.

On his private authority, this man had constituted himself the defender of the caravans that crossed the desert, and protector of the trappers and hunters, whom they no longer dared plunder, through fear of being attacked by this unknown redressor of grievances.

This existence was growing insupportable, and an end must be put to it. Unfortunately the means had hitherto failed the pirates to deal a heavy blow, and free themselves from the crushing yoke Bloodson bowed them under. Hence they did not hesitate, as we have seen, to accept Red Cedar's proposition.

These men had been acquainted with the bandit for several years: he had, indeed, been their chief for some time; but at that period they were still civilised brigands, if we may employ that expression when speaking of such fellows, prowling along the frontiers of the American Union, assaulting isolated farms, and plundering and killing the defenceless inhabitants.

This band, which was at that time composed of about fifty, was gradually driven back on the desert, where Bloodson, who hunted them like wild beasts, had decimated them so thoroughly in many a fight, that the band, now reduced to only ten persons, was literally at bay, and compelled to live on the produce of the chase, or the rare occasions for plunder offered by isolated travellers, whom their unlucky star brought into the vicinity of the pirates' lair.

As they were perfectly concealed by the Indian garb they wore, the few travellers who escaped them fancied they had been plundered by redskins. This disguise caused their security, and allowed them to go at times and sell the produce of their plunder in the seaport towns.

We have said that the bandit band was composed of ten men, but we were incorrect; for one of them was a woman.

There was a strange anomaly in this creature, scarce twenty years of age, with delicate features, a tall and lithe form, living among these ruffians whom she ruled over with all the force of a vast mind, indomitable courage, and an iron will. The brigands had a superstitious adoration for her which they could not exactly account for; obeying her slightest caprices without a murmur, and ready to let themselves be killed at the least sign from her rosy fingers.

She was, as it were, their palladium. The girl was perfectly well aware of the uncontrolled power she exercised over her terrible guardians, and abused it constantly, while they never attempted resistance. The Indians themselves, seduced by the grace, vivacity, and sympathetic charms of the

young creature, had christened her the White Gazelle; a name harmonising so well with her character, that she was known by no other.

She wore a fanciful costume of extraordinary wildness and eccentricity, which was admirably suited to the gentle, though decided, and slightly dreamy expression of her face. It was composed of loose Turkish trousers, made of Indian cashmere, fastened at the knees with diamond garters; while boots of stamped deer hide protected her leg, and imprisoned her little foot. To her heels were fastened heavy gold Mexican spurs; double-barrelled pistols and a dagger were passed through her China crape girdle, which confined her delicate waist. A jacket of violet velvet, buttoned over the bosom with a profusion of diamonds, displayed her exquisite bust. A brilliant-hued Navajo zarapé, fastened at the neck with a clasp of rubies, served as her cloak, and a Panama hat of extreme fineness (*doble paja*), decorated with an eagle plume, covered her head, while allowing tresses of jet black hair to fall in disorder on her neck, and which, had they not been bound by a ribbon, would have trailed on the ground.

This girl was asleep when Red Cedar entered the cavern, and the pirates were accustomed to do nothing without her assent.

"Red Cedar is a man in whom we can place entire confidence," Pedro Sandoval said, as he summed up the affair, "but we cannot give him answer till we have consulted the *niña*."

"That is true," a second confirmed him—"hence, as any discussion will be useless, I think the best thing we can do, is to follow Red Cedar's example, and go to rest."

"Powerfully reasoned," said one of the bandits, called Orson; a little man with ignoble features, grey eyes, and a mouth extending from ear to ear, while laughing so as to display two rows of white teeth, wide and sharp as those of a wild beast; "so shall I say good night."

The other pirates did the same, and in a few minutes the deepest silence prevailed in the grotto, whose inhabitants, secure in the strength of their position, slept peacefully.

At daybreak Red Cedar opened his eyes, and rose from the hard bed on which he had rested, in order to stretch his limbs, and restore the circulation of the blood.

"Up already!" Sandoval said, as he emerged, cigarette in mouth, from one of the sleeping cells.

"My bed was not so attractive as to keep me longer," Red Cedar answered with a smile.

"Bah!" the other said, '"Tis the fortune of war; therefore I do not complain about it:" the squatter continued, drawing his comrade to the entrance of the grotto. "And now, gossip, answer me, if you please; what do you think of my proposal? You have had time for reflection, I suppose?"

"*Cascaras!*—it did not require much reflection to see that it was a good bargain."

"You accept," Red Cedar said, with a movement of joy.

"If I were to be master, I should not make the slightest difficulty, but—"

"Hang it, there is a but."

"You know very well there always is one."

"That is true; and what is the but?"

"Oh, less than nothing; we must merely submit the question to the Niña."

"That is true: I did not think of that."

"You see now."

"*Cristo!* She will accept."

"I am certain of it. Still, we must lay it before her."

"Of course. Stay, comrade, I prefer you should undertake it: while you are doing it, I will go and kill some game for breakfast. Does that suit you?"

"Very well."

"Good-bye for the present, then."

Red Cedar threw his rifle over his shoulder and left the grotto, whistling to his dog.

Sandoval, when left alone, prepared to discharge his commission, while saying to himself in an aside—

"That devil of a Red Cedar is always the same, as timid as he used to be: that results from not having been used to the society of ladies.

"Good morning, Sandoval," a gentle and melodious voice breathed in his ear.

And the White Gazelle tapped the shoulder of the old bandit, while smiling kindly on him. The girl was really a ravishing creature. She wore the costume we just now described; but she held in her hand a rifle, damascened with silver. Sandoval gazed on her for a moment with profound admiration, and then answered in a trembling voice—

"Good morning, child; did you have a good night?"

"I could not have had a better; I feel in glorious spirits this morning."

"All the better, dear girl, all the better; for I have to present to you an old comrade, who ardently desires to see you again."

"I know whom you are alluding to, father," the girl replied. "I was not asleep last night when he arrived, and even supposing I had been so the noise you made would have awakened me."

"You heard our conversation, then?"

"From one end to the other."

"And what is your advice?"

"Before answering, tell me who are the people we are to attack."

"Do you not know?"

"No; since I ask you."

"Hang it; they are Americans, I believe."

"But what sort of Americans? Are they Gringos or Gachupinos?"

"I did not inquire into such details; to me all Americans are alike; and provided they are attacked, I ask for nothing more."

"That is possible, old father," the girl answered, with a little pout; "but I make a grand difference between them."

"I do not exactly see the use of it."

"I am free to think as I please, I suppose," she interrupted him, as she stamped her foot impatiently.

"Yes, my child, yes—do not be angry, I entreat you."

"Very good; but pay attention to what I am going to tell you. Red Cedar is a man on whom I do not put the slightest trust. He is ever accustomed to pursue a gloomy object, which escapes his partners; they only serve him as a cat's paw in all his undertakings; and he abandons them unblushingly so soon as they are of no further use to him. The affair Red Cedar proposes to you is magnificent at the first glance; but, on reflecting, far from offering us profits, it may bring a multitude of annoyances on us, and bring us into a wasp's nest, whence we cannot emerge."

"Then, your opinion is to decline?"

"I do not say that; but I wish to know what you intend doing, and what our chances of success are?"

During this conversation, the other bandits had left their cells and ranged themselves round the speakers, whose discussion they followed with the deepest interest.

"On my word, my dear child, I do not know what answer to make you. Last evening Red Cedar spoke to me of the affair, and it appeared to us grand; but if it does not please you we will give it up. We will not mention it again; and that's all about it."

"That is how you always are, Sandoval; it is impossible to discuss any point with you. At the slightest objection offered you flare up, and will not listen to the reasons which may be given to you."

"I am not so, my child; I only state facts. However, here is Red Cedar; have it out with him."

"That will not take long," the girl answered; and turning to the squatter, who entered the grotto, bearing on his shoulders a magnificent elk he had shot, and which he threw on the ground, she said—

"Answer me a single question, Red Cedar."

"Twenty, if it be agreeable to you, charming Gazelle," the bandit said, with a constrained smile, which rendered him hideous.

"No, one will be sufficient. Who are the people you are engaged with?"

"A Mexican family."

"I want to know their name."

"I will tell it you. It is the Zarate family, one of the most influential in New Mexico."

At this answer a vivid flush ran over the girl's face, and she displayed marks of profound emotion.

"I also propose," the bandit continued, whose notice this flush had not escaped, "to finish with that demon, Bloodson, on whom we have so many insults to avenge."

"Good!" she said with increasing emotion.

The astounded brigands gazed anxiously on the girl. At length, by a violent effort, the Gazelle succeeded in reassuming an air of coolness; and, addressing the Pirates, said to them, in a voice whose accent revealed a great internal agitation—

"That entirely changes the question. Bloodson is our most cruel enemy. If I had known that at first, I should not have opposed the enterprise as I did."

"Then—?" Sandoval ventured to interrupt. "I consider the idea excellent; and the sooner we put it in execution, the better."

"Very good," Red Cedar exclaimed. "I felt sure that the niña would support me."

The Gazelle smiled on him.

"Whoever could understand women?" Sandoval muttered in his moustache.

"Now," the young girl added, with extraordinary animation, "let us hasten to make our preparations for departure, as we have not an instant to lose."

"Caspita! I am glad we are going to do something at last," said Orson, as he prepared to cut up the elk brought in by Red Cedar: "we were beginning to moulder in this damp hole."

"Leonard," Sandoval said, "look after the horses; fetch them from the corral, and bring them to the subterraneous passage."

"Hang it all," said Red Cedar; "talking about horses, I haven't one."

"That is true," Sandoval replied; "you arrived on foot yesterday; but I fancied you had left your horse in the chaparral."

"No, it was killed in an ambuscade, where I all but left my hide. Since then, my dog has carried the saddle."

"We have more horses than we want, so Leonard shall bring one to you."

"Thanks, I will make it up to you."

Leonard and another bandit collected the harness and went off. When the meal was finished, which did not take long, as the Pirates were anxious to start, the separations forming the rooms were taken down, and two or three Pirates, arming themselves with powerful levers, moved an enormous rock, under which was the hole, serving as cache to the band, when obliged to leave its den temporarily. In this hole they placed any objects of value which the grotto contained, and the rock was then returned to its place.

This duty accomplished, Sandoval shouted as he proceeded to the mouth of the grotto—

"Some men to help."

At a sign from Sandoval, half a dozen men seized the end of a tree serving as a bridge, lifted it, balanced it for a moment in the air, and hurled it into the precipice, down which it rolled, with a sound resembling the discharge of a park of artillery. The exterior of the grotto was then covered with shrubs, in order to conceal it as far as possible.

"Ouf," Sandoval said, "at present all is in order; we will start when you please."

"At once!" the girl said, who seemed a prey to a great impatience, and who during all these lengthened preparations had not ceased to, scold the Pirates for their delay.

The band entered the passage without further delay; and, after a march of about half an hour, entered a ravine, where the horses, under the guard of a Pirate, were nibbling the pea vines and young tree shoots.

All mounted. The White Gazelle allowed her comrades to pass, and managed to remain a little in the rear. Then, approaching Red Cedar, she

looked at him in a peculiar way, and laid her dainty hand on his shoulder.

"Tell me, scalp hunter," she muttered, in a low and concentrated voice, "it is really Don Miguel de Zarate, the father of Don Pablo, whom you wish to crush?"

"Yes, señorita," the squatter answered, feigning astonishment at this question. "Why do you ask me that?"

"Nothing," she said, with a shrug of her shoulders; "merely an idea."

And, spurring her horse, which bounded forward with a snort of pain, she rejoined the band, which started at a long trot.

"Why does she take such interest in Don Pablo?" Red Cedar asked himself, so soon as he was alone. "I must know that! Perhaps it may help me to—"

A sinister smile curled the corners of his thin lips, and he added, as he watched the girl gallop on—

"You fancy your secret well kept. Poor fool! I shall soon know it."

CHAPTER XI.

THE APACHES.

The little band galloped silently through one of those primitive landscapes which owe nothing to art, and whose imposing and grand aspect makes us understand the infinite power of the Creator, and plunges the soul into a gentle reverie. It was one of those fresh, but lovely autumn mornings, on which travelling is so pleasant. The sun, gently rising in the horizon, spread its vivifying heat over nature, which seemed smiling on it. When you look around you in the valleys, all seemed spotted with white and blackish gray. The hills bore on their crests enormous mushrooms of granite, which affected the quaintest shapes. The soil of these hills was grayish white, and was only covered with a few faded plants already in seed.

In the plain the vegetation was yellow; here and there in the distance a few male buffaloes were scattered over the prairie like black dots. The flying

locusts, some with brown wings, but the majority of a light yellow colour, were so numerous, that they literally covered the earth at certain spots.

At a slight distance off rose the lofty Bears-hand mountain, whose crest was already covered by a slight layer of snow. The crows formed vast circles in the air, and the buffaloes, elks, asshatas, and bighorns ran and bounded in every direction, bellowing and lowing.

The pirates, insensible to the charms of the scenery, and having no other moving principle than greed, galloped in the direction of the village of the Buffalo tribe, of which Stanapat (the handful of blood) was the Sachem, gradually approaching the banks of the Gila, which was still invisible, but whose course could now soon be traced, owing to the mass of vapour that rose from its bosom, and floated majestically over it, incessantly drawn up by the sunbeams.

Toward midday the band stopped to let the horses breathe, but, owing to the impatience of Red Cedar, and specially of the White Gazelle, soon started again. After descending a very steep hill, and marching for some distance in a deep ravine, that formed a species of cañon, the band at length debouched on the banks of the Gila.

A strange spectacle was the result: on both sides the stream a number of Indians apparently encamped at the spot, although their village stood a little distance off at the top of a hill, in accordance with the fashion of the Pueblos, to convert their habitations into little fortresses, were running and seeking in every direction, shrieking, gesticulating, and making the most fearful disturbances.

So soon as they perceived strangers advancing in a straight line toward them, and not attempting to conceal themselves, but marching in perfect order, they uttered frenzied yells, and rushed to meet them, brandishing their weapons, and making ready for a fight.

"Confound it!" said Sandoval, "the Indians do not seem in a good temper. Perhaps we do wrong in accosting them at this moment: from their present appearance they may play us a trick, so we will keep on our guard."

"Bah! Let me act. I take everything on myself," Red Cedar answered, with assurance.

"I ask for nothing better, my friend," Sandoval remarked; "do exactly what you please; deuce take me if I try to interfere. *Caray*, I know those demons too well to get into trouble with them rashly."

"Very good! That is agreed; do not trouble yourself any further."

At a sign from Red Cedar the Pirates stopped, waiting impatiently what was going to happen, and resolved, at any rate, with that brutal egotism characteristic of scamps of that sort, to remain unmoved spectators. The squatter, not displaying the slightest trepidation, threw back his rifle on its sling, and taking off his buffalo robe which he waved before him, advanced towards the Apaches.

The latter, seeing the strangers halt with their hands on their guns, and this man advancing alone as ambassador, hesitated for a moment. They formed a group, and consulted; after a hurried deliberation, two men moved forward, and also waving their buffalo robes, stood about ten paces in front of the hunter.

"What does my brother want of the warriors of my nation?" one of the Indians said, in a haughty voice; "Does he not know that the hatchet has been dug up between the palefaces and redskins, or has he brought us his scalp, to save us the trouble of going to fetch it?"

"Is my brother a chief?" the Pirate answered, displaying no emotion.

"I am a chief," the Indian replied—"my brothers call me Black Cat."

"Very good," Red Cedar continued. "I will therefore answer my brother that I have known for a long time that the hatchet has been dug up for a long time between the 'Great hearts of the East' and the Apaches. As for my scalp, I am weak enough to set an enormous value on it, gray as it is, and I have no intention of letting it be raised."

"In that case my brother acted very imprudently in coming to deliver himself up."

"The future will prove the truth of that. Will my brother hear the propositions I am commissioned to make him?"

"My brother can speak, but he must be brief, for my sons are impatient."

"What I have to say only concerns Black Cat."

"My ears are open."

"I have come to offer my brother the help of my comrades and my own—that is to say, the eleven best rifles in the prairie. By the council fire, I will explain to the chiefs what we can do to deliver them from their implacable enemy, Bloodson."

"Bloodson is a cowardly dog," the chief answered; "the Indian women despise him. My brother has spoken well, but the whites have a forked tongue: what proof will my brother give me of his sincerity?"

"This," the Pirate intrepidly answered, as he approached near enough to touch the Indian, "I am Red Cedar, the scalp hunter."

"Wah!" the chief said, his eyes flashing.

The squatter continued, without displaying any emotion—

"I have to avenge myself on Bloodson—to succeed in it I have come to you, who, till this day, have been my enemies, and on whom I have inflicted so many injuries, and I place myself in your hands, with my comrades, frankly and unreservedly, bringing you as proof of my sincerity a skin full of firewater, three plugs of tobacco, and two female buffalo-robes, white as the snows of the Bears-hand. My brother will decide—I await his answer."

The Indians, who display extraordinary temerity, are good judges of courage. A bold action always pleases them, even from an enemy; on the other hand, a present of firewater makes them forget the deepest insults.

In the meanwhile Black Cat consulted for some minutes with the chief who accompanied him. After a very long discussion, cupidity doubtless gained the victory in the Apache's mind over the desire for vengeance, as his countenance brightened up, and he held out his hand to the squatter, saying—

"The chiefs of my tribe will smoke the calumet with my brother and his companions."

Then, taking off his cap of antelope hide, adorned with feathers, he placed it himself on Red Cedar's head, adding—"My brother is now sacred; he and his companions can follow me without fear—no insult will be offered them."

The Pirates had anxiously watched the phases of this conversation. Though too far off to overhear it, they followed all the gestures of the speakers. When Black Cat placed his cap on their comrade's head, they immediately advanced, without waiting for him to give them the signal. They knew that from this moment they had nothing to fear; but, on the contrary, they would be treated with the greatest respect and utmost consideration by all the members of the tribe.

A strange fact, worthy of remark, is the way in which the American races understand and practice hospitality. The most ferocious tribes, and those most addicted to pillage, respect in the highest degree the stranger who takes a seat at their fire. This man may have killed one of the members of the family which shelters him; he may have the most precious articles about him, and be alone, but no one will dare to insult him; everyone will strive to do him all sorts of services, and supply him with everything that may be useful to him, reserving the right of mercilessly killing him a week later, if they meet him on the prairie.

The Pirates were, consequently, received with open arms by the Apaches; a tent was put up expressly for them, and they were supplied with everything they could want.

The first care of Red Cedar was to carry out his bargain with Black Cat, and pay him what he had promised. The chief was delighted; his little eyes sparkled like carbuncles, he leaped, gesticulated, and was half out of his mind. The squatter had paid him a royal ransom, which he was far from expecting ever to receive. Hence he did not leave his new friend again, whom he overwhelmed with attentions.

When the Pirates had rested and had their food, Red Cedar turned to Black Cat.

"When the council assembles," he said, "I will point out to the chief the spot where Bloodson now is."

"My brother knows it?"

"I suspect it."

"In that case I will warn the *hachesto*, that he may assemble the chiefs round the council fire."

"Why not light the fire here, instead of returning to the village, which will occasion a great loss of time?"

"My brother is right," the chief answered.

He rose, and immediately quitted the tent. A few moments after, the hachesto of the hill mounted a species of hillock, and shaking his *chichikoui* with all his strength, invited the chiefs of the nation to assemble in council. The same announcement was made in the camp on the other side of the Gila.

An hour later, the principal Apache chiefs were crouching round the council fire, lit in the prairie at a short distance from the tent of the white men.

At the moment when Black Cat rose and was preparing to utter a few words, probably with the intention of explaining the reason of the meeting, a great noise was heard, and a mounted Indian galloped up, shouting—

"The Buffaloes! Stanapat, Stanapat!"

Another Indian arriving at equal speed from the opposite direction, shouted at the same time:

"The Siksekaï! The Siksekaï!"

"Here are our allies," Black Cat then said; "my sons will prepare to receive them."

The council was broken up. The warriors hurriedly assembled, formed in two large bands, flanked on the wings by horsemen, and ranged themselves for battle in the two directions indicated by the scouts.

The war detachment of the Buffaloes appeared descending a hill, and advancing in good order. It was composed of about five hundred warriors, perfectly armed and painted for war, and looking most martial.

A detachment of the Siksekaï of about equal strength appeared immediately after, marching in good order.

So soon as the four Indian bands saw each other, they uttered their war cry, discharged their muskets and brandished their lances, while the horsemen, starting at full speed, executed the most singular evolutions, rushing on each other as if charging, turning and curvetting round the detachments which marched on at quick step, singing, shouting, firing their guns, rattling

their chichikouis, blowing their shells, and incessantly sounding their war whistles.

There was something really imposing in the aspect of these savage warriors, with their stern faces, clothed in fantastic costumes, and covered with feathers and hair, which the wind blew in every direction.

When the four parties arrived at a short distance from each other, they stopped and the noise ceased. Then the principal chiefs, holding in their hand the totem of their tribe, left the ranks, followed by the pipe-bearer, carrying a great sacred calumet; they walked a few paces toward each other, and planted the totem on their right.

The pipe-bearers filled the calumets, lighted them, bowed to the four cardinal points, and handed them in turn to the chief, while holding the bowls in their hands, and being careful that no one was passed over.

This preliminary ceremony accomplished, the principal sorcerer of the Buffaloes placed himself between the totems, and turned to the sun.

"Home of light!" he said, "thou who vivifiest everything in nature, servant and visible representative of the Great Invisible Spirit who governs the world which he has created, thy children long separated are assembling today to defend their villages and hunting grounds, unjustly and incessantly attacked by men without faith or country, whom Niang, the Spirit of Evil, has let loose upon them. Smile on their efforts, O Sun, and grant them the scalps of their enemies! Grant that they be victorious, and accept this offering made thee by thy most fervent adorer, to render thee favourable to thy sons, and make thy Apache children invincible!"

While uttering these words, he seized a light stone axe hanging at his girdle, and placing his left arm on a rock, laid open his wrist with one blow.

The blood poured profusely from this horrible wound; but the sorcerer, impassive and apparently insensible to pain, drew himself up with an eye flashing with enthusiasm and religious fanaticism, and shaking his arm in every direction, sprinkled the chiefs with his blood, while shouting in a loud voice:

"Sun, Sun, grant us our enemies, as I have given thee my hand!"

All the Indians repeated the same prayer.

The yells recommenced, and in an instant the redskins, seized with a spirit of frenzy, rushed upon each other, brandishing their weapons to the sound of the chichikouis and war whistles, and imitating all the evolutions of a real battle.

The sorcerer, still stoical, wrapped up his mutilated arm in grass, and retired with a slow and measured step, saluted on his passage by the Indians whom his action had electrified. When the tumult was slightly calmed, the chiefs assembled for the second time round the council fire, whose circle had been enlarged to make room for the allies.

The newly arrived warriors were mingled with those of Black Cat, and the greatest cordiality prevailed among those ferocious men, whose number amounted at this moment to nearly two thousand, and who only dreamed of blood, murder, and pillage.

"Confederate sachems of the powerful nation of the Apaches," Stanapat said, "you know the cause which once again draws us up arms in hand against the perfidious white men. It is, therefore, useless to enter into details you know; still, I believe, that since the hatchet has been dug up, we ought to use it till it is completely blunted. The palefaces daily invade our territory more and more; they respect none of our laws; they kill us like wild beasts. Let us forget our personal habits for an instant, to combine against the common foe, that Bloodson, whom the genius of evil has created for our ruin. If we can manage to remain united, we shall exterminate him, for we shall be the stronger! When we have conquered, we will share the spoils of our enemy. I have spoken."

Stanapat sat down again, and Black Cat rose in his turn. "We are unanimous enough to commence the war with advantage; within a few days other auxiliaries will have found us. Why wait longer? Ten white hunters of the prairies, our allies, offer to surrender to us the den of the long knives of the East, in which they tell me they have friends. What do we wait for? Let us utter our war cry and start at once; any delay may be deadly for us, by giving our enemies time to prepare a desperate resistance, against which all our efforts will be broken. Let my brothers reflect. I have spoken."

"My brother has spoken well," Stanapat answered; "we must fall like lightning on our enemy, who will be terrified by an unexpected attack; but we should not be imprudent. Where are the white hunters?"

"Here," Black Cat replied.

"I ask," the sachem continued, "that they be heard by the council."

The other chiefs bowed their heads in assent, and Black Cat rose and went to the Pirates, who were impatiently awaiting the result of the deliberation of the sachems.

CHAPTER XII.

BLACK CAT.

In order to understand the ensuing incidents, we are compelled to return to the maidens whom we left at the moment when they escaped from Red Cedar's camp, escorted by the Canadian hunters.

The fugitives stopped a few moments before sunrise on a little tongue of sand forming a species of promontory a few yards in length on the waters of Gila, which were rather deep at this point, whence the river or prairie could be surveyed.

All was calm and tranquil in the desert. The impetuous Gila rolled along its yellowish stream between two banks clothed with wood and thick chaparral. Amid the dark green branches thousands of birds were striking up a concert, with which was mingled at intervals the lowing of the buffaloes.

The first care of the hunters was to kindle a fire and prepare the morning meal, while their hobbled horses nibbled the young tree shoots.

"Why breakfast already, Harry?" Ellen asked, "When we have been travelling hardly four hours."

"We do not know what await us in an hour, Miss Ellen," the hunter answered; "hence we must profit by the moment of respite Providence grants us to restore our strength."

The maiden let her head droop. The meal was soon ready, and when it was over they remounted and the flight commenced.

All at once, a shrill and peculiar whistle was heard in the tall grass, and some forty Indians, as if emerging from the ground, surrounded the party. At the first moment, Ellen fancied that these men were the Coras warriors Eagle-wing was to bring up; but the illusion lasted a very short while, and a glance sufficed for them to recognise Apaches.

Doña Clara, at first alarmed by this unexpected attack, almost immediately regained her coolness, and saw that any resistance was impossible.

"You would sacrifice yourselves in vain for me," she said to the Canadians; "leave me temporarily in the hands of these Indians, whom I fear less than Red Cedar's gambusinos. Fly, Ellen—fly, my friends."

"No!" the American girl exclaimed, passionately; "I will die with you, my friend."

"The two women will follow us, as well as the paleface hunters," one of the Indians commanded.

"For what purpose?" Doña Clara asked, softly.

At a sign from the chief, two men seized the young Mexican lady, and tied her to her horse, though not employing any violence.

With a movement swifter than thought, Harry lifted Ellen from her saddle, threw her across his horse's neck, and trying a desperate effort, threw himself, followed by Dick, into the thick of the redskins. Employing their rifles like clubs, they began felling the Apaches. There was, for a moment, a terrible contest, but at length Harry succeeded, after desperate efforts, in forcing his way, and set off at full speed, bearing with him Red Cedar's daughter, who had fainted from terror.

Less lucky than he, Dick, after felling two or three Indians, was hurled from his horse, and nailed to the ground by a lance. The young man, in falling, cast a despairing glance at her whom he had been unable to save, and for whom he died. An Indian leaped on his body, raised his scalp, and brandished it, all blood dripping, with cries of ferocious laughter, before the eyes of Doña Clara, who was half dead with terror and pain. The redskins then started at a gallop, carrying off their prey with them.

The Indians are not in the habit now-a-days of ill-treating their prisoners as they used to do, especially if they are women. Hence Doña Clara's

abductors had not made her endure any unkind treatment.

These Indians formed part of an Apache war party, about one hundred strong, and commanded by a renowned chief, called Black Cat. All these warriors were well armed, and mounted on handsome and good horses.

Immediately after capturing the maiden, they started at a gallop across the prairie for nearly six hours, in the hope of outstripping any party that might start in pursuit, and toward nightfall they halted on the banks of the Gila. At this spot the river flowed majestically between two escarped banks, bordered by lofty rocks carved in the strangest fashion. The ground was still covered by a grass at least three feet high, and a few clumps of trees scattered over the plain agreeably diversified the landscape, which was enlivened by flocks of buffaloes, elks, and bighorns, which could be seen feeding in the distance.

The Indians raised their tents on a hill, from the top of which a very extensive view could be enjoyed. They lit several fires, and prepared to pass the night in waiting for the other warriors to join them. Doña Clara was placed by herself in a tent of buffalo skins, in which a fire was lighted, as at this advanced season the nights are cold in the Far West.

Accustomed to desert life, and familiarised with Indian customs, Doña Clara would have patiently supported her position, had it not been for the thought of the misfortunes which had so long crushed her, and of her father's fate of which she was ignorant.

Seated on buffalo skins by the fire, she had just finished eating a few mouthfuls of roast elk, washed down with smilax water, and was reflecting deeply on the strange and terrible events which had marked this day, when the curtain of the tent was raised, and Black Cat appeared.

The chief was a man of lofty stature. He was upwards of sixty years of age, but his hair was still black. He enjoyed in his tribe a reputation for courage and wisdom, which he justified in every respect. A cloud of sorrow veiled his naturally soft and placid features. He walked slowly in, and took a seat by the side of Doña Clara, whom he regarded for some moments with interest.

"My daughter is afflicted," he said, "she is thinking of her father, her heart is with her family; but my daughter will take courage, and not be cast down.

Natosh (God) will come to her, and dry her tears."

The young Mexican shook her head sadly, but made no reply; the chief continued—

"I also suffer: a cloud is very heavy on my mind. The paleface warriors of her nation wage an obstinate war with us, but I know the way to make them assume the feet of antelopes, to fly far from our hunting grounds. Tomorrow, on reaching the village of my tribe, I will have recourse to a great medicine. My daughter will console herself; no harm will happen to her among us; I will be her father."

"Chief," Doña Clara answered, "lead me back to Santa Fe, and I promise you my father will give you as many rifles, powder, bullets, and looking glasses as you like to ask of him."

"That is not possible; my daughter is too precious a hostage for me to think of surrendering her. My daughter must forget the whites, whom she will never see again, and prepare to become the wife of a chief."

"I!" the maiden exclaimed in terror, "Become the wife of an Indian? Never! —make me undergo all the tortures you please to inflict on me, instead of condemning me to such a punishment."

"My daughter will reflect," Black Cat answered, "of what does the White Lily of the Valley complain? We are only doing to her what has been done to us frequently—that is the law of the prairies."

Black Cat rose, giving Doña Clara a mingled glance of tenderness and pity, and slowly left the tent.

After his departure the poor girl fell into a state of utter prostration; the horror of her position appeared before her in all its truth.

The night passed then for her, weeping and sobbing, alone, amid the laughter and songs of the Apaches, who were celebrating the arrival of the warriors of their detachment.

The next morning, at daybreak, the warriors started again, several men watching the movements of the prisoner; but Black Cat kept aloof from her.

The Indians marched along the Gila, through a yellowish prairie. Gloomy lines of chaparral, intersected by trees, whose red or grayish-brown colour

contrasted with the yellow frondage of the poplars, bordered the road; on the horizon rose grand hills of a whitish grey, covered with patches of coloured grass and dark green cedar.

The band undulated like an immense serpent in this grand desert, proceeding towards the village, whose approaches could already be detected by the mephitic miasmas, exhaling from scaffoldings, seen in the distance, on which the Indians keep their dead, and let them decompose, and dry in the sun, instead of burying them.

At about two o'clock the warriors entered the village, amid the shouts of inhabitants, and the sound of the chichikouis, mingled with the furious barking of the dogs.

This village, built on the top of a hill, formed a tolerably regular circle. It was a considerable number of earth huts, built without order or symmetry. Wooden palisades, twelve feet high, served it as ramparts, and at equal distances four bastions of earth supplied with loopholes, and covered inside and outside with intertwined willow branches, completed the system of defence. In the centre of the village was a vacant space, of about forty feet in diameter, in the centre of which was the "ark of the first man," a species of small round cylinder, formed of wide planks, four feet high, round which creepers twined. To the west of the spot we have just described was the medicine lodge, where the festivals and religious rites of the Apaches were celebrated. A mannikin made of animal skins, with a wooden head, painted black, and wearing a fur cap, decorated with plumes, was fixed on a tall pole, to represent the spirit or genius of evil. Other quaint figures of the same nature were dispersed in various squares of the village, and were offerings made to the lord of life.

Between the huts was a great number of several storied scaffoldings, on which the maize, wheat, and vegetables of the tribe were drying.

Black Cat ordered Doña Clara to be conducted to a *calli* he had inhabited for a long time, and whose position, in the centre of the village, offered sufficient guarantee for the security of the prisoner. He then went to prepare himself for the great magical conjuration, by which he hoped to destroy the palefaces, his enemies.

When Doña Clara found herself alone, she fell despondingly on a pile of leaves, and burst into tears. The cabin serving her as a prison was like all the rest in the village; it was round, and slightly arched at the top; the entrance was protected by a species of porch, closed with a dried skin, stretched on the cross sticks. In the centre of the roof was an orifice, intended to let the smoke out, and covered with a sort of rounded cap made of sticks and branches. The interior of the hut was large, clean, and even rather light.

The mode of building these abodes is extremely simple. They consist of eleven to fifteen stakes, four or five feet in length, between which shorter ones are placed very closely together. Upon the higher poles rest long beams, inclining to the centre, and which, placed very close to each other, support the roof. Externally, they are covered with a sort of trellis work, made of branches, fastened together with bark; straw is laid over them, and earth on the top of that again.

The maiden, although she was so wearied, did not feel the slightest inclination to repose on the bed prepared for her. It was formed of a long parchment box, with a square entrance; the interior was lined with several bears' skins, on which she could have stretched herself comfortably, but she preferred crouching in the centre of the hut, near the hole in which the fire, lit to protect her from the cold, was on the point of expiring.

Toward midnight, at the moment when, despite her firm resolution to keep awake, she was beginning to doze, Doña Clara heard a slight sound at the entrance of her hut. She ran hastily, and by the dying flashes of the fire, perceived an Indian warrior.

It was Eagle-wing. The maiden suppressed with difficulty a cry of joy at the sudden appearance of the Coras Chief. The latter laid a finger on his lip; then, after looking scrutinisingly around, he walked up to the maiden, and said in a voice soft as a sigh:

"Why did not the Lily follow the road laid down Eagle-wing? Instead of being at this hour the prisoner of the Apache dogs, the pale virgin would be by her father's side."

At this remark a heart-rending sob burst from Doña Clara's bosom, and she hid her face in her hands.

"The Apaches are cruel, they sell women. Does my sister know the fate that threatens her?"

"Too well, alas!"

"What will my sister the Lily do?" the Indian asked.

"What I will do?" the Mexican girl answered, her eye suddenly gleaming with a dark flash; "A daughter of my race will never be the slave of an Apache; if my father will give me his knife, he will see whether I fear death."

"It is well," the sachem continued; "my sister is brave; great courage and cunning will be needed to succeed in what I am about to attempt."

"What does my brother mean?" the maiden asked, with a lively movement of hope.

"My sister will listen; the moments are precious; has the Lily confidence in me?"

Doña Clara looked the Indian in the face; she regarded his honest countenance for a moment, then, seizing the warrior's hand and pressing it in hers, said warmly:

"Yes, yes, I have confidence in you, Eagle-wing; speak, what do you ask of me?"

"To save you, I, an Indian, am about to betray the men of my race," the sachem proceeded sadly; "I do not say this to heighten the value of my deed, sister; I will restore you to your father. Tomorrow Black Cat will undergo, in the presence of the whole tribe, the great medicines of the sweating cabin, in order that Bloodson may fall into his hands with all the warriors he commands."

"I know it."

"My sister will be present at the ceremony. She must pay attention to my slightest signs, but, above all, must be careful that none of the Apache warriors notice the glances she exchanges with me, or we shall both be lost. Till tomorrow."

Then, bowing with a respect blended with tenderness, Eagle-wing left the calli. Doña Clara fell on her knees, clasped her trembling hands, and

addressed a fervent prayer to Heaven. Without, the barking of the dogs could be heard, mingled with the howls of the coyotes, and the measured steps of the Apache warriors watching the hut.

Moukapec was one of the sentinels.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE GREAT MEDICINE.

Before going further we will give some indispensable information respecting the Pueblos Indians, who are destined to play a great part in this story, which, we believe, through its novelty, will interest the reader.

These Indians hold the centre between the redskins of North America, and that race of Toltecs, on whom were grafted all the branches whose amalgamation composes the great indigenous nation of Mexico. Though living chiefly by trade and agriculture, they have not resigned all their warlike tastes.

The Pueblos are established all along the northern line of Mexico, the principal tribes being the Navajos, Apaches, Yutas, Caignas, and Comanches. The Apaches differ a little from the redskins properly so called, with whom they have a common character, however; and so do the Comanches.

The latter tribe is the most redoubtable in the desert, and calls itself proudly the Queen of the Prairies. The Comanches alone of all the Indians have managed to shield themselves from a taste for strong liquors, which are so pernicious to the red race. The Comanches possess a haughty and independent character, as the reader will be enabled to judge in the progress of our story. We will only mention here one of their customs, which will be sufficient to let them be appreciated at their full value.

Polygamy is allowed among the Comanches; each chief has six, eight or ten wives; but, among this people a marriage is arranged neither by soft words

nor presents; the Comanche warrior reaches a surer and more solemn pledge. This is how he acts:

So soon as he fancies himself beloved by a woman, he kills one of his horses, plucks out its heart, and nails it all bleeding to the door of the girl he is courting. She takes it down, roasts it, and then divides it equally, giving one half to her lover, eating the other herself, and the marriage is concluded.

Up to the present, none have been able to enslave this nation, which is the terror of all the Mexican frontiers. After this explanation, we will go on with our story.

Doña Clara was aroused at an early hour by the sound of the chichikouis and other Indian instruments, with which was incessantly mingled the barking of the countless pack of dogs that always accompanies the redskins. At sunrise Black Cat entered the prisoner's cabin, and, after bowing to her, told her in his honeyed voice, while gazing eagerly at her, that he was about to make the great medicine of the Bah-oh-akan-es, in order to obtain from the Master of Life the surrender of his enemy into his hands; and that if, instead of remaining alone with her grief, she desired to witness the ceremony, she could follow him.

The young Mexican, not wishing the chief to notice the delight she experienced at this proposal, appeared to submit, and not to accept his offer.

The whole population of the village was astir, the women and children running in all directions, uttering deafening yells. Even the warriors and old men seemed to have forgotten the Indian stoicism. In a few minutes the village was deserted, so eager were all to proceed to a vast plain running along the banks of the Gila, where the great medicine talisman was to be accomplished.

Black Cat, cunning as he was, was deceived by the apparent weakness of his prisoner, and her feigned despondency. After giving her a piercing glance to assure himself that she was not playing with him, he made her a sign to leave the hut and mix with the aged women, who, like all the rest, wished to witness the ceremony; and he then retired, without having the slightest suspicion.

Doña Clara placed herself at the foot of a tree, whose tufted branches bent over the river; and there, with palpitating heart, restless mind, and eye and

ears on the watch, she impatiently awaited the hour of her deliverance, although feigning to be attracted by all that went on around her.

The Indians had built a small hut, covered externally with buffalo robes, and having a low and narrow door. In order to reach this hut, a path forty feet long and one wide had been traced, crossing the village road at right angles. The grass had been torn up all along this path, and collected at its termination opposite the hut. Forty pair of moccasins had also been placed, one behind the other, in two rows, all the extent of the path.

By the side of the mound of grass burned a fire, in which the flat stones were heated. When they were red hot, they were carried into the hut, and placed on a hearth made for the purpose.

The entire population of the village, with the exception of a few women, whom their age kept apart, were seated along the two sides of the path, with a large number of dishes of Indian corn, broth, grease, and meat before them. The sorcerer was standing on the mound of grass.

At a signal he rose, and proceeded to the sweating lodge, being careful always to place his feet on the moccasins. At the door of the lodge Black Cat was standing, naked to the waist. The sorcerer, after remaining a few minutes in the lodge, came out again, holding a cutlass in his hand. He walked silently towards Black Cat, who, on seeing him, rose and stretched his left hand, saying:

"I gladly give the first joint of the forefinger of this hand to Natosh, if he will surrender my enemy to me, and allow me to lift his scalp."

"Natosh has heard thee: he accepts," the sorcerer replied, laconically.

With a blow of his cutlass he cut off the joint, which he threw over his head, uttering some mysterious words; while Black Cat, apparently insensible to the pain, continued his prayers. This operation terminated, the sorcerer took a rod made of willow branches and fastened by the tail of a prairie wolf: he dipped it in each of the dishes, and scattered the contents in the direction of the four winds, while invoking the Lord of life, fire, water, and air. These dishes, which no one had yet touched, were then divided among the spectators, who devoured them in a twinkling.

After this, the oldest warriors entered the medicine lodge: the women carefully covered them, and threw over the red-hot stones water which they

drew from the sacred vessels, with sprigs of wormwood. After this ceremony, all the inhabitants began dancing round the hut, accompanying themselves with their chichikouis. During this time, he had placed on the pile of grass in front of the lodge, a buffalo head with its muzzle to the wind: then, taking a long pole covered with a brand new red blanket, which he offered to the Master of Life, he proceeded, followed by his relations and friends, to plant it before the sweating lodges.

The songs and dances continued. The sounds of the chichikouis became more animated. A species of frenzy seemed to seize on all the Indians, and the old women, who, till this moment, had remained passive spectators of the ceremony, rushed in disorder towards the lodge, uttering loud yells, and mingled with the noisy crowd.

Doña Clara remained alone at the foot of the tree, near the riverbank. No one paid any further attention to her. It seemed as if she had been forgotten in the general excitement. She took an anxious glance around: by a species of intuition she felt that the help she expected would arrive from the direction of the river. Carelessly and slowly, stooping every second to cull one of the charming flowers—something like our violets—which are the last to enamel the prairie, she approached the bank. All at once she felt herself pulled back by the skirt of her dress, and felt terribly alarmed. At the same time as this mysterious hand seized her, a voice whispered the simple words:

"To the right, and stoop."

The maiden guessed, rather than heard the words; but she obeyed without hesitation. Two minutes after, following a small path that opened before her, she found herself sheltered behind an enormous rock, on the riverbank. Two horses, saddled in the Indian fashion, were fastened to a picket near the rock. At a sign from Eagle-wing, Doña Clara leaped on to one of the horses, while the Indian bestrode the other.

"Good," he said, in his sympathising voice; "brave heart!" And letting loose the bridles of both horses, he said:

"Quicker than the storm!"

The half-tamed mustangs started more rapidly than the wind, making the pebbles strike fire under their hoofs. It was broad day, the prairie extended

for an enormous distance, flat, naked, and undiversified; and at only a few paces off, the whole population of the village would not fail soon to notice them. The position was most perilous and critical; the two fugitives knew it, and redoubled their ardour, boldly braving danger. All at once a yell of rage vibrated in the air.

"Courage!" the chief said.

"I have it," the girl replied, with clenched teeth, as she urged her horse to increased speed. "They shall never capture me alive."

The Apaches, who had left their village for a religious festival, had not brought their arms with them, and their horses naturally remained in the stables. This was an hour's respite granted the fugitives.

So soon as the Indians had perceived Doña Clara's flight, the ceremony was interrupted, and all rushed tumultuously toward the village, noisily demanding their weapons and horses. Within a few minutes the most active were in the saddle, and galloping in the traces of Doña Clara and Eagle-wing.

The most celebrated European riders can form no idea of what a pursuit is on the prairies. The Indians are the finest horsemen in the world. Riveted to their steeds, which they squeeze and hold up between their nervous knees, they become identified with them, communicating their passions to them, as it were, by an electric fluid, and, like the Centaurs in the fable, they perform prodigies on horseback; rocks, ravines, hedges, currents—nothing stops or checks this furious race which is allied to madness: a living whirlwind, they fly through space with headlong speed, enveloped in a halo of dust.

Two hours passed thus, and the fugitives, bent over their horses' necks, were unable to take a moment's rest. Their half-maddened steeds, with their coats white with foam, and bleeding nostrils, reeled with fatigue and terror; their trembling sinews scarce supported them, and yet, urged on by their riders, they devoured the space, guessing instinctively that the furious band of Indians was pursuing them at a short distance.

Scarce a thousand yards separated the two parties. Black Cat, furious at having been cheated by a woman, was two horses' length in advance, and was followed by seven or eight Indians, whose horses, fresher than those of

the others, had forged ahead. Eagle-wing turned round, and saw four warriors a hundred paces from him.

"Forward!" he shouted to the maiden, as he struck her horse's croup with his whip; and it bounded forward, with a supreme effort, uttering a snort of pain.

At the same time the Coras turned back, and rushing like lightning on his enemies, ere they had time to place themselves in a posture of defence, he discharged his rifle at them. An Apache fell dead. The sachem, whose horse was exhausted, felled a second foe with the butt of his gun; then, with extraordinary skill, he leaped onto the steed of the first warrior he had killed, caught the other by the bridle, and went off again, leaving the Apaches astounded by this act of boldness.

Ten minutes later he rejoined Doña Clara, who had seen with a terror, mingled with admiration, the heroic action of her defender. The maiden, beneath her apparent weakness, concealed a thoroughly manly soul. With her cheeks slightly tinged, her eyebrows contracted, her teeth clenched, and animated by the fixed idea of escaping her ravishers, fatigue seemed to have no mastery over her. It was with a feeling of indescribable joy that she mounted the fresh steed the Indian brought her.

Owing to Eagle-wing's bold stroke, the fugitives had a considerable advance on their pursuers; for the Apaches, as they came up to the spot where their two companions had been killed, leaped off their horses, and surrounded their corpses with lamentations.

Eagle-wing understood that this flight could not last, and that sooner or later they must die or yield; he therefore altered his tactics.

At a little distance from the spot where they now were the Gila was contracted; the river, reduced to a width of one hundred and fifty yards at the most, ran between two wooded hills.

"We are lost," he hurriedly said to his companion, "if we continue to fly thus. A desperate resolve can alone save us."

"Let us try it at all risks," the maiden answered, intrepidly, with quivering lip and flashing eye.

"Come!" he continued.

Doña Clara followed him without hesitation to the rugged bank of the river, when the warrior stopped.

"There," he said, hoarsely, as he pointed with a gesture full of nobility to the Apaches coming up at full speed, "slavery, infamy, and death. Here," he continued, as he pointed to the river, "death, perhaps, but liberty."

"Let us be free or die!" she replied.

As we have said, the river ran between two elevated banks, and the fugitives were now standing like two equestrian statues on the top of a hillock twenty or five-and-twenty feet in height, from which they must throw themselves into the river, an enormous leap for the horses which ran a risk of being crushed in falling, and dragging their riders down with them. But any other means of flight had become impossible.

The Apaches, spread all over the plain, had succeeded in surrounding the fugitives.

"Has my sister decided?" the Indian asked.

Doña Clara took a glance around her.

The redskins, headed by Black Cat, were scarce one hundred and fifty yards distant.

"Let us go, in Heaven's name," she said.

"May Natosh protect us!" the Indian said.

They energetically pressed the flanks of their horses, lifting them at the same moment, and the two noble animals leaped into the river, uttering a snort of terror. The Apaches arrived at this moment on the brow of the hill, and could not restrain a yell of disappointment and wrath at the sight of the desperate act.

The waters had closed over the fugitives, sending up to heaven a cloud of spray, but the horses soon reappeared swimming vigorously toward the other bank. The Indians had halted on the hill, insulting by their yells and threats the victims who escaped by such a prodigy of daring. One of them, urged by his fury, and unable to pull up his horse in time, plunged into the Gila; but, having taken his precautions badly, the fall was mortal to the horse.

The Indian slipped off, and began striking out for the bank. Instead of continuing his flight, as he should have done, Eagle-wing, impelled by that spirit of bravado natural to the redskins, re-entered the river without hesitation, and, at the moment when the Apache warrior reappeared on the surface, he bent over, seized him by his long hair, and buried his knife in his throat. Then, turning to his enemies, who watched with a shudder this terrible drama, he drew up the wretch to his saddle-bow, scalped him, and brandishing this sanguinary trophy with an air of triumph, he uttered his war yell.

The Apaches poured a shower of bullets and arrows round the Coras Sachem, who, standing motionless in the middle of the river, still waved his horrible trophy. At length he turned his horse's head, and rejoined his companion, who was awaiting him timorously on the bank.

"Let us go," he said, as he fastened the scalp to his waist belt. "The Apaches are dogs, who can do nought but bark."

"Let us go," she replied, as she turned her head away in horror.

At the moment when they started again without troubling themselves about their enemies, who, scattered along the other bank, were eagerly seeking a ford, Eagle-wing perceived a cloud of dust, which, on dissipating, permitted him to see a party of horsemen galloping up at lightning speed.

"There is no hope left," he muttered.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SUCCOUR.

We will leave Eagle-wing and Doña Clara for a moment, and return to Bloodson's Teocali.

A few minutes before sunrise, Valentine awoke. "Up," he said to his companions, "it is the hour for starting."

Don Pablo and Shaw opened their eyes and got ready; but Curumilla was not there.

"Oh, oh," the hunter said; "the chief is up already, I fancy. Let us go down to the plain. We shall probably soon come across him."

The three men left the grotto, and began, by the uncertain rays of the moon, sliding down the abrupt sides of the Teocali, leaving their comrades asleep. A few minutes later, they reached the plain, where Curumilla was waiting for them, holding four horses by the bridle. Valentine gave a start of surprise.

"We had agreed to go on foot, chief," he said. "Have you forgotten that?"

"No," the other replied, laconically.

"Then, why the deuce did you saddle these horses, which are useless to us?"

The Indian shook his head.

"We shall be better on horseback," he said.

"Still," Don Pablo observed, "I fancy that it's better to follow a trail on foot, as you said yourself yesterday, Don Valentine."

The latter reflected for an instant; then, turning to the young man, he answered him with a significant toss of the head:

"Curumilla is a prudent man. We have lived together for nearly fifteen years, and I have always found it best to follow his advice. Only once I wanted to have my own way, and then I all but lost my scalp. We will mount, Don Pablo. The chief has his reasons for acting as he is now doing, as the result will in all probability prove."

The hunters leaped into the saddle, and, after a farewell glance at the Teocali, where their friends were resting, they let their horses feel the spur.

"In what direction are we going?" Don Pablo asked.

"Let us first gain the riverbank," Valentine answered. "So soon as we have got there, we shall see what we have to do. But, mind we do not separate; for in the darkness it will be almost impossible to find each other."

On the prairies, the only roads that exist, and can be followed, are paths traced for ages by buffaloes, elks, and wild beasts. These paths form

labyrinths; of which the Indians alone hold the thread; hunters, however well acquainted they may be with the prairies, only enter them with the utmost precautions. When they fancy they recognise a path, they will not leave it under any pretext, certain that if they Were so imprudent as to turn to the right or left, they would not fail to lose themselves, and have infinite difficulty in finding their road again.

Valentine was, perhaps, the only white hunter on the prairies who, owing to the profound knowledge he possessed of the desert, could enter this maze with impunity. However, as all the paths inevitably lead to the banks of rivers, and this direction was the one the little party was to follow, Valentine's remark was only intended to moderate Don Pablo's ardour, and compel him to march at his side.

After a hurried ride of two hours, the hunters at length found themselves on the banks of the Gila, which rolled its yellow and turbid waters along beneath them. At the moment when they reached the river, the sun rose majestically on the horizon in a mist of purpled clouds.

"Let us stop here a moment," Valentine said, "in order to form our plan of action."

"We do not need a long discussion for that." Don Pablo replied.

"You think so?"

"Hang it all, the only thing to be done, I fancy, is to follow Red Cedar's trail."

"True: but to follow it we must first find it."

"Granted: so let us look for it."

"That is what we are about to do."

At this moment furious yells were heard not far from them. The hunters, surprised, looked about them anxiously, and soon saw a band of Indians running in every direction along the river bank. These were not more than half a league distant.

"Oh, oh," Valentine said, "what's the meaning of this?"

"They are Apaches," Shaw remarked.

"I can see that," the Frenchman said. "But what the deuce is the matter with those devils? On my honour, they seem mad."

"Wah!" Curumilla suddenly exclaimed, who was also looking, though not speaking, as was his wont.

"What's, the matter now?" Valentine asked, as he turned to the chief.

"Look," the latter replied, as he stretched out his arm, "Doña Clara!"

"What, Doña Clara!" the hunter exclaimed, with a start of surprise.

"Yes," Curumilla observed, "my brother must look."

"It is, in truth, Doña Clara," Valentine said after a minute; "what on earth can she be doing here?"

And without caring for the Indians, who, on seeing him, would not fail to start in pursuit, he hurried at full gallop in the direction of the maiden. His comrades followed him; not caring for the width of the stream at this spot, they plunged in, resolved to reach the other bank, and fly to the help of the maiden, under a shower of arrows which the Indians fired at them, while uttering yells of rage at these new enemies, who rose as if by enchantment before them.

Eagle-wing and Doña Clara were still flying, unheeding the shouts of the hunters; the horsemen the Coras had perceived were Apache warriors returning to their village from a buffalo hunt. Although they were ignorant of what had happened, the sight of their friends galloping along the river bank, and the two riders escaping at full speed, revealed the truth to them, that is to say, that prisoners had escaped, and warriors of their tribe were in pursuit of them.

The river was soon crowded with Apache warriors, who crossed it to catch up with the fugitives. The pursuit was beginning to reassume alarming proportions for Eagle-wing and Doña Clara, in spite of the considerable advance they still had on their enemies.

The Gila is one of the largest and most majestic rivers in the Far West; its course is winding and capricious—it is full of rapids, cataracts, and islets formed by the change of bed which it effects when, by an abundant overflow of water, it spreads far and wide over the country, inundating it for four or five leagues around.

Eagle-wing had seen that the only chance of safety left him was not on the prairie, where he had, not a single covert to attempt a desperate resistance, but on one of those little islets of the Gila, whose rocks and thick scrubs would offer a temporary shelter, that could not be violated with impunity. His vagabond course had, therefore, no other object but to return to the river by a zigzag route.

Valentine and his comrades had not lost one of the fugitive's movements; although they were themselves hotly pursued, they anxiously followed the incidents of this terrible struggle.

"They are lost!" Don Pablo suddenly shouted. "That Indian is mad, on my soul. See, he is trying to turn back in this direction—it is running into the wolf's throat!"

"You are mistaken," Valentine answered; "the tactics of that man are, on the contrary, extremely simple, and at the same time most clever. The Apaches have guessed them; for look, they are trying to cut him off from the river as far as they can."

"'Tis true, by heavens!" Shaw said; "We must help that man in his manoeuvre."

"That depends on ourselves," Valentine answered, quickly; "let us turn and suddenly attack the Apaches; perhaps that diversion will enable our friends to succeed."

"Well, that is an excellent idea," remarked Don Pablo; "how wise it was of Curumilla to make us ride."

"What did I say to you?" Valentine said with a smile. "Oh! the chief is an invaluable man."

Curumilla smiled proudly, but maintained silence.

"Are you ready to follow me and be killed, if necessary to save Doña Clara?" Valentine went on.

"*Cascaras!*" the hunters answered.

"Forward, then, in heaven's name! Each of us must be worth ten men!" the Frenchman shouted, as he suddenly turned his horse on its hind legs. The

four men rushed at full speed on the Apaches, uttering a formidable yell. On arriving within range they discharged their rifles, and four Apaches fell.

The Indians, intimidated by this sudden attack, which they were far from anticipating, dispersed in every direction to avoid the shock of their daring adversaries; then, collecting in a compact mass, they charged in their turn, uttering their war cry, and brandishing their weapons. But the hunters received them with a second discharge, which hurled four more Indians on the sand, and then started in different directions to collect again, one hundred and fifty yards further on.

"Courage, my friends!" Valentine cried, "Those scoundrels do not know how to use their weapons; if we liked We could hold them in check the whole day."

"That will not be necessary," Don Pablo remarked; "look there!"

In fact, the fugitives, profiting by the moment's respite which the hunters' attack on the Apaches granted them, had reached an islet about one hundred yards in circumference, in the middle of the stream, where they were temporarily in safety.

"It is now our turn," Valentine loudly shouted; "a final charge to drive those devils back, and then to the islet!"

"Hurrah! Hurrah!" the hunters then shouted, and they rushed on the Apaches.

There were a few minutes of hand-to-hand fighting, but the Apaches at length broke, and the hunters, freed by prodigies of valour, retreated to the riverbank, from which they were not more than twenty yards distant. The others plunged into the river, but suddenly Valentine's horse stood up, gave a prodigious bound, and fell back on its rider—the noble animal was literally riddled with arrows.

The Apaches uttered a formidable yell of joy, on seeing one of their enemies rolling on the ground, and they rushed up to scalp him. But Valentine had risen to his feet immediately; kneeling behind the body of his horse, which he converted into a breastwork, he discharged at the Indians first his rifle, and then his pistols, being supported by the fire of the hunters, who had reached the islet.

The Apaches, exasperated at being held in check by one man, rushed upon him, as if to crush him beneath their weight. Valentine, to whom his firearms were now useless, seized his rifle by the barrel, and employed it like a mace, falling back step by step, but always keeping his front to the enemy.

By a prodigious chance, Valentine had not yet received a wound, save a few unimportant scratches, for the Indians were so close together that they could not use their arms for fear of wounding one another. But Valentine felt his strength deserting him, his ears buzzed, his temples throbbed as if bursting; a veil was gradually spread over his eyes, and his wearied arms only dealt uncertain blows.

Human strength has its limits, and however great the energy and will of a man may be, the moment arrives when further fighting becomes impossible, his strength betrays his courage, and he is forced to confess himself vanquished.

Valentine was reduced to this supreme point. His rifle broke in his hands; he was disarmed, and at the mercy of his ferocious enemies. All was over with the gallant Frenchman.

But the hunters, whom the Indians had forgotten in the heat of the action, seeing the imminent peril of their companion, resolutely hurried to his aid. While Eagle-wing, Don Pablo, and Shaw attacked the Indians and compelled them to fall back, Curumilla carried off his friend on his shoulders.

The contest began again, more obstinate and terrible than before, but, after extraordinary efforts, the hunters succeeded in regaining the islet, in spite of the stubborn resistance of the redskins.

Valentine had fainted, and Curumilla carried him to a perfectly sheltered spot, and silently busied himself with recalling him to life. But fatigue alone had produced the hunter's syncope, so he soon reopened his eyes, and ten minutes later he was perfectly restored.

When the Apaches saw their enemies in safety, they ceased a contest henceforth useless, and retired out of rifle range. The day passed without fresh incidents, and the hunters were able to intrench themselves as well as

they could on the islet, which they had succeeded in reaching with so much toil.

CHAPTER XV.

ON THE ISLAND.

The sun had descended on the horizon, and darkness was invading the sky; ere long a dense veil of gloom was spread over the entire face of nature. The Indians seemed to have given up all idea of attacking the whites, but did not leave the riverbank; on the contrary, their number momentarily increased. On either bank of the Gila they had lit large fires, and put up their tents.

The situation of the fugitives was far from reassuring; sheltered on an island, whence they could not escape without being seen by their vigilant enemies, their provisions were reduced to a few handfuls of maize boiled in water, and a little pemmican. Their ammunition consisted of twenty charges of powder at the most.

The hunters lit no fire, for fear of letting the Apaches know the exact spot where they were; collected in the middle of the island in a dense thicket, they watched over Doña Clara, who, overwhelmed by the terrible emotions of the day, had yielded to sleep, and was lying on a bed of dry leaves.

Valentine and his friends watched the movements of the enemy by the light of their bivouac fires. Opposite the island, and round a fire larger than the rest, several chiefs, among whom Black Cat could be clearly distinguished, appeared engaged in a lively discussion. At length, two men rose and advanced slowly to the water's edge; on reaching it, they took off their buffalo robes, raised them above their heads, and let them float in the breeze.

"Do you see that?" Don Pablo said to Valentine. "The redskins wish to parley with us."

"What the deuce can they have to say to us?" the hunter answered; "the demons must know in what extremities we are."

"No matter. I fancy we shall do well by receiving them.

"What does Eagle-wing think of it?" Valentine asked the Coras, who, crouched near them with his head resting on the palms of his hands, was reflecting deeply.

"The Apaches are foxes without courage," the sachem answered; "let us hear what they want."

"And you, *penni*, what is your opinion?" the hunter said, turning to Curumilla.

"My brother is prudent," the Aucas Ulmen replied; "we can hear the propositions of the Apaches."

"Well, as you all wish it, I consent; but I feel certain that no good will come of this interview."

"Perhaps so," Shaw remarked.

"That is not my opinion," Don Pablo said.

"Koutonepi must not receive them here," Curumilla went on. "The Apache are very crafty; they have an extremely forked tongue, and the eyes of tiger cats."

"That is true," said Valentine; "let us go and see what they want."

He rose, making Curumilla a sign to follow him; and after assuring himself that his arms were in good condition, he walked to the end of the island. The Indians were still continuing their signals, and Valentine raised his hands to his mouth in the shape of a speaking trumpet.

"What do the Buffalo Apaches want?" he shouted.

"The chiefs have to speak with the palefaces, but they cannot hear them at such a distance. Will the palefaces promise them safety if the warriors come to them?"

"Come," Valentine replied, "but mind, only two of you."

"Good," the chief said, "two warriors will come."

The Apaches consulted for an instant together, and then took from among the lofty grass in which it was concealed a light raft, which the hunters had not noticed, and prepared to gain the island.

The whites awaited them, resting on their rifles, apparently careless, but anxiously watching the shrubs on the bank, behind which the Apache warriors were doubtless hidden, and watching them in their turn.

The Indians landed and walked toward the hunters with all the etiquette prescribed by the law of the prairies. On seeing that the Indians were unarmed, Valentine handed his rifle to Don Pablo, who laid it a few paces behind him.

"Good," Black Cat muttered, with a smile; "my brother acts loyally. I expected that from him."

"Hum, chief!" Valentine answered, sharply; "Enough of compliments—what have you to say to me?"

"My pale brother does not like to lose time in vain words," the Indian said; "he is a wise man. I bring him the propositions of the principal chiefs of the tribe."

"Let us hear them, chief. If they are just, although we are not in so bad a position as you may suppose, we may possibly accept them, merely for the sake of saving bloodshed."

"There are at this moment more than two hundred warriors assembled on the riverbank; tomorrow there will be five hundred. Now, as the palefaces have no canoes, as they are not otters to plunge unseen into the 'endless river,' or birds to soar in the air—"

"What next?" Valentine interrupted him impertinently.

"How will my brothers eat, when the little provision they have is exhausted? With what will my brothers defend themselves when they have burnt all their powder?"

"I presume that is of little consequence to you, chief," the hunter answered, with ill-concealed impatience. "You did not ask the interview I have granted to talk nonsense, so I must ask you to come to facts."

"I only wished to prove to my brother that we are well-informed, and know that the palefaces have no means of flight or safety. If, then, my brothers are willing, they can rejoin their nations, without being impeded by us in their retreat."

"Ah, ah! And in what way, chief, if you please?"

"By delivering to us immediately two persons who are here."

"Only think of that! And who may these two persons be?"

"The White Lily and the Coras Chief."

"Listen, chief: if you took the trouble to come here in order to make me such a proposal, you were wrong to leave your comrades," Valentine said, with a grin.

"My brother will reflect," the Apache said, with perfect calmness.

"I never reflect when the question is the commission of an act of cowardice, chief," Valentine answered sharply. "We have known each other for a long time; many of your warriors have been sent by me to the happy hunting grounds. I have often fought against you, and never on the desert have you or your brothers had to reproach me with an action unworthy of an honest hunter."

"That is true," the two chiefs answered, with a deferential bow; "my brother is beloved and esteemed by all the Apaches."

"Thanks. Now listen to me: the maiden you call White Lily, and whom you made prisoner, is free by right and in fact, and you know very well that you have no right to ask her of me."

"Several of our brothers, the most valiant warriors of our tribe, have gone to the happy hunting grounds before their hour marked by the Wacondah: their blood cries for vengeance."

"That does not concern me; these were killed fighting like brave men, and those are the chances of war."

"My brother has spoken well," Black Cat said. "The Lily is free; she can remain with the warriors of her nation. I consent to it. But my brother cannot refuse to give up to me the Indian hidden in his camp."

"That Indian is my friend," the hunter answered nobly; "he is not my prisoner, that I can deliver him up. I have no right to compel him to leave me. If he prefers to remain with us, the chief knows that hospitality is sacred on the prairie; if Moukapec wishes to return to his brothers, he is free. But what interest have the Apaches in my giving this man into their hands?"

"He has betrayed his nation, and must be punished."

"Do you imagine, chief, that I should deliberately, and stifling every feeling of gratitude within me, place in your hands a man I love, whose devotion is known to me, in order that you may kill him with horrible torture? On my soul, chief, you must be mad."

"You must do it, or woe to you!" Black Cat said with a degree of heat he could not repress.

"It shall not be," Valentine answered coldly.

"It shall be!" a calm and haughty voice said.

And Eagle-wing suddenly appeared in the midst of the group.

"What!" Valentine exclaimed with amazement, "you would give yourself up to torture? I will not suffer it, chief: remain with your friends, we will save you, or perish together."

The Coras shook his head sadly.

"No!" he said, "I cannot do that, it would be cowardly. The White Lily of the Valley must be saved. I have sworn to her father to devote myself to her, and my brother Koutonepi must let me accomplish my promise."

"But these men," Valentine continued to urge, "have no claim on you."

Moukapec let his head sink.

"By Nuestra Señora del Pilar," Don Pablo interrupted him with emotion, "we cannot thus abandon a man who has done us many services."

Valentine, with his eyes fixed on the ground, was reflecting.

"Good," Black Cat went on; "Eagle-wing is here, the palefaces are free: they will return to their great lodges whenever they please: they will find the roads open. The Apaches have only one word; let the warrior follow me."

The Indian took a parting glance at his friends, and a sigh escaped from his chest; but with a superior effort he overcame the sorrow that choked him, his face assumed its usual mask of stoicism, and turning to the two Apache chiefs, he said in a firm voice—

"I am ready: let us go."

The hunters exchanged a glance of discouragement, but they made no attempt to oppose the Coras' resolution, for they knew that it would be futile. But at this moment Doña Clara suddenly appeared, walked boldly up to the Indian, and touched him lightly on the shoulder.

"Stay!" she exclaimed. "I will not have you go, chief."

Eagle-wing turned as if he had received an electric shock, and gave the maiden a glance of undefinable expression; but he overcame this emotion, and reassumed his apparent coolness.

"I must go," he said softly, "the Lily must not restrain me; she is doubtless ignorant that her safety depends on my departure."

"I have heard everything," she quickly retorted. "I know the odious propositions these men have dared to make, and the condition they had audacity to insist on."

"Well, why then does my sister wish to stop me?"

"Because," the maiden energetically exclaimed, "I will not accept that condition."

"By Heavens! That is fine," Valentine said joyfully; "that is what I call speaking."

"Yes," the young lady continued, "in my father's name I order you not to leave this island, chief—in my father's name, who, were he here, would order you as I do."

"I answer for that," Don Pablo said; "my father has too noble a heart to assent to an act of cowardice."

The maiden turned to the Indian chief, who had been stoically witnessing the scene.

"Begone, redskins," she went on with a majestic accent, impossible to render, "you see that all your victims escape you."

"Honour bids me go," the warrior murmured feebly.

Doña Clara took his hand between hers, and looked at him softly.

"Moukapec!" she said to him, in her melodious and pure voice, "do you not know that yours would be a useless sacrifice? The Apaches are only

striving to deprive us of our most devoted defender, that they may make an easier conquest of us. They are very treacherous Indians; remain with us."

Eagle-wing hesitated for a moment, and the two chiefs tried in vain to read on his face the feelings that affected him. During several seconds, a leaden silence weighed on this group of men, whose hearts could be heard beating. At length the Coras raised his head, and answered with an effort—

"You insist; I remain here."

Then he turned to the chief, who was waiting anxiously.

"Go," he said to them in a firm voice, "return to the tents of your tribe. Tell your brothers, who were never mine, but who at times have granted me a cordial hospitality, that Moukapec, the great Sachem of the Coras of the lakes, takes back his liberty: he gives up all claim to fire and water in their villages; he wishes to have nothing more in common with them; and if the Apache dogs prowl round him, and seek him, they will find him ever ready to meet them face to face on the warpath. I have spoken."

The Buffalo chiefs had listened to these words with that calmness which never abandons the Indians; not a feature on their faces had quivered. When the Coras warrior finished speaking, Black Cat looked at him fixedly, and replied to him with a cold and cutting accent—

"I have heard a crow, the Coras are cowardly squaws, to whom the Apache warriors will give petticoats. Moukapec is a prairie dog, the sunbeams hurt his eyes, he will make his lair with the paleface hares, my nation no longer knows him."

"Much good may it do him," Valentine remarked with a smile, while Eagle-wing shrugged his shoulders at this outburst of insults.

"I retire," Black Cat continued; "ere the owl has twice saluted the sun, the scalps of the palefaces will be fastened to my girdle."

"And," the second chief added, "the young men of my tribe will make war whistles of the white thieves' bones."

"Very good," Valentine replied, with a crafty smile; "try it, we are ready to receive you, and our rifles carry a long distance."

"The palefaces are boasting and yelping dogs," Black Cat said again. "I shall soon return."

"All the better," said Valentine; "but in the meanwhile, as I suppose you have nothing more to say to us, I fancy it is time for you to rejoin your friends, who must be growing impatient at your absence."

Black Cat gave a start of anger at this parting sarcasm; but repressing the passion that inflamed him, he folded himself haughtily in his buffalo robe, remounted the raft with his comrade, and they rapidly retired from the island.

CHAPTER XVI.

SUNBEAM.

The situation of the fugitives was most critical, as the Indians had stated; the number of their warriors hourly increased, and on both sides of the island there were large encampments, indicated by numerous fires.

The day passed in this way, and there was no attack. No incident even disturbed the tranquillity of the robbers till about the middle of the following night. At this moment the darkness was thick, and not a star glistened in the sky; the moon, obscured by clouds, only displayed her pallid disc at intervals.

One of those intense fogs which frequently prevail at this season on the Rio Gila, had fallen, and ended by confusing all objects; the banks of the river had disappeared from sight, and even the Indian campfires were no longer visible. The hunters, seated in a circle, maintained the deepest silence; each was yielding to the flood of bitter thoughts that rose from his heart. All at once, amid the silence of the night, a confused and indistinct sound was audible, like that of a paddle striking the side of a canoe.

"Hilloh! what's the meaning of this?" Valentine said. "Can the Apaches be dreaming of surprising us?"

"Let us have a look, at any rate," Don Pablo remarked.

The five men rose, and glided silently through the bushes, in the direction of the sound which had aroused them. After proceeding a certain distance, Valentine stopped to listen.

"I am certain I was not mistaken," he said to himself; "it was the sound produced by a paddle falling in a canoe that I heard. Who can have come to visit us? Perhaps it is some Indian deviltry."

And the hunter sounded the darkness around him with his piercing and unerring eye. All at once, he fancied he saw an object moving in the fog. He went on; then after carefully examining this person, who grew every moment more and more distinct, he drew himself up, and leant on his rifle.

"What the deuce do you want here at this hour, Sunbeam, my dear child?" he asked in a low voice.

The young Indian squaw, for it was really she whom the hunter had addressed, laid a finger on her lip as if recommending prudence.

"Follow me, Koutonepi," she said to him so softly that her voice resembled a sigh.

After going a few yards, the girl stooped, and made the hunter a sign to follow her example.

"Look," she said, pointing to one of those long and light canoes which the Indians hollow out of enormous trees, and which carry ten persons with ease. "Look."

Valentine, in spite of his self-command, had difficulty in suppressing a cry of joy. He held out his hand, saying with considerable emotion:

"My brave girl!"

"Sunbeam remembers," the Indian girl replied with a smile, "that Koutonepi saved her; the heart of the white lady is kind, Sunbeam wishes to save them all."

The first moment of emotion past, the hunter, who was thoroughly acquainted with the cunning and roguery of the redskins, bent a scrutinising gaze on the girl. The Indian's face had an expression of honesty which commanded confidence, and Valentine entered the canoe.

It contained paddles, provisions, and, what caused him more pleasure than all else, six large buffalo horns, full of gunpowder, and two bags of bullets.

"Good!" he said, "my daughter is grateful, Wacondah will protect her."

Sunbeam's face expanded at these words.

At this moment Don Pablo and the other hunters rejoined Valentine, and learned with delight what had happened; the sight of the canoe restored them all their energy. Shaw remained on guard, while Valentine, accompanied by the others, and Sunbeam, returned to Doña Clara, whom anxiety had aroused.

"Here is a new friend I present to you," the hunter said, pointing to the young Indian, who stood timidly behind him.

"Oh! I know her," Doña Clara replied, as she embraced the girl, who was quite confused by these caresses.

"But tell me, Sunbeam," Valentine said, after the expiration of a moment, "how comes it that you arrived here?"

The Indian girl smiled haughtily.

"Unicorn is a great warrior," she answered; "he has the glance of the eagle, he knows all that happens in the prairie; he saw the danger his brother, the great paleface hunter, ran, and his heart trembled with sadness."

"Yes," Valentine said, "the chief loves me."

The Indian continued.

"Unicorn sought a mode of coming to his brother's assistance; he was wandering along the riverbank when the fog supplied him with the means he so greatly desired; he placed Sunbeam in a canoe, ordered her to come, and she came with joy, laughing at the Apache dogs, whose mole eyes could not perceive her, when she passed in front of them."

"Yes, it must be so," Valentine said, "but why did not the chief come himself with his warriors, instead of sending you?"

"Unicorn is a sachem," the squaw answered, "he is wise and prudent as he is brave. The warriors had remained in the village; the chief was alone with Sunbeam."

"May heaven grant that your words be sincere, and that we may not have cause to repent having placed confidence in you," Don Pablo said.

"Sunbeam is a Comanche woman," the Indian replied haughtily; "her heart is red, and her tongue is not forked."

"I answer for her," Doña Clara said, impetuously; "she would not deceive us."

"I believe it," Valentine said; "but, at any rate, we shall see. There is some honour among the redskins; besides, we shall be prudent. Now, I presume that, like myself, you are all anxious to quit this island? My advice is, that we should at once take advantage of the canoe this young woman has brought us."

"It is true, then," Doña Clara said joyfully, as she sprang up.

"Yes," Valentine answered, "a magnificent canoe, in which we shall be perfectly at our ease; and, better still, it is capitally found in food and ammunition. Still, I think we should not do wrong by taking advantage of the fog to escape, without giving the Indians a chance of seeing us."

"Be it so," Don Pablo said; "but once on firm ground, what road shall we follow, as we have no horses? Come, Sunbeam, can you give us any advice on that head?"

"Listen," the young squaw said; "the Apaches are preparing for a great expedition. They have called under arms all their brethren; and more than three thousand warriors are traversing the prairie in every direction at this moment. Their war parties hold all the paths. Two nations alone would not respond to the invitation of the Apaches: they are the Comanches and the Navajos. The villages of my tribe are not far off, and I can try to lead you to them."

"Very good," Don Pablo answered. "From what you tell us, the riverbanks are guarded. Going up the Gila in a canoe is impossible, because within two hours we should be inevitably scalped. I am therefore of opinion that we should proceed by the shortest road to the nearest Comanche or Navajo village. But, to do that, we require horses, for we must let no grass grow under our feet."

"Only one road is open," Sunbeam said, firmly.

"Which?" Don Pablo asked.

"The one that crosses the Apache camp."

"Hum!" Valentine muttered, "That seems to me very dangerous. We are only seven, and two of them are women."

"That is true," Eagle-wing remarked, who had hitherto been silent; "but it is, at the same time, the road which offers the best chances of success."

"Let us hear your plan, then," Valentine asked.

"The Apaches," the sachem went on, "are numerous; they believe us crushed and demoralised by the critical position in which we are. They will never suppose that five men will have the audacity to enter their camp; and their security is our strength."

"Yes, but horses! Horses!" the hunter objected.

"The Wacondah will provide them," the chief replied. "He never abandons brave men, who place their confidence in him."

"Well, let us trust in Heaven!" Valentine said.

"I believe," said Doña Clara, who had listened to the conversation with deep attention, "that the advice of our friend, the Indian warrior, is good, and we ought to follow it."

Eagle-wing bowed, while a smile of satisfaction played over his face.

"Let it be as you desire," the hunter said, turning to the young Mexican girl, "we will start without further delay."

The cry of the jay was heard twice.

"Hilloh!" the hunter went on, "What is going on now? That is Shaw's signal."

Everybody seized his weapon, and proceeded at full speed in the direction whence the signal came; Doña Clara and Sunbeam remaining behind, concealed in a thicket.

Though unable to guess the motive which had caused Sunbeam to act in the way she had done, Doña Clara had however, understood at the first word, with that intuition which women possess, that Sunbeam was to be trusted—

that in the present case she was acting under the impression of a good thought, and was entirely devoted to them for some reason or another. Hence she bestowed the most affectionate caresses on her.

Knowing, besides, the desire for rapine and the avarice which are the foundation of the redskin character generally, she took off a gold bracelet she wore on her right arm, and fastened it on the Indian's, whose joy and happiness were raised to their acme by this pretty present.

Seduced by this unexpected munificence, although already devoted to Valentine by the services he had rendered her, she attached herself unreservedly to Doña Clara.

"The pale virgin need not feel alarmed," she said in her soft and musical voice; "she is my sister. I will save her, with the warriors who accompany her."

"Thanks," Doña Clara answered, "my sister is good; she is the wife of a great chief; I shall ever be her friend. So soon as I have rejoined my father, I will make her presents far more valuable than this."

The young Indian clapped her dainty little hands, in sign of joy.

"What is the matter there?" Valentine asked, on reaching Shaw, who, lying on the ground with his rifle thrust forward, seemed trying to pierce the darkness.

"On my honour, I do not know," the latter replied simply, "but it seems as if something extraordinary were going on around us. I see shadows moving about the river, but can distinguish nothing, owing to the fog; I hear dull sounds, and plashing in the water, and I fancy that the Indians are going to attack us."

"Yes," Valentine muttered, as if speaking to himself, "these are their favourite tactics. They like to surprise their enemies, so let us look out for the canoe."

At this instant, a black mass pierced the fog, advancing slowly and noiselessly up to the island.

"Here they are," Valentine said, in a low voice. "Attention! Do not let them land."

The hunters hid themselves behind the shrubs. Valentine was not mistaken: it was a raft loaded with Indian warriors coming up. So soon as the Apaches were only a few yards from the island, five shots were fired simultaneously, which spread death and disorder among them.

The Apaches believed they should surprise their enemies asleep, and were far from expecting so rough a reception. Seeing their plans foiled, and that the enemy were ready for action, there was a momentary hesitation; still, shame gained the victory over prudence, and they continued to advance.

This raft was the vanguard of some dozen others, still hidden in the fog, awaiting the result of the reconnoissance made by the first. If the hunters were awake, they had orders to return without attacking them, which they obeyed. The first raft had the same instructions, but it had either got into a current which urged it on, or, as was more probable, the Indians wished to avenge their comrades, and they consequently advanced.

This time the word of command was given by Valentine, and the Apaches landed without being disturbed. They all rushed forward brandishing their clubs, and uttering their war yell, but were received with clubbed rifles, felled or drowned, ere they had scarce time to walk a couple of paces on land.

"Now," Valentine said coldly, "we shall be quiet the whole night. I know the Indians, they will not recommence the attack. Don Pablo, be so good as to warn Doña Clara: Shaw and the Coras warrior will get the canoe ready, and, if you think proper, we will start at once."

Curumilla had already prepared to pull the canoe into a more suitable spot for embarking than the mass of tall grass and shrubs in which it was concealed, but, as he was about to leap into it, he fancied he saw that it was sensibly moving from the bank.

Curumilla, much surprised, stepped into the river, in order to discover the cause of this unusual movement. The canoe was moving further and further, and was already three or four yards from the bank. Completely liberated from the reeds, it was cutting the current at right angles, with a continuous and regular movement, which proved that it was obeying some secret and intelligent influence.

Curumilla, more and more surprised, but determined to know the truth, proceeded silently to the bow of the boat, and then all was explained. An end of rope, intended to tie up the canoe and prevent it from drifting, was hanging over; an Apache was holding this end between his teeth, and swimming vigorously in the direction of the camp, dragging the canoe with him.

"My brother is fatigued," Curumilla said, ironically; "he must let me in my turn direct the canoe."

"Ouchi!" the Indian exclaimed, in his alarm; and, letting loose the rope, he dived. Curumilla dived upon him. For some minutes the river was agitated by a submarine shock, and then the two men reappeared on the surface. Curumilla held the Apache tightly by the throat.

He then drew his knife, buried it twice in the Indian's heart and lifted his scalp, and letting go of the corpse, which floated swiftly on the river, he leaped into the canoe, which during the short struggle had continued to drift, and brought it back to the isle.

"Hilloh!" Valentine said, laughing; "Where on earth do you come from, chief? I thought you were lost." Without uttering a syllable, Curumilla showed him the bloody scalp hanging from his girdle.

"Good," said Valentine; "I comprehend; my brother is a great warrior, nothing escapes him."

The Araucano smiled proudly. The little party had collected; the embarkation took place at once, and the men, each seizing a paddle, began crossing the river slowly and silently, thanks to Curumilla's precaution of muffling the paddles with leaves.

The hearts of these men, brave as they were, palpitated with fear, for they did not yet dare believe in the success of their daring project.

CHAPTER XVII.

INDIAN HOSPITALITY.

Not only was the attempt of the hunters to escape not so desperate as the reader might be inclined to suppose, but it even offered, up to a certain point, great chances of success.

The Apaches, when encamped in sight of an enemy, never keep watch, unless they form a weak detachment of warriors, and find themselves opposed to a far superior force; but even in that case these sentries are so careless that it is extremely easy to surprise them, which often happens, by the way, without rendering them any the more cautious.

In the case of which we write, hardly a few miles from their village, and having an effective strength of nearly eight hundred bold warriors, they could not suppose that five men, who had sought shelter in an island, without the means of quitting it, would attempt such a daring stroke.

Hence, after their attempted surprise of the whites had failed, they returned to sleep, some round the fires, others in the tents erected by their wives, waiting patiently for the morrow to attack their foes from all sides at once, which offered a certain chance of success.

In the meanwhile the hunters advanced toward the bank, concealed by the fog that enfolded them like a winding sheet, and hid their movements from the eyes interested in spying them. In this way they arrived in sight of the fires, whose uncertain gleams became weaker and weaker, and they saw their enemies lying down asleep.

Eagle-wing, at a hint from Sunbeam, steered the canoe to the foot of a rock, whose commanding mass stood about thirty feet over the river, and offered them under its flank a propitious shelter to disembark in security.

So soon as they landed, the hunters took Indian file, and with their rifles ready, they stealthily marched toward the camp, stopping at intervals to look anxiously around them, or listen to any suspicious sound.

Then, when all became quiet again, they resumed their venturesome march, gliding past tents and at times stepping over the sleepers at the fire, whom the slightest badly-calculated movement would have aroused.

It is impossible to form a correct idea of such a march unless you have made one yourself. A man gifted with the most energetic mind could not endure its terrible emotions for an hour. With oppressed chest, haggard eyes, and limbs agitated by a feverish and convulsive motion, the hunters

passed through the midst of their ferocious enemies, knowing perfectly well that, if they were discovered, it would be all over with them, and that they would perish in the most horrible agony.

On reaching almost the extreme limit of the camp, an Indian, lying across the path they were following, suddenly made a movement and sat up, instinctively seizing his lance. One shout and the hunters were lost! Curumilla walked straight up to the Indian, who was stupefied by the sight of this funereal and fantastic procession, which he could not comprehend, and was followed by his comrades, whose step was so light that they seemed to glide over the ground without touching it.

The Apache, terrified by this apparition, which, in his superstitious belief, he attributed to the heavenly powers, crossed his arms on his chest and silently bowed his head. The band passed, the Indian not making a sigh or uttering a word. The hunters had scarce disappeared behind some rising ground, when the Apache ventured to lift his eyes; he was then convinced that he had had a vision, and without trying to account for what he had seen, he lay down and went quietly to sleep again. By this time the hunters had emerged from the camp.

"Now," said Valentine, "the worst is over."

"On the contrary," Don Pablo observed, "our position is more precarious than ever, since we are in the midst of our enemies, and have no horses."

Curumilla laid his hand on his shoulder, and looked at him softly. "My brother will be patient," he said, "he will soon have them."

"How so?" the young man asked.

"Sunbeam," the Aucas Chief continued, "must know where the horses of the tribe are."

"I know it," she replied, laconically.

"Very good; my sister will guide me."

"Chief, one moment: the deuce!" Valentine exclaimed, "I will not let you run this new danger alone; it would be a dishonour to my white skin."

"My brother can come."

"That is exactly what I mean to do. Don Pablo will remain here with Shaw and Eagle-wing near Doña Clara, while we attempt this new expedition. What do you think of it, Don Pablo?"

"That your plan, my friend, is worth nothing."

"Why so?"

"For this reason: we are here two paces from the Apaches, and one of them may awake at any moment. Just now we escaped only by a miracle; who knows how our enterprise will turn? If we separate, perhaps we may never come together again. My opinion is, that we should all go together to look for the horses; we should then save time in useless coming and going, and this will give us a considerable advantage."

"That is true," Valentine answered; "let us go together, and in that way we shall have finished sooner."

Sunbeam then began guiding the little party, but instead of re-entering the camp, as the hunters feared, she skirted it for some distance; then, making a sign to her companions to stop and wait, she advanced alone. Within five minutes she returned.

"The horses are there," she said, pointing to a spot in the fog; "they are hobbled, and guarded by a man walking up and down near them. What will my pale brothers do?"

"Kill the man, and seize the horses we want," Don Pablo said; "we are not in such a situation that we can be fastidious."

"Why kill the poor man, if he can be got rid of otherwise?" Doña Clara said, softly.

"That is true," Valentine supported her, "we are not wild beasts, hang it all!"

"The warrior shall not be killed," Curumilla said, in his grave voice; "my pale brothers must wait."

And seizing the lasso he always carried about him, the Aucas lay down on the ground, and began crawling through the tall grass. He soon disappeared in the fog.

The Apache sentry was strolling carelessly along, when Curumilla suddenly rose behind him, and seizing his neck in both his hands, he squeezed it with

such force that the Apache, taken unawares, had not time to utter a cry.

In a turn of the hand he was thrown down, and garotted, and that so promptly that he was choked as much by the sudden attack as by the terror that had seized on him. The chief put his prisoner on his shoulders, and deposited him at Doña Clara's feet, saying—"My sister's wishes are accomplished, this man is safe and sound."

"Thank you," the maiden answered, with a charming smile.

Curumilla turned red with delight.

Without loss of time, the hunters seized the seven best horses they came across, which they saddled, and then shod with *parflèche* to avoid the sound of their hoofs on the sand.

This time, Valentine assumed the command of the party. So soon as the horses were urged into a gallop, all their chests, oppressed by the moving interludes of the struggle which had continued so long, dilated, and hope returned to their hearts. The hunters were at length in the desert; before them they had space, good horses, arms and ammunition. They fancied themselves saved, and were so to a certain extent, as their enemies still slept, little suspecting their daring escape.

The night was half spent, and the fog covered the fugitives. They had at least six hours before them, and they profited by them.

The horses, urged to their utmost speed, went two leagues without stopping. At sunrise the fog was dissipated by the first beams; and the hunters instinctively raised their heads. The desert was calm, nothing disturbed its majestic solitude; in the distance a few elks and buffaloes were browsing on the prairie grass, a sure sign of the absence of Indians, whom these intelligent animals scent at great distances.

Valentine, in order to let the horses breathe awhile, as well as draw breath himself, checked the headlong speed, which had no further object. The region on which the hunters found themselves in no way resembled that they had quitted a few hours previously; here and there, the monotony of the landscape was broken by lofty trees; on either side stretched out high hills. At times they forded some of the innumerable streams which fall from the mountains, and, after the most capricious windings, are swallowed up in the Gila.

At about eight o'clock Valentine noticed, a little to the left, a light cloud of bluish smoke rising in a spiral to the sky.

"What is that?" Don Pablo asked, anxiously.

"A hunter's encampment, doubtless," Valentine answered.

"No," Curumilla said; "that is not a paleface, but an Indian, fire."

"How the deuce can you see that, chief? I fancy all fires are the same, and produce smoke," Don Pablo said.

"Yes," Valentine remarked, "all fires produce smoke; but there is a difference in smoke—is there not, chief?" he added, addressing Curumilla.

"Yes," the latter answered laconically.

"All that is very fine," Don Pablo went on; "but can you explain to me, chief, by what you see, that the smoke is produced by a redskin fire?"

Curumilla shrugged his shoulders without replying—Eagle-wing took the word.

"The whites, when they light fires," he said, "take the first wood to hand."

"Of course," said Don Pablo.

"Most frequently they collect green wood: in that case the wood, which is damp, produces in burning a white thick smoke, very difficult to hide on the prairie; while the Indians only employ dry wood, whose smoke is light, thin, almost impalpable, and soon becomes confused with the sky."

"Decidedly, on the desert," Don Pablo said, with an air of conviction, "the Indians are better than us; we shall never come up to them."

"Humph!" said Valentine; "If you were to live with them a while, they would teach you plenty more things."

"Look," Eagle-wing continued; "what did I tell you?"

In fact, during this conversation the hunters had continued their journey, and at this moment were not more than a hundred yards from the spot where the fire burned which had given rise to so many comments. Two Indians, completely armed and equipped for war, were standing in front of the travellers, waving their buffalo robes in sign of peace.

Valentine quivered with joy on recognising them; these men were Comanches, that is to say, friends and allies, since the hunter was an adopted son of that nation. Valentine ordered his little party to halt, and carelessly throwing his rifle on his back, he pushed on, and soon met the still motionless Indians.

After exchanging the different questions always asked in such cases on the prairie, as to the state of the roads and the quantity of game, the hunter, though he was well aware of the fact, asked the Indians to what nation they belonged.

"Comanches," one of the warriors answered, proudly. "My nation is the Queen of the Prairies."

Valentine bowed, as if fully convinced. "I know," he said, "that the Comanches are invincible warriors. Who can resist them?"

It was the Indian's turn to bow, with a smile of satisfaction at this point-blank compliment.

"Is my brother a chief?" Valentine again asked.

"I am Pethonista (the Eagle)," the Indian said, regarding the hunter like a man persuaded that he was about to produce a profound sensation.

He was not mistaken; for the name was that of one of the most venerated chiefs of the Comanche nation.

"I know my brother," Valentine answered; "I am very happy to have met him."

"Let my brother speak; I am listening to him: the great white hunter is no stranger to the Comanches, who have adopted him."

"What?" the hunter exclaimed; "Do you know me too, chief?"

The warrior smiled.

"Unicorn is the most powerful Sachem of the Comanches," he said. "On leaving his village twelve hours ago, he warned his brother Pethonista that he expected a great white warrior adopted by the tribe."

"It is him," said Valentine. "Unicorn is a part of myself, and the sight of him dilates my heart. Personally, I have nothing to say to you, chief, since the

sachem has instructed you; but I bring with me friends and two females—one is Sunbeam, the other the White Lily of the Valley."

"The White Lily is welcome among my people: my sons will make it a duty to serve her," the Indian answered nobly.

"Thanks, chief. I expected nothing less from you. Permit me to rejoin my companions, who are doubtless growing impatient, to tell them of the fortunate meeting with which the Master of Life has favoured me."

"Good. My brother can return to his friends, and I shall go before him to the village, in order to warn my young men of the arrival of a warrior of our nation."

Valentine smiled at this remark.

"My brother is the master," he said.

After bowing to the Indian chief, he returned to his companions, who did not know to what circumstance they should attribute his lengthened absence.

"They are friends," Valentine said, pointing to Pethonista, who had leaped on a mustang, and started at full speed. "Unicorn, on leaving his village, ordered the chief I have been speaking to, to do us the honours until his return. So look, Don Pablo, how he hurries to announce our arrival to the warriors of his tribe."

"Heaven be praised!" the young man said, "For ease and rest in safety. Suppose we push on?"

"Do not do so, my friend. On the contrary, if you will take my advice, we shall reduce our pace. The Comanches are doubtless preparing us a reception, and we should annoy them by arriving too soon."

"I do not wish that," Don Pablo replied. "In fact, we have nothing to fear now, so we can continue our journey at a trot."

"Yes; for nothing presses on us. In an hour at the most we shall have arrived."

"May Heaven be thanked for the protection it has deigned to grant us," the young man said, looking up with a glance of gratitude.

The little party continued to advance in the presumed direction of the village.

CHAPTER XVIII.

LOVE!

An hour later, the hunters, on reaching the top of a hill, perceived, about a mile ahead of them, a large village, before which three hundred Indian warriors were ranged in battle array.

At the sight of the whites the warriors advanced at a gallop, making their horses curvet and dance, and discharging their muskets in the air. They uttered their war cry, and unfolded their buffalo robes, performing, in a word, all the usual evolutions in a friendly reception.

Valentine made his companions to imitate the Indians; and the hunters, who asked nothing better than to display their skill, descended the hill at headlong speed, shouting and discharging their rifles, amid the yells of joy from the redskins, who were delighted at this triumphal arrival among them.

After the usual salutations and expressions of welcome, the Comanches formed a semicircle round the hunters, and Pethonista advanced to Valentine, and held out his hand, saying:—

"My brother is an adopted son of the nation. He is at home. The Comanches are happy to see him. The longer he remains among them with the persons who accompany him, the more pleasure he will cause them. A calli is prepared for my brother, and a second for the White Lily of the Valley; a third for his friends. We have killed many buffaloes; my brothers will eat their meat with us. When our brother leaves us, our hearts will be swollen with sorrow. Hence my brother must remain as long as possible with his Comanche friends, if he wishes to see them happy."

Valentine, well versed in Indian customs, replied graciously to this harangue, and the two bands, smiling, made their entry into the village to the sound of the chichikouis, conches, and Indian instruments, mingled with

the voices of the women and children, and the barking of the dogs, which produced the most horrible row imaginable.

On reaching the village square, the chief conducted the guests to the huts prepared to receive them, which stood side by side, after which he invited them to rest, with a politeness that a man more civilised than him might have envied, after telling them at twelve o'clock they would be summoned to the meal.

Valentine thanked Pethonista for the kind attention he displayed to him and his comrades: then, after installing Doña Clara in a hut with Sunbeam, he entered his own, after recommending the hunters to display the greatest prudence toward the Comanches, who, like all Indians, are punctilious, irascible, and susceptible to the highest degree.

Curumilla lay down without saying a word, like a good watchdog, across the door of the lodge inhabited by Doña Clara. So soon as the two females were alone, Sunbeam seated herself at the Mexican lady's feet, and, fixing on her a bright glance, full of tenderness, she said, in a soft and caressing voice—

"Is my sister, the White Lily of the Valley, satisfied with me? Have I faithfully fulfilled the obligation I contracted toward her?"

"What obligation was that, child?" the girl said, as she passed her hand through the Indian's long hair which she began plaiting.

"That of saving you, my sister, and conducting you in safety to the callis of my nation."

"Yes, yes, poor girl," she said, tenderly, "your devotion to me has been unbounded, and I know not how I can ever requite it."

"Do not speak of that," the Indian said, with a charming pout. "Now that my sister has nothing more to fear, I will leave her."

"You would leave me, Sunbeam?" Doña Clara exclaimed anxiously. "Why so?"

"Yes," the young woman answered, as she frowned, and her voice became stern, "I have a duty to accomplish. I have taken an oath, and my sister well knows that is sacred. I must go."

"But where are you going, my poor child? Whence arises this sudden thought of leaving me? What do you intend? Where are you about to proceed?"

"My sister must not ask me. Her questions would only grieve me, for I cannot answer her."

"Then you have secrets from me, Sunbeam. You will not give me your confidence? Fool! Do you fancy I do not know what you intend doing?"

"My sister knows my plan!" The Indian interrupted her with flashing eye, while a convulsive tremor passed over her limbs.

"Yes, I do," the other answered with a smile. "Unicorn is a renowned warrior, and my sister is doubtless anxious to rejoin him?"

The Indian shook her head in denial.

"No," she said, "Sunbeam is following her vengeance."

"Oh, yes, poor child," Doña Clara said, as she pressed the young squaw to her heart, "I know from what a fearful catastrophe Don Valentine saved you."

"Koutonepi is a great warrior. Sunbeam loves him; but Stanapat is a dog, son of an Apache devil."

The two women wept for several minutes, silently mingling their tears, but the Indian, overcoming grief, dried her red eyes with a passionate gesture, and tore herself from the arms that held her.

"Why weep?" she said. "Only cowards and weak people groan and lament. Indian squaws do not weep. When they are insulted they avenge themselves," she added, with an accent full of strange resolution. "My sister must let me depart! I can no longer be useful to her, and other cares claim my attention."

"Go, then, poor girl. Act as your heart orders you. I have no right either to retain you or prevent you acting as you please."

"Thanks," the Indian said. "My sister is kind. The Wacondah will not desert her."

"Cannot you tell me what you intend doing?"

"I cannot."

"At any rate, tell me in what direction you are going?"

The girl shook her head with discouragement.

"Does the leaf detached from the tree by a high wind know in what direction it will be carried? I am the leaf. So my sister must ask me no more."

"As you wish it, I will be silent; but before we separate, perhaps forever, let me make you a present, which will recall me to mind when I am far from you."

Sunbeam laid her hand on her heart with a charming gesture.

"My sister is there," she said, with emotion.

"Listen," the maiden continued: "last night I gave you a bracelet; here is another. These ornaments are useless to me, and I shall be happy if they please you."

She unfastened the bracelet, and fastened it on the Indian's arm. The latter allowed her to do it, and, after kissing the pearl several times, she raised her head and held out her hand to the young Mexican.

"Farewell!" she said to her, with a shaking voice. "My sister will pray to her God for me: He is said to be powerful, perhaps He will come to my help."

"Hope, poor child!" Doña Clara said, as she held her in her arms.

Sunbeam shook her head sadly, and, making a last sign of farewell to her companion, she bounded like a startled fawn, rushed to the door, and disappeared.

The young Mexican remained for a long time pensive after Sunbeam's departure; the Indian's veiled words and embarrassed countenance had excited her curiosity to the highest degree. On the other hand, the interest she could not forbear taking in this extraordinary woman, who had rendered her a signal service, or, to speak more correctly, a gloomy presentiment warned her that Sunbeam was leaving her to undertake one of those dangerous expeditions which the Indians like to carry out without help of any soul.

About two hours elapsed. The maiden, with her head bowed on her bosom, went over in her mind the strange events which had led her, incident by incident, to the spot where she now was. All at once a stifled sigh reached her ear; she raised her head with surprise, and saw a man standing before her, humbly leaning against a beam of the calli, and gazing on her with a strange meaning in his glance. It was Shaw, Red Cedar's son.

Doña Clara blushed and looked down in confusion; Shaw remained silent, with his eyes fixed on her, intoxicating himself with the happiness of seeing and contemplating her at his ease. The girl, seated alone in this wretched Indian hut, before the man who so many times had nobly risked his life for her, fell into profound and serious thought.

A strange trouble seized upon her—her breast heaved under the pressure of her emotion. She did not at all comprehend the delicious sensations which at times made her quiver. Her eye, veiled with a soft languor, rested involuntarily on this man, handsome as an ancient Antinous, who with his haughty glance, his indomitable character, whom a frown from her made tremble—the wild son of the desert, who had hitherto known no will but his own!

On seeing him, so handsome and so brave, she felt herself attracted to him by all the strength of her soul. Though she was ignorant of the word love, for some time an unconscious revolution had taken place in her mind: she now began to understand that divine union of two souls, which are commingled in one, in an eternal communion of thoughts of joy and suffering.

In a word, she was about to love!

"What do you want with me, Shaw?" she asked, timidly.

"I wish to tell you, señorita," he answered, in a rough voice, marked, however, with extraordinary tenderness, "that, whatever may happen, whenever you have need of a man to die for you, you will have no occasion to seek him for I will be there."

"Thanks," she answered, smiling, in spite of herself, at the strangeness of the offer and the way in which it was made; "but here we have nothing to fear."

"Perhaps," he went on. "No one knows what the morrow has in store."

Women have a decided taste for taming ferocious animals: like all natures essentially nervous, woman is a creature of feeling, whose passion dwells in her head rather than in her heart. Love with a woman is only an affair of pride or a struggle to endure: as she is weak, she always wishes to conquer, and above all dominates at the outset, in order to become presently more completely the slave of the man she loves, when she has proved her strength, by holding him panting at her feet.

Owing to that eternal law of contrasts which governs the world, a woman will never love any man but him who, for some reason or another, flatters her pride. At any rate, it is so in the desert. I do not pretend to speak for our charming European ladies, who are a composite of grace and attraction, and who, like the angels, only belong to humanity, by the tip of their little wing, which scarce grazes the earth.

Doña Clara was a Mexican. Her exceptional position among Indians, the dangers to which she had been exposed, the weariness that undermined her —all these causes combined must dispose her in favour of the young savage, whose ardent passion she divined, with that intuition peculiar to all women.

She yielded so far as to answer him, and encourage him to speak. Was it sport, or did she act in good; faith? No one could say: woman's heart is a book, in which man has never yet been able to construe a word.

One of those long and pleasant conversations now begun between the two young people, during which, though the word "love" is not once uttered, it is expressed at every instant on the lips, and causes the heart to palpitate, which it plunges into those divine ecstacies, forgotten by ripe age, but which render those who experience them so happy.

Shaw, placed at his ease by the complacent kindness of Doña Clara, was no longer the same man. He found in his heart expressions which, in spite of herself made the maiden quiver, and put her into a confusion she could not understand.

At the hour indicated by Pethonista, a Comanche warrior appeared at the door of the calli, and broke off the conversation. He was ordered to lead the strangers to the meal prepared for them in the chief's lodge. Doña Clara

went out at once, followed by Shaw, whose heart was ready to burst with joy.

And yet what had Doña Clara said to him? Nothing. But she had let him speak, and listened to him with interest, and at times smiled at his remarks. The poor young man asked no more to be happy, and he was so, more than he had ever been before.

Valentine, Don Pablo, and the two Indians were awaiting Doña Clara. So soon as she appeared, all proceeded to the calli of the chief, preceded by the Comanche warrior, who served as guide.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE DANCE OF THE OLD DOGS.

Pethonista received his guests with all the refinements of Indian courtesy, obliging them to eat when he fancied he noticed that what was placed before them pleased their taste.

It is not always agreeable to a white man to be invited to an Indian dinner; for, among the redskins, etiquette prescribes that you should eat everything offered you without leaving a mouthful. Acting otherwise would greatly offend the "Anfitrión". Hence the position of small eaters is very disagreeable at times: owing to the vast capacity of Indian stomachs, they find themselves under the harsh necessity of undergoing an attack of indigestion, or attract on themselves a quarrel which must have serious consequences.

Fortunately nothing of this sort occurred on the present occasion, and the repast terminated satisfactorily to all. When dinner was over, Valentine rose, and bowing thrice to the company, said to the chief—

"I thank my brother, in the name of my comrades and myself, for his gracious reception. In a thousand moons the recollection of it will not be effaced from my mind. But warriors have something else to do than to eat,

when serious interests claim their attention. Will my brother Pethonista hear the news I have to impart to him?"

"Has my brother a secret communication to make to me, or does his message interest the whole tribe?"

"My message concerns all."

"Wah! my brother must be patient, then. Tomorrow—perhaps in a few hours—Unicorn, our great sachem, will have returned, and my brother can then speak with him."

"If Unicorn were here," Valentine said quickly, "two words would suffice; but he is absent, and time presses. For a second time I ask my brother to listen to me."

"Good; as my brother wishes it, in an instant all the chiefs shall be assembled in the great audience lodge, above the vault in which burns the fire of Montecuhzoma."

Valentine bowed in acquiescence.

We will say something here about the fire of Montecuhzoma, which is not without interest to the reader.

This singular custom has been handed down from age to age, especially among the Comanches. They state that, at the period of the conquest, and a few days prior to his death, Montecuhzoma,[1] having a presentiment of the fate that surely awaited him, lit a sacred fire and ordered their ancestors to keep it up, never allowing it to expire until the day when he returned to deliver his people from the Spanish yoke.

The guard of this sacred fire was confided to picked warriors; it was placed in a vault, in a copper basin, on a species of small altar, where it constantly smoulders under a dense layer of ashes.

Montecuhzoma announced at the same time that he would return with the Sun, his father; hence, at the first hour of day, many Indians mount on the roof of their callis, in the hope of seeing their well-beloved sovereign reappear, accompanied by the day planet. These poor Indians, who constantly maintain in their hearts the hope of their future regeneration, are convinced that this event, will be accomplished, unless the fire go out, through some reason impossible to foresee.

Scarce fifty years ago, the persons appointed to maintain the secret fire were relieved every two days, thus passing eight-and-forty hours without eating, drinking or sleeping. It frequently happened that these poor wretches, asphyxiated by the carbonic gas in the narrow space where they stopped, and weakened by the long fast, succumbed to their religious devotion. Then, according to the Indians, the bodies were thrown into the den of a monstrous serpent, which devoured them.

At the present day this strange belief is beginning to die out, although the fire of Montecuhzoma may be found in nearly all the pueblos; but the old custom is not kept up so vigorously, and the serpent is obliged to obtain his food in a different fashion.

I knew at the Paso del Norte a rich hacendero of Indian origin, who, though he would not confess it, and asserted a very advanced degree of belief, preciously kept up the fire of Montecuhzoma, in a vault he made for this express purpose, at a considerable expense.

The Comanches are divided into a number of small tribes, all placed under the orders of a special chief. When this chief is old or infirm, he surrenders the military command to the one of his sons most distinguished by his bravery, only retaining the civil jurisdiction; on the father's death, the son attains the complete sovereignty.

The chief summoned an old Indian who was leaning against the wall of the lodge, and bade him assemble the council. In the Comanche villages the old men incapable for active service, and whom their merits have not raised to the rank of chief, perform the office of crier. They undertake to announce the news to the population, transmit the orders of the sachem, organise the ceremonies, and convene the council. They are all men gifted with powerful voices; they mount on the roof of a calli, and from this improvised pulpit perform those duties, with an extraordinary quantity of shouts and gestures.

When the chiefs were assembled, Pethonista humbly led his guests to the council lodge, called the great medicine lodge. It was a large cabin, completely without furniture, in the midst of which an enormous fire burned. Some twenty chiefs were assembled, and gravely crouched in a circle; they maintained the most profound silence.

Ordinarily, no stranger is admitted to the council; but on this occasion this was departed from, owing to Valentine's quality as an adopted son of the tribe. The newcomers took their place. A chair of sculptured nopal was placed in a corner for Doña Clara, who, by a privilege unprecedented in Indian manners, and through her double quality of white woman and stranger, was present at the council, which is never permitted a squaw, except in the rare instance when she holds the rank of warrior.

So soon as each was comfortably settled, the pipe bearer entered the circle, holding the calumet, which he presented ready-lighted to Pethonista. The chief pointed it to the four cardinal points, and smoked for a few seconds; then, holding the bowl in his hand, he offered the stem to all present in turn, who imitated him. When all had smoked, the chief returned the pipe to the bearer, who emptied it into the fire, while pronouncing some mysterious words addressed to the Sun, that great dispenser of all the good things of this world, and walked backward out of the circle.

"Our ears are open, my brother; the great pale hunter can take the word. We have removed the skin from our heart, and the words his bosom breathes will be carefully received by us. We impatiently await the communications which he has to make us," the chief said, bowing courteously to Valentine.

"What I have to say will not take long," the hunter answered. "Are my brothers still the faithful allies of the palefaces?"

"Why should we not be so?" the chief sharply interrupted him. "The great pale hearts have been constantly good to us; they buy of our beaver skins and buffalo robes, giving us in exchange gunpowder, bullets, and scalping knives. When we are ill, our pale friends nurse us, and give us all we need. When the winter is severe—when the buffaloes are gone, and famine is felt in the villages—the whites come to our help. Why, then, shall we no longer be their allies? The Comanches are not ungrateful; they have a noble and generous heart; they never forget a kindness. We shall be the friend of the whites so long as the sun lights the universe."

"Thanks, chief," the hunter answered; "I am glad you have spoken in that way, for the hour has come to prove your friendship to us."

"What does my brother mean?"

"The Apaches have dug up the hatchet against us: their war parties are marching to surround our friend, Bloodson. I have come to ask my brothers if they will help us to repulse and beat back our enemies."

There was a moment's silence, and the Indians seemed to be seriously reflecting on the hunter's words. At length, Pethonista said, after giving the members of the council a glance—

"The enemies of Bloodson and of my brother are our enemies," he said, in a loud and firm voice. "My young men will go to the help of the palefaces. The Comanches will not suffer their allies to be insulted. My brother may rejoice at the success of his mission. Unicorn, I feel convinced, would not have answered differently from me, had he been present at the council. Tomorrow, at sunrise, all the warriors of my tribe will set out to the assistance of Bloodson. I have spoken. Have I said well, powerful chiefs?"

"Our father has spoken well," the chiefs replied, with a bow. "What he desires shall be done."

"Wah!" Pethonista went on; "my sons will prepare to celebrate worthily the arrival of our white friends in their village, and prove that we are warriors without fear. The Old Dogs will dance in the medicine lodge."

Shouts of joy greeted these words. The Indians, who are supposed to be so little civilised, have a number of associations, bearing a strong likeness to Freemasonry. These associations are distinguished by their songs, dances, and certain signs. Before becoming a member, the novice has certain trials to undergo, and several degrees to pass through. The Comanches have eleven associations for men and three for women, the scalp dance not included.

We will allude here solely to the Band of the Old Dogs, an association which only the most renowned warriors of the nation can join, and whose dance is only performed when an expedition is about to take place, in order to implore the protection of Natosh.

The strangers mounted on the roof of the medicine lodge with a multitude of Indians, and when all had taken their places, the ceremony commenced. Before the dancers appeared, the sound of their war whistles,—made of human thigh bones, could be heard; and at length ninety "Old Dogs" came up, attired in their handsomest dresses.

A portion were clothed in gowns or shirts of bighorn leather; others had blouses of red cloth, and blue and scarlet uniforms the Americans had given them, on their visits to the frontier forts. Some had the upper part of the body naked, and their exploits painted in reddish brown on their skin; others, and those the most renowned, wore a colossal cap of raven plumes, to the ends of which small tufts of down were fastened. This cap fell down to the loins, and in the centre of this shapeless mass of feathers were the tail of a wild turkey and that of a royal eagle.

Round their necks the principal Old Dogs wore a long strip of red cloth, descending behind to their legs, and forming a knot in the middle of the back. They had on the right side of the head a thick tuft of screech owl feathers, the distinctive sign of the band. All had round their necks the long *ihkochekas*, and on the left arm their fusil, bow, or club, while in their right hand they held the chichikoui.

This is a stick adorned with blue and white glass beads, completely covered with animals' hoofs, having at the upper end an eagle's feather, and at the lower a piece of leather embroidered with beads and decorated with scalps.

The warriors formed a wide circle, in the centre of which was the drum, beaten by five badly dressed men. In addition to these, there were also two others, who played a species of tambourine. When the dance began, the Old Dogs let their robes fall behind them, some dancing in a circle, with the body bent forward, and leaping in the air with both feet at once.

The other Dogs danced without any order, their faces turned to the circle, the majority collected in a dense mass, and bending their heads and the upper part of the body simultaneously. During this period, the war whistles, the drums, and chichikouis made a fearful row. This scene offered a most original and interesting sight—these brown men, their varied costumes, their yells, and the sounds of every description produced by the delighted spectators, who clapped their hands with grimaces and contortions impossible to describe, in the midst of the Indian village, near a gloomy and mysterious virgin forest, a few paces from the Rio Gila; in this desert where the hand of God is marked in indelible characters—all this affected the mind, and plunged it into a melancholy reverie.

The dance had lasted some time, and would have been probably prolonged, when the fierce and terrible war cry of the Apaches re-echoed through the

air. Shots were heard, and Indian horsemen rushed like lightning on the Comanches, brandishing their weapons, and uttering terrible yells. Black Cat, at the head of more than five hundred warriors, had attacked the Comanches.

There was a frightful disorder and confusion. The women and children ran frantically in every direction, pursued by their ferocious enemies, who pitilessly scalped and massacred them, while the warriors collected, mostly badly armed, in order to attempt a desperate, but almost impossible, resistance.

The hunters, stationed, as we have said, on the top of the hut whence they had witnessed the dance, found themselves in a most critical position. Fortunately for them, thanks to their old habit as wood rangers, they had not forgotten their weapons.

Valentine understood the position at the first glance. He saw that, unless a miracle occurred, they were all lost. Placing himself with his comrades before the terrified maiden, to make her a rampart of his body, he resolutely cocked his rifle, and said to his friends, in a firm voice:—

"Lads, the question is not about conquering, but we must all prepare to die here!"

"We will," Don Pablo said haughtily.

And with his clubbed rifle he killed an Apache who was trying to escalade the hut.

[1] And not Montezuma, as ordinarily written. All Mexican names had, and still have, a meaning. Montecuhzoma means the "severe Lord." It is also sometimes written in old Mexican MSS. of the time of the conquest Moctecuhzoma, but never Montezuma, which has no meaning.

CHAPTER XX.

A HAND-TO-HAND FIGHT.

In order to explain thoroughly to our readers the sudden attack on the Comanche village, we are compelled to return to Red Cedar.

Black Cat had left the council to proceed to the pirates, who were ready to follow him; but as Red Cedar had noticed that the agitation prevailing in the camp on his arrival had increased instead of diminishing, he could not refrain from asking the chief what it all meant, and what had happened.

Black Cat had hastened to satisfy him by narrating the miraculous flight of Doña Clara, who had disappeared with her companions, and no one could imagine what had become of them. Since the morning, the most experienced warriors of the tribe had been on the search, but had discovered nothing. Red Cedar was far from suspecting that the maiden he had left in his camp was the one so eagerly sought by the Apaches. He reflected for some moments.

"How many white men were there?" he asked.

"Three."

"Was there no one else with them?"

"Yes," the chief said, frowning, and his eyes flashing with fury. "There were also two redskin warriors, one of them a cowardly Coras, a renegade of his nation."

"Very good," Red Cedar answered. "The chief will lead me to the council, and I will tell them where the prisoners are."

"My brother knows it, then?" Black Cat asked, quickly.

Red Cedar threw his rifle on his back, whistled softly, but gave no answer.

They reached the council lodge. Red Cedar, taking the responsibility on himself, undertook to answer the questions addressed to him by the Indians. Since Black Cat's departure, not a word had been uttered in the council. The Indians were patiently awaiting the result of the promises made by the chief. The latter resumed his place at the council fire; and, addressing the other sachem, said—

"Here are the white hunters."

"Very good," an old warrior answered, "let them speak, we hear."

Red Cedar advanced, and, leaning on his rifle, he took the word, at a sign from Black Cat.

"My red brothers," he said, in a clear and marked voice, "are all as wearied as ourselves by the continual attacks of that coyote who belongs to no nation, or no colour, and who is called the Son of Blood. If they will allow themselves to be guided by the experience of a man who has, for many years, been thoroughly acquainted with tricks and villany of which that man is capable, before long, in spite of the imposing force he has at his command, they will have driven him disgracefully from the prairies, and compelled him to recross the frontier, abandoning forever the rich hunting grounds over which he pretends to reign as a master."

"We await till our brother has explained himself more clearly, with frankness, and without equivocation," Black Cat interrupted him.

"That is what I am about to do," the squatter went on. "The prisoners you made were precious to you, because there was a white woman among them. You allowed them to escape, and must capture them again. They will be important hostages for you."

"My brother does not tell us where these prisoners have sought shelter."

Red Cedar shrugged his shoulders.

"That is, however, very easy to know. The prisoners had only one spot where they could obtain a refuge, before reaching the frontier."

"And that is?" Black Cat asked.

"The great summer village of the Comanches of the mountains, the most faithful allies of Bloodson, the sons of Unicorn, that nation which has renounced the faith of its fathers, to become completely dependent on the whites, and to whom you ought to send petticoats. Hence you need not seek your prisoners elsewhere, for they are there."

The Indians, struck by the correctness of this reasoning, gave unequivocal marks of approval, and prepared to listen with greater interest to what the hunter had still to say to them.

"My brother must, therefore, do two things," the squatter continued; "first, surprise the Comanches' village, and, secondly, march immediately against Bloodson."

"Good," Stanapat said, "my brother is a wise man; I have known him a long time; his advice is good; but the Teocali inhabited by Bloodson is well defended. In what way will my brother set about seizing it?"

"My brother will listen," Red Cedar continued. "I have ten bold hunters with me; but I have left eighty, all armed with good rifles, on an island of the endless river where they are encamped, which are awaiting my return. The detachment intended to attack the Teocali will invest it on all sides, though the warriors will not let themselves be seen; during that time I will accompany Black Cat and his tribe to the Comanche village. As soon as the prisoners have fallen into our hands, I will go and fetch my young men from the island where I left them, and return with them and Black Cat to help my brother in seizing the Teocali, which cannot resist us."

This promise, made in a loud and firm voice, produced all the effect the squatter expected. The Indians, dreaming of the immense pillage they could indulge in, and the incalculable wealth collected at the spot, had only one desire: to seize the Teocali as soon as possible. Still, through the Indian stoicism, none of the passions boiling in their veins were displayed in their faces, and it was in a cold and calm voice that Black Cat thanked Red Cedar and told him he could withdraw while the chiefs deliberated on what he had brought before them. The squatter bowed and left the council, followed by his companions.

"Well," the Gazelle asked him, "what do you fancy the redskins will do?"

"Do not be uneasy, señorita," the squatter answered, with a most meaning smile, "I know the Indians; the plan I have submitted to them is too simple, and offers too many advantages for them to decline it; I can assure you beforehand that they will follow it exactly."

"Is it far from here to the Comanche village?"

"No," the other said, emphatically; "by starting at once we should reach it this evening."

The girl gave vent to a sigh of satisfaction, and a vivid blush suffused her charming face. Red Cedar, who was watching her aside, could not refrain from muttering to himself:

"I must have the solution of the enigma ere long."

They returned to the tent.

In the Council of the Chiefs all happened as Red Cedar had foreseen: after a short deliberation, referring more to the mode of execution than to the plan itself, it was adopted unanimously.

An hour later, all was movement in the camp; the warriors rose to join the detachments and form squadrons; there was an indescribable confusion. At length, calm was gradually restored, the two war parties started in the directions proposed by Red Cedar, and soon, of the crowd of warriors who had been yelling and dancing in the camp, only thirty remained to receive the warriors as they arrived.

Black Cat placed himself at the head of his band, followed by the Pirates. The Apaches started for the Comanche village in Indian file, at their peculiar pace, which a trotting horse finds difficulty in keeping up with. The greatest silence and caution prevailed in the ranks, and it seemed as if the Apaches did not wish to be heard even by the birds.

With extraordinary dexterity, of which the Indians alone are capable, each marched in the other's footsteps so exactly that it looked as if only one person had gone along the path, carrying their care to such an extent as to stoop for fear of grazing the branches, and avoiding any contact with the shrubs. They marched as far as was possible on broken earth or rocks, that their traces might be less visible, making detours after detours, and returning a dozen times to the same spot, for the purpose of so thoroughly confusing their trail that it would be impossible to discover it.

When they reached the bank of a stream, instead of crossing it at right angles, they followed or went up it for a considerable distance, not landing again till the soil was hard enough to take the marks of their footsteps. They did all this with exemplary patience, without checking their speed, and still advancing to the object they had chosen.

They found themselves at about half past six in the evening at the top of a hill, whence the summer village of the Comanches could be perceived scarce two miles distant. The sound of the songs and chichikouis reached the Apaches at intervals, thus telling them that their enemies were rejoicing and celebrating some ceremony without any suspicion of a sudden attack. The Indians halted and consulted as to their final measures.

The Comanches have two sorts of villages, summer and winter. The latter are built with care, and some regularity. Their houses are of two stories, well arranged, light, and even elegant. But the Comanches are birds of prey, continually exposed to invasions, and menacing their enemies with them: hence they construct their villages on the point of rocks, exactly like eagles' nests, and seek all means to render them impregnable. The most curious village we have seen is formed by two lofty pyramids, standing on either side of a ravine, and connected by a bridge some distance up. These pyramids are about four hundred and twenty-five feet long by one hundred and forty-eight wide; as they rise this width diminishes, and the total height is about eighty-six feet. These two villages, divided into eight floors, contain five hundred inhabitants, who are enabled to defend themselves against a swarm of enemies from these extraordinary fortresses.

In the Comanche winter villages the door is not on the ground floor, as in Europe and civilised countries. The Comanche, when he wishes to enter his house, places a ladder against the side, mounts on the roof, and thence descends by a trap to the lower floors. When the ladder is once drawn up, it is impossible to enter the house.

The Pueblo of Aronco is situated on the summit of a scarped rock, over a precipice several hundred feet in depth. The inhabitants only enter by means of ladders, as is the case in some Swiss villages; but in time of war the ladders disappear, and the pueblo can only be reached by notches cut at regular distances in the rock.

The summer villages are only constructed for habitation in fine weather, or peace times, to facilitate getting in the crops and the chase; so soon as the first frost arrives, or a sound of war is heard, they are immediately deserted.

All the summer villages are alike; the one to which we allude here was surrounded by palisades and a wide ditch, but the fortifications, which had not been kept up, were in a complete state of dilapidation; the ditch was filled up at several spots, and the palisades, torn down by the squaws to light fires, offered, at many places, a convenient passage for assailants.

The Apaches wished to descend into the plain, unnoticed by the inhabitants; which would have been difficult, almost impossible, for European troops; but the Indians, whose wars are only one succession of surprises and ambushes, know how to surmount such difficulties.

It was arranged that the band, divided into three detachments, the first commanded by Black Cat, the second by another chief, and the third by Red Cedar, should crawl down the hillside, while the few men left to guard the horses would come up when the village was invaded.

This settled, Black Cat had torches prepared. When all was ready, the three detachments lay down on the ground, and the descent of the hill began. Assuredly, a man standing sentry in the place could not have suspected that more than five hundred warriors were marching on the village, crawling in the lofty grass like serpents, not even making the branches or leaves under which they crept oscillate, and keeping such order in their march that they always formed front.

The descent had lasted more than an hour, and as soon as the plain was reached the greatest difficulty was surmounted; for owing to the height of the plants and bushes, it was almost impossible for them to be perceived. At length, gaining ground inch by inch, after surmounting enormous obstacles and difficulties, they reached the palisade.

The first to arrive was Black Cat, who imitated the barking of the coyote. Two similar signals answered him, uttered by the chiefs of the other detachments, who had also arrived. Black Cat, now confident of being vigorously supported by his friends, seized his war whistle, and produced from it a shrill and piercing sound.

All the Indians rose as one man, and, bounding like tigers, rushed on the village, uttering their formidable war cry. They entered the village by three sides simultaneously, driving before them the terrified population; who, taken unawares, fled in every direction, howling with terror.

Some of the Apaches, as soon as they got in, lit their torches, and threw them on the straw roofs of the callis. The huts immediately caught, and the fire spreading around, served as the vanguard of the Apaches, who excited it with everything they could lay hands on.

The unhappy Comanches, surprised in the middle of a ceremony, surrounded by a belt of fire, and attacked on all sides by their ferocious enemies, who were killing and scalping women and children, suffered from the most profound despair, and only offered a weak resistance to this fierce assault. In the meanwhile the fire spread further. The village became a

burning furnace—the heated air was oppressive to breathe, and masses of sparks and of smoke, driven by the wind, blinded and burnt the eyes.

The hunters, on the roof of the calli, defended themselves vigorously, not hoping to escape, but wishing, at least, to sell their lives dearly. They were already surrounded by the flames which met over their heads, and yet they did not dream of giving ground.

Still, when the first moment of terror had passed, a band of Comanche warriors had succeeded in uniting, and offered a most obstinate resistance to the Apaches. All at once, White Gazelle, with flashing eye, suffused face, clenched teeth, and blanched lips, rushed forward, followed by Red Cedar and the Pirates, who followed at her heels.

"Surrender!" she cried to Valentine.

"Coward!" the latter replied, who took her for a man; "here is my answer!"

And he fired a pistol at the girl. The bullet passed through Orson's arm, who uttered a yell of pain, and rushed madly into the medley.

"Surrender! I say again," the girl went on, "you must see that you will be killed."

"No! A hundred times no," Valentine shouted. "I will not surrender."

The Gazelle, by a prodigious effort, reached the wall of the calli, and by the help of her hands and feet, succeeded in reaching the roof before her intention was suspected. With the energy and fierceness of a tiger, she bounded on Doña Clara, seized her round the waist, and put a pistol to her forehead.

"Now, will you surrender?" she said furiously.

"Take care, Niña; take care," Sandoval shouted.

It was too late: Curumilla had felled her with the butt end of his rifle. The pirates rushed to her aid, but Valentine and his friends repulsed them. A horrible hand-to-hand combat began over the body of the girl, who lay senseless on the ground.

Valentine took a scrutinising glance around him; with a movement swift as thought he caught up Doña Clara, and, leaping from the calli, he fell into the midst of a detachment of Comanches, who welcomed him with shouts

of joy. Without loss of time the hunter laid the maiden, who was half dead with terror, on the ground, and placing himself at the head of the warriors, he made so successful a charge, that the Apaches, surprised in their turn, were compelled to give ground. Don Pablo and the others then rejoined the hunters.

"By Jove! It is warm work," said the Frenchman, whose hair and eyebrows were scorched. "Our friend, Red Cedar, has brought this on us. I was decidedly wrong in not killing him."

In the meanwhile the Comanches had recovered from their terror; the warriors had found arms and assumed the offensive. Not only did the Apaches no longer advance, but at various points they began falling back, inch by inch, it is true but it was already a retreat. The pirates, rendered desperate by the wound of their darling child, surrounded her, and tried in vain to recall her to life. Red Cedar alone fought at the head of the Apaches, and performed prodigies of valour.

Night had set in, and the combat was still going on by the sinister glare of the fire. Valentine took Pethonista aside, and whispered a few words.

"Good," the chief answered; "my brother is a great warrior: he will save my nation."

And he straightway disappeared, making some of his men a sign to follow him.

Doña Clara was not long despondent; when the first effect of terror had passed she rose and seized a pistol.

"Do not trouble yourself about me," she said to Valentine and her brother. "Do your duty as brave hunters: if I am attacked, I can defend myself."

"I will remain by your side," said Shaw, giving her a passionate glance.

"Be it so," she answered with a kind smile; "henceforth I shall be in safety."

The Comanches had entrenched themselves with their squaws in the great square of the village, where the flames did not affect them greatly. Indeed, the wretched callis had not taken long to burn; the fire was already expiring for lack of nourishment, and they were fighting on a heap of cinders.

Valentine, while fighting in the first ranks of his allies, contented himself with holding the positions he had succeeded in occupying, and did not attempt to repulse the Apaches. All at once the war cry of the Comanches, mingled with a formidable hurrah, sounded in the rear of the Apaches, who were attacked with incredible fury.

"Bloodson! Bloodson!" the Apaches shouted, attacked with extraordinary terror.

It was, in truth, the stranger, who, followed by Don Miguel, General Ibañez, Unicorn, and all his comrades, rushed like a whirlwind on the Apaches. Valentine gave vent to a shout of joy in response to the hurrah of his friends, and rushed forward at the head of his warriors. From this moment the medley became horrible: it was no longer a combat, but a butchery, an atrocious carnage!

CHAPTER XXI.

THE AVENGER.

In order fully to comprehend the ensuing facts, we are constrained to relate here an event which occurred about twenty years before our story commences.

At that remote period Texas belonged, if not *de facto*, still *de jure*, to Mexico. Marvellously situated on the Mexican Gulf, endowed with a temperate climate and a fertile soil, which, if tickled with a spade, laughs with a harvest, Texas is assuredly one of the richest countries in the New World. Hence, the Government, foreseeing the future of this province, did all in its power to populate it.

Unfortunately, it effected very little, incapable as it was of populating even Mexico. Still, a considerable number of Mexicans went across and settled in Texas.

Among the men who let themselves be tempted by the magic promises of this virgin soil were two brothers, Don Stefano and Don Pacheco de Irala,

of the best families in the province of Nuevo-León. The active part they played in the war of independence had ruined them, and not obtaining from the liberals, after the triumph of their cause, the reward they had a right to expect for the services they had rendered—Don Gregorio, their father, having even paid with his life for his attachment to the party—they had no other resource but settling in Texas, a new country, in which they had hopes of speedily re-establishing their fortunes.

Owing to their thorough knowledge of agriculture, and their intelligence, they soon gave a considerable extension to their settlement, which they had the pleasure of seeing daily grow more prosperous, in defiance of Indians, buffaloes, tempests, and illness. The Hacienda del Papagallo (Parrot farm), inhabited by the two brothers, was, like all the houses in this country, which are continually exposed to the inrods of the savages, a species of fortress built of carved stone and surrounded by a thick and embrasured wall, with a gun at each corner: it stood on the top of a rather lofty hill, and commanded the plain for a considerable distance.

Don Pacheco, the elder of the two brothers, was married and had two daughters, little creatures scarce three years of age, whose joyous cries and ravishing smiles filled the interior of the hacienda with gaiety. Hardly three leagues from the farm was another, occupied by Northern Americans, adventurers of more than dubious conduct, who had come to the country no one knew how, and who, since they inhabited it, led a mysteriously problematical existence, which gave birth to the strangest and most contradictory reports about them.

It was whispered that, under the guise of peaceful farmers, these men maintained relations with the bandits who flocked into the country from every side, and that they were the secret chiefs of a dangerous association of malefactors, who had ravaged the country for several years past with impunity. On several occasions the two brothers had disputes with these unpleasant neighbours about cattle that had disappeared and other pecadillos of the same nature. In a word, they lived with them on the footing of an armed peace.

A few days previous to the period to which this chapter refers, Don Pacheco had a sharp altercation with one of these Americans of the name of Wilkes, about several slaves the fellow tried to seduce from hacienda, and the result

was, that Don Pacheco, naturally hot-tempered, gave him a tremendous horsewhipping. The other swallowed the insult without making any attempt to revenge himself; but he had withdrawn, muttering the most terrible threats against Don Pacheco.

Still, as we have said, the affair had no further consequences. Nearly a month had passed, and the brothers had heard nothing from their neighbours. On the evening of the day which we take up our narrative, Don Stefano, mounted on a mustang, was preparing to leave the hacienda, to ride to Nacogdoches, where important business called him.

"Then, you are really going?" Don Pacheco said.

"At once: you know that I put off the journey as long as I could."

"How long do you expect to be absent?"

"Four days, at the most."

"Good: we shall not expect you, then, before."

"Oh, it is very possible I may return sooner."

"Why so?"

"Shall I tell you? Well, I do not feel easy in mind."

"What do you mean?"

"I am anxious, I know not why. Many times I have left you, brother, for longer journeys than this—"

"Well!" Don Pacheco interrupted him.

"I never felt before as I do at this moment."

"You startle me, brother. What is the matter with you?"

"I could not explain it to you. I have a foreboding of evil. In spite of myself, my heart is contracted on leaving you."

"That is strange," Don Pacheco muttered, suddenly becoming thoughtful. "I do not dare confess it to you, brother; but I have just the same feeling as yourself, and am afraid I know not why."

"Brother," Don Stefano replied in a gloomy voice, "you know how we love each other. Since our father's death, we have constantly shared everything—

joy and sorrow, fortune or reverses. Brother, this foreboding is sent us from Heaven. A great danger threatens us."

"Perhaps so," Don Pacheco said sadly.

"Listen, brother," Don Stefano remarked, resolutely. "I will not go."

And he made a movement to dismount, but his brother checked him.

"No," he said, "we are men. We must not, then, let ourselves be conquered by foolish thoughts, which are only chimeras produced by a diseased imagination."

"No. I prefer to remain here a few days longer."

"You told me yourself that your interests claim your presence at Nacogdoches. Go, but return as soon as possible."

There was a silence, during which the brothers reflected deeply. The moon rose pallid and mournful on the horizon.

"That Wilkes is a villain," Don Stefano went on; "who knows whether he is not waiting my departure to attempt on the hacienda one of those terrible expeditions of which he is accused by the public voice?"

Don Pacheco began laughing, and, stretching out his hand in the direction of the farm, whose white walls stood out clearly on the dark blue sky, he said:—

"The Papagallo has too hard sides for those bandits. Go in peace, brother, they will not venture it."

"May Heaven grant it!" Don Stefano murmured.

"Oh, those men are cowards, and I inflicted a well-merited punishment on the scoundrel."

"Agreed."

"Well?"

"It's precisely because those men are cowards that I fear them. Canarios! I know as well as you that they will not dare openly to attack you."

"What have I to fear, then?" Don Pacheco interrupted him.

"Treachery, brother."

"Why, have I not five hundred devoted peons on the hacienda? Go without fear, I tell you."

"You wish it?"

"I insist on it."

"Good-bye, then," Don Stefano said, stifling a sigh. "Good-bye, brother, till we meet again."

Don Stefano dug his spurs into his horse's flanks and started at full speed. For a long time his brother followed the rider's outline on the sandy road, till he turned a corner, and Don Pacheco re-entered the hacienda with an anxious heart.

Don Stefano, stimulated by the vague alarm that oppressed him, only stopped the absolutely necessary period at Nacogdoches to finish his business, and hurried back scarce two days after his departure. Strangely enough, the nearer he drew to the farm, the greater his anxiety grew, though it was impossible for him to explain the causes of the feeling.

Around home all was tranquil—the sky, studded with an infinite number of glistening stars, spread over his head its dome of azure; at intervals, the howling of the coyote was mingled with the hoarse lowing of the buffaloes, or the roars of the jaguars in quest of prey.

Don Stefano still advanced, bowed over his horse's neck, with pale forehead and heaving chest, listening to the numerous sounds of the solitude, and trying to pierce with vivid glance the darkness that hid from him the point to which he was hurrying with the speed of a tornado.

After a ride of six hours, the Mexican suddenly uttered a yell of agony, as he violently pulled up his panting steed. Before him the Hacienda del Papagallo appeared, surrounded by a belt of flames. The magnificent building was now only a shapeless pile of smoking ruins, reflecting its ruddy flames on the sky for a considerable distance.

"My brother! My brother!" Don Stefano shrieked in his despair.

And he rushed into the furnace.

A mournful silence brooded over the hacienda. At every step the Mexican stumbled over corpses half-consumed by the flames and horribly mutilated.

Mad with grief and rage, with his hair and clothes burned by the flames that enveloped him, Don Stefano continued his researches.

What was he seeking in this accursed charnel house? He did not himself know, but still he sought. Not a shriek, not a sigh! On all sides the silence of death!—that terrible silence which makes the heart leap, and ices the bravest man with fear!

What had taken place during Don Stefano's absence?—What enemy had produced these ruins in a few short hours?

The first beams of dawn were beginning to tinge the horizon with their fugitive opaline tints, and the sky gradually assumed that ruddy hue which announces sunrise. Don Stefano had passed the whole night in vain and sterile researches, and though he had constantly interrogated the ruins, they remained dumb.

The Mexican, overcome by grief, and compelled to acknowledge his own impotence, gave Heaven a glance of reproach and despair, and throwing himself on the calcined ground, he hid his face in his hands, and wept! The sight of this young, handsome, brave man weeping silently over the ruins whose secret he had been unable to discover must have been heartrending.

Suddenly, Don Stefano started up, with flashing eye, and a face on which indomitable energy was imprinted.

"Oh!" he shouted, in a voice that resembled the howl of a wild beast, "vengeance! Vengeance!"

A voice that seemed to issue from the tomb answered his, and Don Stefano turned round with a shudder. Two yards from him, his brother, pale, mutilated, and bleeding, was leaning against a fallen wall, like a spectre.

"Ah!" the Mexican exclaimed, as he rushed toward him.

"You come too late, brother," the wounded man murmured, in a voice choking with the death rattle.

"Oh! I will save you, brother," Don Stefano said, desperately.

"No," Don Pacheco replied sadly, shaking his head, "I am dying, brother; your foreboding did not deceive you."

"Hope!"

And, raising his brother in his powerful arms, he prepared to pay him that attention which his condition seemed to demand.

"I am dying, I tell you—all is useless," Don Pacheco continued, in a voice that momentarily grew weaker. "Listen to me."

"Speak!"

"Say that you will avenge me, brother?" the dying man asked, his eye emitting a fierce flash.

"I will avenge you," Don Stefano answered; "I swear it by our Saviour!"

"Good! I have been assassinated by men dressed as Apache Indians, but among them I fancied I recognised—"

"Whom?"

"Wilkes the squatter, and Samuel, his accomplice."

"Enough! Where is your wife?"

"Dead! My daughters, save them!" Don Pacheco murmured.

"Where are they?"

"Carried off by the bandits."

"Oh! I will discover them, even if hidden in the bowels of the earth! Did you not recognise anyone else?"

"Yes, yes, one more," the dying man said, in an almost unintelligible voice.

Don Stefano bent over his brother in order to hear more distinctly.

"Who? Tell me—brother, speak in Heaven's name!"

The wounded man made a supreme effort.

"There was another man, formerly a peon of ours."

"His name?" Don Stefano asked eagerly.

Don Pacheco was growing weaker, his face had assumed an earthy hue, and his eyes could no longer distinguish objects.

"I cannot remember," he sighed rather than said.

"One word, only one, brother."

"Yes, listen—it is Sand—ah!"

He suddenly fell back, uttering a terrible cry, and clutching at his brother's arm; he writhed in a final convulsion, and all was over.

Don Stefano knelt by his brother's corpse, embraced it tenderly, piously closed its eyes, and then got up. He dug a grave with his machete among the smoking ruins of the hacienda, in which he laid his brother's body. When this sacred duty was performed, he addressed an ardent prayer to the Deity in behalf of the sinful man who was about to appear before His judgment seat, and then, stretching out his arms over the grave, he said in a loud, distinct voice—

"Sleep in peace, brother, sleep in peace. I promise you a glorious revenge."

Don Stefano slowly descended the hill, found his horse, which had spent the night in nibbling the young tree shoots, and started at a gallop, after giving a parting glance to these ruins, under which all his happiness lay buried.

No one ever heard of Don Stefano again in Texas: was he dead too, without taking that vengeance which he had sworn to achieve? No one could say. The Americans had also disappeared since that awful night and left no sign. In these primitive countries things are soon forgotten: life passes away there so rapidly, and is so full of strange incidents, that the events of the morrow obliterate the remembrances of those of the eve. Ere long the population of Texas had completely forgotten this terrible catastrophe.

Every year, however, a man appeared on the hill where the hacienda once stood, whose ruins the luxuriant vegetation of the country had long ago overgrown; this man seated himself on the silent ruins, and passed the whole night with his face buried in his hands.

"What did he there?"

"Whence did he come?"

"Who was he?"

These three questions ever remained unanswered, for at daybreak the stranger rode off again, not to return till the following year on the anniversary of the frightful tragedy. One strange fact was proved however,

after every visit paid by this man—one, two, or even sometimes three horribly mutilated human heads were found lying on the hill.

What demoniac task was this incomprehensible being performing? Was it Don Stefano pursuing his vengeance?

We shall probably see presently.

CHAPTER XXII.

EXPLANATORY.

We are compelled to retrograde a short distance in our story, in order to explain to the reader the arrival of that help which in an instant altered the face of the fight, and saved Valentine and his friends from captivity, probably from death.

Unicorn carefully watched the movements of Red Cedar and his band; since the Pirate's arrival on the desert he had not once let him out of sight. Hidden in the chaparral on the riverbank, he had been an unseen spectator of the bandit's fight with the hunters; but, with that caution which forms the basis of the Indian character, he had left his friends perfect liberty to act as they thought proper, with the design of interfering when necessary.

When he saw the Pirates disarmed, and reduced to his last shifts, he considered it useless to follow him longer, and proceeded in the direction of his village, to assemble his warriors, and go at their head to attack the camp of the scalp hunters.

The Comanche chief was alone with his squaw, from whom he scarcely ever separated; they were both galloping along the bank of the Gila, being careful to hide themselves among the brushwood, when suddenly deafening cries, mingled with shots, and the hasty gallop of a horse, struck his ears.

Unicorn made his companion a signal to halt, and dismounted; then, cautiously crawling among the trees, he glided like a serpent through the

tall grass to the skirt of the chaparral which sheltered him. On reaching this point he cautiously rose on his knees and looked out.

A man, bearing a fainting woman across his saddle-bow, was coming up at full speed; in the distance several Indian warriors, doubtless wearied of an useless pursuit, were slowly retiring, while the fugitive rapidly drew nearer Unicorn.

The chief perceived at the first glance that he was a white. On arriving within a short distance of the spot where he lay in ambush, the newcomer looked round several times nervously; then he dismounted, took the female in his arms, laid her tenderly on the grass, and ran to the river to fill his hat with water. It was Harry, the Canadian hunter, and the female was Ellen.

So soon as he had gone off, Unicorn started from his hiding place, giving his wife a sign to follow him, and both approached the maiden, who was lying senseless on the ground. Sunbeam knelt by the side of the American girl, gently raised her head, and began paying her those delicate attentions of which women alone possess the secret. Almost immediately after, Harry ran up; but at the sight of the Indian he hurriedly dropped his hat, and drew a pistol from his girdle.

"Wah!" Unicorn said quickly, "My pale brother need not pull out his weapons—I am a friend."

"A friend?" Harry replied, ill-humouredly; "Can a redskin warrior be the friend of a white man?"

The chief crossed his arms on his broad chest, and boldly walked up to the hunter.

"I was hidden ten paces from you," he said; "had I been an enemy, the paleface would have been dead ere now."

The Canadian shook his head.

"That is possible," he said; "may heaven grant that you speak frankly, for the struggle I have gone through in saving this poor girl has so exhausted me that I could not defend her against you."

"Good!" the Indian continued, "She has nothing to fear; Unicorn is chief of his nation, when he gives his word he must be believed."

And he honestly offered his hand to the hunter. The latter hesitated for a moment, then suddenly forming a resolution, he cordially pressed the hand, saying—

"I believe you, chief; your name is known to me; you have the reputation of a wise man and brave warrior, so I trust to you; but I implore you to help me in recovering this unhappy girl."

Sunbeam gently raised her head, and gave the hunter a glance of tender sympathy, as she said in her harmonious voice—

"The pale virgin runs no danger, in a few minutes she will come to herself again; my brother may be at his ease."

"Thanks, thanks, young woman," the Canadian said, warmly; "the hope you give me fills me with joy; I can now think about avenging my poor Dick."

"What does my brother mean?" the chief asked, surprised at the flash of fury from the hunter's dark eye.

The latter, reassured as to the state of his companion, and attracted by the open and honest reception the Indian gave him, did not hesitate to confide to him not only what had occurred to himself, but also the causes which had brought him into this deserted country.

"Now," he said in the close, "I have only one desire—to place this girl in security, and then avenge my friend."

The Indian has listened unmoved and without interruption to the hunter's long story. When he had finished he seemed to reflect for some minutes, and then answered the Canadian, as he laid his hand on his shoulder—

"Then my brother wishes to take vengeance on the Apaches?"

"Yes!" the hunter exclaimed; "So soon as this girl is in a safe place I will go on their trail."

"Ah!" the Indian said, as he shook his head, "One man cannot fight with fifty."

"I do not care for the number of my enemies so long as I can come up with them."

Unicorn gave the daring young man an admiring glance.

"Good!" he said, "My brother is brave—I will help him to his vengeance."

At this moment Ellen partly opened her eyes.

"Where am I?" she murmured.

"Reassure yourself, Ellen," the hunter replied; "for the moment at least you have nothing to fear as you are surrounded by friends."

"Where is Doña Clara? I do not see her," she continued, in a weak voice.

"I will tell you presently, Ellen, what has happened to her," the hunter remarked.

Ellen sighed and was silent; she understood that Harry would not tell her fresh misfortune in her present state of weakness. Owing to Sunbeam's increasing attentions she, however, soon completely regained her senses.

"Does my sister feel her strength returned?" the squaw asked her anxiously.

"Oh," she said, "I am quite well now."

Unicorn looked fixedly at her.

"Yes," he said, "my sister is at present in a condition to travel. It is time to start, our road is long; Sunbeam will give her horse to the pale virgin, that she may be able to follow us."

"Where do you intend taking us, chief?" the hunter asked, with badly-veiled anxiety.

"Did not my brother say that he wished to avenge himself?"

"Yes, I did."

"Well, he can follow me, and I will lead him to those who will help him."

"Hum!" the Canadian muttered, "I require nobody for that."

"My brother is mistaken; he requires allies, for the enemy he will have to fight is powerful."

"That is possible. But I should like to know these allies, at any rate; I am not inclined to league myself with the villainous bandits, who flock to the desert and dishonour our colour. I am a frank and honest hunter, for my part."

"My brother has spoken well," the chief answered, with a smile; "he can be at rest, and place entire confidence in those to whom I am about to lead him."

"Who are they, then?"

"One is the father of the maiden the Apaches have carried off, the others—"

"Stay, chief," the hunter quickly exclaimed, "that is sufficient, I do not want to know the rest. We will start when you please, and I will follow you anywhere."

"Good; my brother will get the horses ready, while I give some indispensable orders to my squaw."

Harry bowed in sign of acquiescence, and deftly accomplished the task, while the Comanche took his wife aside, and conversed with her in a whisper.

"Now we will go," the Comanche said, as he returned to the hunter.

"Does not Sunbeam accompany us?" Ellen asked.

"No," the chief answered laconically.

The young Indian woman smiled pleasantly on the squatter's daughter and gliding swiftly among the trees, disappeared almost instantaneously. The others mounted and started at a gallop in the opposite direction.

The Comanche warrior fancied he knew where to find Valentine and his comrades, and hence went in a direct line to the Teocali.

After the Trail-hunter's departure, Don Miguel and the other characters of our story, who remained in Bloodson's fortress, continued to sleep peaceably for several hours, and when they awoke the sun was already high on the horizon. The hacendero and the general, fatigued by the emotions of the preceding day, and but little accustomed to desert life, had yielded to sleep like men who require to regain their strength; when they opened their eyes, a plentiful meal awaited them.

Several days passed without any incident. The stranger, in spite of the cordiality of his reception, maintained a certain degree of reserve with his guests, only speaking to them when it was absolutely necessary, but never seeking to begin with them one of those conversations in which people

gradually forget themselves, and insensibly glide into confidential talk. There was something frigid about the manner of this strange man, which could not be explained, but which prevented any friendly relations.

One evening, at the moment when Don Miguel and the general were preparing to lie down on the skins of wild beasts, which served as their bed, their host approached them. Through the day the two gentlemen had noticed a certain agitation among the denizens in the Teocali. An unusual excitement had prevailed, and it was plain that Bloodson was about to attempt one of those daring expeditions to which he was accustomed.

Although the two Mexicans eagerly desired to know their host's projects, they were too much men of the world to question him, and restrained their curiosity while patiently awaiting an explanation which he would not fail soon to give them.

"Good news, caballeros," he said, as he joined them.

"Oh, oh!" the general muttered, "That's novel fruit here."

Don Miguel awaited their host's explanation.

"One of my friends," Bloodson continued, "arrived here this morning, accompanied by a Canadian hunter and Red Cedar's daughter."

At this unexpected good news the Mexicans started with joy and surprise.

"Ah," Don Miguel said, "she will be a precious hostage for us."

"That is what I thought," Bloodson continued; "however, the poor child is perfectly innocent of her father's crimes; and if she is at this moment in our power, it is only because she wished to save your daughter, Don Miguel."

"What do you mean?" the hacendero asked, with an internal tremor.

"You shall understand it," Bloodson answered.

And without any further preamble, he told his listeners all the details connected with the flight of the girls, which the reader already knows.

When he had finished his narrative there was a moment's silence.

"The position is a serious one," the general said, shaking his head.

"We must save our friends, at all risks," Don Miguel exclaimed, impetuously.

"That is my intention," said Bloodson; "at present the position of affairs is improved."

"How so?" the hacendero asked.

"Because it is better for Doña Clara to be a prisoner with the Apaches than with Red Cedar."

"That is true," Don Miguel observed.

"How can we get her out of their clutches?" asked the general.

"That does not embarrass me," Bloodson said; "tomorrow, at daybreak, we will start with all our people, and go to Unicorn's village, who will join his warriors to ours, and then we will attack the Apaches in their village."

"Very good; but shall we be sure of finding my daughter at the village?"

"In the desert everything is seen and known. Do you fancy that Don Valentine has remained inactive since he left us? You may feel assured that he has long been on the trail of the young lady, if he has not already liberated her."

"May heaven grant it," the father remarked with a mournful sigh; "but who will advise us of what he has done?"

"Himself, you may be convinced of that. Still, as we are a very long distance from the village where your daughter is probably confined, we must hasten to get nearer to her; hence, my guests, get up your strength, for tomorrow will be a tiring day, I warn you. Now, permit me to wish you good night, and leave you, in order to give my final orders."

"One word more, I beg of you."

"Speak."

"What do you intend doing with the girl whom a strange accident has thrown into your power?"

"I do not know; events will decide her fate; I shall regulate my conduct by that of our common enemy."

"You said yourself," Don Miguel continued, "that the girl is innocent of her father's crimes."

Bloodson gave him a peculiar glance

"Do you not know, Don Miguel," he answered, in a hollow voice, "that in this world the innocent always suffer for the guilty?"

And, not adding a word further, he gave the Mexicans a profound bow, and slowly retired.

The two gentlemen looked after him, as he gradually disappeared in the gloom of the Teocali; then they fell back on their beds despondingly, not daring to impart to each other the sorrowful thoughts that oppressed them.

CHAPTER XXIII.

APACHES AND COMANCHES.

At daybreak some forty horsemen, at whose head rode Bloodson, Don Miguel Zarate, and General Ibañez, started in the direction of the Comanche village, guided by Unicorn. In the midst of the band rode Ellen, closely watched, and Harry, who would not leave her for a moment, galloped by her side.

The maiden had guessed, in spite of the attentions offered her, or perhaps through them, that she was regarded rather as a prisoner than a friend by the men who surrounded her. Hence, on leaving the Teocali, she had given Harry a suppliant glance to remain by her side. The hunter had understood this glance, and, in spite of all that Bloodson urged to induce him to ride with him at the head of the party, he obstinately remained by Ellen's side.

By a strange coincidence, at the very moment when the partisans, guided by Unicorn, were leaving the Teocali to go in search of news of their friends at the Comanche village, the latter were executing their miraculous flight, had left the islet on which they had defended themselves so bravely, and, after

boldly crossing the Apache camp, were also proceeding, though by a different route, to the same village.

The march of a numerous party in the desert is generally less rapid than that of a few men, and it is easy of explanation. Two or three men proceeding together pass without difficulty anywhere, gliding through the chaparral, and following the track of wild beasts; but some forty persons compelled to adopt the Indian file, that is to say, march one after the other, along these problematical paths, scarce wide enough for one horseman, are constrained to cheek their pace, and advance with extreme precaution, especially on an expedition of the sort the partisans were now undertaking.

Hence, in spite of all the diligence they displayed, they advanced but slowly. The ruddy disc of the sun was rapidly descending on the horizon, the shadow of the lofty trees was lengthening more and more, the evening breeze was beginning to sough through the virgin forest, which extended for an enormous distance on the right of the travellers, while on the riverbank the alligators were clumsily leaving the bed of mud in which they had been slothfully wallowing, and were regaining the deep waters of the Gila.

The horses and riders, harassed by the fatigues of a long journey, were slowly dragging along, when Unicorn, who was about one hundred yards ahead, suddenly turned back and rejoined his comrades, who at once halted.

"What is the matter?" Bloodson asked, so soon as the chief found him; "Has my brother seen anything that alarms him?"

"Yes," the Indian laconically replied.

"I am waiting for my brother to explain."

"The desert is not quiet," the chief went on in a grave voice; "the vultures and white-headed eagles are flying in long circles, the deer and buffaloes are restless, the asshatas are bounding in every direction, and the antelopes flying with all the speed of their limbs northward."

Bloodson frowned and waited a moment ere he replied. The Mexicans examined him anxiously, but at length he raised his head.

"What do you conclude from these signs?"

"This: the Apaches are crossing the prairie; they are numerous, for the desert is disturbed for a very considerable extent."

"Why the Apaches sooner than others?" Bloodson answered. "Cannot wood rangers have produced the excitement you have noticed, as well as the Indians?"

The Comanche warrior shook his head in contradiction.

"They are Apaches," he said, peremptorily. "This is not the season of the great hunts, the animals are not troubled by man at this period of the year. They know it, and do not desperately fly from him, as they are certain of not being pursued. The wood rangers march alone, or only three or four together, employing precautions not to startle the game. But the Apaches are ignorant dogs, who, like the coyotes they resemble, continually assemble in large parties, and, instead of marching like men or warriors, pass like a hurricane over the prairie, burning, destroying, and devastating everything in their passage."

"That is true," Bloodson muttered; "your sagacity has not deceived you, chief; only the Apaches can be near here."

"Good; and what will my brother do?" the Comanche asked.

The stranger's eye flashed fire.

"We will fight them," he said.

The Indian gave an almost imperceptible shrug of his shoulders.

"No," he said; "that is no good; we must not fight at this moment."

"Speak then, in the devil's name," the stranger exclaimed, impatiently, "and explain your plan to us."

The Indian smiled.

"My brother is quick," he said.

Bloodson, ashamed of having given way to his temper, had already regained his coolness.

"Pardon me, chief; I was wrong."

And he held out his hand, which Unicorn took and pressed warmly.

"My brother is wise," he replied; "I know that he did not wish to insult a friend."

"Speak, chief; time is slipping away; explain your plan to me."

"Behind that hill is Unicorn's village; the warriors will remain here while he advances alone, in order to know what is going on."

"Good; my brother can go; we will wait."

In the desert, long conversations are not the fashion; moments are too precious to be lost in words. The Indian set spurs to his horse and went off, and he soon disappeared from their sight.

"What do you think of what the chief has just told us?" the general asked.

"It is very serious," the stranger answered. "The Indians have an extraordinary skill for discovering what goes on in the desert—they have an infallible instinct which never deceives them. This man is one of the most intelligent I know. I am only acquainted with two men in the world capable of contending with him—that frightful scoundrel, Red Cedar, and Don Valentine, that French hunter whom the Indians themselves have surnamed the Trail-Hunter."

"Ah!" Don Miguel said, "Then your opinion is—"

"That we must await the result of the step Unicorn is taking at this moment; his village is only an hour's march at the most from the spot where we now are."

"But, in that case, why stop us?"

"An Indian never returns home till he has assured himself that all is in order. Who can foresee what has happened during his absence?"

"That is true; let us wait, then," the hacendero said, stifling a sigh.

Nearly an hour passed thus. All the partisans seated on their horses, with their finger on the trigger of their rifle, remained motionless as bronze statues. In the meanwhile the sun had set in a mist of vapour, the shadow spread gradually over the desert like a thick winding sheet, and the stars were slowly lit up in the dark blue sky. Still Unicorn did not return.

The hunters did not exchange a word; each, persuaded in his heart that the position was a serious one, was reflecting deeply. Not a sound was audible, save the hoarse and continuous rustling of the Rio Gila over the pebbles and rocks that border its banks.

Suddenly, Bloodson, whose eye had been obstinately fixed in the direction where the Comanche Chief had disappeared, gave a slight start and whispered in Don Miguel's ear:

"Here he is."

In fact, the gallop of a horse was heard gradually drawing nearer till the chief reappeared.

"Well?" the stranger shouted to him.

"Koutonepi and the pale virgin are in the village," he said; "the hunter has delivered the maiden."

"May Heaven be praised!" Don Miguel said, fervently.

Unicorn looked at him sadly.

"The Apaches are pursuing them," he added; "at this moment the village is being attacked, but our friends defend themselves bravely."

"Let us fly to their help," the Mexicans shouted.

Bloodson turned to them.

"Patience," he said; "let the chief explain."

"My pale brother," the Comanche continued, "with one-half of the warriors, will turn the hill and enter the village by the north, while I, with the other half, will enter by the south."

"Good," said Bloodson; "but we are far off yet; perhaps our friends will be unable to hold out till our arrival."

Unicorn smiled scornfully.

"The Apaches are cowardly dogs," he said. "The Comanches will defend themselves: they know not flight."

Without replying, the partisan divided his band, taking the command of one party, and entrusting the other to the Comanche warrior. All these men were Indians, long habituated to a war of ambushes and surprises: this bold stroke was a Godsend to them: with flashing eyes and quivering lips, though apparently unmoved, they impatiently awaited the signal for departure.

"Let us go," Bloodson vociferated, brandishing his rifle over his head.

All bent over their horses manes and started forward. On reaching the foot of the hill one band went to the right, the other to the left, Ellen remaining behind, under the guard of a few warriors and the Canadian hunter, who would not leave her. This little band moved forward gently as a rearguard.

In the meanwhile, the partisans reached the village at headlong speed; and it was high time for them to arrive, for the huts, enveloped in flames, resembled a volcano. By the gleam of the fire, shadows could be seen darting hither and thither; and shouts of pain and rage, mingled with the discharge of firearms, incessantly rose from this burning mass.

The partisans rushed into this horrible furnace, uttering their war yell and brandishing their arms, and the medley became frightful. The Apaches, thus attacked on two sides simultaneously, underwent a momentary stupor, which soon changed into a panic and utter rout, at the sight of these new opponents, who seemed to rise from the ground to crush them, and change their triumph into a defeat.

But flight was not easy. The entire population of the village was under arms: women and children, electrified by their example, and joining the warriors, rushed madly on the Apaches, who, seeing their surprise foiled, only tried to reach the open country again.

For a quarter of an hour the massacre was fearful. At length the Apaches, led by Stanapat and Black Cat, who vainly performed prodigies of valour in order to restore the chances of the fight, succeeded in clearing a gap through their enemies, and rushed in every direction, closely followed by the Comanches, who felled them with their war clubs and pitilessly scalped them.

Only one band still resisted.

Leaning against the palisades, which they had not yet found time to cross, the pirates, bearing in their midst the body of their beloved Gazelle, had recoiled inch by inch before the enemies who enveloped them on all sides, dashing forward every now and then, and compelling their foes to give ground in their turn.

But the struggle was too unequal, and a long resistance soon became impossible. The pirates, skilfully profiting by a moment of disorder, started

to fly each in a different direction, hoping to escape more easily in this way. Sandoval had taken on his robust shoulders the body of the girl, and with an extraordinary effort, which despair alone made successful, had leaped out on the plain, where he hoped to conceal himself in the grass.

He would have probably succeeded in this, but he had to do with four men, who seemed to have made up their minds to hunt him down. At the moment he drew himself up after his leap, Valentine and his comrades threw themselves upon him, without giving him time to defend himself, and, in spite of his desperate resistance and furious yells, tied him securely.

The old pirate, on finding himself a prisoner, let his head sink on his chest, and giving a sad glance at the girl he had been unable to save, he gave vent to a deep sigh, and a burning tear silently coursed down his furrowed cheeks. At the same moment Ellen entered the village, in the middle of her escort: on seeing her, Valentine started.

"Oh!" he muttered; "Where is Doña Clara?"

"My daughter, my daughter!" the hacendero exclaimed, suddenly appearing before the hunter, with his clothes disordered and his brow pale with fear. The unhappy father, since he had entered the village, had only attended to one thing—seeking his daughter.

Followed step by step by the general, he entered the thickest of the fight, asking after his daughter of all those he met, thrusting aside the weapons that menaced him, and not thinking of the death which at every moment rose before him, under every shape. Protected, as it were, by an invisible talisman, he had traversed the whole village and entered every hut the fire had spared, Seeing nothing, hearing nothing, having only one object—that of finding his child. Alas! His search had been in vain.

Doña Clara had disappeared: although Valentine had intrusted her to Shaw, no one knew what had become of her. The hacendero fell into his friend's arms, and burst into heartrending sobs.

"My daughter," he groaned. "Valentine, restore my daughter to me!"

The hunter pressed him to his manly breast.

"Courage, poor father," he said to him. "Courage!"

But the hacendero no longer heard him; grief had at length overpowered him, and he fainted away.

"Oh!" Valentine said, "Red Cedar, you viper, shall I never succeed in putting my heel on your chest!"

Aided by the general and Don Pablo, he carried Don Miguel to the medicine lodge, which the flames had not reached, and laid him a bed of dry leaves.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE SCALP-DANCE.

When the combat was at an end, the Comanches busied themselves in repairing the ravages caused by the Apache attack. Though their losses were great, they were not so serious as might be supposed; because, as the season was already far advanced, they had sent the larger portion of their property to the winter village. This accidental circumstance saved the greater part of their wealth.

On the other hand, the Apaches had been in such haste, and the defence had been so promptly organised and obstinate, that they had found no time to plunder. Although all the callis were reduced to ashes, that damage was trifling, and could be repaired in a few days.

The most serious part of the affair was the loss of some twenty warriors, who had courageously fallen in the defence of their homes. Several women and children had also fallen; but the Apaches had suffered a far more considerable loss. Without counting more than eighty warriors killed during the rout, Black Cat and six other Apache warriors had fallen alive into the power of their adversaries, and a terrible fate awaited them.

"What does my brother intend to do with his prisoners?" Unicorn asked Valentine.

"My brother need not feel anxious about them," the latter answered; "they are whites, and I intend disposing of them as I think proper."

"It shall be done as my brother desires."

"Thanks, chief; I should feel obliged, however, by your lending me two or three warriors to guard them."

"It is unnecessary," Sandoval interrupted. "I pledge my word of honour and that of my comrade not to try and escape for the next twenty-four hours."

Valentine fixed on him a glance that seemed trying to read his most secret thoughts.

"It is well," he said presently. "I accept your parole."

"Are you going to leave this poor creature without help?"

"You love him?"

"As my son; had it not been so, you would not have captured me."

"Very good. We will try to save him; but, perhaps, it would be better for him to die at once."

"Perhaps so," the old Pirate said, shaking his head, and speaking, as it seemed, to himself.

"In a few moments the scalp dance will begin; will my brothers be present at it?" Unicorn asked.

"I will," Valentine replied, who, although caring very little for this ceremony, understood that it would be impolitic not to appear at it.

We have already said that Ellen had reached the village by this time. On seeing her, Don Pablo felt his heart quiver with emotion, and he trembled in all his limbs. Ellen, whose glance was idly wandering around, let her eyes settle accidentally on him; she suddenly blushed, and let her eyelashes droop to hide her look of pleasure.

Instinctively she felt reassured on finding she had near her this young man, whom, however, she hardly knew, and who had only addressed her once or twice. A cry of joy died away on her lips. Don Pablo walked up to her. He had already learned by what a concourse of singular events she had fallen into the hands of the partisans.

"You are free, señorita," he said to her; "henceforth you have nothing more to fear here, for you are under my protection."

"And mine," Harry said, roughly, as he hastily surveyed Don Pablo. "I alone am sufficient to defend Miss Ellen from any insult."

The two young men exchanged a very significant glance: at the first word, each recognised in the other a rival.

"I have no desire to withdraw Miss Ellen from your protection, caballero," the Mexican said coldly. "Still, as you are a stranger in this village, where I am among devoted friends, I fancy that my support will not be useless to her, and offer it—that is all."

"I gratefully accept, caballero," she replied with a charming smile. "Be kind enough to employ your influence in procuring me some shelter, where I can take a few minutes' repose, which I so greatly need."

"Be good enough to follow me," the young man answered, with a bow; "your wishes shall be immediately satisfied."

Ellen then turned to Harry.

"Thanks, brother," she said to him, cordially offering her hand. "Now, think of yourself; we shall meet again soon."

Then she added, addressing Don Pablo:

"I follow you, caballero."

The Canadian hunter stood for a moment abashed by this hurried leave-taking, but soon raised his head again.

"Hum!" he muttered, "that's the way she leaves me, is it? But why be angry with her, all women are alike—and, then, I have sworn to defend her! Can I compel her to love me?"

And after these philosophical reflections, which restored him all his tranquillity of mind, he threw his rifle over his shoulder, and quietly mixed among Bloodson's partisans.

Don Pablo, in the meanwhile, had conducted the maiden to a cabin miraculously preserved from the flames. At the moment they entered, they were joined by Valentine.

"Ah, a woman," he said, gaily, "all the better."

And laying White Gazelle on the buffalo hides, he added with a smile:

"Permit me, madam, to entrust to your care this young person, whom my friend Curumilla has half killed. We must do all our best to restore life."

Pedro Sandoval, so soon as he had pledged his word, had been freed from his ligatures, though his weapons were taken from him.

"Compañero," he said, "let the señorita do what is necessary; she will manage better than we can."

"Poor child!" Ellen murmured, sympathisingly. "Be assured, gentlemen, that I will take care of her."

"Thanks, madam, thanks," the old Pirate said, as he several times kissed the maiden's hands. "I would give my last drop of blood to see her smile on me again."

"Is she your daughter?" Ellen asked with interest.

The Pirate shook his head sadly.

"We have no children or family, we the accursed ones of civilisation," he said, in a hollow voice; "but, as I have watched over this poor girl almost since her birth, I love her as we are capable of loving. I have always acted as her father, and my greatest grief today is to see her suffering and be unable to relieve her."

"Leave that care to me; I hope you will soon hear her voice and see her smile on you."

"Oh, do that, madam," he exclaimed, "and I, who never yet blessed anything, will worship you as an angel."

The maiden, affected by such devoted love in a nature so rough as that of the Pirate, renewed her assurance of giving the prisoner all the care her position demanded, and the two women remained alone in the tent.

In the meanwhile, a new village had risen, as if by enchantment, on the ruins of the old one. Within a few hours, buffalo skin tents were erected in every direction, and only a few traces remained of the sanguinary contest of which the spot had been the scene on that same day.

A fire was kindled in the public square, and the Apache prisoners, fastened to stakes put up expressly for them, were stoically awaiting the decision on their fate.

All were getting ready for the scalp dance, and a great number of men, tall, handsome, and well dressed, soon invaded every corner of the square. Their faces were blackened, as were those of Unicorn and Pethonista, who led them; after these the old women and children came up in procession, and ranged themselves behind the men. Last of all, the other females came up in close column, two by two, and occupied the centre of the square.

Seven warriors belonging to the Old Dogs formed the band; they, too, had blackened their faces, and three of them carried drums; the other four, chichikouis. The warriors, wrapped in their buffalo robes, had their heads uncovered, and generally adorned with feathers, which fell down behind. The women's faces were also painted, some black, others red; they wore buffalo robes, or blankets dyed of different colours. Two or three, the wives of the principal chiefs, had on white buffalo robes, and wore on their heads an eagle plume, placed perpendicularly.

As Sunbeam, Unicorn's squaw, was absent, the first wife of Pethonista took her place, and, alone, wore the grand sacred cap of feathers. All the other women held in their hands war clubs or muskets, decorated with red cloth and small feathers, the butt of which they struck on the ground while dancing.

We will remark here, that in the scalp dance the women carry arms, and put on the war costume, to the exclusion of the men.

The chieftainess stood at the right extremity of the band. She had in her hand a long wand, from whose upper end were suspended four scalps, still dripping with blood, surmounted by a stuffed jay, with outstretched wings; a little lower, on the same staff, were five more scalps. Opposite her stood another woman, carrying eight scalps in the same way, while the majority of the rest had either one or two.

The women formed a semicircle; the musicians, placed on the right, began their deafening noise, beating the drums with all their strength, singing their exploits, and shaking the chichikouis. The squaws then began dancing. They took little steps, balancing to the right and left; the two ends of the

semicircle advanced and fell back in turn; the dancers shrieked at the top of their lungs, and produced a fearful concert, which can only be compared to the furious miauwling of a multitude of cats.

The Apache prisoners were fastened to stakes in the centre of the circle. Each time the women approached them in their evolutions, they overwhelmed them with insults, spat in their faces, and called them cowards, hares, rabbits, and dogs without hearts.

The Apaches smiled at these insults, to which they replied by enumerating the losses they had entailed on the Comanches, and the warriors they had killed. When the dance had lasted more than an hour, the women, exhausted with fatigue, were compelled to rest, and the men advanced in their turn, and stood before the prisoners.

Among them was one Valentine would have liked to save—it was Black Cat. The hunter therefore resolved to interfere, and employ all his influence with Unicorn to obtain the life of the Apache chief.

Valentine did not conceal from himself the difficulty of such an undertaking with men to whom vengeance is the first duty, and whose good will he was, above all, afraid of alienating. But powerful reasons compelled him to act thus, and he resolved to attempt it. He therefore advanced without hesitation to Unicorn, who was preparing the punishment of the prisoners, and touched him lightly on the arm.

"My brother is the first sachem of the Comanches," he said to him.

The chief bowed silently.

"His calli," Valentine continued, in an insinuating voice, "disappears under the scalps of his enemies, so numerous are they, for my brother is more terrible than lightning in combat."

The Indian regarded the hunter with a proud smile.

"What does my brother want?" he asked.

"Unicorn," Valentine continued, "is no less wise at the council fire than he is intrepid in battle. He is the most experienced and revered of the warriors of his nation."

"My brother, the great pale hunter, must explain himself clearly, in order that I may understand him," the sachem answered, with a shade of impatience.

"My brother will listen to me for a moment," Valentine continued, quite unmoved. "Several Apache warriors have fallen alive into his hands."

"They will die!" the chief said, hoarsely.

"Why kill them? Would it not be better to set a ransom on them and send them back to their tribe, thus proving to the Apaches that the Comanches are great warriors, who do not fear them?"

"The palefaces understand nothing about war: a dead man is no longer to be feared. If you pardon an enemy, you run the risk of him taking your scalp on the morrow. The Apaches must die. They have burnt my village, killed the squaws and children of my young men. Blood demands blood. They have an hour to live!"

"Very good," the hunter replied, who understood that if he attempted to save all the prisoners he should not succeed, and was therefore compelled, much against the grain, to compromise; "the warriors must die; that is the law of war, and I do not seek to oppose it; but among them there is one for whom my heart swells with pity."

"The Apache prisoners are mine," Unicorn objected.

"I do not deny it, and my brother has the right to dispose of them as he pleases, and I cannot object; hence I ask a favour of my brother."

The chief frowned slightly, but Valentine went on without seeming to notice the tacit dissatisfaction of the Comanche:

"I have a great interest in saving this man."

"My brother is white. The palefaces have a gilded tongue; they know how to find words which say all they wish. My brother is aware that I can refuse him nothing. Who is the warrior he desires to save?"

"Does my brother promise me that the man shall not perish, whoever it may be, whose life I may demand?"

The Comanche Chief was silent for a moment, looking fixedly at the hunter, who watched him with equal attention.

"Unicorn is my friend," Valentine continued. "I have a perfectly new rifle: if it pleases my brother, I will give it to him."

At this insinuation a slight smile enlivened the chief's face.

"Good: I accept the rifle," he answered. "It is a proper weapon for a sachem. My brother has my word. Who is the warrior he wishes to save?"

"Black Cat."

"Wah! I suspected it: however, no matter, my brother, can be at his ease. Black Cat shall be saved."

"I thank my brother," Valentine said warmly. "I see that his heart is noble! He is a great warrior!"

Then, alter affectionately pressing the chief's hand, Valentine returned to his station, suppressing a sigh of satisfaction.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE TORTURE.

The Apaches, who had been fastened for a long time to the stakes at which they would be tortured, regarded the terrible preparations for their atrocious punishment with a calm eye, and not a muscle quivering in their stoical and indifferent faces. So great was their carelessness, or, at any rate, it appeared so, that you might have fancied that they were merely about to figure as spectators in the gloomy tragedy preparing, although they were destined to play so terrible a part in it.

So soon as Valentine left him, Unicorn ordered the torture to commence, but he suddenly altered his mind.

"My sons," he said, addressing the Comanche warriors, and pointing to Black Cat; "this man is a chief, and as such can claim an exceptional death, in which he can prove to us his constancy and courage under suffering. Send him to the happy hunting grounds in such a way that the warriors of his nation whom he meets in another life may give him a reception worthy

of him. Tomorrow the old men and chiefs will assemble round the council fire, to invent a punishment meet for him. Take him from the stake."

The Indians frenziedly applauded these words, which promised them so attractive a spectacle for the morrow.

"The Comanches are boasting and cowardly women," Black Cat broke out; "they do not know how to torture warriors. I defy them to make me utter a groan, if the punishment lasted a whole day."

"The Apache dogs can bark," Unicorn said coldly; "but if their tongue is long, their courage is short; tomorrow, Black Cat will weep like a daughter of the palefaces."

Black Cat shrugged his shoulders contemptuously, and the Comanches repeated their frenzied applause.

"Unfasten him," Unicorn commanded a second time.

Several warriors approached the Apache chief, cut the cords that bound him to the stake, and then secured his limbs and threw him at the foot of a tree, Black Cat not deigning to make a sign evidencing the slightest irritation. After exchanging a glance with Valentine, Unicorn placed himself at the head of a band of warriors, who formed a semicircle round the prisoners. The chieftainess placed herself opposite to him, with the women; the band struck up more noisily than ever, and the torture began.

The squaws and warriors danced round the prisoners, and in passing before them, each, whether a man or woman, cut off a strip of flesh with long, sharp scalping knives. In making these wounds, the Comanches employed the utmost precaution to prevent the knives running too deep into the flesh, lest the victims should run the chance of dying at once, which would have unpleasantly modified the intention of the Indians, by depriving them of a sight from which they promised themselves so much pleasure.

The Apaches smiled on their torturers, and excited them still more by telling them that they did not know how to treat their prisoners; that their wounds were only so many mosquito stings; that the Apaches were far more skilful; and that the many Comanche prisoners they had made endured in their tribe much more atrocious sufferings.

The unfortunate men were in a pitiable state: their bodies were only one wound, from which the blood streamed. The Comanches grew excited and rage seized upon them, on hearing the insults of their enemies. A woman rushed all at once on one of the prisoners whose words were the bitterest, and with her sharp and curved talons tore out his eyes, which she swallowed on the spot, saying to him—

"Dog, you shall not see the sun again."

"You have torn out my eyes, but left me my tongue," the prisoner replied, with a smile rendered more hideous by the two empty and bleeding sockets. ""Twas I who devoured the quivering heart of your son, Running-water, when he entered my calli to steal horses. Do what you please, I am revenged beforehand!"

The woman, exasperated by this last insult, rushed upon him and buried her knife in his heart. The Apache burst into a hoarse laugh, which suddenly changed into the death rattle, and fell a corpse while uttering the words—

"I said truly that you do not know how to torture your prisoners—dogs, rabbits, thieves!"

The Comanches doubled their fury on the wretched victims, incessantly hacking and stabbing them, and though the majority were dead already, they did not leave off till they had destroyed all appearance of humanity. The scalps were then raised, and the victims thrown into the fire prepared for them.

The Comanches danced and howled round this fire until their voice and strength failed them, and they fell exhausted, in spite of the drums and chichikouis. The men and women, stretched on the ground pell-mell, soon fell asleep, in that strange state of intoxication produced by the odour of the blood shed during this atrocious butchery.

Valentine, despite the almost insurmountable disgust this scene had occasioned him, did not wish to retire, as he feared lest Black Cat might be massacred by the Comanches in a moment of mad fury. This precaution was not vain: several times, had he not resolutely interfered, the Apache chief would also have been sacrificed to the hatred of his enemies, who had attained a paroxysm of fury impossible to describe.

When the camp was plunged in silence, and everybody asleep, Valentine proceeded cautiously in the direction where the Apache chief lay bound, who watched him come up with a very peculiar glance. Not saying a word, the hunter, after assuring himself that nobody was watching his movements, cut all the cords that bound him. The Apache bounded like a jaguar, but fell back again on the ground; the cords had been tied so securely that they had entered into his flesh.

"My brother must be prudent," the Frenchman said gently. "I wish to save him."

He then took his flask and poured a few drops of brandy on the pallid lips of the chief, who gradually recovered, and at length stood on his feet. Bending a searching glance on the man who so generously paid him attentions he was far from expecting, he asked in a hoarse voice—

"Why does the pale hunter wish to save me?"

"Because," Valentine answered, without hesitation, "my brother is a great warrior in his nation, and must not die. He is free."

And holding out his hand to the chief, he helped him to walk. The Indian followed him unresistingly, but without a word. On reaching the spot where the horses of the tribe were picketed, Valentine selected one, saddled it, and led it to the Apache, who, during the hunter's short absence, had remained motionless on the same spot.

"My brother will mount," he said.

The warrior was still so weak that Valentine was compelled to help him into the saddle.

"Can my brother keep on his horse?" he asked, with tender solicitude.

"Yes," the Apache answered, laconically.

The hunter took the gun, bow, and panther skin quiver of the chief which he handed to him, saying gently—

"My brother will take back his arms. A great warrior as he is must not return to his tribe like a timid woman; he should be able to kill a stag, if he met one on the road."

The Indian seized the weapons; a convulsive tremor ran over his limbs, and joy gained the victory over Indian stoicism. This man, who had faced a horrible death without change of countenance, was conquered by the Frenchman's noble conduct; his granite heart was softened; a tear, doubtless the first he had ever shed, escaped from his fever parched eyes, and a sob burst from his overcharged breast.

"Thanks," he said, in a choking voice, so soon as words could find their way to to his lips; "thanks, my brother is good, he has a friend."

"My brother owes me nothing," the hunter replied, simply; "I act as my heart and my religion order me."

The Indian remained pensive for a moment, then he muttered, shaking his head dubiously:

"Yes, I have heard that said before, by Father Seraphin, the Chief of Prayer of the palefaces. Their God is omnipotent, He is before all merciful; is not that a blessing?"

"Remember, chief," Valentine quietly interrupted him, "that I save your life in the name of Father Seraphin, whom you seem to know."

The Apache smiled softly.

"Yes," he said, "these are his words, 'Requite good for evil.'"

"Remember those divine precepts which I put in practice today," Valentine exclaimed, "and they will support you in suffering."

Black Cat shook his head.

"No," he said, "the desert has its own laws, which are immutable; the red skins are of a different nature from the palefaces: their law is one of blood, and they cannot alter it. Their law says: 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' The maxim is derived from their fathers, and they are obliged to submit to it, and follow it; but the redskins never forget an insult or a kindness. Black Cat has a great memory."

There was a silence of some minutes, during which the two men regarded each other attentively. At length the Apache spoke again.

"My brother will lend me his gourd."

The hunter gave it to him; the Apache quickly raised it to his lips, and took a mouthful. Then, bending down to Valentine, he placed his hands on his shoulders, and kissed him on the lips, while allowing a portion of the fluid he held in his mouth to pass into the hunter's.

On the prairies of the Far West this ceremony is a species of mysterious initiation, and the greatest mark of attachment one man can give another. When two men have embraced in this way, they are henceforth friends, whom nothing can separate save death, and they help one another without hesitation under all circumstances.

Valentine knew this, and hence, in spite of the disgust he internally experienced, he did not oppose the action of the Apache chief. On the contrary, he yielded to it joyfully, comprehending the immense advantages he should, at a later date, derive from this indissoluble alliance with one of the most influential Apache sachems, those allies of Red Cedar, on whom he had sworn to take an exemplary revenge.

"We are brothers," Black Cat said, gravely. "Henceforth, by day or night, wherever the great pale hunter may direct his footsteps, a friend will constantly watch over him."

"We are brothers," the hunter replied; "Black Cat will ever find me ready to come to his assistance."

"I know it," said the warrior. "Farewell; I will return to the warriors of my tribe."

"Farewell," Valentine said.

And vigorously lashing his horse, the Apache Chief started at full speed, and soon disappeared in the darkness. Valentine listened for a moment to the echo of his horse's hoofs on the hardened ground, and then returned thoughtfully to the calli, in which Ellen was nursing White Gazelle.

CHAPTER XXVI.

TWO WOMEN'S HEARTS.

Ellen felt moved with pity at the sight of this young and lovely woman, who lay on the floor of the hut, and whom life seemed to have quitted forever. She felt for her, although she never remembered to have seen her before, a sympathy for which she could not account, and which instinctively attracted her.

Who was this woman? How had she, still so young, become mixed up in these scenes of murder and associated with these savage prairie men, to whom every human being is an enemy, every valuable article a booty? Whence arose this strange ascendancy which she exerted over outlaws, whom she made cry like children?

All these thoughts crossed Ellen's mind, and heightened, were that possible, the interest she felt in the stranger. And yet, in her heart, a vague fear, an undefinable presentiment warned her to be on her guard, and that this woman, gifted with, a strange character and fatal beauty, was an enemy, who would destroy her happiness forever.

As Ellen was one of those rare women for whom evil sentiments did not exist, and who made it a principle to obey, under all circumstances, the impulse of her heart, without reflecting on the consequences that might result from it, she silenced the feeling of revolt within her, and bent over White Gazelle.

And with that exquisite tact, innate in the female heart, she sat down by the side of the sufferer, laid her beautiful head on her knees, loosened her vest, and gave her that busy attention of which the other sex alone possess the secret.

The two maidens, thus grouped on the uneven floor of a wretched Indian hut, offered an exquisite picture. Both deliciously lovely, though of different beauty—for Ellen had the most lovely golden locks ever seen, while the Gazelle, on the contrary, had the warm tint of the Spanish woman, and hair of a bluish black—presented the complete type, in two different races, of the beau-ideal of woman, that misunderstood and incomprehensible being, the fallen angel in whose heart God seems to have let fall a glorious beam of His divinity, and who retains a vague reminiscence of that Eden which she made us lose.

The American woman, that perfect whole, a composition of graces, volcanic and raging passions, angel and demon, who loves and hates simultaneously, and who makes the man she prefers feel in the same second the joys of paradise and the nameless tortures of the Inferno! Who could even analyze this impossible nature, in which virtue and vices, strangely amalgamated, seem to personify the terrible convulsions of the soil on which she lives, and which has created her?

For a long time, Ellen's cares were thrown away. White Gazelle remained pale and cold in her arms. The maiden began to grow alarmed. She knew not to what she should have recourse, when the stranger made a slight movement, and a faint ruddiness tinged her cheeks. She uttered a profound sigh, and her eyelids painfully rose. She looked round her in amazement, and then closed her eyes again.

After a moment, she opened them once more, raised her hand to her brow as if to dissipate the clouds that obscured her mind, fixed her eyes on the person who was attending to her, and then, with a frown and quivering lips, she, tore herself from the arms that entwined her, and, bounding like a panther, sought shelter in one of the corners of the hut, without ceasing to gaze fixedly at the young American, who was startled at this strange conduct, and could not understand it.

The two girls remained thus for a few seconds, face to face, devouring each other with their eyes, but not exchanging a syllable. No other sound could be heard in the hut, save the panting respiration of the two females.

"Why do you shun me?" Ellen at length asked in her harmonious voice, soft as the cooing of a dove. "Do I frighten you?" she added, with a smile.

The Spaniard listened to her as if she did not catch her meaning, and shook her head so passionately that she broke the ribbon confining her hair, which fell in thick ringlets over her white shoulders, and veiled them.

"Who are you?" she asked, impetuously, with an accent of menace and anger.

"Who am I?" Ellen replied, in a firm voice, in which a slight tinge of reproach was perceptible. "I am the woman who has just saved your life."

"And who told you I wished it to be saved?"

"In doing so, I only consulted my own heart."

"Oh, yes, I understand," the Gazelle said, ironically. "You are one of those women called in your country Quakeresses, who spend their life in preaching."

"I am nothing of the sort," Ellen said, softly. "I am a woman who suffers like yourself, and whom your misfortunes affect."

"Yes, yes," the Spaniard shrieked, as she writhed her hands despairingly, and burst into tears—"I suffer all the torments of hell."

Ellen regarded her for a moment with compassion, and walked towards her. "Do not cry, poor girl!" she said to her, mistaking the cause that made her shed tears. "You are in safety here. No one will do you any harm."

The Spaniard threw up her head haughtily.

"Nay!" she said, impetuously. "Do you fancy, then, that I am not in a condition to defend myself, were I insulted? What need have I of your protection?"

And, roughly seizing Ellen's arm, she shook her passionately as she said:—

"Who are you? What are you doing here? Answer!"

"You, who were with the bandits when they attacked this village, should know me," Ellen replied, drily.

"Yes, I know you," the Spaniard said presently, in a hoarse voice. "You are the woman whom the genius of evil brought across my path to rob me of all my happiness! I did not expect to find you here, but I am delighted at doing so, for I can at length tell you how I hate you," she added, stamping her foot passionately. "Yes, I hate you!"

Ellen, in her heart, was alarmed at the stranger's violence; she tried in vain to explain her incomprehensible words.

"You hate me!" she replied, softly. "For what reason? I do not know you. This is the first time that accident has brought us together. Up to this day, we never had any relations together, near or remote."

"Do you think so?" the Spaniard continued, with a cutting smile. "In truth," she added, "we never had any relations together. You are right, and yet I

know you thoroughly. Miss Ellen, daughter of the squatter, the scalp hunter, the bandit, in a word, Red Cedar, and who dares to love Don Pablo de Zarate, as if you did not belong to an accursed race. Have I forgotten aught —are those all your titles? Answer, will you?" she said, thrusting her face, inflamed with passion, close to Ellen's, and shaking her violently by the arm.

"I am, indeed, Red Cedar's daughter," Ellen answered, coldly; "but I do not understand what you mean by your allusion to Don Pablo de Zarate."

"Do you not, innocent lamb!" the Spaniard retorted with irony.

"And supposing it were so," the American answered with some haughtiness, "what does it concern you? By what right do you cross-question me?"

"By what right?" the Spaniard said, violently, but suddenly checked herself, and, biting her lips till the blood came, she folded her hands on her breast, and, surveying Ellen with a glance full of the utmost contempt, she continued:—

"In truth, you are an angel of purity and gentleness; your life has passed calmly and softly at the hearth of honest and respectable parents, who inculcated in you at an early age all the virtues they practice so well—ah, ah! Is not that what you meant to say to me?— while I, who am an associate of brigands, who have spent my whole life on the prairie, who understand nothing of the narrow exigencies of your paltry civilisation, who have always breathed the sharp and savage air of liberty—by what right should I come to interfere in your family arrangements, and interfere in your chaste loves, whose sentimental and insipid incidents are so well regulated by feet and inches? You are right, I cannot, with my savage manner, and burning heart, cross your love, and destroy for a caprice all your combinations—I am, indeed, mad," she added, as she rudely repulsed the maiden.

She folded her arms on her chest, and leant against the wall of the hut in silence. Ellen looked at her for a while, and then said, in a soft and conciliating voice—

"I try in vain to understand your allusions, but if they refer to any fact effaced from my mind, if, under any circumstance, I may have unconsciously offended you, I am ready to offer you all the apologies you may require. Our position among these ferocious Indians is too critical for

me not to try, by all means in my power, to draw more closely together the bonds of friendship between ourselves, the only representatives of the white race here, which alone can enable us to escape the snares laid for us, and resist the attacks that threaten us."

The Spaniard's face had gradually lost the hateful and wicked expression that disfigured it, and her features had become calmer. Now that she had reflected, she repented the imprudent words she had uttered on the first outburst of passion. She would have liked to recall her secret; still she hoped that it was not too late to do so; and with that craft innate in woman, and which renders her so dangerous under certain circumstances, she resolved to deceive her companion, and efface from her mind the bad impression which her foolish words must have left there.

Hence it was with a smile, and in her softest voice, that she answered the American—

"You are good-hearted; I am not worthy of the attention you have paid me, or of the gentle words you address to me, after what I dared to say to you. But I am more unfortunate than wicked. Abandoned when a child, and adopted by the bandits with whom you saw me, the first sounds that struck my ear were cries of death, the first light I saw was the glare of incendiary fires. My life has been passed in the desert, far from the towns, where people learn to grow better. I am an impetuous and obstinate girl; but, believe me, my heart is good; I can appreciate a kindness, and remember it. Alas! A girl in my position is more to be pitied than blamed."

"Poor child!" Ellen said, with involuntary emotion, "So young, and already so unhappy."

"Oh, yes, most unhappy," the Spaniard went on; "I never knew the sweetness of a mother's caresses, and the only family I have had is composed of the brigands, who accompanied the Apaches when they attacked you."

The girls remained seated side by side, with their arms intertwined and head on each other's shoulder, like two timid doves. They talked for a long time, describing their past life. Ellen, with the candour and frankness that formed the basis of her character, allowed her companion to draw from her all her secrets, harmless as they were, not perceiving that the dangerous woman

who held her beneath the charm of her blandishments, continually excited her to confidence, while herself maintaining the utmost reserve.

The hours passed thus rapidly, nearly the whole night slipped away in their confessions, which did not terminate till sleep, which never surrenders its sway over young and animated people, closed the drooping eyelids of the American girl.

The Spaniard did not sleep; when the other maiden's head fell on her chest she raised it cautiously, and laid it delicately on the skins and furs arranged to act as a bed; then, by the flickering and uncertain light of the pinewood torch fixed in the ground, which lit up the hut, she gazed long and attentively on the squatter's daughter.

Her face had lost its placid mask and assumed an expression of hatred of which such lovely features would have been thought incapable; with frowning brow, clenched teeth, and pallid cheeks, as she stood before the maiden, she might have been taken for the genius of evil, preparing to seize the victim which it holds fascinated and gasping beneath its deadly glance.

"Yes," she said, in a hollow voice, "this woman is lovely; she has all needed to be beloved by a man. She told me the truth—he loves her! And I," she added, with a movement of rage, "why does he not love me? I am lovely too—more lovely than this one, perhaps. How is it that he has been at least twenty times in my presence, and his heart has never been warmed by the fire that flashed from my eyes? Whence comes it that he has never noticed me, that all my advances to make him love me have remained futile, and that he has never thought of anyone but the woman lying asleep there, who is in my power, and whom I could kill if I pleased?"

While uttering these words she had drawn from her girdle a small stiletto, with a blade sharp as the tongue of a cascabel.

"No!" she added, after a moment's reflection, "No, it is not thus that she must die! She would not suffer enough. Oh, no! I mean her to endure all the sufferings that are lacerating me. Jealousy shall torture her heart as it has done mine for so long. *Voto a Dios!* I will avenge myself as a Spanish woman should do. If he despise me, if he will not love me, neither of us shall have him; we shall both suffer, and her torture will alleviate mine. Oh! Oh!" she said, with a smile, as she walked round the sleeping girl with the

muffled tread of a wild beast; "fair-haired girl, with lily complexion, your cheeks covered with the velvety down of a peach, will ere long be as pale as mine, and your eyes, red with fever, will no longer find tears to soothe them."

She bent over Ellen, attentively listened to her regular breathing, and certain that she was plunged in a deep sleep, she walked toward the curtain door of the hut, raised it cautiously, and after looking around her in the obscurity, feeling assured by the calmness that surrounded her, she stepped over the body of Curumilla, who was lying across the door, and started off hurriedly, but with such light steps that the most practised ear could not have noticed the sound.

The Indian warrior had taken on himself the duty of watching over the two women. When the scalp dance was ended he returned to install himself at the spot he had selected, and, in spite of the remarks of Valentine and Don Pablo, who assured him that they were in safety, and it was unnecessary for him to remain there, nothing could make him give up his resolution.

Phlegmatically shaking his head at his friend's remarks, he took off his buffalo robe without any further response; he stretched it on the ground, and lay down on it, wishing them good night with a brief but peremptory nod. The others, seeing the Araucano's immoveable resolve, philosophically went away, shaking their heads.

Curumilla was not asleep—not one of the Spanish girl's movements escaped him; and she had scarce gone ten yards when he was already on her trail, watching her carefully. Why he did so he was himself ignorant; but a secret foreboding warned him to follow the stranger, and try to learn for what reason, instead of sleeping, she traversed at so late an hour the camp in which she was a prisoner, and where she consequently exposed herself to come in contact at each step with a ferocious enemy, who would have killed her with delight.

The reason that made her brave so imminent a danger must be very powerful, and that reason the Indian chief determined on knowing.

The girl had difficulty in finding her way through this inextricable labyrinth of huts and tents, against which she stumbled at every step. The night was

dark; the moon, veiled under a dense mass of clouds, only displayed its sickly disc at lengthened intervals; not a star gleamed in the sky.

At times the girl halted on her journey, stretching forth her hand to listen to any suspicious sound, or else returned hurriedly on her footsteps, turning in the same circle, while careful not to go far from Ellen's hut.

It was evident to Curumilla that the prisoner was seeking, though unable to find, a tent that contained the person she wished to speak with. At length, despairing probably of ever succeeding in this search of which she did not hold the thread, the girl stopped and imitated twice the snapping bark of the white coyote of the Far West. This signal, for it was evidently one, succeeded better than she expected, for two similar barks, uttered at points diametrically opposed, answered her almost immediately. The girl hesitated for a second; a dark flush passed over her face, but recovering at once, she repeated the signal.

Two men appeared simultaneously at her side—one, who seemed to rise out of the ground, was Red Cedar, the second, Pedro Sandoval.

"Heaven be praised!" the Spaniard said, as he pressed the girl's hand, "You are saved, Niña, and I fear nothing more now. *Canarios!* You may flatter yourself with having caused me a terrible fright."

"Here I am," said Red Cedar; "can I be of any service to you? We are ambushed a few steps from here, with two hundred Apaches; speak, what is to be done?"

"Nothing at present," the Gazelle said, as she returned the pressure of her two friends' hands. "After our ill success of this evening, any attempt would be premature, and fail. At daybreak, from what I have heard, the Comanches will set out to take up your trail. Do not let their war party out of sight. It is possible that I may require your help on the way; but till then do not show yourself; act with the greatest prudence, and before all try to keep your enemies in ignorance of your movements."

"You have no other recommendations to give me?"

"None; so retire; the Indians will soon wake up, and it would not be well for you if they surprised you."

"I obey."

"Above all, do what I told you."

"That is agreed," Red Cedar repeated.

He glided into the gloom and disappeared among the tents. Curumilla was inclined to follow him and kill him as he fled; but after a short hesitation he allowed him to escape.

"It is now your turn," the Gazelle continued, addressing Sandoval; "I have a service to ask of you."

"A service, Niña; say rather an order to give me; do you not know that I am happy to please you in everything?"

"I am aware of it, and feel grateful to you, Pedro; but this time what I have to ask of you is so important and so serious, that, in spite of myself, I hesitate to tell you what I expect from you."

"Speak without fear, my child, and whatever it may be, I swear to you to do it."

"Even if the life of a person were at stake?" she said, with a bright and fixed glance, resembling that of a wild beast.

"All the worse for him: I would kill him."

"Without hesitation?"

"Yes. Has anyone insulted you, my child? If so, point him out to me, that you may be the sooner avenged."

"What I would ask of you is worse than killing a man."

"I do not understand you."

"I wish—you understand me clearly, my dear Pedro?—I wish that on the road we should escape—"

"If it is only that, it is easy."

"Perhaps so! But that is not all."

"I am listening."

"When we escape, you must carry off and take with us the girl to whom you entrusted me last evening."

"What the deuce would you do with her?" the pirate exclaimed, astonished at this singular proposition, which he was far from expecting.

"That is my business," the Gazelle answered rudely.

"Of course, still it seems to me—"

"After all, why should I not tell you? There is, I think, in a country a long distance from here, a savage and ferocious race called the Sioux?"

"Yes, and they are precious scoundrels, I can assure you, señorita; but I do not see what connection there is—"

"You shall see," she sharply interrupted him. "I wish that the girl you carry off tomorrow shall be handed over as a slave to the Sioux."

This proposition was so monstrous, that Pedro Sandoval could not refrain from a glance of stupefaction at the young Spaniard.

"You have heard me," she continued.

"Yes, but I should prefer killing her: it would be sooner done, and the poor girl would suffer less."

"Ah, you pity her!" she said with a demoniac smile; "the fate I reserve for her, then is very atrocious? Well, that is exactly what I want; she must live and suffer for a long time."

"This woman must have terribly insulted you?"

"More than I can tell you."

"Reflect on the horrible punishment to which you condemn her."

"All my reflections are made," the girl replied in a sharp voice; "I insist on it."

The Pirate hung his head silently.

"Will you obey me?" she asked.

"I must, for am I not your slave?"

She smiled proudly.

"Take care, Niña! I know not what has happened between this girl and yourself, but I am conscious that vengeance often produces very bitter

fruits, Perhaps you will repent hereafter what you do today?"

"What matter? I shall be avenged. That thought will render me strong, and give me the courage to suffer."

"Then, you are quite resolved?"

"Irrevocably."

"I will obey."

"Thanks, my kind father," she said, eagerly; "thanks for your devotion."

"Do not thank me," the Pirate said, sadly; "perhaps you will curse me some day."

"Oh, never!"

"May Heaven grant it!"

With these words, the accomplices separated.

Pedro re-entered the tent allotted to him, while the Gazelle rejoined Ellen, who was still sleeping her untroubled sleep, smiling at the pleasant dreams that lulled her.

Curumilla lay down again at the entrance of the lodge.

CHAPTER XXVII.

SHAW.

We have said that Doña Clara had disappeared.

At the moment when the struggle was most obstinate, Valentine, taking Doña Clara in his arms, leaped from the top of the lodge on which he had hitherto been fighting, intrusted the maiden to Shaw, and rushed back into the fight at the head of the Comanches, who, recovering from the terror caused by the unforeseen attack of their implacable foes the Apaches, gradually assembled to the powerful war cry of their chief, Pethonista.

"Watch over her," Valentine said to Red Cedar's son; "watch over her, and, whatever may happen, save her."

Shaw took the maiden in his powerful arms, threw her over his shoulder, and with flashing eye and quivering lip, he brandished his axe, that fearful squatter's instrument he never laid aside, and rushed head foremost among the Apaches, resolved to die or break the human barrier that rose menacingly before him.

Like a boar at bay, he dashed madly forward, felling and trampling mercilessly on all who attempted to bar his progress. A living catapult, he advanced step by step over a pile of corpses, incessantly dropping his axe, which he raised again dripping with blood. He had only one thought left—to save Doña Clara or die!

In vain did the Apaches collect around him; like an implacable reaper, he cut them down as ripe corn, while laughing that dry and hoarse grin, a nervous contraction which affects a man who has reached the last stage of rage or madness.

In fact, at this moment, Shaw was no longer a man, but a demon. Trampling over the quivering bodies that fell beneath the terrible blows of his axe, feeling the body of her for whose safety he fought trembling on his shoulder, he struggled without stopping in his impossible task, but resolved to cut a hole, at all risks, through the human wall constantly arising before him.

Shaw was a man of tried courage, long habituated to fighting, and pitiless to the redskins. But alone, on this night, only illumined by the blood-red hue of the fire, and confined in a fatal circle, he felt a great fear involuntarily coming over him; he breathed with difficulty, his teeth were clenched, an icy perspiration ran down his body, and he felt on the point of succumbing.

Falling would have been death. He would have immediately disappeared under the avalanche of ferocious Indians yelling around him.

This discouragement did not last so long as a lightning flash. The young man, sustained by that hope which springs eternal in the human breast, as well as by his love for Doña Clara, prepared to continue the unequal contest.

Bounding like a jaguar, he hurled himself into the thick of the fight. This contest of a single man against a swarm of enemies had something grand and startling about it. Shaw, as if under the influence of a horrible nightmare, struggled in vain against the incessantly renewed cloud of foemen; in him every feeling of self had vanished, he no longer reflected, his life had become entirely physical, his movements were automatic, his arms rose and fell with the rigid regularity of a pendulum.

He had managed, without knowing how, to clear the fortifications of the village; at a few paces from him the Gila flowed silently on, and appeared to him in the moonlight like an immense silver ribbon. Could he reach the river, he was saved; but there is a limit which human strength, however great it may be, cannot go beyond, and Shaw felt that he was reaching this limit.

He took an anxious glance around; Apaches hemmed him in on all sides! He uttered a sigh, for he thought that he was about to die. At this solemn moment, when all was about to fail him, a final shriek burst from his chest. A cry of agony and despair, of terrifying meaning, and re-echoed for a second far and wide, so that it drowned all the battle sounds; it was the parting protest of a man who at length confesses himself conquered by fatality, and who, before succumbing, summons his fellow men to his aid, or implores the succour of Heaven.

A cry answered his! Shaw, astonished, unable to count on a miracle, as his friends were too far off and themselves too busy to help him, fancied himself the victim of a dream or hallucination; still, collecting all his strength, feeling hope well up again in his heart, he gave vent to a more startling shout than the former.

"Courage!"

This time, it was not echo that answered him.

Courage! This word alone was borne on the wings of the wind, weak as a sigh, and, in spite of the horrible yells of the Apaches, was distinctly heard by Shaw.

In moments of frenzy, or when a man is at bay, the senses acquire a perfection for which it is impossible otherwise to account. Like the giant Antæus, Shaw drew himself up, and seemed restored to that life which was

on the point of leaving him. He redoubled his blows on his innumerable enemies, and at length succeeded in breaking through the barrier they opposed to him.

Several horsemen appeared galloping over the plain; shots illumined the darkness with their transient flash, and men, or rather demons, rushed suddenly on the throng of the Apaches, and commenced a frightful carnage. The redskins, surprised by their unexpected attack, rushed toward the village, uttering yells of terror: their prey had escaped them.

Shaw had fought bravely and firm as a rock up to the last moment; but when his enemies disappeared, he sank to the ground in a state of unconsciousness.

How long did he remain in this state? He could not say: but when he recovered his senses it was night. He fancied at first, that only a few hours had elapsed since the terrible struggle he had undergone, and he looked inquiringly around him. He was lying by a fire in the centre of a clearing; Doña Clara was a few paces from him, weak and pale as a spectre.

Shaw uttered a cry of surprise and terror on recognising the men who surrounded him, and who had probably saved him by answering his final shout. They were his two brothers, Fray Ambrosio, Andrés Garote, and a dozen Gambusinos.

By what strange accident had he rejoined his comrades at the moment when he had so great interest in shunning them? What evil chance had brought them across his path?

The young man let his head sink on his chest, and fell into a sad and gloomy reverie. His comrades, lying like him by the fire, maintained the most obstinate silence, and did not seem at all eager to cross-question him.

We will take advantage of the momentary respite allowed Shaw, to explain what had taken place on the island since we quitted it to follow Doña Clara, Ellen, and the two Canadian hunters.

Until sunrise no one perceived the flight of the girls. At breakfast, Nathan and Sutter, amazed at not seeing their sister appear, ventured on entering the hut of branches that served as shelter to the two females, and then all was explained. They went in a furious rage to Fray Ambrosio to tell him what

had happened, and the monk completed the news they gave him by announcing in his turn the flight of Eagle-wing, Dick, and Harry.

The fury of the two brothers was unbounded, and they proposed to raise the camp at once, and go in pursuit of, the fugitives. Fray Ambrosio and his worthy friend Garote had infinite difficulty in making them understand that this would lead to no result; that, moreover, they had as guide an Indian thoroughly acquainted with the topography of the country, and the hiding places, and that it would be folly to suppose that the persons who had escaped had not so arranged their flight as to foil all attempts made to seize them again.

Another and more powerful reason obliged them to remain on the island, to which the squatter's sons were compelled to yield. Red Cedar, on going away, ordered that under no pretext should they quit the post he had selected; he had moreover promised to join his band again there, and if they left it, it would be impossible for him to find them, as he would not know in what direction they had gone.

The young men were forced to allow that Fray Ambrosio was right; but, in order to satisfy their conscience, they placed themselves at the head of a few resolute men, crossed the river, and beat up the neighbourhood. We need scarcely say that they found nothing, for at about a league from the Gila the traces were finally lost.

The young men were in despair; but Fray Ambrosio, on the other hand, was delighted. He had only one desire, that of seeing the band quit of Doña Clara, who, according to his views, impeded its progress and prevented it marching with the speed circumstances required; and now, instead of one woman, two had gone!

The worthy monk could scarce contain himself for joy; he, listened with, a sympathising air and expressions of condolence to the advice and complaints of his comrades at this extraordinary flight; but in his heart he was delighted.

Still, as there was no perfect happiness in this world, and wormwood must always be mixed with the honey of life, an unexpected incident suddenly troubled the beatitude of Fray Ambrosio.

At starting, Red Cedar, while concealing the object of his journey, had dropped hints to his comrades that he would bring them allies; moreover, he informed them, that his excursion would not last more than three or four days at the most. In the desert, especially in the Far West, there is no regular road; travellers are compelled, for the greater part of the time, to march axe in hand, and cut a path by force. The gambusinos knew this by experience, and hence were not surprised, because Red Cedar did not return at the period he had fixed.

They were patient, and as their provisions were beginning to give out, they scattered on either side the river, and organised great hunting expeditions to renew their stock. But days had slipped away, and Red Cedar did not return: a month had already passed, and no news or sign arrived to tell the gambusinos that he would come soon. Another fortnight also passed, and produced no change in the position of the gold-seekers.

By degrees the band began to grow discouraged, and soon, without anyone knowing how, the most sinister news circulated at first in a whisper, but then they acquired the almost certainty, that the squatter, surprised in an ambuscade by the redskins, had been massacred, and that, consequently, it was useless waiting for him any longer.

These rumours, to which Fray Ambrosio attached but slight importance at the outset, became presently so strong that he grew anxious in his turn, and tried to dissipate them; but this was difficult, not to say impossible. Fray Ambrosio knew no more than the rest about Red Cedar's movements; his fears were, at least, as great as those of his comrades; and whatever he might do, he was compelled to allow that he had no valid reason to offer them, and was completely ignorant of the fate of their common chief.

One morning the gambusinos, instead of setting out to hunt as they did daily, assembled tumultuously before the *jacal*, which served as headquarters for the monk and the squatter's sons, and told them plainly that they had waited long enough for Red Cedar: as he had given them no news of his movements for upwards of two months, he must be dead: that consequently the expedition was a failure; and as they had no inclination to fall, some fine morning, into the power of their foes, the redskins, they were going to return at once to Santa Fe.

Fray Ambrosio in vain told them that, even supposing Red Cedar was dead —which was not proved—although it was a misfortune, it did not cause the expedition to fail, as he alone held the secret of the placer, and promised to lead them to it. The gambusinos, who placed no confidence in his talents as guide, or in his courage as a partisan, would not listen to anything; and, whatever he might do to check them, they mounted their horses, and rode off from the island, where he remained with the squatter's sons, Andrés Garote, and five or six other men still faithful to him. Fray Ambrosio saw them land, and spur their horses into the tall grass, where they speedily disappeared. The monk fell to the ground in despair; he saw his plans for a fortune irredeemably ruined; plans which he had fostered so long, and which were crushed at the very moment when they seemed on the point of realisation.

Any other man than Fray Ambrosio, after such a disaster, would have yielded to despair; but he was gifted with one of those energetic natures which difficulties arouse instead of crushing; and, in lieu of renouncing his schemes, he resolved, as Red Cedar did not return, to go in search of him, and leave the island at once. An hour later, the little party set out on its march.

By an extraordinary coincidence, they set out on the very day when the Apaches started to attack the Comanche village; and as when accident interposes it does not do things by halves, it led them to the vicinity of the village at the moment when the desperate contest was going on which we have described in a previous chapter.

Their predacious instincts invited them to draw nearer the village under the protection of the darkness, in the hope of obtaining some Indian scalps, which were very valuable to them. It was then that the gambusinos heard Shaw's cry for help, to which they responded by hurrying up at full speed.

They rushed boldly into the medley, and saved the young man and the precious burthen he still held enclasped; then, after cutting the throats of several Indians, whom they conscientiously scalped, as they considered it imprudent to venture further, they started off again as quickly as they had come, and reached a forest where they concealed themselves, intending to ask Shaw, when he regained his senses, how he happened to be at the

entrance of this village, holding Doña Clara in his arms, and fighting alone against a swarm of Indians.

The young man remained unconscious the whole day. Although the wounds he had received were not dangerous, the great quantity of blood he had lost, and the extraordinary efforts he had been obliged to make, plunged him into such a state of prostration, that several hours still elapsed after he had regained his senses before he seemed to have restored sufficient order in his ideas to be able to give an account of the events in which he had played so important a part.

It was, therefore, Fray Ambrosio's advice to grant time to recall his thoughts before beginning to cross-question him, and hence the affected indifference of the gambusinos toward him, an indifference which he profited by, to seek in his mind the means to part company with them, carrying off for the second time Doña Clara, who had so unhappily fallen into their hands again.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE DEPARTURE.

On the day after the battle, at sunrise, there was a busy scene in the Comanche village. The criers or hachestos mounted on the piles of ruins, summoned the warriors, who arrived one after the other, still fatigued by the dances and combats of the previous night. The war whistles, the shells, the drums and chichikouis, made an infernal disturbance, and hence the entire population was speedily assembled.

Unicorn was a chief of great prudence. Being on the point of undertaking an expedition which might separate him for a long time from his friends, he did not wish to leave the women and children exposed defencelessly to an attack like that of the previous evening. As the season was advanced, he resolved to abandon the village definitively, and escort those who were not selected to accompany him, to the winter village of the nation, situated at no great distance off, in a virgin forest, and in an impregnable position.

The appearance of the village was most picturesque; the warriors, painted and armed for war, formed two companies of one hundred men each, collected on the square, having on each flank a squadron of twenty-five horsemen. Between the two detachments the women, children, and old men placed themselves, with the dogs fastened to the sledges, which bore all their valuable property, such as furniture, furs, &c.

Unicorn, surrounded by his staff, composed of the subordinate chiefs of the tribe, held in his hands the totem, and gave his orders with a word or a gesture, which were immediately executed with an intelligence and dexterity that would have done honour to the most civilised nation.

Valentine was also on the public square, with his comrades and prisoners. The two maidens, calm and smiling, were side by side, conversing together, while Curumilla was holding his head down, and frowning.

Bloodson had gone off at daybreak, with his band, to try and surprise, in his turn, the Apache village, which was no great distance off. It was a strange fact, but the hunters and Mexicans felt an extraordinary pleasure at the departure of this man, who had, however, rendered them an immense service. Certainly, it would have been impossible for them to explain this feeling, which all experienced. Still, when he was no longer among them,

their chests expanded, and they breathed with greater ease; in a word, it seemed as if an immense weight had been suddenly removed.

And yet, we repeat, the hunters and Mexicans had only terms of praise in which to allude to this man's treatment of them. Whence came this instinctive repulsion with which he inspired them?—the truth was, that Bloodson had something about him which caused those to whom accident brought into contact with him to feel disgust mingled with fear.

A great noise was suddenly heard in the square, and two or three Indians came up to speak to the chief. Unicorn uttered an exclamation of anger and feigned the greatest disappointment.

"What is the matter, chief?" Valentine asked, with the most indifferent air he could assume.

"Our most valuable Apache prisoner," Unicorn said, "has found means to escape, I do not know how."

"That is a misfortune," Valentine said: "still, it may not be irreparable."

"How so?"

"Who knows? Perhaps he may have escaped very recently; if you were to send couriers in every direction, it is possible that he may be recaptured. Besides, if that measure did not produce the anticipated result," he added, as he gave the young Spaniard a cold and stern glance, which made her start, "it would, at any rate, tell us what has become of our Apache enemies, and if they have not left round the village spies ordered to watch our movements."

The sachem smiled at this proposal; he made a sign, and a dozen horsemen galloped out in the plain. While awaiting the return of the scouts, the final preparations for departure were made.

After overhearing the conversation between the Gazelle and the Pirates, Curumilla repeated it to Valentine. The latter thanked him, and begged him to watch the movements of the girl and Pedro Sandoval. The advice Valentine gave the chief, and which he readily followed was intended to unmask the Apaches, compel them to retire, and hence deprive the Pirate of the assistance he expected in effecting his escape.

In fact the Apaches on seeing their enemies spread all over the plain, not knowing their intentions, but fearing lest they should be surprised by them, fell back, and that so rapidly, that the scouts returned to the village without seeing anything, after a two hours' ride.

On the report they delivered of all being quiet in the neighbourhood and the road quite clear, Unicorn gave the signal for departure: the immense caravan slowly set out to the sound of musical instruments, mingled with the yells of the warriors and the barking of the dogs. Valentine, for greater security, placed the two females at the head of the column, in the group of horsemen formed by the subordinate chiefs.

The day had opened with a pure sky and dazzling sun; the atmosphere, perfumed by the exhalations from the prairie flowers, pleasantly dilated the lungs, and caused the hunters to feel in the highest spirits. The caravan was unfolded like an immense serpent on the prairie, advancing in good order through an enchanting landscape.

The hunters were crossing at this moment the spot called the Bad Lands, a continuation of the Black Coast, which the Gila intersects. The prairie extended along the river, then gradually ascended in rollers toward the mountains, and was covered with blocks of greyish-brown granite, displaying various strata. All around rose a marvellous chain of tall greyish and barren mountains, with extraordinarily shaped summits, and spotted with dark patches of conifera.

The Rio Gila, which was rather narrow found its way with difficulty through the lofty crests of schist, granite, and clay, and the nude and dead scenery that surrounded it was but slightly animated on the banks by the poplars and pine bushes that bordered it.

To the right was a village of prairie dogs: these pretty little animals, which are not at all savage, were seated on the flattened roofs of their house, watching the caravan, as they shook their tails rapidly and uttered their shrill cry, which is not a perfect bark; then they disappeared in the ground.

The caravan rapidly advanced toward a virgin forest, whose gloomy spurs stretched out nearly to the river's bank, and which they reached after two hours' march. On reaching the first trees, the caravan halted for a while, in

order to make the final arrangements, before burying itself beneath the gloomy dome which would serve as its shelter for several months.

Before leaving his friends, the white hunters, the Comanche Chief had the neighbourhood beaten up, but no trail was visible; the Apaches seemed to have definitely declined further fighting, and gone off. In fact, it would have been signal folly for them to try and attack the Comanches, thrice as strong as themselves, rendered haughty by their last victory, and who, before entering the forest, would have liked nothing better than to have a parting fight with their implacable enemies. But nothing disturbed the calmness of the prairie.

"My brother can continue his journey," Unicorn said to Valentine; "the Apache dogs have fled with the feet of antelopes."

"Oh, we do not fear them," the hunter replied, disdainfully.

"Before the eighth sun, my brother will see me again," the chief continued.

"Good."

"Farewell."

And they separated. The Comanche warriors entered the forest; for a while the sound of their footsteps and the tinkling of the bells fastened to their dogs' necks re-echoed under the gloomy arcades of the forest; then silence was gradually re-established, and the hunters found themselves alone. They were six resolute and well-armed men, who feared no danger; they could continue their journey in perfect safety.

"Are we still far from the island where Red Cedar's band is encamped?" Valentine asked the Sachem of the Coras.

"Scarce four leagues," Eagle-wing answered. "Were it not for the countless turnings we shall have to take, we should reach it in an hour; but we shall not arrive till the last song of the *maukawis*."

"Good; you and Don Pablo will go on ahead with the squarer's daughter."

"Do you fear anything?" Don Pablo asked.

"Nothing; but I wish to speak a few minutes with the Spanish girl."

"All right."

The two men pushed on with the maiden, and Valentine took his place on the right of the Gazelle, who was riding thoughtfully, without paying any attention to her horse.

The revelations made by Curumilla had the more struck Valentine, because he did not at all comprehend the Gazelle's hatred of Ellen. Every feeling must have its reason, every hatred a cause; and both these escaped him. In vain did he seek in his memory a fact which might account for, if not excuse, the strange conduct of White Gazelle; he found nothing that would put him on the right track.

He recalled to mind that he had seen the girl several times in the vicinity of Don Miguel de Zarate's hacienda, at the Paso del Norte; he also remembered that Don Pablo had done her a slight service, when she craved his help, but her relations with the hacendero's son had terminated there.

He believed it certain that, although Red Cedar's daughter lived near the hacienda, the Gazelle had never seen her before they met at the Indian village. Still, as he knew Don Pablo's love for Ellen, a love of which the young man had never spoken to him, but which he had long seen; as, too, the position was grave, and Ellen might at any moment fall into danger, which must be avoided at any cost, Valentine resolved to have a conversation with the Spanish girl, and try to read clearly in her heart, were that possible.

But if gentle means failed, he would show her no indulgence, or let a gentle and unoffending creature be exposed to the perfidy of a cruel woman, whom no consideration seemed to arrest in her sinister plans.

Valentine looked round. Ellen was about two hundred yards ahead, between Eagle-wing and Don Pablo. Temporarily reassured, he turned to the Spanish girl, who at this moment was talking eagerly, and in a loud voice, with Pedro Sandoval. The girl blushed, and ceased speaking. Valentine, not appearing to notice the confusion his presence caused the speakers, bowed slightly to the Spaniard, and addressed her in a calm voice:—

"I beg your pardon," he said, "if I interrupt a doubtless interesting conversation; but I wish to have a few words with you."

The girl blushed still more deeply. Her black eye flashed fire under the long lash that veiled it, but she answered in a trembling voice, as she stopped her

horse—

"I am ready to listen to you, señor caballero."

"Do not stop, I beg, señora," Valentine said. "This worthy man, who doubtless shares all your secrets," he added, with an ironical smile, "can hear our conversation, which, indeed, will relate to him."

"In truth," the girl answered, in a firmer voice, as she let her horse proceed, "I have nothing hidden from this worthy man, as you do him the honour of calling him."

"Very good, señora," the hunter continued with equal coldness. "Now, be good enough not to take in ill part what I am about to say to you, and answer a question I shall take the liberty of asking you."

"I presume you intend me to undergo an interrogation?"

"That is not my intention, at least at this moment; it will depend on you, madam, that we do not pass the limits of a friendly conversation."

"Speak, sir. If the question you ask me is one of those a woman may answer, I will satisfy you."

"Be good enough to tell me, madam, whether you found us cruel enemies last night?"

"Why this question?"

"Be so kind as to answer it first."

"I can only speak in terms of praise of your conduct."

"I thank you. And how did Miss Ellen treat you?"

"Admirably."

"Good. You are not ignorant, I think, that through your yesterday's aggression, an aggression which may be regarded as attempted murder and robbery, since, as you are not at war with the Indians, and as, belonging to our race, should regard us as friends—you are not ignorant, I say, that you have rendered yourself amenable to the prairie law, which says, 'an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.'"

"What do you wish to arrive at?"

"Pardon me. You are not ignorant, I assume, that, instead of treating you as I did, with the most perfect respect, I should have been quite justified in passing a rope round your neck, and hanging you, with your worthy friend, to the branches of the first tree: and there are some magnificent specimens in these parts!"

"Sir!" the girl exclaimed, as she drew herself up, and became livid with fury.

"Pardon me," Valentine continued impressively. "I am alluding here to an incontestable right, which you cannot deny: do not get in a passion, but answer me categorically, yes, or no."

"Well, sir, yes; you had that right, and you still have it. What checks you? Why do you not use it?" she added, as she gave him a defiant look.

"Because it does not suit me to do so at this moment," Valentine said, coldly and drily.

These stern words suddenly checked the passion that was boiling in the girl's heart: she let her eyes fall, and replied:—

"Is that all you have to say to me?"

"No, it is not all; and I have a final question to ask you."

"Speak, sir, as I am condemned to listen to you."

"I will not occupy much of your time."

"Oh, sir," she answered ironically, "my time cannot be employed better than in conversing with so polished a gentleman as yourself."

"I thank you for the good opinion you are kind enough to have of a poor hunter like myself," he replied, with a tinge of sarcasm; "and I now reach the second question I wished to ask you."

"In truth, it seems, sir, that like the *juces de letras*, your accomplices," she added bitterly, "you have classified in your head the questions that compose my examination: for, in spite of what you did me the honour of telling me, I persist in seeing only an examination in what it pleases you to call our conversation."

"As you please, madam," Valentine replied with imperturbable coolness. "Will you explain to me how it is, that, after having been treated, according to your own statement, by us so kindly, you laid aside all gratitude and feelings of honour last night, to join two villains in a plot for carrying off a girl to whom you owe your life, and handing her over as a slave to the most ferocious Indians on the prairies—the Sioux?"

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE AMBUSCADE.

If the lightning had struck the ground at the Spanish girl's feet, it would not have caused her greater terror than this revelation, which she was far from expecting, made in a dear, dry, and unmoved voice.

Her features were contracted—the blood mounted to her head—she tottered on her horse, and would have fallen off, had not Valentine held her. But overcoming by the strength of her will the terrible emotion that troubled her, she repulsed the young man, saying in a firm voice, and with an implacable accent:

"You are well informed, sir; such is my intention."

Valentine felt momentarily stupefied. He regarded this woman, who had hardly emerged from childhood, whose lovely features, distorted by the passions that agitated them, had become almost hideous: he recalled, as in a dream, another woman nearly as cruel whom he had once known. An indescribable feeling of sorrow pervaded his heart at the terrible reminiscence thus suddenly evoked. So much perfidity seemed to him to go beyond the limits of human wickedness; and for an instant he almost fancied himself in the presence of a demon.

"And you dare confess it to me?" he at length said, with badly concealed terror.

"And why not? What can you do to me? Kill me! A glorious revenge for a brave man! And, besides, what do I care for life? Who knows? perhaps,

without wishing it, and fancying you are punishing me, you would do me an uncommon service by killing me."

"Kill you? Nonsense," the hunter said, with a smile of contempt. "Creatures of your kind are not killed. In the first flush of passion we crush them under our boot heel, like venomous reptiles: but, on reflection, we prefer plucking out their teeth. That is what I have done, viper? Now bite if you dare!"

A fearful rage took possession of the Spanish girl; she raised her whip, and with a movement more rapid than thought struck Valentine across the face, merely hissing the word:

"Coward!"

At this insult the hunter lost his coolness. He drew a pistol and fired it point blank at this woman, who sat before him motionless, and smiling. But she had not lost one of the Frenchman's movements out of sight. She made her horse leap on one side, and the bullet whistled inoffensively past her ear.

At the sound of the firing, the hunters felt alarmed, and they galloped up to the spot, to inquire what had occurred. The shot had been scarce fired ere Pedro Sandoval, who had hitherto listened with apparent indifference to the conversation, dashed at Valentine, brandishing a long knife which he had managed to conceal.

The hunter, who had regained his presence of mind, awaited him firmly; and as the pirate came up to him, he stopped him short with a bullet through his body. The villain rolled on the ground with a yell of disappointed rage.

The Spanish girl looked around her disdainfully, made her horse bound, and started at an incredible pace amidst the bullets that whizzed round her from all sides, crying in a hoarse voice:—

"We shall meet again, soon, Valentine. Till then, farewell."

The hunter would not allow her to be pursued, and she soon disappeared in the tall grass.

"Oh, oh, this scamp seems to me very ill," the general said, after dismounting. "What the deuce shall we do with him?"

"Hang him!" Valentine observed, drily.

"Well," the general continued, "that is not such a bad idea. In that way, we shall get rid of one of the villains, and, on reflection, that will prevent him feeling the pain of his wound."

"Let us finish with him," Don Miguel interrupted.

"*Caspita!* what a hurry you are in, my friend," the general answered. "Hum! I am certain he is not in such haste—are you, my good fellow?"

"Come," Valentine said, with that mocking expression he had through his Parisian birth, and which broke out at intervals—"our friend is in luck. He has fallen at the foot of a splendid tree, which will form an observatory whence he can admire the landscape at his ease. Curumilla, my worthy fellow, climb up the tree, and bend down that branch as much as you can."

Curumilla, according to his laudable habit, executed immediately the order given him, though without uttering a word.

"Now, my good fellow," the hunter continued, addressing the wounded man, "if you are not a thorough Pagan, and can recollect any prayer, I should recommend you to repeat it, for it will do you more good than ever it did."

And, raising Sandoval in his arms, who maintained a gloomy silence, he passed the cord round his neck.

"One moment," Curumilla remarked, as he seized with his left hand the bandit's thick hair.

"That is true," said the hunter. "It is your right, chief, so make use of it."

The Indian did not wait for this to be repeated. In a second he had scalped the Spaniard, who looked at him with flashing eyes, and coldly placed the dripping scalp in his girdle. Valentine turned away his head in disgust at this hideous sight, but the Spaniard did not give vent to a groan.

As soon as he had placed the running noose round the bandit's neck, Valentine threw the cord to Curumilla, who attached it firmly to the branch, and then came down again.

"Now that justice is done, let us go," said Valentine.

The witnesses of the execution remounted. The branch which had been held down flew back, bearing with it the body of the pirate.

Pedro Sandoval remained alone, quivering in the last convulsions of death.

So soon as Valentine and his comrades were out of sight, several Apaches, at the head of whom were Red Cedar and the White Gazelle, started out of a thicket. An Indian climbed up the tree, cut the rope, and the body of the Spaniard was gently laid on the ground. He did not give a sign of existence.

The girl and Red Cedar hastened to give him help, in order to recall life, were it possible, to this poor and fearfully mutilated body; but all their efforts seemed futile. Pedro Sandoval remained cold and inert in the arms of his friends. In vain had they removed the slip knot which pressed his throat —his swollen and blue veins would not diminish in size, or his blood circulate. All seemed over.

As a last chance, an Apache took a skinful of water, and poured the contents on the bare and bleeding skull of the Spaniard. At the contact of this cold shower, his whole body trembled, a deep sigh burst with an effort from his oppressed chest, and the dying man painfully opened his eyes, fixing a sad and languishing glance on those who surrounded him.

"Heaven be praised!" said the girl; "He is not dead."

The bandit looked at the girl with that glassy and wandering stare which is the infallible sign of a speedy death; a smile played round his violet lips, and he muttered in a low and inarticulate voice:

"No, I am not dead, but I shall soon be so."

Then he closed his eyes again, and fell back, apparently in his former state of insensibility. The spectators anxiously followed the progress of this frightful agony: White Gazelle frowned, and, bending over the dying man, put her mouth to his ear.

"Do you hear me, Sandoval?" she said to him.

The bandit suddenly quivered, as if he had received an electric shock. He turned toward the speaker, and partially opened his eyes.

"Who is near me?" he asked.

"I, Pedro. Do you not recognise me, old comrade?" Red Cedar said.

"Yes," the Pirate said, peevishly, "I recognise you; but it was not you I wished to see."

"Whom do you mean?"

"The Niña. Has she abandoned me too—she, for whom I am dying!"

"No, I have not abandoned you," the girl quickly interrupted him; "your reproach is unjust—for it was I who succoured you. Here I am, father."

"Ah," he said, with a sigh of satisfaction, "you are there, Niña; all the better. God, if there be a God, will reward you for what you have done."

"Do not speak of that, but tell me why you asked for me, father."

"Do not give me that name," the bandit said violently; "I am not your father!"

There was a moment's silence; at length the Pirate continued, in an almost indistinct voice, and as if speaking to himself—

"The hand of God is in this—it was He who decreed that at the last moment the daughter of the victim should see one of the principal assassins die."

He shook his head piteously, sighed and added, mournfully—

"That is the hand of God."

His hearers looked at each other silently; an instinctive fear, a species of superstitious terror had seized upon them, and they did not dare question this man. A few minutes elapsed.

"Oh, how I suffer!" he suddenly muttered; "my head is a red-hot furnace—give me drink."

Water was quickly brought him, but he repulsed it, saying—

"No, not water—I want to regain my strength."

"What will you have, then?" Red Cedar asked him.

"Give me aguardiente."

"Oh!" the girl said imploringly; "do not drink spirits—they will kill you."

The bandit grinned horribly.

"Kill me?" he said, "Why, am I not a dead man already, poor fool?"

The White Gazelle gave Red Cedar a glance.

"Let us do what he wishes," the latter whispered; "he is a lost man."

"Aguardiente," the sufferer said again; "make haste, if you do not wish me to die ere I have spoken."

Red Cedar seized his gourd, and in spite of the girl's entreaties, thrust the neck between the pirate's lips. Sandoval drank deeply.

"Ah!" he said, with a sigh of satisfaction; "at present I feel strong. I did not believe that it was so difficult to die. Well, if there be a God, may His will be done. Red Cedar, give me one of your pistols, and leave me your gourd."

The squatter did as his comrade requested.

"Very good," he went on; "now, retire all of you; I have to speak with the Niña."

Red Cedar could not conceal his dissatisfaction.

"Why weary yourself?" he said; "it would be better for you to let us pay you that attention your condition demands."

"Oh!" the bandit said, with a grin, "I understand you; you would sooner see me die like a dog, without uttering a syllable, for you suspect what I am about to say—well, I feel sorry for you, gossip, but I must and will speak."

The squatter shrugged his shoulders.

"What do I care for your wanderings?" he said; "It is only the interest I feel in you that—"

"Enough!" Sandoval interrupted him, sharply. "Silence! I will speak! no human power can force me in my dying hours to keep the secret longer; it has been rankling in my bosom too long already."

"My good father—" the girl murmured.

"Peace," the bandit went on authoritatively, "do not oppose my will, Niña. You must learn from me certain things before I render my accounts to Him who sees everything."

Red Cedar fixed a burning glance on the dying man, as he convulsively clutched the butt of a pistol; but he suddenly loosed his hold, and smiled ironically.

"What do I care?" he said; "It is too late now."

Sandoval heard him.

"Perhaps so," he replied; "Heaven alone knows."

"We shall see," the squatter retorted, sarcastically.

He made a signal; the Apaches retired silently with him, and the girl remained alone near the dying man.

White Gazelle was a prey to an extraordinary emotion, for which she could not account; she experienced a curiosity mingled with terror, that caused her a strange oppression and trouble. She regarded the man lying half dead at her feet, and who while writhing in atrocious pain, fixed on her a glance full of indescribable pity and irony.

She feared, and yet desired that the bandit should make to her the gloomy confession she expected. Something told her that on this man her life and future fortune depended. But he remained gloomy and dumb.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE PIRATE'S CONFESSION.

A few moments passed, during which the Pirate seemed painfully collecting his thoughts before speaking. White Gazelle, with her eyes fixed on him, waited with anxious curiosity.

At length, the bandit seized the gourd, raised it to his lips a second time, and after drinking heartily, replaced it by his side. A feverish flush immediately spread over his cheeks, his eyes grew brighter, and he said, in a firmer voice than might have been expected—

"Listen to me attentively, child, and profit by what you are about to hear. I am dying and men do not lie at such a moment. The words I shall utter are true. You well know me."

He stopped for some seconds, and then continued with an effort—

"I have not always been a pirate of the prairies, or tiger with a human face —one of those wretches whom it is permissible to hunt like wild beasts. No! there was a time when I was young, handsome, and rich; at that remote period I was called Walter Stapleton, and was so rich that I did not know the amount of my fortune. Like everyone else you fancied me a Spaniard, and have been equally deceived—I am a citizen of the United States, descended from an old puritan family, long settled at New York. My parents died before I was twenty years of age; master of an immense fortune, I had become connected with all the scamps in the city; two especially became my intimate friends, and succeeded in a short time in getting such a hold on me, that I only acted on their impulses and by their suggestions. One of them was born in New York like myself, the other was a Mexican. Both were, like myself, young, good-looking, and rich, or, at least, they appeared so, for they squandered enormous sums. Their names were—but why tell you them?" he added, "I am not speaking of them here, but only of myself. One day the Mexican came to me with a letter in his hand; his family called him home, for he was to enter the church; but he would not, or, at least, could not leave New York at the moment. I never knew the reason; but one month later we were all three compelled to seek a refuge in Mexico, after a mournful tragedy, in which my two friends played the chief part, leaving behind them a trail of blood. I repeat to you that I never learned the circumstances."

At this moment a rustling was audible in the bushes against which the bandit was leaning; but the Gazelle, overcome by the increasing interest of the story, did not notice it. There was an interruption for some minutes. Pedro Sandoval was growing perceptibly weaker.

"I must finish, however," he said; and making an effort, he continued: —"We were at Mexico, where we lived nobly. In a short time I gained the reputation of a finished gentleman. A great gambler, and adored by women, shall I repeat to you the follies and extravagances that filled my days? What good would it be? Suffice it for you to know that I deserved this reputation in every respect. One day, a stranger arrived in Mexico. He was, it was said, a caballero from an upcountry province, enormously rich, and travelling for his pleasure. This man in a short time displayed such recklessness, that his reputation soon equalled and even surpassed mine. I, who had always been the first in every wild scheme, was placed in the second rank. My friends

laughed at the sudden change effected, and by this incessant raillery augmented my anger and detestation of this Don Pacheco de Tudela, as the man was called. Several times already we had met face to face at the tertulias, and each time our glances crossed like sword blades. I comprehended that this man hated me. For my part, a dull jealousy devoured me when his name was mentioned in my presence.

"A crisis was imminent, and we both sought it. One evening, when we were both at the tertulia of the Governor of Arispe, a game of monte was arranged. You know that game, which is the ruling passion of the Mexicans. I had held the bank for some hours, and an incredible run of luck had made me gain immense sums, which were piled up before me, and covered nearly the whole of the table. The gamblers, terrified by this constant good luck, retired in terror. I was about to collect and send off my money, when I heard a few paces from me Don Pacheco saying ironically to a party of friends:—'I am not jealous of señor Stapleton's good luck. I have allowed him to win that he may repair his ruined fortune, and stop the cries of his creditors, who have been yelping for a long time at his heels.'

"These words wounded me the more because they were true. My fortune, mortgaged beyond its value, only existed on paper, and numerous creditors incessantly pursued me. I walked up to Don Pacheco, and looked him boldly in the face.

"'To prove to you that I do not fear losing,' I said to him, 'I offer to stake on one hand with you all it has taken me so many hours to win.'

"The stranger looked at me in his turn; then he said, in his cutting voice, and with the sarcastic accent habitual to him:—

"'You are wrong, my dear sir. This money is very necessary to you; and, if I were mad enough to play with you, I warn you that you would lose.'

"He laughed in my face, and turned his back on me.

"'Oh!' I said to him, 'you are afraid—and then, again, you probably do not possess one quarter the sum there, and that is why you dare not play.'

"Don Pacheco shrugged his shoulders without replying to me, and addressed the richest banker of Arispe, who was standing near him:—

"'Señor Don Julio Baldomero,' he said to him, 'how much do you think there is on that table?'

"The banker took a glance in my direction, and then answered:—

"'Six hundred thousand piastres, or nearly so, señor.'

"'Very good,' the other said. 'Don Julio, be good enough to give me a bill for twelve hundred thousand piastres, payable at sight, on your bank.'

"The banker bowed, took out his pocketbook, and wrote a few words on a leaf which he tore out, and handed to Don Pacheco.

"'Do you believe, sir,' the Mexican said to me, 'that this bill represents the sum before you?'

"These words were accompanied by the sarcastic smile this man constantly had on his lips, and which drove me wild.

"'Yes,' I replied haughtily, 'and I am awaiting your determination.'

"'It is formed,' he said. 'Ask for new cards, and let us begin. Still, you can recall your word, if you like.'

"'Nonsense,' I said, as I undid a fresh pack of cards.

"Although our altercation had been short, as everybody knew our feelings toward each other, the conversation had broken off, and all the guests at the tertulia had collected around us. A profound silence prevailed in the room, and the faces expressed the curiosity and interest aroused by this strange scene. After shuffling the cards for some time, I handed them to my opponent to cut. The stranger laid his right hand on the pack, and said to me impertinently:—

"'There is yet time.'

"I shrugged my shoulders as reply. He cut, and I began dealing. At the fourth hand I had lost, and was ruined!"

The pirate stopped. For some time his voice had been growing weaker, and it was only by making extreme efforts that he succeeded in speaking distinctly.

"Drink!" he said so softly that the girl scarce heard him. She caught up a skin of water.

"No," he said, "brandy."

White Gazelle obeyed him.

The pirate eagerly drank two or three mouthfuls.

"All was over," he continued, in a firm voice, with sparkling eye, and face flushed by the fever preying on him. "Concealing my rage in my heart, I prepared to leave the table with a smile on my lips.

"'One moment, sir,' my opponent said. 'The game is not over yet.'

"'What do you want more?' I answered him. 'Have you not won?'

"'Oh!' he said, with a gesture of supreme contempt: 'That is true. I have won this wretched sum. But you have a stake still to risk.'

"'I do not understand you, sir.'

"'Perhaps so! Listen to me. There are on this table eighteen hundred thousand piastres, that is to say, a fabulous fortune, which would form the happiness of a dozen families.'

"'Well?' I answered in a surprise.

"'Well, I will play you for them, if you like. Hang it, my dear sir, I am in luck at this moment, and I will not let fortune escape me while I hold her.'

"'I have nothing more to stake, sir, and you know it,' I said in a loud and haughty voice. 'I do not understand what you are alluding to.'

"To this he replied, without seeming in the least disconcerted, 'You love Doña Isabella Izaguirre?'

"'How does that concern you?'

"'If I may believe public rumour, you are to marry her in a few days,' he continued calmly. 'Well, I too love Doña Isabel, and I have made up my mind she shall be mine by fair means or foul.'

"'And?' I interrupted him violently.

"'And, if you like, I will stake these eighteen hundred thousand piastres against her hand. You see that I appreciate her value,' he added, as he carelessly lit his panatellas.

"'*Canario!* A splendid game! What a magnificent stake! A man cannot act more gallantly!' Such were the remarks made around me by the witnesses of this scene.

"'You hesitate?' Don Pacheco asked me in his ironical way.

"I looked defiantly round me, but no one accepted my challenge.

"'No,' I answered in a hollow voice, my teeth clenched with rage. 'I accept.'

"The audience uttered a cry of admiration. Never in the memory of players at Arispe, had a game of monte afforded such interest, and all eagerly collected round the table. I felt for Doña Isabel that profound love which constitutes a man's existence.

"'Who is to deal?' I asked my adversary.

"'You!' he replied, with his infernal smile.

"Five minutes later, I had lost my mistress!"

There was a moment's silence; a nervous tremor had assailed the pirate, and for some instants it was only by an extraordinary effort that he had been enabled to utter the words that seemed to choke him. It was evident that the wound in his heart was as vivid as on the day when he received it, and that only a strong interest induced him to refer to it.

"At length," he continued with a certain volubility, as he wiped away the cold perspiration that beaded on his forehead, and mingled with the blood that oozed from his wound, "the stranger approached me.

"'Are you satisfied?' he said.

"'Not yet,' I replied in a gloomy voice: 'we have still one game to play out.'

"'Oh,' he said, ironically, 'I fancied you had nothing more to lose.'

"'You were mistaken. You have still my life to gain from me.'

"'That is true,' he said, 'and by heaven, I will win it from you. I wish to cover your stake to the end, so let us go out.'

"'Why do that?' I said to him. 'This table served as the arena for the first two games, and the third shall be decided upon it.'

"'Done!' he said. 'By Jupiter! You are a fine fellow! I may kill you, but I shall be proud of my victory.'

"People attempted in vain to prevent the duel; but neither the stranger nor myself would listen to it. At length they consented to give us the weapons we asked for; and then, moreover, this strange combat in the flower-adorned room, on the table covered with gold, among lovely young women, whose freshness and beauty the lights heightened, had something fatal about it which inflamed the imagination. The two heroes of Arispe, the men who had for so long a time formed the sole topic of conversation, had at length decided to settle which should definitely hold the palm.

"I leaped on the table, and my opponent at once followed my example. I enjoyed the reputation of being a fine swordsman, and yet, at the second pass, I fell with my chest pierced through and through. For three months I hovered between life and death, and when my youth and powerful constitution at length triumphed over my horrible wound, and I was approaching convalescence, I inquired about my adversary. On the day after our duel, this man had married Doña Isabel; a week later, both disappeared, and no one could tell me in what direction they had gone.

"I had only one object, one desire—to revenge myself on Don Pacheco. So soon as I was sufficiently recovered to leave the house, I sold the little left me, and quitted Arispe in my turn, followed by my friends, who were as poor as myself, for the blow that had struck me had struck them too, and, like myself, they only desired revenge on Don Pacheco. For a long time our researches were vain, and many years elapsed ere I grew weary of seeking their trail. There were only two of us now to do it, for the third had left us.

"What had become of him? I do not know, but one day, by chance, at an American frontier village where I had gone to sell my peltry, Satan brought me face to face with this friend, whom I never expected to meet again. He wore a monk's gown, and so soon as he perceived me, walked up to me. The first words he addressed to me after our lengthened separation were:

"'I have found them again.'

"I understood without it being necessary for him to make any further explanation, for my hatred had taken such deep root in my heart. What more shall I tell you, Niña?" he added, with an effort, while a fearful smile

crisped his blue lips. "I took my revenge. Oh! This vengeance was long in coming, but it was terrible!... Our foe had become one of the richest hacenderos in Texas; he lived happily with his wife and children, respected and loved by all who surrounded him. I bought a farm near his, and then, on the watch, like a jaguar with its prey, I followed his every movement, and introduced myself into his house. So lengthened a period had elapsed since our last meeting, that he did not recognise me, although a foreboding seemed from the outset to warn him that I was his enemy.

"One night, at the head of a band of pirates and Apaches, my two friends and myself, after assuring ourselves that all were quietly sleeping in Don Pacheco's hacienda, glided like serpents through the darkness; the walls were escaladed, and our vengeance began. The hacienda was given up to the flames; Don Pacheco and his wife, surprised in their sleep, were pitilessly massacred, after undergoing atrocious tortures. I tore both yourself and your sister from the arms of your dying mother, who sobbed at our feet, imploring me to spare you in memory of my old love for her.

"I swore it, and kept my promise. I do not know what became of your sister; I did not even trouble myself about her. As for you, Niña, have you had ever any cause to reproach me?"

The girl had listened to this fearful revelation with frowning eyebrows and livid cheeks. When the bandit stopped, she said harshly:

"Then you are the murderer of my father and mother?"

"Yes," he replied, "but not alone; there were three of us, and we took our revenge."

"Wretch!" she burst forth; "Vile assassin!"

The girl uttered these words with such an implacable accent, that the bandit shuddered.

"Ah!" he said, "I recognise the lioness. You are truly my enemy's daughter. Courage, child, courage. Assassinate me in your turn. What restrains you? Rob me of the short span of life still left me, but make haste, or Heaven will prevent your vengeance."

And he fixed on her his eye, which was still proud, but already clouded by the hand of death. The girl gave no answer.

"You prefer seeing me die; well, receive this last present," he said, plucking from his bosom a bag, suspended from a steel chain; "in it you will find two letters, one from your father, the other from your mother; you will learn who you are, and what name you should bear in the world, for the one I mentioned is false; I wished to deceive you to the end. That name is my last vengeance.... Niña, you will remember me."

The girl bounded on to the bag and seized it.

"Now, good-bye," the Pirate said; "my work is accomplished on this earth."

And seizing the pistol Red Cedar had left him, he blew out his brains, fixing on the girl a glance of strange meaning. But she did not seem to notice this tragical end, for she was tearing the bag with her teeth. When she succeeded in opening it, she unfolded the papers it contained, and hurriedly perused them. Suddenly she uttered a shriek of despair, and fell back, clutching the letters in her hand.

The Indians and pirates ran up to help her, but, quicker than lightning, a horseman darted from the chaparral, reaching the girl without checking the speed of his horse; he bent down, raised her up in his powerful arms, threw her across his saddle-bow, and passed like a tornado through the astounded spectators.

"We shall meet again soon, Red Cedar," he said in a loud voice, as he passed the squatter.

Before the latter and his comrades could recover from their surprise, the horseman had disappeared in the distance in a cloud of dust.

The horseman was Bloodson!

Red Cedar shook his head sadly.

"Can what the priests say be true?" he muttered; "Is there really a Providence?"

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE RIVALS.

After the tragic execution of the Pirate, the hunters slowly continued their journey. The scenes we have described in previous chapters had spread over them a gloom which nothing could dissipate. Since his daughter's disappearance, Don Miguel Zarate, who had been suddenly hurled from the height of his hopes, maintained a gloomy and stern silence. This man, so strong and energetic, at length conquered by misfortune, marched silently by the side of his comrades, who respected his grief, and offered him those little attentions to which suffering minds are so sensitive.

Valentine and General Ibañez were holding an animated conversation, the two Indians, Curumilla and Moukapec, going in front and serving as guides. Don Pablo and Ellen rode side by side; they alone of the small party seemed happy, and a smile now and then played over their faces. Alone of the little band the two young people had the faculty of forgetting past sufferings through the present joy.

During Sandoval's execution Ellen had been kept aloof, hence she was ignorant of what had occurred; and nothing happened to dull the pleasure she experienced at seeing herself reunited to the man to whom she had mentally given her heart.

One of the privileges of love is forgetting; the two young people, absorbed in their passion, remembered nothing, but the happiness of meeting again. The word "love" had not been uttered; still, it was so fully reflected in their glances and smiles, that they understood each other perfectly.

Ellen was describing to Don Pablo how Doña Clara and herself escaped from Red Cedar's camp, protected by the two Canadian hunters.

"Ah!" Don Pablo said, "talking of those hunters, what has become of them?"

"Alas!" Ellen replied, "One of them was killed by the Apaches, and the other—"

"Well and the other?"

"There he is," she said; "oh, he is devoted to me body and soul."

Don Pablo turned round with an angry movement, and a dull jealousy was inflamed in him. He looked at the hunter who rode a few paces in the rear, but at the sight of this open, honest face, over which a tinge of melancholy was spread, the young man seriously upbraided himself for his apprehensions. He quickly went up to the hunter, while Ellen regarded them with a smile; when he was at the Canadian's side, he offered him his hand.

"Thanks," he said to him simply, "for what you did for her."

Harry pressed the hand, and answered sadly but nobly: "I did my duty; I swore to defend her and die for her: when the hour arrives, I will keep my oath."

Don Pablo smiled gracefully,

"Why do you not ride by our side?"

"No," Harry answered with a sigh, as he shook his head; "I ought not, and do not wish to be the third in your conversation. You love each other, and be happy. It is my duty to watch over your happiness; leave me in my place and remain in yours."

Don Pablo thought for a moment over these words, then pressed the hunter's hand a second time.

"You have a noble heart," he said to him; "I understand you;" and he rejoined his companion. A smile played round the hunter's pallid lips.

"Yes," he muttered so soon as he was alone; "yes, I love her. Poor Ellen! She will be happy, and if so, what matter what becomes of me?"

He then reassumed his indifferent look; but at times he gazed with a feeling of sorrowful pleasure on the young people who had renewed their conversation.

"Is he not a glorious fellow?" Ellen said to the young man as she pointed to the hunter.

"I think so."

"And I have been certain of it for a long time. Harry watches over me; I have always found him at my side in the hour of danger: to follow me he has abandoned everything, country, friends, family, without hesitation or

reflection, and has done it without any hope of ever being rewarded for such abnegation and devotion."

Don Pablo sighed.

"You love him," he murmured.

The maiden smiled.

"If you mean by those words that I place an unbounded confidence in him, that I feel a sincere and deep affection for him, in that sense, yes, I do love him."

Don Pablo shook his head.

"That is not what I mean," he said.

She gazed on him fixedly, and remained silent for some minutes, the Mexican not daring to question her. At length she turned to him, and laid her hand on his shoulder; at this touch the young man started, and quickly raised his head.

"Listen, Don Pablo," she said, in her clear and harmonious voice.

"I am listening," he answered.

"Accident one day brought us together," she continued, with a sort of feverish animation, "under extraordinary circumstance. On seeing you, I felt a sensation at once sweet and painful: my heart contracted, and when, after defying my brothers, you set off, I looked after you so long as I could perceive you through the trees. At length I returned dreamily to our cabin, for I felt that my fate was decided; your words echoed in my ears, your image was in my heart, and yet you had appeared to me as an enemy: the words you uttered in my presence were threats. Whence arose the strange emotion that agitated me?"

She stopped.

"Oh, you loved me!" the young man exclaimed impetuously.

"Yes, did I not?" she continued. "It is what is called love," she added, in a quivering voice, while two tears fell from her long lashes and coursed down her pale cheeks; "in what will that love result? The daughter of a proscribed race, I am not so much your friend as your prisoner, or, at any; rate, your

hostage. I inspire your comrade with contempt, perhaps with hatred; for I am the daughter of their implacable foe—of the man whom they have sworn to sacrifice to their vengeance."

Don Pablo bowed his head, with a sigh.

"What I say is true, is it not?" she continued; "you are forced to allow it."

"Oh, I will protect—I will save you," he exclaimed impetuously.

"No," she said firmly; "no, Don Pablo, for you must defend me against your own father; you would not dare do it; and if you did," she added, with a flashing eye, "I would not suffer it."

There was a moment's silence: then Ellen continued—

"Leave me to accomplish my destiny, Don Pablo; renounce this love, which can have only one result—our mutual wretchedness: forget me!"

"Never," he exclaimed; "never! I love you, Ellen, so greatly as to sacrifice all for you—my life, if you order it."

"And I," she replied—"do you fancy that I do not love you?—have I not given you sufficient proof of that love?—I who betrayed my father for your sake. But you see, I am strong; imitate me, and do not enter on a mad struggle."

"Whatever happens, I shall ever love you. Ellen! What do I care for your family! Children are not responsible for the faults of their parents. You are noble, you are holy: I love you, Ellen, I love you!"

"And do you think I doubt it?" she replied. "Yes, you love me, Don Pablo; I know it; I am sure of it; and, shall I confess it? This love, which causes my despair, renders me at the same time happy. Well, you must forget me; it must be so."

"Never," he repeated wildly.

"Listen, Don Pablo; you and your comrades are on my father's trail; if, as is almost certain, you find him, nothing will save him, neither tears nor entreaties, but you will kill him."

"Alas!" the young man murmured.

"You understand," she said, with great agitation, "that I cannot be an unmoved witness of the death of the man to whom I owe my life. This man, whom you hate, on whom you wish to revenge yourself, is my father; he has always been kind to me. Be merciful, Don Pablo!"

"Speak, Ellen; whatever you may ask I will swear to do."

Ellen fixed on him a glance of strange meaning.

"Is it true? Can I really trust to your word?" she said, with marked hesitation.

"Order, and I will obey."

"This evening, when we reach the spot where we are to bivouac, when your comrades are asleep—"

"Well?" he said, seeing that she stopped.

"Let me fly, Don Pablo, I implore you."

"Oh, my poor child," he exclaimed; "let you fly! But what will become of you alone, and lost in this desert?"

"Heaven will guard me."

"Alas! It is death that you ask."

"What matter, if I have done my duty."

"Your duty, Ellen?"

"Must I not save my father?"

Don Pablo made no reply.

"You hesitate—you refuse," she said, bitterly.

"No," he answered. "You ask, and your will shall be accomplished; you shall go."

"Thanks," she said, joyfully, as she offered the young man her hand, which he pressed to his lips.

"And now," she said, "one last service."

"Speak, Ellen."

She drew a small box from her bosom and handed it to her companion.

"Take this, box," she continued. "I know not what it contains; but I took it from my father before escaping from his camp with your sister. Keep it preciously, in order that, if Heaven allow us ever to meet again, you may restore it to me."

"I promise it."

"Now, Don Pablo, whatever may happen, know that I love you, and that your name will be the last word that passes my lips."

"Oh! Let me believe, let me hope that one day perhaps—"

"Never!" she exclaimed, in her turn, with an accent impossible to describe. "However great my love may be, my father's blood will separate us eternally."

The young man bowed his head in despair at these words—a gloomy malediction, which enabled him to measure the depth of the abyss into which he had fallen. They continued their journey silently, side by side.

The Sachem of the Coras, as we said, acted as guide to the little party. On reaching a spot where the path he followed took a sudden bend in the river bank, he stopped, and imitated the cry of the jay. At this signal, Valentine dug his spurs into his horse and galloped up to him.

"Is there anything new?" he asked.

"Nothing, except that in a few minutes we shall be opposite the islet where Red Cedar established his camp."

"Ah, ah!" said Valentine; "In that case we will halt."

The hunters dismounted, and concealed themselves in the shrubs; the utmost silence prevailed on the riverbank.

"Hum!" Valentine muttered; "I believe the bird has flown."

"We shall soon know," Eagle-wing replied.

Then, with that prudence characteristic of the men of his race, he stepped cautiously from tree to tree, and soon disappeared from his comrades' sight.

The latter awaited him motionless, and with their eyes fixed on the spot where he had vanished, as it were. They had long to wait, but at the end of an hour a slight rustling was audible in the shrubs, and the Indian rose before them. It was easy to see that he had emerged from the water, for his clothes were dripping.

"Well?" said Valentine.

"Gone!"

"All?"

"All."

"How long?"

"Two days at least! the fires are cold."

"I suspected it," said the hunter, as if speaking to himself.

"Oh!" Don Miguel exclaimed, "this demon will constantly escape us."

"Patience," Valentine replied. "Unless he has glided through the river like a fish, or risen in the air like a bird, we shall find his trail again—I swear it."

"But what shall we do?"

"Wait," said the hunter. "It is late, we will pass the night here; tomorrow, at daybreak, we will start in pursuit of our enemy."

Don Miguel sighed, and made no answer. The preparations for a hunter's bivouac are not lengthy. Harry and Eagle-wing lit a fire, unsaddled and hobbled the horses, and then the supper was got ready. With the exception of Don Miguel and his son, who ate but little, though for different reasons, the hunters did honour to the frugal meal, which the fatigues of the day caused them to find delicious. So soon as the supper was over, Valentine threw his rifle on his shoulder, and gave Curumilla a sign to follow him.

"Where are you going?" Don Miguel asked.

"To the isle where the gambusinos' camp was."

"I will go with you."

"Hang it all! And so will I," said the general.

"Very good."

The four men set out, and only Don Pablo, Ellen, the Chief of the Coras, and Harry were left in the encampment. So soon as the footsteps of the hunters had died out in the distance, Ellen turned to Don Pablo.

"The time has arrived," she said.

The Mexican could not repress a nervous start.

"You wish it?" he answered her, sadly.

"It must be," she continued, stifling a sigh.

She rose and walked up to Harry.

"Brother, I am going," she said.

"It is well," the hunter replied.

Without any further explanation, he saddled two horses, and waited with apparent indifference. Moukapec slept, or feigned to sleep. Ellen offered her hand to Don Pablo, and said, in a trembling voice—

"Farewell!"

"Oh!" the young man exclaimed, "Remain, Ellen, I implore you!"

The squatter's daughter shook her head sadly.

"I must rejoin my father," she murmured; "Don Pablo, let me go."

"Ellen! Ellen!"

"Farewell, Don Pablo!"

"Oh!" he said, in his despair, "Can nothing move you?"

The maiden's face was inundated with tears, and her bosom heaved.

"Ungrateful man," she said, with an accent of bitter reproach, "he does not understand how much I love him."

Don Pablo made a final effort; he overcame his grief, and said, in a stammering voice—

"Go, then, and may Heaven protect you!"

"Farewell!"

"Oh! Not farewell—we shall meet again."

The girl shook her head sadly, and leaped on the horse the Canadian held ready for her.

"Harry," said Don Pablo, "watch over her."

"As over my sister," the Canadian answered, in a deep voice.

Ellen gave a parting signal of farewell to Don Pablo, and loosened the bridle. The young man fell on the ground in despair.

"Oh! All my happiness has fled me!" he muttered, in a broken voice.

Moukapec had not made a move; his sleep must have been very sound. Two hours later, Valentine and his friends returned from their trip to the island, and Don Miguel at once noticed the absence of the squatter's daughter.

"Where is Ellen?" he asked, quickly.

"Gone!" Don Pablo muttered.

"And you allowed her to fly?" the hacendero exclaimed.

"She was not a prisoner, hence I had no right to oppose her departure."

"And the Canadian hunter?"

"Gone too."

"Oh!" Don Miguel exclaimed, "We must start in pursuit of them without the loss of a moment."

A shudder of terror and joy ran over the young man's body, as he turned pale at this proposition. Valentine gave him a searching glance, and then laid his hand on his friend's shoulder.

"We will do nothing of the sort," he said, with a meaning smile; "on the contrary, we will allow Red Cedar's daughter to withdraw unimpeded."

"But—" Don Miguel objected.

Valentine bent down and whispered a few words in his ear. The hacendero started.

"You are right," he muttered.

"Now," the hunter went on, "let us sleep, for I promise you a hard day's work tomorrow."

Everyone seemed to acknowledge the justice of this remark, and scarce a quarter of an hour after it had been made, the hunters were lying asleep round the fire. Curumilla alone was leaning against a larch tree, of which he seemed to form part, watching over the common safety.

CHAPTER XXXII.

FRAY AMBROSIO.

We will now return to the gambusinos.

Sutter and Nathan had not said a word to their brother; while he, for his part, did not appear to have recognised them. When all were preparing to sleep, Shaw also laid himself on the ground, while imperceptibly approaching Doña Clara.

The maiden, with her head buried in her hands, and her elbows supported on her knees, was weeping silently. These tears broke Shaw's heart, and he would have laid down his life to stop their flow.

In the meanwhile, the night grew more and more dark; the moon, veiled by thick clouds which passed incessantly over its pale disc, only cast forth dim rays, too weak to pierce the dome of foliage under which the gambusinos had sought shelter. Shaw, reassured by the complete immobility of his comrades and the mournful silence that brooded over the clearing, ventured slightly to touch the young lady's arm.

"What do you want with me?" she asked in a mournful voice.

"Speak low," he replied; "in Heaven's name, speak low, señora, or one of the men lying there may overhear us. These villains have so fine an ear, that the slightest sighing of the wind through the leaves is sufficient to awake them and put them on their guard."

"Why should I care whether they awake?" she continued, reproachfully "Thanks to you, in whom I trusted, have I not fallen into their hands again?"

"Oh!" he said, writhing his hands in despair, "you cannot believe me capable of such odious treachery."

"Still, you see where we are."

"Alas! I am not to blame for it; fatality has done it all."

An incredulous smile hovered round the maiden's pallid lips.

"Have at least the courage to defend your bad deed, and confess you are a bandit like the men sleeping there. Oh," she added, bitterly, "I have no right to reproach you; on the contrary, I ought to admire you; for though you are still very young, you have displayed, under present circumstances, a degree of skill and cunning I was far from suspecting in you: you have played your part with consummate talent."

Each of these cruel words entered the unhappy young man's heart like a dagger, and made him endure atrocious torture.

"Yes," he said sadly, "appearances are against me; in vain should I try to persuade you of my innocence, for you would not believe me; and yet Heaven is my witness that I attempted all it was humanly possible to do, in order to save you."

"You were very unfortunate then, sir," she continued sarcastically; "for it must be allowed that all these attempts of which you boast strangely turned against you."

Shaw uttered a deep sigh.

"Good Heaven!" he said, "What proof can I give you of my devotion?"

"None," she replied coldly.

"Oh! madam."

"Sir," she interrupted him in a firm and ironical voice, "spare me, I beg of you, your lamentations, in whose sincerity I cannot believe, as there are too many undeniable proofs against you; even more odious than treachery are the hypocritical protestations of a traitor. You have succeeded, so what more do you want? Enjoy your triumph. I repeat to you that I do not reproach you, for you have acted as your instincts and training urged you to do; you have been true to yourself and faithful to your antecedents: I need say no more. Now, if I may be allowed to ask a favour of you, let us break off a

conversation no longer possessing any interest, as you will not succeed in destroying my impressions about you: imitate the example of your comrades, and let me indulge in my grief without any obstacle."

Shaw thunderstruck by these words, pronounced in a tone that admitted of no reply; he saw the fearful position he was in, and a mad fury seized on him. Doña Clara had left her head fall again in her hands and was weeping: The young man felt a sob choking him.

"Oh!" he said, "What pleasure you take in torturing my heart. You say I betrayed you, I who loved you so!"

Doña Clara drew herself up, haughty and implacable.

"Yes," she answered ironically, "you love me, sir, but it is after the fashion of wild beasts, that carry off their prey to their den to rend it at their pleasure; yours is a tiger's love."

Shaw seized her arm violently, and looked firmly in her eyes.

"One word more, one insult further, madam," he gasped, "and I stab myself at your feet: when you see my corpse writhing on the ground, possibly you may then believe in my innocence."

Doña Clara, surprised, gazed at him fixedly.

"What do I care?" she then said, coldly.

"Oh!" the young man exclaimed in his despair, "You shall be satisfied."

And with a movement rapid as thought, he drew his dagger. Suddenly a hand was roughly laid on his arm; but Doña Clara had not stirred.

Shaw turned round. Fray Ambrosio was standing behind him, smiling, but not relaxing his grasp.

"Let me go," the young man said, in a hollow voice.

"Not so, my son," the monk said gently, "unless you first promise to give up your homicidal project."

"Do you not see," Shaw exclaimed passionately, "that she believes me guilty?"

"It must be so: leave it to me to persuade her of the contrary."

"Oh! if you did that?" the young man muttered, with an accent of doubt.

"I will do it, my son," Fray Ambrosio said, still smiling; "but you must first be reasonable."

Shaw hesitated for a moment, then let fall the weapon, as he muttered—

"There will still be time."

"Excellently reasoned," said the monk. "Now, sit down, and let us talk. Trust to me: the señora ere long will not feel the slightest doubt about your innocence."

During this scene Doña Clara had remained motionless as a statue of grief, apparently taking no interest in what passed between the two men.

"This young man has told you the perfect truth," he said; "it is a justice I take pleasure in rendering him. I know not what cause urged him to act so, but, in order to save you, he achieved impossibilities; holding you in his arms, he fought with a cloud of redskins thirsting for his blood. When Heaven sent us so miraculously to his assistance, he was about to succumb, and he rolled unconscious under our horses' hoofs, still holding against his bleeding breast the precious burthen which had doubtless been confided to him, and from which he had sworn only death should separate him. That is the real truth, madam: I swear it on my honour."

Doña Clara smiled bitterly.

"Oh," she answered, "keep these deceitful and useless protestations to yourself, father; I have learned to know you too, thanks be to Heaven, for some time past, and am aware what faith can be placed in your word."

The monk bit his lips spitefully.

"Perhaps, you are mistaken, madam," he answered, with a humble bow, "and too readily put faith in false appearances."

"Very false, in truth," the girl exclaimed, "since your conduct, up to this day, has only proved their correctness."

A flash shot from the monk's savage eye, which expired as soon as it burst forth; he composed his countenance, and continued with immoveable gentleness—

"You judge me wrongly too, señorita; misfortune renders you unjust. You forget that I owe all to your father."

"It is not I, but you, who have forgotten it," she said, sharply.

"And who tells you, madam," he said, with a certain degree of animation, "that if I am in the ranks of your enemies, it is not to serve you better?"

"Oh!" she answered, ironically; "it would be difficult for you to supply me with proofs of such admirable devotion."

"Not so much as you suppose; I have at this moment one at my service, which you cannot doubt."

"And that proof is?" she asked with a sneer.

"This, madam. My comrades are asleep; two horses have been tied up by myself fifty paces from here in the forest; I will lead you to them, and guided by this unhappy young man, who is devoted to you, although you have been cruel to him, after the perils to which he has exposed himself for your sake—it will be easy for you to get out of our reach in a few hours, and foil any pursuit. That is the proof, madam; can you now say it is false?"

"And who will guarantee me," she replied, "that this feigned solicitude you take in me, and which, I fancy, is very sudden, does not conceal a new snare?"

"Moments are precious," the monk said again, still imperturbable; "every second that slips away is a chance of safety you are deprived of. I will not argue with you, but limit myself to saying—of what use would it be to me to pretend to let you escape?"

"How do I know? Can I guess the causes on which you act?"

"Very good, madam, do as you think proper; but Heaven is my witness that I have done all in my power to save you, and that it was you who refused."

The monk uttered these words with such an accent of conviction, that, in spite of herself, Doña Clara felt her suspicions shaken. Fray Ambrosio's last observation was correct: why feign to let her escape, when he had her in his power? She reflected for a moment.

"Listen," she said to him, "I have sacrificed my life; I know not if you are sincere; I should like to believe so; but as nothing can happen to me worse

than what threatens me here, I confide in you; lead on, therefore, to the horses you have prepared for me, and I shall soon know whether your intentions are honest, and I have been deceived in my opinion of you."

A furtive smile lit up the monk's face, and he uttered a sigh of satisfaction.

"Come," he said, "follow me; but walk cautiously, so as not to arouse my comrades, who are probably not so well disposed towards you as I am."

Doña Clara and Shaw rose and noiselessly followed the monk, the squatter's son walking before the maiden and removing all the obstacles to her passage. The darkness was thick, hence it was difficult to walk through the thickets, interlaced as they were with creepers and parasitical plants; Doña Clara stumbled at every step.

At the expiration of half an hour, they reached the skirt of the forest, where two horses, fastened to trees, were quietly nibbling the young tree shoots.

"Well," the monk said, with a triumphant accent, "do you believe me now, señora?"

"I am not saved yet," she sadly answered; and she prepared to mount. Suddenly, the branches and shrubs were violently parted, six or eight men rushed forward, and surrounded the three, ere it was possible for them to attempt a defence. Shaw, however, drew a pistol, and prepared to sell his life dearly.

"Stop, Shaw," Doña Clara said to him, gently; "I now see that you were faithful, and I pardon you. Do not let yourself be uselessly killed; you see that it would be madness to resist!"

The young man let his head droop, and returned the pistol to his girdle.

"Hilloh!" a rough voice shouted, which caused the fugitives to tremble, "I felt sure that these horses belonged to somebody. Let us see what we have here. A torch here, Orson, to have a look at them."

"It is unnecessary, Red Cedar, we are friends."

"Friends," Red Cedar answered, hesitating, for it was really he; "that is possible; still, I would sooner be convinced of it. Light the torch, lad, all the same."

There was a moment's silence, during which Orson lit a branch of candle wood tree.

"Ah, ah," the squatter said, with a grin; "in truth, we are among friends. But where the deuce were you going at this hour of the night, señor Padre?"

"We were returning to the camp, after a ride, in which we have lost our way," the monk answered, imperturbably.

Red Cedar gave him a suspicious glance.

"A ride!" he growled between his teeth; "It is a singular hour for that. But there is Shaw. You are welcome, my boy, though I little expected to meet you, especially in the company of that charming dove," he added, with a sarcastic smile.

"Yes, it is I, father," the young man answered in a hollow voice.

"Very good; presently you shall tell me what has become of you for so long, but this is not the moment. Did you not say that your camp was near here, señor Padre? Although, may the devil twist my neck, if I can understand how that is, as I was going to seek you on the isle where I left you."

"We were compelled to leave it."

"All right; we have no time to lose in chattering. Lead me to the camp, my master; at a later date, all will be cleared up, never fear."

Guided by the monk, and followed by the pirates, who had Shaw and Doña Clara in their midst, Red Cedar entered the forest. This unforeseen meeting once again robbed the poor girl of a speedy deliverance. As for Fray Ambrosio, he walked along apparently as calmly as if nothing extraordinary had happened to him.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE TRAIL.

The dawn was just commencing to overshadow the horizon with transient opaline tints; a few stars were still glistening in the dark blue sky. The wild beasts were leaving their watering places, and slowly retiring to their dens, disturbing at intervals the solemn silence of the desert with their sinister howling.

Valentine opened his eyes, looked around him anxiously, and after employing a few seconds in shaking off his drowsiness, he rose slowly and awoke his comrades, who were still sleeping, rolled up in their blankets.

Soon, the whole little party were collected round the fire, on which the hunter had thrown a few armfuls of dry wood, and in whose brilliant flames the breakfast was now preparing.

The Mexicans, with their eyes fixed Valentine, silently awaited his explanation, for they guessed that he had important communications to make to them. But their expectations were foiled, at least for the present, and the Frenchman remained quite silent.

When the meal was ready, Valentine made his comrades a signal to eat; and for some twenty minutes no other sound could be heard save that caused by the formidable appetites of the hunters. When they had finished, Valentine quietly lit his Indian pipe, and indicated to his companions that he wished to speak. All turned toward him.

"My friends," he said, in his sympathetic voice, "what I feared has happened. Red Cedar has left his island camp; he has, if I am not mistaken, several days' start of us, and in vain did I try last night to take up his trail: it was impossible. Red Cedar is a villain, endowed with a fortunately far from common ferocity, whose destruction we have sworn, and I hope we shall keep our word. But I am compelled to do him the justice of saying, that he is one of the most experienced hunters in the Far West; and no one, when he pleases, can more cleverly hide his own trail, and discover that of others. We are, therefore, about to have a trial of patience with him, for he has learned all the stratagems of the redskins, of whom, I am not ashamed to say, he is the superior in roguery."

"Alas!" Don Miguel muttered.

"I have sworn to restore your daughter to you, my friend," Valentine continued, "with the help of heaven. I shall keep my oath, but I am about to

undertake a gigantic task: hence I ask of you all the most perfect obedience. Your ignorance of the desert might, under certain circumstances, cause us serious injury, and make us lose in a few minutes the fruit of lengthened researches: hence I ask of your friendship that you will let yourselves be entirely guided by my experience."

"My friend," Don Miguel replied, with an accent full of majesty, "whatever you may order, we will do; for you alone can successfully carry out the difficult enterprise in which we are engaged."

"Good! I thank you for the obedience you promise me, my friend: without it, it would be impossible to succeed. Now leave me to arrange with the Indian chiefs."

Valentine rose, made a sign to Curumilla and Eagle-wing, and the three sat down a short distance off. Valentine passed his calumet to the Araucano, who took a few whiffs and then handed it to Eagle-wing, and he, after smoking also, returned it to the hunter.

"My brothers know why I have convened them in council," Valentine said presently.

The two chiefs bowed in reply.

"Very good," he continued; "now what is the advice of my brother? Let the Sachem of the Coras speak first. He is a wise chief, whose counsels can only be good for us."

"Why does Koutonepi ask the advice of his red brothers?" he said. "Koutonepi is a great warrior: he has the eye of the eagle, the scent of the dog, the courage of the lion, and the prudence of the serpent. No one can discover better than him a trail lost in the sand: what Koutonepi does is well done: his brothers will follow him."

"Thanks, chief," Valentine continued; "but in what direction should we proceed?"

"Red Cedar is the friend of Stanapat: after his defeat the scalp hunter will have sought a refuge with his friend."

"That is also my opinion," the hunter remarked. "What do you think, chief?" he said, turning to Curumilla.

The Araucano shook his head.

"No," he said, "Red Cedar loves gold."

"That is true," said Valentine: "besides, the Apaches are too near us. You are right, chief: we must therefore proceed northward?"

Curumilla nodded an assent.

"No horses," he said, "they destroy a trail."

"We will go on foot. Have you Red Cedar's measure?"

Curumilla fumbled in his medicine bag, and produced an old worn moccasin.

"Oh!" Valentine said eagerly; "that is better still: let us be off at once."

They broke up the conference.

"My friends," the hunter said to the Mexicans, "this is what we have resolved on: you three, alone, will be mounted. Each of you will lead one of our horses, so that we may mount at the first signal. The two chiefs and myself will march on foot, in order to let no sign escape us. You will keep two hundred yards, behind us: and as I noticed that there are at this moment a great many trumpeter swans in the river, that will be our rallying cry. All this is arranged?"

"Yes," the three gentlemen answered unanimously.

"Good! now to set out, and try never to let us out of sight."

"Be at your ease, my friend, about that," the general said; "we have too great an interest in not quitting you. *Canarios!* what would become of us alone, lost in this confounded desert?"

"Come, come, something tells me that we shall succeed," Valentine said gaily, "so we will have courage."

"May heaven grant you are not mistaken, my friend," Don Miguel said sadly. "My poor child!"

"We will deliver her. I have followed a more difficult trail before now."

With these consolatory words, the two Indians and the hunter set out. Instead of taking Indian file, as ordinarily adopted on the prairie, and

marching one after the other, they spread like a fan, in order to have a greater space to explore, and not lose the slightest indication. So soon as the scouts were at the arranged distance, the Mexicans mounted and followed them, being careful not to let them out of sight, as far as was possible.

When Valentine told Don Miguel that he had followed more difficult trails, he was either boasting, or, as is more probable, judging from his frank character, he wished to restore hope to his friend.

In order to follow a trail, it must exist. Red Cedar was too old a wood ranger to neglect the slightest precaution, for he knew too well that, however large the desert may be, a man habituated to cross it always Succeeds in finding the man he is pursuing.

He knew, too, that he was followed by the most experienced hunter of the Far West, whom, by common accord, white and half-breed trappers, and the redskins themselves, had surnamed "The Trail-hunter." Hence he surpassed himself, and nothing was to be seen.

Although Valentine and his two comrades might interrogate the desert, it remained dumb and indecipherable as a closed book. For five hours they had been walking, and nothing had given an embodiment to their suspicions, or proved to them that they were on the right track.

Still, with that patience which characterises men accustomed to prairie life, and whose tenacity no word can express, the three men marched on, advancing, step by step, with their bodies bent, their eyes fixed on the ground, never yielding to the insurmountable difficulties that opposed them, but, on the contrary, excited by these very difficulties, which proved that they had an adversary worthy of them.

Valentine walked in the centre, with Curumilla on his right and Eagle-wing on his left. They were crossing at this moment a level plain, where a considerable view could be enjoyed; on one side stood the outposts of the virgin forest, on the other was the Gila, running over a sand bed. On reaching the bank of a small stream, obstructed with shrubs, Valentine noticed all at once that two or three small branches were broken a few inches from the ground.

The hunter stopped, and in order to examine more closely, lay down on the ground, carefully regarding the fracture of the wood, as he thrust his head

into the copse. Suddenly he started up on his knees, uttering a cry of joy: his comrades ran up to him.

"Ah, by Heaven," Valentine exclaimed; "now I have him. Look, look!"

And he showed the Indians a few horse's hairs he held in his hand. Curumilla examined them attentively, while Eagle-wing, without saying a word, formed with earth and stones a dyke across the bed of the stream, which was only a few yards in width.

"Well, what do you say to that, chief?" Valentine asked. "Have I guessed it?"

"Wah," the Indian replied, "Koutonepi has good eyes; these hairs come from Red Cedar's horse."

"I noticed that the horse he rode was iron grey."

"Yes; but it halts."

"I know it, with the off foreleg."

At this moment the Coras summoned them: he had turned the course of the stream, and the traces of a horse's hoofs could be distinctly traced in the sand.

"Do you see?" said Valentine.

"Yes," Curumilla remarked; "but he is alone."

"Hang it, so he is."

The two warriors looked at him in amazement.

"Listen," Valentine said, after a moment's reflection, "this is a false trail. On reaching this stream, where it was impossible for him not to leave signs, Red Cedar, supposing that we should look for them in the water, crossed the stream alone, although it would be easy for men less accustomed to the desert than ourselves to suppose that a party had crossed here. Look down there on the other side, at a horse's marks. Red Cedar wanted to be too clever; showing us a trail at all has ruined him. The rest of the band, which he joined again presently, instead of crossing, descended the bed of the stream to the Gila, where they embarked and passed to the other side of the river."

The two Indians, on hearing this clear explanation, could not repress a cry of admiration. Valentine burst the dyke, and with their help formed another one hundred yards below, a short distance from the Gila. The bed of the stream was hardly dry, ere the two Indians clapped their hands, while uttering exclamations of delight.

Valentine had guessed aright: this time they had discovered the real trail, for the bed of the stream had been trampled by a large band of horses.

"Oh, oh," Valentine said; "I fancy we are on the right road."

He then imitated the cry of a swan, and the Mexicans, who had been puzzled by the movements of the hunters, and were anxious to hear the news, galloped up.

"Well?" Don Miguel shouted.

"Good news," said Valentine.

"You have the trail?" the general asked, hurriedly.

"I think so," the hunter modestly replied.

"Oh!" said Don Pablo, joyously; "In that case we shall soon catch the villain."

"I hope so. We must now cross the river; but let us three go first."

The three hunters leaped on their horses and crossed the river, followed at a distance by the others. On reaching the other side of the Gila, instead of ascending the bank, they followed the current for some distance, carefully examining the ground.

"Ah!" Valentine suddenly exclaimed, as he stopped his horse. "I think the men we are pursuing landed here."

"That is the place," said Curumilla, with a nod.

"Yes," Moukapec confirmed him; "it is easy to see."

In fact, the spot was admirably adapted for landing without leaving any signs. The bank was bordered for nearly one hundred yards with large flat rocks, shaped like tombstones, where the horses could rest their hoofs without any fear of leaving a mark. These atones extended for a

considerable distance into the plain, and thus formed a species of natural highway, nearly half a mile in width.

Still, a thing had happened which no one could have foreseen, and which would have passed unnoticed, save for Valentine's watchful eye. One of the horses, in climbing on to the rock, had miscalculated its distance and slipped, so that an almost imperceptible graze, left by its hoof on the stone, showed the quick-sighted hunter where the party struck the bank.

The hunters followed the same road; but, so soon as they had landed, the trail disappeared anew. Although the scouts looked around with the most minute attention, they found nothing that would indicate to them the road followed by the enemy on leaving the water.

Valentine, with his hands resting on the muzzle of his rifle, was thinking deeply, at one moment looking on the ground, at another raising his eyes to the sky, like a man busied with the solution of a problem which seems to him impossible, when suddenly he perceived a white headed eagle soaring in long circles over a mass of rocks, situated a little to the right of the spot where he was standing.

"Hum," the hunter said to himself, as he watched the eagle, whose circles were growing gradually smaller, "what is the matter with that bird? I am curious to know."

Summoning his two comrades, he threw his rifle on his back, and hurried toward the spot above which the bird of prey still continued to hover. Valentine imparted to the Indians the suspicions that had sprung up in his mind, and the three men began painfully climbing up the mass of rocks strangely piled up one on the other, and which rose like a small hill in the middle of the prairie.

On reaching the top the hunters stopped to pant; the eagle, startled by their unexpected appearance, had flown reluctantly away. They found themselves on a species of platform, which must infallibly have once served as a sepulchre to some renowned Indian warrior, for several shapeless fragments lay here and there, near a rather wide cavity, some ten yards in width.

Valentine bent over the edge of this hole, but the obscurity was so dense, owing to the shape of the cavity, that he could perceive nothing, though his

sense of smell was most disagreeably assailed by a fetid odour of decaying flesh.

"Hilloah! what is this?" he asked.

Without speaking, Curumilla had lit a candle wood torch which he handed the hunter. Valentine bent over again and looked in.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "Red Cedar's horse—I have you now, my fine fellow! but how the deuce did he manage to get the animal up here without leaving any trail?" After a moment he added: "Oh, what a goose I am! The horse was not dead, he led it up here, and then forced it into the hole. By Jove! It is a good trick: I must confess that Red Cedar is a very remarkable rogue, and had it not been for the eagle, I should not have discovered the road he took—but now I have him! Were he ten times as cunning he would not escape me."

And, all delighted, Valentine rejoined the Mexicans, who were anxiously awaiting the result of his researches.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE HUNT.

"Then," Don Miguel asked the hunter, "you believe, my friend, that we are on the right track, and that the villain cannot escape us."

"I am convinced," Valentine replied, "that we have followed his trail up to the present. As for assuring you that he will not escape us, I am unable to say that; I can only assert that I shall discover him."

"That is what I meant," the hacendero remarked, with a sigh.

They started once more. The prairie became more broken, here and there clumps of trees diversified the landscape, and in the distance rose hills, the first spires of the Sierra Madre, which jagged the blue horizon, and undulated the soil. The hunters reached at about an hour before sunset the

first trees of an immense virgin forest, which stretched out like a curtain of verdure, and completely hid the prairie from their sight.

"Wah!" said Curumilla, suddenly stooping and picking up an object which he handed Valentine.

"Hilloah!" the latter exclaimed, "if I am not mistaken, it is Doña Clara's cross."

"Give it me, my friend," Don Miguel said, hurriedly advancing.

He seized the article the hunter handed him; it was, in truth, a small diamond cross, which the maiden constantly wore. The hacendero raised it to his lips, with a joy mingled with sorrow.

"Oh, heavens!" he exclaimed, "What has happened to my poor girl?"

"Nothing," Valentine replied; "reassure yourself, my friend. The chain has probably broken, and Doña Clara lost it—that is all."

Don Miguel sighed, two tears burst from his eyes, but he did not utter a word; at the entrance of the forest Valentine halted.

"It is not prudent," he said, "to go among these large trees by night; perhaps those we seek may be waiting here to attack us under covert. If you will listen to me, we will bivouac here."

No one objected to this proposal, and consequently the encampment was formed. Night had completely set in, and the hunters, after eating their super, had rolled themselves up in their blankets, and were sleeping. Valentine, Curumilla, and Eagle-wing, gravely seated around the fire, were conversing in a low voice, while watching the neighbourhood.

All at once Valentine sharply seized the Ulmen by the collar, and pulled him to the ground; at the same moment a shot was fired, and a bullet struck the logs, producing myriads of sparks. The Mexicans, startled by the shot, sprung up and seized their arms, but the hunters had disappeared.

"What is the meaning of this?" Don Miguel asked, looking round vainly in the darkness.

"I am greatly mistaken," said the general, "if we are not attacked."

"Attacked!" the hacendero continued; "By whom?"

"By enemies, probably," the general remarked; "but who those enemies are I cannot tell you."

"Where are our friends?" Don Pablo asked.

"Hunting, I suppose," the general replied.

"Stay, here they come," said Don Miguel.

The hunters returned; but not alone; they had a prisoner with them, and the prisoner was Orson, the pirate. So soon as he had him in the bivouac, Valentine bound him securely, and then examined him for some minutes with profound attention. The bandit endured this examination with a feigned carelessness, which, well played though it was, did not quite deceive the Frenchman.

"Hum!" the latter said to himself, "this seems to me a cunning scamp; let me see if I am wrong—who are you, ruffian?" he roughly asked him.

"I?" the other said with a silly air.

"Yes, you."

"A hunter."

"A scalp hunter, I suppose?" Valentine went on.

"Why so?" the other asked.

"I suppose you did not take us for wild beasts?"

"I do not understand you," the bandit said, with a stupid look.

"That is possible," said Valentine, "what is your name?"

"Orson."

"A pretty name enough. And why were you prowling round our bivouac?"

"The night is dark, and I took you for Apaches."

"Is that why you fired at us?"

"Yes."

"I suppose you did not expect to kill us all six?"

"I did not try to kill you."

"Ah, ah! You wished to give us a salute, I suppose?" the hunter remarked, with a laugh.

"No, but I wished to attract your attention."

"Well, you succeeded; in that case, why did you bolt?"

"I did not do so—I let you catch me."

"Hum," Valentine said again; "well, no matter, we have got you and you'll be very clever if you escape."

"Who knows?" the pirate muttered.

"Where were you going?"

"To join my friends on the other bank of the river."

"What friends?"

"Friends of mine."

"I suppose so."

"The man is an idiot," Don Miguel said, with a shrug of his shoulders.

Valentine gave him a significant look.

"Do you think so?" he said.

As the hacendero made no reply, Valentine continued his cross-questioning.

"Who are the friends you were going to join?"

"I told you—hunters."

"Very well—but those hunters have a name."

"Have you not one, too?"

"Listen, scamp," Valentine said, whom the Pirate's evasions were beginning to make angry, "I warn you that, if you do not answer my questions simply, I shall be forced to blow out your brains."

Orson started back.

"Blow out my brains!" he exclaimed. "Nonsense, you would not dare."

"Why not, mate?"

"Because Red Cedar would avenge me."

"Ah ah, you know Red Cedar?"

"Of course I do, as I was going to join him."

"Hilloh!" Valentine said distrustfully. "Where, then?"

"Wherever he may be."

"That is true—then you know where Red Cedar is?"

"Yes."

"In that case you will guide us to him."

"I shall be delighted," the Pirate said quickly.

Valentine turned to his friend.

"This man is a traitor," he said. "He was sent to draw us into a snare, in which we will not let ourselves be caught. Curumilla, fasten a rope to a branch of that oak tree."

"What for?" Don Miguel asked.

"To hang this scamp, who fancies we are fools."

Orson trembled.

"One moment," he said.

"What for?" the hunter asked.

"Why, I do not wish to be hanged."

"And yet, it will happen to you within ten minutes, my good fellow—so you had better make up your mind to it."

"Not at all, since I offer to lead you to Red Cedar."

"Very good—but I prefer going alone."

"As you please. In that case, let me go."

"That is not possible, unfortunately."

"Why not?"

"I will tell you: because, if you were set at liberty, you would go straight and tell the man who sent you what you have seen, and I do not wish that. Besides, I know at present as well as you do, where Red Cedar is."

"Red Cedar does not hide himself, and can always be found."

"Very good. You have five minutes to recommend your soul to Heaven, and that is more than you deserve."

Orson understood from the hunter's accent that he was lost. Hence he made up his mind bravely.

"Bravo!" he said, "well-played."

Valentine looked at him.

"You are a plucky fellow," he said to him, "and I will do something for you. Curumilla, unfasten his arms."

The Indian obeyed.

"Look here," said Valentine, offering him a pistol. "Blow out your brains, it will be sooner over, and you will suffer less."

The bandit seized the weapon with a diabolical grin, and, with a movement swift as thought, fired at the hunter. But Curumilla was watching him, and cleft his skull with his tomahawk. The bullet whistled harmlessly past Valentine's ear.

"Thanks," said the bandit, as he rolled on the ground.

"What men!" Don Miguel exclaimed.

"*Canarios*, my friend," the general said, "you had a narrow escape."

The three men dug a hole into which they threw the bandit's body. The rest of the night passed without incident, and at daybreak the hunt recommenced. About midday, the hunters found themselves again on the river bank, and saw two Indian canoes drifting down with the current.

"Back, back!" Valentine suddenly shouted.

All lay down on the grass, and at the same instant bullets ricochetted from the rocks, and arrows whizzed through the leaves, but no one was wounded. Valentine disdained to reply.

"They are Apaches," he said. "Let us not waste our powder; besides, they are out of range."

They set out again. Gradually, the forest grew clearer, the trees became rare, and they at length entered a vast prairie.

"Stop," said Valentine, "we must be approaching. I believe we shall do well, now that we have an expanse before us, to examine the horizon."

He stood upright in his saddle, and began looking carefully around. Presently, he got down.

"Nothing," he said.

At this moment, he saw something glistening in the grass, on the river bank.

"What is that?" he asked himself, and bent down. But, instead of rising again, he bent lower still, and in a second turned to Curumilla.

"The moccasin," he said, sharply.

The Indian handed it to him.

"Look!" the hunter said.

At this spot the sand was damp, and, under a pile of leaves, there appeared clearly and distinctly the trace of a man's foot, with the toes in the water.

"They are only two hours ahead of us," said Valentine. "One of them lost a horse bell here."

"They have crossed the river," said Eagle-wing.

"That is easy to see," the general remarked.

Valentine smiled, and looked at Curumilla, who shook his head.

"No," the hunter said. "It is a trick, but they shall not catch me."

Making his comrades a signal not to stir, Valentine turned his back to the river, and walked rapidly toward a tree covered hill a short distance off.

"Come!" he shouted, so soon as he reached the top. Several dead trees lay scattered in an open space. Aided by Curumilla, Valentine began removing them. The Mexicans, whose curiosity was aroused to an eminent degree, also lent a hand.

In a few minutes, several trees were rolled on one side. Valentine then removed the leaves, and discovered the remains of a fire, with the ashes still warm.

"Come, come," he said, "Red Cedar is not so clever as I thought."

Don Miguel, his son, and the general were astounded, but the hunter only smiled.

"It is nothing," he said. "But the shadow of the sun is already lengthening on the horizon, within three hours, it will be night; so remain here. When the gloom is thick, we will start again."

They bivouacked.

"Now, sleep," Valentine bade them. "I will awake you when necessary, for you will have smart work tonight."

And joining example to precept, Valentine lay down on the ground, closed his eyes, and slept. At about an hour after sunset, he woke again; he looked around, his comrades were still asleep, but one was absent—Curumilla.

"Good," Valentine thought; "the chief has seen something, and gone to reconnoitre."

He had scarce finished this aside, when he noticed two shadows standing out vaguely in the night; the hunter darted behind a tree, and cocked his rifle. At the same instant, the cry of the swan was audible a short distance off.

"Halloh!" said Valentine, as he withdrew his rifle, "Can Curumilla have made another prisoner? Let me have a look."

A few minutes later, Curumilla arrived, closely followed by an Indian warrior, who was no other than Black Cat. On seeing him, Valentine repressed with difficulty a cry of surprise.

"My brother is welcome," he said.

"I was expecting my brother," the Apache chief said, simply.

"How so?"

"My brother is on the trail of Red Cedar?"

"Yes."

"Red Cedar is there," said Black Cat, pointing in the direction of the river.

"Far?"

"About half an hour."

"Good. How does my red brother know it?" the hunter asked, with ill-concealed suspicion.

"The great pale warrior is the brother of Black Cat; he saved his life. The redskins have a long memory. Black Cat assembled his young men, and followed Red Cedar to deliver him to his brother Koutonepi."

Valentine did not for an instant doubt the good faith of the Apache Chief; he knew how religiously the Indians keep their oaths. Black Cat had formed an alliance with him, and he could place implicit confidence in his words.

"Good," he said, "I will wake the pale warriors; my brother will guide us."

The Indian bowed and folded his arms on his chest. A quarter of an hour later, the hunters reached the encampment of the redskins, when they found that Black Cat had spoken the truth, for he had one hundred picked warriors with him, so cleverly concealed in the grass that ten paces off it was impossible to perceive them.

Black Cat drew Valentine aside, and led him a short distance from the bivouac.

"Let my brother look," he said.

The hunter then saw, a little way off, the fires of the gambusinos. Red Cedar had placed his camp against a hillside, which prevented the hunters seeing it. The squatter fancied he had thrown Valentine out, and this night, for the first time since he knew he was pursued, he allowed his people to light a fire.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE COMBAT.

Red Cedar's camp was plunged in silence; all were asleep, save three or four gambusinos who watched over the safety of their comrades, and two persons who, carelessly reclining before a tent erected in the centre of the camp, were conversing in a low voice. They were Red Cedar and Fray Ambrosio.

The squatter seemed suffering from considerable anxiety; with his eye fixed on space, he seemed to be sounding the darkness and guessing the secrets which the night that surrounded him bore in its bosom.

"Gossip," the monk said, "do you believe that we have succeeded in hiding our trail from the white hunters?"

"Those villains are dogs at whom I laugh; my wife would suffice to drive them away with a whip," Red Cedar replied, disdainfully; "I know all the windings of the prairie, and have acted for the best."

"Then, we are at length freed from our enemies," the monk said, with a sigh of relief.

"Yes, gossip," the squatter remarked with a grin; "now you can sleep calmly."

"Ah," said the monk, "all the better."

At this moment, a bullet whistled over the Spaniard's head, and flattened against one of the tent poles.

"Malediction!" the squatter yelled, as he sprang up; "those mad wolves again. To arms, lads; here are the redskins."

Within a few seconds, all the gambusinos were alert and ambuscaded behind the bales that formed the wall of the camp. At the same moment, fearful yells, followed by a terrible discharge, burst forth from the prairie.

The squatter's band comprised about twenty resolute men, with the pirates he had enlisted. The gambusinos did not let themselves be terrified; they replied by a point-blank discharge at a numerous band of horsemen galloping at full speed on the camp. The Indians rode in every direction,

uttering ferocious yells, and brandishing burning torches which they constantly hurled into the camp.

The Indians, as a general rule, only attack their enemies by surprise; when they have no other object in view but pillage, as soon as they are discovered and meet with a vigorous resistance, they cease a combat which has become objectless to them. But on this occasion the redskins seemed to have given up their ordinary tactics, so obstinately did they assail the gambusino intrenchments; frequently repulsed, they returned with renewed ardour, fighting in the open and trying to crush their enemies by their numbers.

Red Cedar, terrified by the duration of a combat in which his bravest comrades had perished, resolved to attempt a final effort, and conquer the Indians by daring and temerity. By a signal he collected his three sons around him, with Andrés Garote and Fray Ambrosio; but the Indians did not leave them the time to carry out the plan they had formed; they returned to the charge with incredible fury, and a cloud of incendiary arrows and lighted torches fell on the camp from all sides at once.

The fire added its horrors to those of the combat, and ere long the camp was a burning fiery furnace. The redskins, cleverly profiting by the disorder the fire caused among the gambusinos, escaladed the bales, invaded the camp, rushed on the whites, and a hand-to-hand fight commenced. In spite of their courage and skill in the use of arms, the gambusinos were overwhelmed by the masses of their enemies; a few minutes longer, and all would be over with Red Cedar's band.

The squatter resolved to make a supreme effort to save the few men still left him; taking Fray Ambrosio aside, who, since the beginning the action, had constantly fought by his side, he explained his intentions to him; and when he felt that the monk would certainly carry out his plans, he rushed with incredible fury into the thickest of the fight, and felling or stabbing the redskins who stood in his way, succeeded in entering the tent.

Doña Clara, with her head stretched forward, seemed to be anxiously listening to the noises outside. Two paces from her, the squatter's wife was dying; a bullet had passed through her skull. On seeing Red Cedar, the maiden folded her arms on her bosom, and wailed.

"*Voto a Dios!*" the brigand exclaimed. "She is still here. Follow me, señora, we must be off."

"No," the Spaniard answered, resolutely. "I will not go."

"Come, child, obey; do not oblige me to employ violence; time is precious."

"I will not go, I tell you," the maiden repeated.

"For the last time, will you follow me—yes or no?"

Doña Clara shrugged her shoulders. The squatter saw that any discussion was useless, and he must settle the question by force; so, leaping over the corpse of his wife, he tried to seize the girl. But the latter, who had watched all his movements, bounded like a startled fawn, drew a dagger from her breast, and with flashing eye, quivering nostrils, and trembling lips, she prepared to go through a desperate struggle.

There must be an end of this, so the squatter raised his sabre, and with the flat dealt such a terrible blow on the girl's delicate arm, that she let the dagger fall, and uttered a shriek of pain. But the unhappy girl stooped at once to pick up her weapon with her left hand; Red Cedar took advantage of this movement, bounded upon her, and made her a girdle of his powerful arms. The maiden, who had hitherto resisted in silence, shrieked with all the energy of despair—

"Help, Shaw, help!"

"Ah!" Red Cedar howled; "he, then, was the traitor! Let him come, if he dare."

And, raising the girl in his arms, he ran toward the entrance of the hut, but he fell back suddenly, with a ghastly oath: a man barred his passage, and that man was Valentine.

"Ah, ah!" the hunter said, with a sarcastic smile; "There you are again, Red Cedar. *Caray*, my master, you seem in a hurry."

"Let me pass," the squatter yelled, as he cocked a pistol.

"Pass?" Valentine repeated, with a laugh, while carefully watching the bandit's movements. "You are in a great haste to leave our company. Come, no threats, or I kill you like a dog."

"I shall kill you, villain," Red Cedar exclaimed, pulling with a convulsive movement the trigger of the pistol.

But, although the squatter had been so quick, Valentine was not less so; he stooped smartly to escape the bullet, which did not strike him, and raised his rifle, but did not dare fire, for Red Cedar had fallen back to the end of the tent, and employed the maiden as a buckler. At the sound of the shot Valentine's comrades hurried up to the tent, which was simultaneously invaded by the Indians.

The few gambusinos who survived their companions, about seven or eight, whom Fray Ambrosio had collected by the squatter's orders, guessing what was occurring, and desiring to aid their chief, crept stealthily up, and seizing the tent ropes, cut them all at once.

The mass of canvas, no longer supported, fell in, burying and dragging down with it all who were beneath it. There was a moment of terrible confusion among the Indians and hunters, which Red Cedar cleverly employed to step out of the tent and mount a horse Fray Ambrosio held in readiness for him. But, at the moment he was going to dash off, Shaw barred his passage.

"Stop, father," he shouted, as he boldly seized the bridle, "give me that girl."

"Back, villain, back," the squatter howled, grinding his teeth; "back!"

"You shall not pass," Shaw continued. "Give me Doña Clara!"

Red Cedar felt that he was lost: Valentine, Don Miguel, and their comrades, at length freed from the tent, were hurrying up at full speed.

"Wretch!" he exclaimed.

And, making his horse bound, he cut his son down with his sabre. The witnesses uttered a cry of horror, while the gambusinos, starting at full speed, passed like a whirlwind through the dense mass of foes.

"Oh!" Don Miguel shrieked, "I will save my daughter."

And leaping on a horse, he rushed in pursuit of the bandits; the hunters and Indians, leaving the burning camp to a few plunderers, also started after them. But suddenly an incomprehensible thing occurred: a terrible, superhuman noise was heard; the horses, going at full speed, stopped,

neighing with terror; and the pirates, hunters, and redskins, instinctively raising their eyes to Heaven, could not restrain a cry of horror.

"Oh!" Red Cedar shouted, with an accent of rage impossible to render; "I will escape in spite of Heaven and Hell!"

And he buried his spurs in his horse's flanks; the animal gave vent to a snort of agony, but remained motionless.

"My daughter, my daughter!" Don Miguel shouted, striving in vain to reach the Pirate.

"Come and take her, dog," the bandit yelled; "I will only give her to you dead."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE EARTHQUAKE.

A frightful change had suddenly taken place in Nature. The heavenly vault had assumed the appearance of a vast globe of yellow copper: the pallid moon emitted no beams; and the atmosphere was so transparent, that the most distant objects were visible. A stifling heat weighed on the earth, and there was not a breath in the air to stir the leaves. The Gila had ceased to flow.

The hoarse roar which had been heard before was repeated with tenfold force: the river, lifted bodily, as if by a powerful and invisible hand, rose to an enormous height, and suddenly descended on the plain, over which it poured with incredible rapidity: the mountains oscillated on their base, hurling on to the prairie enormous blocks of rock, which fell with a frightful crash: the earth, opening on all sides, filled up valleys, levelled hills, poured from its bosom torrents of sulphurous water, which threw up stones and burning mud, and then began to heave with a slow and continuous movement.

"*Terremoto!* (earthquake)," the hunters and gambusinos exclaimed, as they crossed themselves and recited all the prayers that recurred to their mind.

It was, in truth, an earthquake—the most fearful scourge of these regions. The ground seemed to boil, if we may employ the expression—rising and falling incessantly, like the waves of the sea during a tempest. The bed of the rivers and streams changed at each instant, and gulfs of unfathomable depth opened beneath the feet of the terrified men.

The wild beasts, driven from their lairs and repulsed by the river, whose waters constantly rose, came, mad with terror, to join the men. Countless herds of buffaloes traversed the plain, uttering hoarse lowings, dashing against each other, turning back suddenly to avoid the abysses that opened at their feet, and threatening in their furious course to trample under everything that offered an obstacle.

The jaguars, panthers, cougars, grizzly bears, and coyotes, pell-mell with the deer, antelopes, elks, and asshatas, uttered howls and plaintive yells, not thinking of attacking each other, so thoroughly had fear paralysed their bloodthirsty instincts.

The birds whirled round, with wild croakings in the air impregnated with sulphur and bitumen, or fell heavily to the ground, stunned by fear, with their wings outstretched, and feathers standing on end.

A second scourge joined the former, and added, were it possible, to the horror of this scene. The fire lit in the gambusino camp by the Indians gradually gained the tall prairie grass; suddenly it was revealed in its majestic and terrible splendour, kindling all in its sparks with a whizzing sound.

A person must have seen a fire on the prairies of the Far West to form an idea of the splendid horror of such a sight. Virgin forests are burnt to the ground, their aged trees writhing, and uttering complaints and cries like human beings. The incandescent mountains resemble ill-omened light-houses, whose immense flames rise as spirals to the sky, which they colour for a wide distance with their blood-red hue.

The earth continued at intervals to suffer violent shocks; to the northwest the waters of the Gila were bounding madly forward; in the south-west, the fire was hurrying on with sharp and rapid leaps. The unhappy redskins, the

hunters, and the pirates their enemies, saw with indescribable terror the space around them growing momentarily smaller, and every chance of safety cut off in turn.

In this supreme moment, when every feeling of hatred should have been extinguished in their hearts, Red Cedar and the hunters, only thinking of their vengeance, continued their rapid hunt, racing like demons across the prairie, which would soon doubtless serve as their sepulchre.

In the meanwhile, the two scourges marched towards one another, and the whites and redskins could already calculate with certainty how many minutes were left them, in their last refuge, ere they were buried beneath the waters, or devoured by the flames. At this terrible moment the Apaches all turned to Valentine as the only man who could save them; and at this supreme appeal, the hunter gave up for a few seconds his pursuit of Red Cedar.

"What do my brothers ask?" he said.

"That the great Hunter of the palefaces should save them," Black Cat said without hesitation.

Valentine smiled mournfully, as he took a look at all these men who awaited their safety from him.

"God alone can save you," he said, "for He is omnipotent; His hand has weighed heavily on us. What can I, a poor creature, do?"

"The pale hunter must save us," the Apache chief repeated.

The hunter gave a sigh.

"I will try," he said.

The Indians eagerly collected around him. The simple men considered that this hunter, whom they were accustomed to admire, and whom they had seen do so many surprising deeds, had a superhuman power at his command: they placed a superstitious faith in him.

"My brothers will listen;" Valentine went on: "only one chance of safety is left them—a very weak one, but it is at present the only one they can attempt. Let each take his arms, and without loss of time kill the buffaloes

madly running about the prairie; their skins will serve as canoes to fly the fire that threatens to devour everything."

The Indians gave vent to a shout of joy and hope, and without further hesitation attacked the buffaloes, which, half mad with terror, let themselves be killed without offering the slightest resistance.

So soon as Valentine saw that his allies were following his advice, and were busily engaged in making their canoes, he thought once more of the pirates, who, for their part, had not remained idle. Directed by Red Cedar, they had collected some uprooted trees, attached them together with their lassos, and after this, forming a raft which would bear them all, they thrust it into the water, and entrusted themselves to the current.

Don Pablo, seeing his enemy on the point of escaping him a second time, did not hesitate to cover him with his rifle. But Andrés Garote had a spite on the Mexican, and taking advantage of the opportunity he quickly raised his rifle, and fired. The bullet, disturbed by the oscillation of the raft, did not hit the young man, but hit his rifle in his hands, at the moment he was pulling the trigger.

The pirates uttered a shout of triumph which was suddenly changed into a cry of anger. Señor Andrés Garote fell into their arms with a bullet through his chest, presented to him by Curumilla.

Just at this moment the sun rose gloriously on the horizon, lighting up the magnificent picture of travailing nature, and restoring a little courage to the men.

The redskins, after making, with their peculiar quickness and skill, some twenty canoes, were already beginning to launch them. The hunters tried to lasso the raft, and draw it to them, while the pirates on the other hand, employed the utmost efforts to keep it in the current. Curumilla had succeeded in throwing his lasso so as to entangle it in the trees, but Red Cedar cut it twice with his knife.

"We must finish with that bandit," Valentine said, "kill him at all risks."

"One moment, I implore you," Don Miguel entreated, "let me first speak to him, perhaps I may move his heart."

"Humph!" the hunter muttered, as he rested his rifle on the ground, "it would be easier to move a tiger."

Don Miguel walked a few paces forward. "Red Cedar," he exclaimed, "have pity on me—give me back my daughter."

The pirate grinned, but gave no answer.

"Red Cedar," Don Miguel went on, "have pity on me, I implore you, I will pay any ransom you ask; but in the name of what there is most sacred on earth, restore me my daughter; remember that you owe your life to me."

"I owe you nothing," the squatter said brutally; "the life you saved you tried to take from me again; we are quits."

"My daughter! Give me my daughter."

"Where is mine? Where is Ellen? restore her to me; perhaps, after that, I will consent to give you your daughter."

"She is not with us, Red Cedar, I swear it to you; she went away to join you."

"A lie!" the Pirate yelled, "A lie!"

At this moment, Doña Clara, whose movements nobody was watching, boldly leaped into the water. But, at the sound of the dive, Red Cedar turned and plunged in after her. The hunters began firing again on the Pirate, who, as if he had a charmed life, shook his head with a sarcastic laugh at every bullet that struck the water near him.

"Help!" the maiden cried in a panting voice; "Valentine, my father, help me!"

"I come," Don Miguel answered: "courage, my child, courage!"

And, only listening to paternal love, Don Miguel bounded forward, but, at a sign from Valentine, Curumilla and Eagle-wing stopped him, in spite of all his efforts to tear himself from their grasp. The hunter took his knife in his teeth and leaped into the river.

"Come, father!" Doña Clara repeated—"Where are you? Where are you?"

"Here I am!" Don Miguel shrieked.

"Courage! Courage!" Valentine shouted.

The hunter made a tremendous effort to reach the maiden, and the two enemies found themselves face to face in the agitated waters of the Gila. Forgetting all feeling of self preservation they rushed on each other knife in hand.

At this moment a formidable sound, resembling the discharge of a park of artillery, burst from the entrails of the earth, a terrible shock agitated the ground, and the river was forced back into its bed with irresistible force. Red Cedar and Valentine, seized by the colossal wave produced by this tremendous clash, turned round and round for some moments, but were then hastily separated, and an impassible gulf opened between them. At the same instant a cry of horrible pain echoed through the air.

"There!" Red Cedar yelled, "I told you I would only give you your daughter dead—come and take her!"

And with a demoniac laugh, he buried his knife in Doña Clara's bosom. The poor girl fell on her knees, clasped her hands, and expired, crying for the last time—

"Father! Father!"

"Oh!" Don Miguel shrieked—"Woe! Woe!" and he fell unconscious on the ground.

At the sight of this cowardly act, Valentine, rendered powerless, writhed his hands in despair. Curumilla raised his rifle, and ere Red Cedar could start his horse at a gallop, fired; but the bullet, badly aimed, did not strike the bandit, who uttered a yell of triumph, and started at full speed.

"Oh!" Valentine shouted, "I swear by Heaven I will have that monster's life!"

The shock we just alluded to was the last effort of the earthquake, though there were a few more scarcely felt oscillations, as if the earth were seeking to regain its balance, which it had momentarily lost.

The Apaches, carried away in their canoes, had already gained a considerable distance; the fire was expiring for want of nourishment on the ground, which had been inundated by the waters of the river.

In spite of the help lavished on him by his friends, Don Miguel did not return to life for a long time. The general approached the hunter, who was leaning, gloomy and pensive, on his rifle, with his eyes fixed on space.

"What are we doing here?" he said to him; "Why do we not resume our pursuit of that villain?"

"Because," Valentine replied, in a mournful voice, "We must pay the last duties to his victim."

The general bowed, and an hour later the hunters placed Doña Clara's body in the ground. Don Miguel, supported by the general and his son, wept over the grave which contained his child.

When the Indian Chief had filled up the hole, and rolled onto it rocks, lest it might be profaned by wild beasts, Valentine seized his friend's hand, and pressed it forcibly.

"Don Miguel," he said to him, "women weep, men avenge themselves."

"Oh, yes!" the hacendero cried, with savage energy; "Vengeance! Vengeance!"

But, alas! This cry, uttered over a scarce-closed tomb, died out without an echo. Red Cedar and his companions had disappeared in the inextricable windings of the desert. Many days must yet elapse before the so greatly desired hour of vengeance arrived, for God, whose designs are inscrutable, had not yet said Enough!

[The further adventures of the hunters and the fate of Red Cedar have yet to be described, in the last volume of this series, entitled "THE TRAPPER'S DAUGHTER," which will speedily appear.]

THE END.

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