The Rifle Rangers

by Mayne Reid

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE RIFLE RANGERS ***

Captain Mayne Reid

"The Rifle Rangers"

Chapter One.

The Land of Anahuac.

Away over the dark, wild waves of the rolling Atlantic—away beyond the summer islands of the Western Ind—lies a lovely land. Its surface-aspect carries the hue of the emerald; its sky is sapphire; its sun is a globe of gold. It is the land of Anahuac!

The tourist turns his face to the Orient—the poet sings the gone glories of Greece—the painter elaborates the hackneyed pictures of Apennine and Alp—the novelist turns the skulking thief of Italy into a picturesque bandit, or, Don Quixote-like, betaking himself into the misty middle age, entertains the romantic miss and milliner's apprentice with stories of raven steeds, of plumed and impossible heroes. All—painter, poet, tourist, and novelist—in search of the bright and beautiful, the poetic and the picturesque—turn their backs upon this lovely land.

Shall we? No! Westward, like the Genoese, we boldly venture—over the dark wild waves of the rolling Atlantic; through among the sunny islands of Ind—westward to the land of Anahuac. Let us debark upon its shores; let us pierce the secret depths of its forests; let us climb its mighty mountains, and traverse its table-plains.

Go with us, tourist! Fear not. You shall look upon scenes grand and gloomy, bright and beautiful. Poet! you shall find themes for poesy worthy its loftiest strains. Painter! for you there are pictures fresh from the hand of God. Writer! there are stories still untold by the author-artist—legends of love and hate, of gratitude and revenge, of falsehood and devotion, of noble virtue and ignoble crime—legends redolent of romance, rich in reality.

Thither we steer, over the dark wild waves of the rolling Atlantic; through the summer islands of the Western Ind; onward—onward to the shores of Anahuac!

Varied is the aspect of that picture-land, abounding in scenes that change like the tints of the opal. Varied is the surface which these pictures adorn. Valleys that open deep into the earth; mountains that lead the eye far up into heaven; plains that stretch to the horizon's verge, until the rim of the blue canopy seems to rest upon their

limitless level; “rolling” landscapes, whose softly-turned ridges remind one of the wavy billows of the ocean.

Alas! word-painting can give but a faint idea of these scenes. The pen can but feebly portray the grand and sublime effect produced upon the mind of him who gazes down into the deep valleys, or glances upward to the mighty mountains of Mexico.

Though feeble be the effort, I shall attempt a series of sketches from memory. They are the panoramic views that present themselves during a single “Jornada.”

I stand upon the shores of the Mexican Gulf. The waves lip gently up to my feet upon a beach of silvery sand. The water is pure and translucent, of azure blue, here and there crested with the pearly froth of coral breakers. I look to the eastward, and behold a summer sea that seems to invite navigation. But where are the messengers of commerce with their white wings? The solitary skiff of the savage “pescador” is making its way through the surf; a lone “polacca” beats up the coast with its half-smuggler crew; a “piragua” swings at anchor in a neighbouring cove: this is all! Far as eye or glass can reach, no other sail is in sight. The beautiful sea before me is almost unfurrowed by the keels of commerce.

From this I draw ideas of the land and its inhabitants—unfavourable ideas of their moral and material condition. No commerce—no industry—no prosperity. Stay! What see I yonder? Perhaps I have been wronging them. A dark, tower-like object looms up against the horizon. It is the smoke of a steamer—sign of advanced civilisation—emblem of active life. She nears the shore. Ha! a foreign flag—the flag of another land trails over her taffrail; a foreign flag floats at her peak; foreign faces appear above her bulwarks, and foreign words issue from the lips of her commander. She is not of the land. My first conjecture was right.

She makes for the principal port. She lands a small parcel of letters and papers, a few bales of merchandise, half a dozen slightly-formed cadaverous men; and then, putting about, a gun is fired, and she is off again. She soon disappears away upon

the wide ocean; and the waves once more roll silently in—their glistening surface broken only by the flapping of the albatross or the plunge of the osprey.

I direct my eyes northward. I behold a belt of white sand skirting the blue water. I turn towards the south, and in this direction perceive a similar belt. To both points it extends beyond the reach of vision—hundreds of miles beyond—forming, like a ribbon of silver, the selvage of the Mexican Sea. It separates the turquoise blue of the water from the emerald green of the forest, contrasting with each by its dazzling whiteness. Its surface is far from being level, as is usual with the ocean-strand. On the contrary, its millions of sparkling atoms, rendered light by the burning sun of the tropic, have been lifted on the wings of the wind, and thrown into hills and ridges hundreds of feet in height, and trending in every direction like the wreaths of a great snow-drift. I advance with difficulty over these naked ridges, where no vegetation finds nourishment in the inorganic heap. I drag myself wearily along, sinking deeply at every step. I climb sand-hills of strange and fantastic shapes, cones, and domes, and roof-like ridges, where the sportive wind seems to have played with the plastic mass, as children with potter's clay. I encounter huge basins like the craters of volcanoes, formed by the circling swirl; deep chasms and valleys, whose sides are walls of sand, steep, often vertical, and not unfrequently impending with comb-like escarpments.

All these features may be changed in a single night, by the magical breath of the "norther". The hill to-day may become the valley to-morrow, and the elevated ridge have given place to the sunken chasm.

Upon the summits of these sand-heights I am fanned by the cool breeze from the Gulf. I descend into the sheltered gorges, and am burned by a tropic sun, whose beams, reflected from a thousand crystals, torture my eyes and brain. In these parts the traveller is often the victim of the coup-de-soleil.

Yonder comes the "norte" Along the northern horizon the sky suddenly changes

from light blue to a dark lead colour. Sometimes rumbling thunder with arrowy lightning portends the change; but if neither seen nor heard, it is soon felt. The hot atmosphere, that, but a moment before, encased me in its glowing embrace, is suddenly pierced by a chill breeze, that causes my skin to creep and my frame to shiver. In its icy breath there is fever—there is death; for it carries on its wings the dreaded “vomito”. The breeze becomes a strong wind—a tempest. The sand is lifted upwards, and floats through the air in dun clouds, here settling down, and there rising up again. I dare not face it, any more than I would the blast of the simoom. I should be blinded if I did, or blistered by the “scud” of the angular atoms. The “norther” continues for hours, sometimes for days. It departs as suddenly as it came, carrying its baneful influence to lands farther south.

It is past, and the sand-hills have assumed a different shape. The ridges trend differently. Some have disappeared, and valleys yawn open where they stood!

Such are the shores of Anahuac—the shores of the Mexican Sea. Without commerce—almost harbourless—a waste of sand; but a waste of striking appearance and picturesque beauty.

To horse and inwards! Adieu to the bright blue waters of the Gulf!

We have crossed the sand-ridges of the coast, and are riding through the shadowy aisles of the forest. It is a tropical forest. The outlines of the leaves, their breadth, their glowing colours all reveal this. The eye roams with delight over a frondage that partakes equally of the gold and the green. It revels along waxen leaves, as those of the magnolia, the plantain, and the banana. It is led upward by the rounded trunks of the palms, that like columns appear to support the leafy canopy above. It penetrates the network of vines, or follows the diagonal direction of gigantic llianas, that creep like monster serpents from tree to tree. It gazes with pleased wonder upon the huge bamboo-briars and tree-ferns. Wherever it turns, flowers open their corollas to meet its delighted glance—tropical tree-flowers, blossoms of the scarlet vine, and

trumpet-shaped tubes of the bignonia.

I turn my eyes to every side, and gaze upon a flora to me strange and interesting. I behold the tall stems of the palma real, rising one hundred feet without leaf or branch, and supporting a parachute of feathery fronds that wave to the slightest impulse of the breeze. Beside it I see its constant companion, the Indian cane—a small palm-tree, whose slender trunk and low stature contrast oddly with the colossal proportions of its lordly protector. I behold the corozo—of the same genus with the palma real—its light feathery frondage streaming outwards and bending downwards, as if to protect from the hot sun the globe-shaped nuts that hang in grape-like clusters beneath. I see the abanico, with its enormous fan-shaped leaves; the wax-palm distilling its resinous gum; and the acrocomia, with its thorny trunk and enormous racemes of golden fruits. By the side of the stream I guide my horse among the columnar stems of the noble coeva, which has been enthusiastically but appropriately termed the “bread of life” (pan de vida).

I gaze with wonder upon the ferns, those strange creatures of the vegetable world, that upon the hillsides of my own far island-home scarce reach the knee in height. Here they are arborescent—tree-ferns—rivalling their cousins the palms in stature, and like them, with their tall, straight stems and lobed leaves, contributing to the picturesqueness of the landscape. I admire the beautiful mammey with its great oval fruit and saffron pulp. I ride under the spreading limbs of the mahogany-tree, marking its oval pinnate leaves, and the egg-like seed capsules that hang from its branches; thinking as well of the brilliant surfaces that lie concealed within its dark and knotty trunk. Onward I ride, through glistening foliage and glowing flowers, that, under the beams of a tropic sun, present the varying hues of the rainbow.

There is no wind—scarcely a breath stirring; yet here and there the leaves are in motion. The wings of bright birds flash before the eye, passing from tree to tree. The gaudy tanagers, that cannot be tamed—the noisy lories, the resplendent trogons, the

toucans with their huge clumsy bills, and the tiny bee-birds (the trochili and colibri)—all glance through the sunny vistas.

The carpenter-bird—the great woodpecker—hangs against the decayed trunk of some dead tree, beating the hollow bark, and now and then sounding his clarion note, which is heard to the distance of a mile. Out of the underwood springs the crested curassow; or, basking in the sun-lit glades, with outspread wings gleaming with metallic lustre, may be seen the beautiful turkey of Honduras.

The graceful roe (Gervus Mexicanus) bounds forward, startled by the tread of the advancing horse. The caiman crawls lazily along the bank, or hides his hideous body under the water of a sluggish stream, and the not less hideous form of the iguana, recognised by its serrated crest, is seen crawling up the tree-trunk or lying along the slope of a lliana. The green lizard scuttles along the path—the basilisk looks with glistening eyes from the dark interstices of some corrugated vine—the biting peckotin glides among the dry leaves in pursuit of its insect prey—and the chameleon advances sluggishly along the branches, while it assumes their colour to deceive its victims.

Serpent forms present themselves: now and then the huge boa and the macaurel, twining the trees. The great tiger-snake is seen with its head raised half a yard from the surface; the cascabel, too, coiled like a cable; and the coral-snake with his red and ringed body stretched at full length along the ground. The two last, though inferior in size to the boas, are more to be dreaded; and my horse springs back when he sees the one glistening through the grass, or hears the “skir-r-r-r” of the other threatening to strike.

Quadrupeds and quadrumana appear. The red monkey (Mono Colorado) runs at the traveller’s approach, and, flinging himself from limb to limb, hides among the vines and Tillandsia on the high tree-tops; and the tiny ouistiti, with its pretty, child-like countenance, peers innocently through the leaves; while the ferocious zambo fills

the woods with its hideous, half-human voice.

The jaguar is not far distant, “laired” in the secret depths of the impenetrable jungle. His activity is nocturnal, and his beautiful spotted body may not be seen except by the silver light of the moon. Roused by accident, or pressed by the dogs of the hunter, he may cross my path. So, too, may the ocelot and the lynx; or, as I ride silently on, I may chance to view the long, tawny form of the Mexican lion, crouched upon a horizontal limb, and watching for the timid stag that must pass beneath. I turn prudently aside, and leave him to his hungry vigil.

Night brings a change. The beautiful birds—the parrots, the toucans, and the trogons—all go to rest at an early hour; and other winged creatures take possession of the air. Some need not fear the darkness, for their very life is light. Such are the “cocuyos”, whose brilliant lamps of green and gold and flame, gleam through the aisles of the forest, until the air seems on fire. Such, too, are the “gusanitos”, the female of which—a wingless insect, like a glow-worm—lies along the leaf, while her mate whirrs gaily around, shedding his most captivating gleams as he woos her upon the wing. But, though light is the life of these beautiful creatures, it is often the cause of their death. It guides their enemies—the night-hawk and the “whip-poor-will”, the bat, and the owl. Of these last, the hideous vampire may be seen flapping his broad dark wings in quick, irregular turnings, and the great “lechuza” (Strix Mexicana), issuing from his dark tree-cave, utters his fearful notes, that resemble the moanings of one who is being hanged. Now may be heard the scream of the cougar, and the hoarser voice of the Mexican tiger. Now may be heard the wild, disagreeable cries of the howling monkeys (alouattes), and the barking of the dog-wolf; and, blending with these, the croaking of the tree-toads and the shrill tinkling of the bell-frog. Perhaps the air is no longer, as in the daytime, filled with sweet perfumes. The aroma of a thousand flowers has yielded to the fetid odour of the skunk (Mephitis chinga)—for that singular creature is abroad, and, having quarrelled with one of the forest denizens, has caused all of them to feel the power

of its resentment.

Such are some of the features of the tropical forest that lies between the Gulf and the Mexican mountains. But the aspect of this region is not all wild. There are cultivated districts—settlements, though far apart.

The forest opens, and the scene suddenly changes. Before me is a plantation—the hacienda of a “rico”. There are wide fields tilled by peon serfs, who labour and sing; but their song is sad. Its music is melancholy. It is the voice of a conquered race.

Yet the scene around them is gay and joyful. All but the people appears to prosper. Vegetation luxuriates in its fullest growth. Both fruit and flower exhibit the hues of a perfect development. Man alone seems stunted in his outlines.

There is a beautiful stream meandering through the open fields. Its waters are clear and cool. They are the melted snows of Orizava. Upon its banks grow clumps of the cocoa-palm and the majestic plantain. There are gardens upon its banks, and orchards filled with the fruit-trees of the tropics. I see the orange with its golden globes, the sweet lime, the shaddock, and the guava-tree. I ride under the shade of the aguacate (Laurus Persea), and pluck the luscious fruits of the cherimolla. The breeze blowing over fields carries on its wings the aroma of the coffee-tree, the indigo-plant, the vanilla bean, or the wholesome cacao (Theobroma Cacao); and, far as the eye can reach, I see glancing gaily in the sun the green spears and golden tassels of the sugar-cane.

Interesting is the aspect of the tropical forest. Not less so is that of the tropical field.

I ride onward and inward into the land. I am gradually ascending from the sea-level. I no longer travel upon horizontal paths, but over hills and steep ridges, across deep valleys and ravines. The hoof of my horse no longer sinks in light sand or dark alluvion. It rings upon rocks of amygdaloid and porphyry. The soil is changed; the scenery has undergone a change, and even the atmosphere that surrounds me. The last is perceptibly cooler, but not yet cold. I am still in the piedmont lands—the

tierras calientes. The templadas are yet far higher. I am only a thousand yards or so above sea-level. I am in the “foot-hills” of the Northern Andes.

How sudden is this change! It is less than an hour since I parted from the plains below, and yet the surface-aspect around me is like that of another land. I halt in a wild spot, and survey it with eyes that wander and wonder. The leaf is less broad, the foliage less dense, the jungle more open. There are ridges whose sides are nearly naked of tree-timber. The palms have disappeared, but in their place grow kindred forms that in many respects resemble them. They are, in fact, the palms of the mountains. I behold the great palmetto (Chamcerops), with its fan-like fronds standing out upon long petioles from its lofty summit; the yuccas, with their bayonet-shaped leaves, ungraceful, but picturesque, with ponderous clusters of green and pulpy capsules. I behold the pita aloe, with its tall flower-stalk and thorny sun-scorched leaves. I behold strange forms of the cactus, with their glorious wax-like blossoms; the cochineal, the tuna, the opuntias—the great tree-cactus “Foconoztle” (Opuntia arborescens), and the tall “pitahaya” (Cereus giganteus), with columnar shafts and straight upright arms, like the branches of gigantic candelabra; the echino-cacti, too—those huge mammals of the vegetable world, resting their globular or egg-shaped forms, without trunk or stalk, upon the surface of the earth.

There, too, I behold gigantic thistles (cardonales) and mimosas, both shrubby and arborescent—the tree-mimosa, and the sensitive-plant (Mimosa frutescens), that shrinks at my approach, and closes its delicate leaflets until I have passed out of sight. This is the favourite land of the acacia; and immense tracts, covered with its various species, form impenetrable thickets (chapparals). I distinguish in these thickets the honey-locust, with its long purple legumes, the “algarobo” (carob-tree), and the thorny “mezquite”; and, rising over all the rest, I descry the tall, slender stem of the Fouquiera splendens, with panicles of cube-shaped crimson flowers.

There is less of animal life here; but even these wild ridges have their denizens. The

cochineal insect crawls upon the cactus leaf, and huge winged ants build their clay nests upon the branches of the acacia-tree. The ant-bear squats upon the ground, and projects his glutinous tongue over the beaten highway, where the busy insects rob the mimosse of their aromatic leaves. The armadillo, with his bands and rhomboidal scales, takes refuge in the dry recesses of the rocks, or, clewing himself up, rolls over the cliff to escape his pursuer. Herds of cattle, half wild, roam through the glassy glades or over the tufted ridges, lowing for water; and black vultures (zopilotes) sail through the cloudless heavens, waiting for some scene of death to be enacted in the thickets below.

Here, too, I pass through scenes of cultivation. Here is the hut of the peon and the rancho of the small proprietor; but they are structures of a more substantial kind than in the region of the palm. They are of stone. Here, too, is the hacienda, with its low white walls and prison-like windows; and the pueblita, with its church and cross and gaily-painted steeple. Here the Indian corn takes the place of the sugarcane, and I ride through wide fields of the broad-leafed tobacco-plant. Here grow the jalap and the guaiacum, the sweet-scented sassafras and the sanitary copaiba.

I ride onward, climbing steep ridges and descending into chasms (barrancas) that yawn deeply and gloomily. Many of these are thousands of feet in depth; and the road that enables me to reach their bottoms is often no more than a narrow ledge of the impending cliff, running terrace-like over a foaming torrent.

Still onward and upward I go, until the “foot-hills” are passed, and I enter a defile of the mountains themselves—a pass of the Mexican Andes.

I ride through, under the shadow of dark forests and rocks of blue porphyry. I emerge upon the other side of the sierra. A new scene opens before my eyes—a scene of such soft loveliness that I suddenly rein up my horse, and gaze upon it with mingled feelings of admiration and astonishment. I am looking upon one of the “valles” of Mexico, those great table-plains that lie within the Cordilleras of the

Andes, thousands of feet above ocean-level, and, along with these mountains, stretching from the tropic almost to the shores of the Arctic Sea.

The plain before me is level, as though its surface were liquid. I see mountains bounding it on all sides; but there are passes through them that lead into other plains (valus). These mountains have no foot-hills. They stand up directly from the plain itself, sometimes with sloping conical sides—sometimes in precipitous cliffs.

I ride into the plain and survey its features. There is no resemblance to the land I have left—the tierra caliente. I am now in the tierra templada. New objects present themselves—a new aspect is before, a new atmosphere around me. The air is colder, but it is only the temperature of spring. To me it feels chilly, coming so lately from the hot lands below; and I fold my cloak closely around me, and ride on.

The view is open, for the valu is almost treeless. The scene is no longer wild. The earth has a cultivated aspect—an aspect of civilisation: for these high plateaux—the tierras templadas—are the seat of Mexican civilisation. Here are the towns—the great cities, with their rich cathedrals and convents—here dwells the bulk of the population. Here the rancho is built of unburnt bricks (adobe's)—a mud cabin, often inclosed by hedges of the columnar cactus. Here are whole villages of such huts, inhabited by the dark-skinned descendants of the ancient Aztecs.

Fertile fields are around me. I behold the maguey of culture (Agave Americana), in all its giant proportions. The lance-like blades of the zea maize wave with a rich rustling in the breeze, for here that beautiful plant grows in its greatest luxuriance. Immense plains are covered with wheat, with capsicum, and the Spanish bean (frijoles). My eyes are gladdened by the sight of roses climbing along the wall or twining the portal. Here, too, the potato (Solanum tuberosum) flourishes in its native soil; the pear and the pomegranate, the quince and the apple, are seen in the orchard; and the cereals of the temperate zone grow side by side with the Cucurbitacece of the tropics.

I pass from one valu into another, by crossing a low ridge of the dividing mountains. Mark the change! A surface of green is before me, reaching on all sides to the mountain foot; and upon this roam countless herds, tended by mounted “vaqueros” (herdsmen).

I pass another ridge, and another valid stretches before me. Again a change! A desert of sand, over the surface of which move tall dun columns of swirling dust, like the gigantic phantoms of some spirit-world. I look into another valle, and behold shining waters—lakes like inland seas—with sedgy shores and surrounded by green savannas, and vast swamps covered with reeds and “tulares” (bulrush).

Still another plain, black with lava and the scoriae of extinct volcanoes—black, treeless, and herbless—with not an atom of organic matter upon its desolate surface.

Such are the features of the plateau-land—varied, and vast, and full of wild interest.

I leave it and climb higher—nearer to the sky—up the steep sides of the Cordilleras—up to the tierra fria.

I stand ten thousand feet above the level of the ocean. I am under the deep shadows of a forest. Huge trunks grow around me, hindering a distant view. Where am I? Not in the tropic, surely, for these trees are of a northern sylva. I recognise the gnarled limbs and lobed leaves of the oak, the silvery branches of the mountain-ash, the cones and needles of the pine. The wind, as it swirls among the dead leaves, causes me to shiver; and high up among the twigs there is the music of winter in its moaning. Yet I am in the torrid zone; and the same sun that now glances coldly through the boughs of the oak, but a few hours before scorched me as it glistened from the fronds of the palm-tree.

The forest opens, and I behold hills under culture—fields of hemp and flax, and the hardy cereals of the frigid zone. The rancho of the husbandman is a log cabin, with shingled roof and long projecting eaves, unlike the dwellings either of the great valus or the tierras calientes. I pass the smoking pits of the “carbonero”, and I meet

the “arriero” with his “atajo” of mules heavily laden with ice of the glaciers. They are passing with their cargoes, to cool the wine-cups in the great cities of the plains.

Upward and upward! The oak is left behind, and the pine grows stunted and dwarfish. The wind blows colder and colder. A wintry aspect is around me.

Upward still. The pine disappears. No vegetable form is seen save the mosses and lichens that cling to the rocks, as within the Arctic Circle. I am on the selvage of the snow—the eternal snow. I walk upon glaciers, and through their translucent mass I behold the lichens growing beneath.

The scene is bleak and desolate, and I am chilled to the marrow of my bones.

Excelsior! excelsior! The highest point is not yet reached. Through drifts of snow and over fields of ice, up steep ledges, along the slippery escarpment that overhangs the giddy abysm, with wearied knees, and panting breath, and frozen fingers, onward and upward I go. Ha! I have won the goal. I am on the summit!

I stand on the “cumbre” of Orizava—the mountain of the “burning star”—more than three miles above the ocean level. My face is turned to the east, and I look downward. The snow, the cincture of lichens and naked rocks, the dark belt of pines, the lighter foliage of the oaks, the fields of barley, the waving maize, the thickets of yucca and acacia trees, the palm forest, the shore, the sea itself with its azure waves—all these at a single vision! From the summit of Orizava to the shores of the Mexican Sea, I glance through every gradation of the thermal line. I am looking, as it were, from the pole to the equator!

I am alone. My brain is giddy. My pulse vibrates irregularly, and my heart beats with an audible distinctness. I am oppressed with a sense of my own nothingness—an atom, almost invisible, upon the breast of the mighty earth.

I gaze and listen. I see, but I hear not. Here is sight, but no sound. Around me reigns an awful stillness—the sublime silence of the Omnipotent, who alone is here.

Hark! the silence is broken! Was it the rumbling of thunder? No. It was the crash of

the falling avalanche. I tremble at its voice. It is the voice of the Invisible—the whisper of a God!

I tremble and worship.

Reader, could you thus stand upon the summit of Orizava, and look down to the shores of the Mexican Gulf, you would have before you, as on a map, the scene of our “adventures.”

Note 1. Anahuac is Mexico.

Note 2. Jornada is a day’s journey.

Note 3. Pescador is a fisherman.

Note 4. Vomito is yellow-fever.

Note 5. Mexico is divided into three regions, known as the “hot” (caliente), “temperate” (templada), and “cold” (fria).

Note 6. Carbonero is charcoal-burner.

Note 7. Arriero is mule-driver.

Chapter Two.

An Adventure among the Creoles of New Orleans.

In the “fall” of 1846 I found myself in the city of New Orleans, filling up one of those pauses that occur between the chapters of an eventful life—doing nothing. I have said an eventful life. In the retrospect of ten years, I could not remember as many weeks spent in one place. I had traversed the continent from north to south, and crossed it from sea to sea. My foot had pressed the summits of the Andes, and climbed the Cordilleras of the Sierra Madre. I had steamed it down the Mississippi, and sculled it up the Orinoco. I had hunted buffaloes with the Pawnees of the Platte, and ostriches upon the pampas of the Plata: to-day, shivering in the hut of an Esquimaux—a month after, taking my siesta in an aery couch under the gossamer

frondage of the corozo palm. I had eaten raw meat with the trappers of the Rocky Mountains, and roast monkey among the Mosquito Indians; and much more, which might weary the reader, and ought to have made the writer a wiser man. But, I fear, the spirit of adventure—its thirst—is within me slakeless. I had just returned from a "scurry" among the Comanches of Western Texas, and the idea of "settling down" was as far from my mind as ever.

"What next? what next?" thought I. "Ha! the war with Mexico."

The war between the United States and that country had now fairly commenced. My sword—a fine Toledo, taken from a Spanish officer at San Jacinto—hung over the mantel, rusting ingloriously. Near it were my pistols—a pair of Colt's revolvers—pointing at each other in sullen muteness. A warlike ardour seized upon me, and clutching, not the sword, but my pen, I wrote to the War Department for a commission; and, summoning all my patience, awaited the answer.

But I waited in vain. Every bulletin from Washington exhibited its list of new-made officers, but my name appeared not among them. In New Orleans—that most patriotic of republican cities—epaulettes gleamed upon every shoulder, whilst I, with the anguish of a Tantalus, was compelled to look idly and enviously on. Despatches came in daily from the seat of war, filled with newly-glorious names; and steamers from the same quarter brought fresh batches of heroes—some legless, some armless, and others with a bullet-hole through the cheek, and perhaps the loss of a dozen teeth or so; but all thickly covered with laurels.

November came, but no commission. Impatience and ennui had fairly mastered me. The time hung heavily upon my hands.

"How can I best pass the hour? I shall go to the French opera, and hear Calve."

Such were my reflections as I sat one evening in my solitary chamber. In obedience to this impulse, I repaired to the theatre; but the bellicose strains of the opera, instead of soothing, only heightened my warlike enthusiasm, and I walked

homeward, abusing, as I went, the president and the secretary-at-war, and the whole government—legislative, judicial, and executive. “Republics are ungrateful,” soliloquised I, in a spiteful mood. “I have ‘surely put in strong enough’ for it; my political connections—besides, the government owes me a favour—”

“Cl’ar out, ye niggers! What de yer want?”

This was a voice that reached me as I passed through the dark corner of the Faubourg Tremé. Then followed some exclamations in French; a scuffle ensued, a pistol went off, and I heard the same voice again calling out:

“Four till one! Injuns! Murder! Help, hyur!”

I ran up. It was very dark; but the glimmer of a distant lamp enabled me to perceive a man out in the middle of the street, defending himself against four others. He was a man of giant size, and flourished a bright weapon, which I took to be a bowie-knife, while his assailants struck at him on all sides with sticks and stilettoes. A small boy ran back and forth upon the banquette, calling for help.

Supposing it to be some street quarrel, I endeavoured to separate the parties by remonstrance. I rushed between them, holding out my cane; but a sharp cut across the knuckles, which I had received from one of the small men, together with his evident intention to follow it up, robbed me of all zest for pacific meditation; and, keeping my eye upon the one who had cut me, I drew a pistol (I could not otherwise defend myself), and fired. The man fell dead in his tracks, without a groan. His comrades, hearing me re-cock, took to their heels, and disappeared up a neighbouring alley.

The whole scene did not occupy the time you have spent in reading this relation of it. One minute I was plodding quietly homeward; the next, I stood in the middle of the street; beside me a stranger of gigantic proportions; at my feet a black mass of dead humanity, half doubled up in the mud as it had fallen; on the banquette, the slight, shivering form of a boy; while above and around were silence and darkness.

I was beginning to fancy the whole thing a dream, when the voice of the man at my side dispelled this illusion.

“Mister,” said he, placing his arms akimbo, and facing me, “if ye’ll tell me yur name, I ain’t a-gwine to forgit it. No, Bob Linkin ain’t that sorter.”

“What! Bob Lincoln? Bob Lincoln of the Peaks?”

In the voice I had recognised a celebrated mountain trapper, and an old acquaintance, whom I had not met for several years.

“Why, Lord save us from Injuns! it ain’t you, Cap’n Haller? May I be dog-goned if it ain’t! Whooray!—whoop! I knowed it warn’t no store-keeper fired that shot. Haroo! whar are yur, Jack?”

“Here I am,” answered the boy, from the pavement.

“Kum hyur, then. Ye ain’t badly skeert, air yur?”

“No,” firmly responded the boy, crossing over.

“I tuk him from a scoundrelly Crow thet I overhauled on a fork of the Yellerstone. He gin me a long pedigree, that is, afore I kilt the skunk. He made out as how his people hed tuk the boy from the Kimanches, who hed brought him from somewhar down the Grande. I know’d it wur all bamboozle. The boy’s white—American white. Who ever seed a yeller-hided Mexikin with them eyes and ha’r? Jack, this hyur’s Cap’n Haller. If yur kin iver save his life by givin’ yur own, yur must do it, de ye hear?”

“I will,” said the boy resolutely.

“Come, Lincoln,” I interposed, “these conditions are not necessary. You remember I was in your debt.”

“Ain’t worth mentioning Cap; let bygones be bygones!”

“But what brought you to New Orleans? or, more particularly, how came you into this scrape?”

“Wal, Cap’n, bein’ as the last question is the most partickler, I’ll gin yur the answer to it fust. I hed jest twelve dollars in my pouch, an’ I tuk a idee inter my head thet I mout as well double it. So I stepped into a shanty whar they wur a-playin’ craps. After bettin’ a good spell, I won somewhar about a hundred dollars. Not likin’ the sign I seed about, I tuk Jack and put out. Wal, jest as I was kummin’ roun’ this hyur corner, four fellers—them ye seed—run out and jumped me, like so many catamounts. I tuk them for the same chaps I hed seed parley vooin’ at the craps-table; an’ tho’t they wur only jokin’, till one of them gin me a sockdolloger over the head, an’ fired a pistol. I then drewed my bowie, an’ the skrimmage begun; an’ thet’s all I know about it, cap’n, more’n yurself.

“Let’s see if it’s all up with this’n,” continued the hunter, stooping. “I’deed, yes,” he drawled out; “dead as a buck. Thunder! ye’ve gin it him atween the eyes, plum. He is one of the fellers, es my name’s Bob Linkin. I kud sw’ar to them mowstaches among a million.”

At this moment a patrol of night gendarmes came up; and Lincoln, and Jack, and myself were carried off to the calaboose, where we spent the remainder of the night. In the morning we were brought before the recorder; but I had taken the precaution to send for some friends, who introduced me to his worship in a proper manner. As my story corroborated Lincoln’s, and his mine, and “Jack’s” substantiated both; and as the comrades of the dead Creole did not appear, and he himself was identified by the police as a notorious robber, the recorder dismissed the case as one of “justifiable homicide in self-defence”; and the hunter and I were permitted to go our way without further interruption.

Note. Craps is a game of dice.

Chapter Three.

A Volunteer Rendezvous.

“Now, Cap,” said Lincoln, as we seated ourselves at the table of a café, “I’ll answer t’other question yur put last night. I wur up on the head of Arkansaw, an’ hearin’ they wur raisin’ volunteers down hyur, I kim down ter jine. It ain’t often I trouble the settlements; but I’ve a mighty puncheon, as the Frenchmen says, to hev a crack at them yeller-bellies. I hain’t forgot a mean trick they sarved me two yeern ago, up thar by Santer Fé.”

“And so you have joined the volunteers?”

“That’s sartin. But why ain’t you a-gwine to Mexico? That ’ere’s a wonder to me, cap, why you ain’t. Thur’s a mighty grist o’ venturin’, I heern; beats Injun fightin’ all holler, an’ yur jest the beaver I’d ’spect to find in that ’ar dam. Why don’t you go?”

“So I purposed long since, and wrote on to Washington for a commission; but the government seems to have forgotten me.”

“Dod rot the government! git a commission for yourself.”

“How?” I asked.

“Jine us, an’ be illected—thet’s how.”

This had crossed my mind before; but, believing myself a stranger among these volunteers, I had given up the idea. Once joined, he who failed in being elected an officer was fated to shoulder a firelock. It was neck or nothing then. Lincoln set things in a new light. They were strangers to each other, he affirmed, and my chances of being elected would therefore be as good as any man’s.

“I’ll tell yur what it is,” said he; “yur kin turn with me ter the rendevooz, an’ see for yurself; but if ye’ll only jine, an’ licker freely, I’ll lay a pack o’ beaver agin the skin of a mink that they’ll illect ye captain of the company.”

“Even a lieutenancy,” I interposed.

“Ne’er a bit of it, cap. Go the big figger. ’Tain’t more nor yur entitled to. I kin git

yur a good heist among some hunters thet's thur; but thar's a buffalo drove o' them parleyvoos, an' a feller among 'em, one of these hyur creeholes, that's been a-showin' off and fencin' with a pair of skewers from mornin' till night. I'd be dog-gone glad to see the starch taken out o' that feller."

I took my resolution. In half an hour after I was standing in a large hall or armoury. It was the rendezvous of the volunteers, nearly all of whom were present; and perhaps a more variegated assemblage was never grouped together. Every nationality seemed to have its representative; and for variety of language the company might have rivalled the masons of Babel.

Near the head of the room was a table, upon which lay a large parchment, covered with signatures. I added mine to the list. In the act I had staked my liberty. It was an oath.

"These are my rivals—the candidates for office," thought I, looking at a group who stood near the table. They were men of better appearance than the hoi polloi. Some of them already affected a half-undress uniform, and most wore forage-caps with glazed covers, and army buttons over the ears.

"Ha! Clayley!" said I, recognising an old acquaintance. This was a young cotton-planter—a free, dashing spirit,—who had sacrificed a fortune at the shrines of Momus and Bacchus.

"Why, Haller, old fellow! glad to see you. How have you been? Think of going with us?"

"Yes, I have signed. Who is that man?"

"He's a Creole; his name is Dubrosc."

It was a face purely Norman, and one that would halt the wandering eye in any collection. Of oval outline, framed by a profusion of black hair, wavy and perfumed. A round black eye, spanned by brows arching and glossy. Whiskers that belonged rather to the chin, leaving bare the jawbone, expressive of firmness and resolve.

Firm thin lips, handsomely moustached; when parted, displaying teeth well set and of dazzling whiteness. A face that might be called beautiful; and yet its beauty was of that negative order which we admire in the serpent and the pard. The smile was cynical; the eye cold, yet bright; but the brightness was altogether animal—more the light of instinct than intellect. A face that presented in its expression a strange admixture of the lovely and the hideous—physically fair, morally dark—beautiful, yet brutal!

From some undefinable cause, I at once conceived for this man a strange feeling of dislike. It was he of whom Lincoln had spoken, and who was likely to be my rival for the captaincy. Was it this that rendered him repulsive? No. There was a cause beyond. In him I recognised one of those abandoned natures who shrink from all honest labour, and live upon the sacrificial fondness of some weak being who has been enslaved by their personal attractions. There are many such. I have met them in the jardins of Paris; in the casinos of London; in the cafés of Havanna, and the "quadroon" balls of New Orleans—everywhere in the crowded haunts of the world. I have met them with an instinct of loathing—an instinct of antagonism.

"The fellow is likely to be our captain," whispered Clayley, noticing that I observed the man with more than ordinary attention. "By the way," continued he, "I don't half like it. I believe he's an infernal scoundrel."

"Such are my impressions. But if that be his character, how can he be elected?"

"Oh! no one here knows another; and this fellow is a splendid swordsman, like all the Creoles, you know. He has used the trick to advantage, and has created an impression. By the by, now I recollect, you are no slouch at that yourself. What are you up for?"

"Captain," I replied.

"Good! Then we must go the 'whole hog' in your favour. I have put in for the first lieutenancy, so we won't run foul of each other. Let us 'hitch teams'."

“With all my heart,” said I.

“You came in with that long-bearded hunter. Is he your friend?”

“He is.”

“Then I can tell you that among these fellows he’s a ‘whole team, and a cross dog under the waggon’ to boot. See him! he’s at it already.”

I had noticed Lincoln in conversation with several leather-legging gentry like himself, whom I knew from their costume and appearance to be backwoodsmen. All at once these saturnine characters commenced moving about the room, and entering into conversation with men whom they had not hitherto deigned to notice.

“They are canvassing,” said Clayley.

Lincoln, brushing past, whispered in my ear, “Cap’n, I understan’ these hyur critters better’n you kin. Yer must mix among ’em—mix and licker—thet’s the idee.”

“Good advice,” said Clayley; “but if you could only take the shine out of that fellow at fencing, the thing’s done at once. By Jove! I think you might do it, Haller!”

“I have made up my mind to try, at all events.”

“Not until the last day—a few hours before the election.”

“You are right. It would be better to wait; I shall take your advice. In the meantime let us follow that of Lincoln—‘mix and licker’.”

“Ha! ha!” laughed Clayley; “let us come, boys,” he added, turning to a very thirsty-looking group, “let’s all take a ‘smile’. Here, Captain Haller! allow me to introduce you;” and the next moment I was introduced to a crowd of very seedy-looking gentlemen, and the moment after we were clinking glasses, and chatting as familiarly as if we had been friends of forty years’ standing.

During the next three days the enrolment continued, and the canvass was kept up with energy. The election was to take place on the evening of the fourth.

Meanwhile my dislike for my rival had been strengthened by closer observation;

and, as is general in such cases, the feeling was reciprocal.

On the afternoon of the day in question we stood before each other, foil in hand, both of us nerved by an intense, though as yet unspoken, enmity. This had been observed by most of the spectators, who approached and formed a circle around us; all of them highly interested in the result—which, they knew, would be an index to the election.

The room was an armoury, and all kinds of weapons for military practice were kept in it. Each had helped himself to his foil. One of the weapons was without a button, and sharp enough to be dangerous in the hands of an angry man. I noticed that my antagonist had chosen this one.

“Your foil is not in order; it has lost the button, has it not?” I observed.

“Ah! monsieur, pardon. I did not perceive that.”

“A strange oversight,” muttered Clayley, with a significant glance.

The Frenchman returned the imperfect foil, and took another.

“Have you a choice, monsieur?” I inquired.

“No, thank you; I am satisfied.”

By this time every person in the rendezvous had come up, and waited with breathless anxiety. We stood face to face, more like two men about to engage in deadly duel than a pair of amateurs with blunt foils. My antagonist was evidently a practised swordsman. I could see that as he came to guard. As for myself, the small-sword exercise had been a foible of my college days, and for years I had not met my match at it; but just then I was out of practice.

We commenced unsteadily. Both were excited by unusual emotions, and our first thrusts were neither skilfully aimed nor parried. We fenced with the energy of anger, and the sparks crackled from the friction of the grazing steel. For several minutes it was a doubtful contest; but I grew cooler every instant, while a slight advantage I

had gained irritated my adversary. At length, by a lucky hit, I succeeded in planting the button of my foil upon his cheek. A cheer greeted this, and I could hear the voice of Lincoln shouting out:

“Wal done, cap’n! Whooray for the mountain-men!” This added to the exasperation of the Frenchman, causing him to strike wilder than before; and I found no difficulty in repeating my former thrust. It was now a sure hit; and after a few passes I thrust my adversary for the third time, drawing blood. The cheer rang out louder than before. The Frenchman could no longer conceal his mortification; and, grasping his foil in both hands, he snapped it over his knee, with an oath. Then, muttering some word about “better weapons” and “another opportunity”, he strode off among the spectators. Two hours after the combat I was his captain. Clayley was elected first lieutenant, and in a week from that time the company was “mustered” into the service of the United States government, and armed and equipped as an independent corps of “Rifle Rangers”. On the 20th of January, 1847, a noble ship was bearing us over the blue water, toward the shores of a hostile land.

Chapter Four.

Life on the Island of Lobos.

After calling at Brazos Santiago, we were ordered to land upon the island of Lobos, fifty miles north of Vera Cruz. This was to be our “drill rendezvous.” We soon reached the island. Detachments from several regiments debarked together; the jungle was attacked; and in a few hours the green grove had disappeared, and in its place stood the white pyramids of canvas with their floating flags. It was the work of a day. When the sun rose over Lobos it was a desert isle, thickly covered with a jungle of mangrove, manzanel, and icaco trees, green as an emerald. How changed the scene! When the moon looked down upon this same islet it seemed as if a warlike city had sprung suddenly out of the sea, with a navy at anchor in front of its bannered walls!

In a few days six full regiments had encamped upon the hitherto uninhabited island, and nothing was heard but the voice of war.

These regiments were all “raw”; and my duty, with others, consisted in “licking them into shape”. It was drill, drill, from morning till night; and, by early tattoo, I was always glad to crawl into my tent and go to sleep—such sleep as a man can get among scorpions, lizards, and soldier-crabs; for the little islet seemed to have within its boundaries a specimen of every reptile that came safely out of the ark.

The 22nd of February being Washington’s birthday, I could not get to bed as usual. I was compelled to accept an invitation, obtained by Clayley, to the tent of Major Twing, where they were—using Clayley’s own words—“to have a night of it.”

After tattoo we set out for the major’s marquee, which lay near the centre of the islet, in a coppice of caoutchouc-trees. We had no difficulty in finding it, guided by the jingling of glasses and the mingling of many voices in boisterous laughter.

As we came near, we could perceive that the marquee had been enlarged by tucking up the flaps in front, with the addition of a fly stretched over an extra ridge-pole. Several pieces of rough plank, spirited away from the ship, resting upon empty bread-barrels, formed the table. Upon this might be recognised every variety of bottles, glasses, and cups. Open boxes of sardines, piles of ship-biscuits, and segments of cheese filled the intervening spaces. Freshly-drawn corks and glistening fragments of lead were strewed around, while a number of dark conical objects under the table told that not a few champagne bottles were already “down among the dead men.”

On each side of the table was a row of colonels, captains, subalterns, and doctors seated without regard to rank or age, according to the order in which they had “dropped in”. There were also some naval officers, and a sprinkling of strange, half-sailor-looking men, the skippers of transport brigs, steamboats, etcetera; for Twing for a thorough republican in his entertainments; besides, the day levelled all

distinctions.

At the head of the table was the major himself, who always carried a large pewter flask suspended from his shoulders by a green string, and without this flask no one ever saw Major Twing. He could not have stuck to it more closely had it been his badge of rank. It was not unusual, on the route, to hear some wearied officer exclaim, “If I only had a pull at old Twing’s pewter!” and “equal to Twing’s flask” was an expression which stamped the quality of any liquor as superfine. Such was one of the major’s peculiarities, though by no means the only one.

As my friend and I made our appearance under the fly, the company was in high glee, everyone enjoying himself with that freedom from restraint of rank peculiar to the American army-service. Clayley was a great favourite with the major, and at once caught his eye.

“Ha, Clayley! that you? Walk in with your friend. Find seats there, gentlemen.”

“Captain Haller—Major Twing,” said Clayley, introducing me.

“Happy to know you, Captain. Can you find seats there? No. Come up this way. Cudjo, boy! run over to Colonel Marshall’s tent, and steal a couple of stools. Adge, twist the neck off that bottle. Where’s the screw? Hang that screw! Where is it anyhow?”

“Never mind the screw, Mage,” cried the adjutant; “I’ve got a patent universal here.” So saying, this gentleman held out a champagne bottle in his left hand, and with a down-stroke of his right cut the neck off, as square as if it had been filed.

“Nate!” ejaculated Hennessy, an Irish officer, who sat near the head of the table, and who evidently admired that sort of thing.

“What we call a Kentucky corkscrew,” said the adjutant coolly. “It offers a double advantage. It saves time, and you got the wine clear of—”

“My respects, gentlemen! Captain Haller—Mr Clayley.”

“Thank you, Major Twing. To you, sir.”

“Ha! the stools at last! Only one! Come, gentlemen, squeeze yourselves up this way. Here, Clayley, old boy; here’s a cartridge-box. Adge! up-end that box. So—give us your fist, old fellow; how are you? Sit down, Captain; sit down. Cigars, there!”

At that moment the report of a musket was heard without the tent, and simultaneously a bullet whistled through the canvas. It knocked the foraging-cap from the head of Captain Hennessy, and, striking a decanter, shivered the glass into a thousand pieces!

“A nate shot that, I don’t care who fired it,” said Hennessy, coolly picking up his cap. “An inch of a miss—good as a mile,” added he, thrusting his thumb into the bullet-hole.

By this time every officer present was upon his feet, most of them rushing towards the front of the marquee. A dozen voices called out together:

“Who fired that gun?”

There was no answer, and several plunged into the thicket in pursuit. The chaparral was dark and silent, and these returned after a fruitless search.

“Some soldier, whose musket has gone off by accident,” suggested Colonel Harding. “The fellow has run away, to avoid being put under arrest.”

“Come, gentlemen, take your sates again,” said Hennessy; “let the poor divil slide—yez may be thankful it wasn’t a shell.”

“You, Captain, have most cause to be grateful for the character of the missile.”

“By my sowl, I don’t know about that!—a shell or a twenty-four would have grazed me all the same; but a big shot would have been mighty inconvanient to the head of my friend Haller, here!”

This was true. My head was nearly in range; and had the shot been a large one, it would have struck me upon the left temple. As it was, I felt the “wind” of the bullet,

and already began to suffer a painful sensation over the eye.

“I’m mighty curious to know which of us the fellow has missed, Captain,” said Hennessy, turning to me as he spoke.

“If it were not a ‘bull’ I should say I hope neither of us. I’m inclined to think, with Colonel Harding, that it was altogether an accident.”

“By the powers! an ugly accident too, that has spoiled five dollars’ worth of an illigant cap, and a pint of as good brandy as ever was mixed with hot water and lemon-juice.”

“Plenty left, Captain,” cried the major. “Come, gentlemen, don’t let this damp us; fill up! till up! Adge, out with the corks! Cudjo, where’s the screw?”

“Never mind the screw, Mage,” cried the adjutant, repeating his old trick upon the neck of a fresh bottle, which, nipped off under the wire, fell upon a heap of others that had preceded it.

And the wine again foamed and sparkled, and glasses circled round, and the noisy revelry waxed as loud as ever. The incident of the shot was soon forgotten. Songs were sung, and stories told, and toasts drunk; and with song and sentiment, and toast and story, and the wild excitement of wit and wine, the night waned away. With many of those young hearts, old with hope and burning with ambition, it was the last “Twenty-second” they would ever celebrate. Half of them never hailed another.

Chapter Five.

A Skeleton Adventure.

It was past midnight when I withdrew from the scene of wassail. My blood was flushed, and I strolled down upon the beach to enjoy the cool fresh breeze that was flowing in from the Mexican Sea.

The scene before me was one of picturesque grandeur, and I paused a moment to gaze upon it. The wine even heightened its loveliness to an illusion.

The full round moon of the tropics was sweeping over a sky of cloudless blue. The stars were eclipsed and scarcely visible, except a few of the larger ones, as the belt of Orion, the planet Venus, and the luminous radii of the Southern Cross.

From my feet a broad band of silver stretched away to the horizon, marking the meridian of the moon. This was broken by the line of coral reef, over which the surf curled and sparkled with a phosphoric brightness. The reef itself, running all round, seemed to gird the islet in a circle of fire. Here only were the waves in motion, as if pressed by some subaqueous and invisible power; for beyond, scarcely a breath stirred the sleeping sea. It lay smooth and silent, while a satellite sky seemed caved out in its azure depths.

On the south, a hundred ships were in the deep roadstead, a cable's length from each other—their hulls, spars, and rigging magnified to gigantic proportions under the deceptive and tremulous moonbeam. They were motionless as if the sea had been frozen around them into a solid crystal. Their flags drooped listlessly down, trailing along the masts, or warped and twined around the halyards.

Up against the easy ascent extended the long rows of white tents, shining under the silvery moonbeam like pyramids of snow. In one a light was still gleaming through the canvas, where, perchance, some soldier sat up, wearily wiping his gun, or burnishing the brasses upon his belts.

Now and then dark forms—human and uniformed—passed to and fro from tent to tent, each returning from a visit to some regimental comrade. At equal distances round the camp others stood upright and motionless, the gleam of the musket showing the sentry on his silent post.

The plunge of an oar, as some boat was rowed out among the anchored ships—the ripple of the light breaker—at intervals the hail of a sentinel, "Who goes there?"—the low parley that followed—the chirp of the cicada in the dark jungle—or the scream of the sea-bird, scared by some submarine enemy from its

watery rest—were the only sounds that disturbed the deep stillness of the night.

I continued my walk along the beach until I had reached that point of the island directly opposite to the mainland of Mexico. Here the chaparral grew thick and tangled, running down to the water's edge, where it ended in a clump of mangroves. As no troops were encamped here, the islet had not been cleared at this point, and the jungle was dark and solitary.

The moon was now going down, and straggling shadows began to fall upon the water.

Certainly some one skulked into the bushes!—a rustling in the leaves—yes! some fellow who has strayed beyond the line of sentries and is afraid to return to camp. Ha! a boat! a skiff it is—a net and buoys! As I live, 'tis a Mexican craft!—who can have brought it here? Some fisherman from the coast of Tuspan. No, he would not venture; it must be—

A strange suspicion flashed across my mind, and I rushed through the mangrove thicket, where I had observed the object a moment before. I had not proceeded fifty yards when I saw the folly of this movement. I found myself in the midst of a labyrinth, dark and dismal, surrounded by a wall of leaves and brambles. The branches of the mangroves, rooted at their tops, barred up the path, and vines laced them together.

"If they be spies," thought I, "I have taken the worst plan to catch them. I may as well go through now. I cannot be distant from the rear of the camp. Ugh! how dismal!"

I pushed on, climbing over fallen trunks, and twining myself through the viny cordage. The creepers clung to my neck—thorns penetrated my skin—the mezquite slapped me in the face, drawing blood. I laid my hand upon a pendent limb; a clammy object struggled under my touch, with a terrified yet spiteful violence, and, freeing itself, sprang over my shoulder, and scampered off among the fallen leaves. I

felt its fetid breath as the cold scales brushed against my cheek. It was the hideous iguana.

A huge bat flapped its sail-like wings in my face, and returned again and again, breathing a mephitic odour that caused me to gasp. Twice I struck at it with my sword, cutting only the empty air. A third time my blade was caught in the trellis of parasites. It was horrible; I felt terrified to contend with such strange enemies.

At length, after a continued struggle, an opening appeared before me—a glade; I rushed to the welcome spot.

“What a relief!” I ejaculated, emerging from the leafy darkness. Suddenly I started back with a cry of horror; my limbs refused to act; the sword fell from my grasp, and I stood palsied and transfixed, as if by a bolt from heaven.

Before me, and not over three paces distant, the image of Death himself rose out of the earth, and stretched forth his skeleton arms to clutch me. It was no phantom. There was the white, naked skull, with its eyeless sockets, the long, flesh-less limbs, the open, serrated ribs, the long, jointed fingers of Death himself.

As my bewildered brain took in these objects I heard a noise in the bushes as of persons engaged in an angry struggle.

“Emile, Emile!” cried a female voice, “you shall not murder him—you shall not!”

“Off! off!—Marie, let me go!” was shouted in the rough accents of a man.

“Oh, no!” continued the female, “you shall not—no—no—no!”

“Curses on the woman! There, let me go now!”

There was a sound as of someone struck with violence—a scream—and at the same moment a human figure rushed out of the bushes, and, confronting me, exclaimed: “Ha! Monsieur le Capitaine! coup pour coup!” I heard no more; a heavy blow, descending upon my temples, deprived me of all power, and I fell senseless to the earth. When I returned to consciousness the first objects I saw were the huge brown

whiskers of Lincoln, then Lincoln himself, then the pale face of the boy Jack; and, finally, the forms of several soldiers of my company. I saw that I was in my own tent and stretched upon my camp-bed.

“What?—howl—what’s the matter!—what’s this?” I said, raising my hands to the bandage of wet linen that bound my temples.

“Keep still, Cap’n,” said Bob, taking my hand from the fillet and placing it by my side.

“Och! by my sowl, he’s over it; thank the Lord for His goodness!” said Chane, an Irish soldier.

“Over what? what has happened to me?” I inquired.

“Och, Captin, yer honour, you’ve been nearly murthered, and all by thim Frinch scoundhrels; bad luck to their dirty frog-atin’ picthers!”

“Murdered! French scoundrels! Bob, what is it?”

“Why, yer see, Cap’n, ye’ve had a cut hyur over the head; and we think it’s them Frenchmen.”

“Oh! I remember now; a blow—but the Death?—the Death?”

I started up from the bed as the phantom of my night adventure returned to my imagination.

“The Death, Cap’n?—what do yer mean?” inquired Lincoln, holding me in his strong arms.

“Oh! the Cap’n manes the skilleton, maybe,” said Chane.

“What skeleton?” I demanded.

“Why, an owld skilleton the boys found in the chaparril, yer honner. They hung it to a three; and we found yer honner there, with the skilleton swinging over ye like a sign. Och! the Frinch bastes!”

I made no further inquiries about the “Death.”

“But where are the Frenchmen?” asked I, after a moment.

“Clane gone, yer honner,” replied Chane.

“Gone?”

“Yes, Cap’n; that’s so as he sez it,” answered Lincoln.

“Gone! What do you mean?” I inquired.

“Desarted, Cap’n.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because they ain’t here.”

“On the island?”

“Searched it all—every bush.”

“But who? which of the French?”

“Dubrosc and that ’ar boy that was always with him—both desarted.”

“You are sure they are missing?”

“Looked high and low, Cap’n. Gravenitz seed Dubrosc steal into the chaparril with his musket. Shortly afterwards we heern a shot, but thought nothin’ of it till this mornin’, when one of the sodgers foun’ a Spanish sombrary out thar; and Chane heern some’dy say the shot passed through Major Twing’s markey. Besides, we foun’ this butcher-knife where yer was lyin’.”

Lincoln here held up a species of Mexican sword called a macheté.

“Ha!—well.”

“That’s all, Cap’n; only it’s my belief there was Mexicans on this island, and them Frenchmen’s gone with them.”

After Lincoln left me I lay musing on this still somewhat mysterious affair. My memory, however, gradually grew clearer; and the events of the preceding night soon became linked together, and formed a complete chain. The shot that passed so

near my head in Twing's tent—the boat—the French words I had heard before I received the blow—and the exclamation, "Coup pour coup!"—all convinced me that Lincoln's conjectures were right.

Dubrosc had fired the shot and struck the blow that had left me senseless.

But who could the woman be whose voice I had heard pleading in my behalf?

My thoughts reverted to the boy who had gone off with Dubrosc, and whom I had often observed in the company of the latter. A strange attachment appeared to exist between them, in which the boy seemed to be the devoted slave of the strong fierce Creole. Could this be a woman?

I recollected having been struck with his delicate features, the softness of his voice, and the smallness of his hands. There were other points, besides, in the tournure of the boy's figure that had appeared singular to me. I had frequently observed the eyes of this lad bent upon me, when Dubrosc was not present, with a strange and unaccountable expression.

Many other peculiarities connected with the boy and Dubrosc, which at the time had passed unnoticed and unheeded, now presented themselves to my recollection, all tending to prove the identity of the boy with the woman whose voice I had heard in the thicket.

I could not help smiling at the night's adventures; determined, however, to conceal that part which related to the skeleton.

In a few days my strength was restored. The cut I had received was not deep—thanks to my forage-cap and the bluntness of the Frenchman's weapon.

Chapter Six.

The Landing at Sacrificios.

Early in the month of March the troops at Lobos were re-embarked, and dropped down to the roadstead of Anton Lizardo. The American fleet was already at anchor

there, and in a few days above a hundred sail of transports had joined it.

There is no city, no village, hardly a habitation upon this half-desert coast. The aspect is an interminable waste of sandy hills, rendered hirsute and picturesque by the plumed frondage of the palm-tree.

We dared not go ashore, although the smooth white beach tempted us strongly. A large body of the enemy was encamped behind the adjacent ridges, and patrols could be seen at intervals galloping along the beach.

I could not help fancying what must have been the feeling of the inhabitants in regard to our ships—a strange sight upon this desert coast, and not a pleasing one to them, knowing that within those dark hulls were concealed the hosts of their armed invaders. Laocoon looked not with more dread upon the huge ribs of the Danaic horse than did the simple peasant of Anahuac upon this fleet of “oak leviathans” that lay within so short a distance of his shores.

To us the scene possessed an interest of a far different character. We looked proudly upon these magnificent models of naval architecture—upon their size, their number, and their admirable adaptation. We viewed with a changing cheek and kindling eye this noble exhibition of a free people’s strength; and as the broad banner of our country swung out upon the breeze of the tropics, we could not help exulting in the glory of that great nation whose uniform we wore around our bodies.

It was no dream. We saw the burnished cannon and the bright epaulette, the gleaming button and the glancing bayonet. We heard the startling trumpet, the stirring drum, and the shrill and thrilling fife; and our souls drank in all those glorious sights and sounds that form at once the spirit and the witchery of war.

The landing was to take place on the 9th, and the point of debarkation fixed upon was the beach opposite the island of Sacrificios, just out of range of the guns of Vera Cruz.

The 9th of March rose like a dream, bright, balmy, and beautiful. The sea was

scarcely stirred by the gentlest breeze of the tropics; but this breeze, light as it was, blew directly in our favour.

At an early hour I observed a strange movement among the ships composing the fleet. Signals were changing in quick succession, and boats gliding rapidly to and fro.

Before daybreak the huge surf-boats had been drawn down from their moorings, and with long hempen hawsers attached to the ships and steamers.

The descent was about to be made. The ominous cloud which had hung dark and threatening over the shores of Mexico was about to burst upon that devoted land. But where? The enemy could not tell, and were preparing to receive us on the adjacent shore.

The black cylinder began to smoke, and the murky cloud rolled down upon the water, half obscuring the fleet. Here and there a broad sail, freshly unfurled, hung stiffly from the yard; the canvas, escaping from its gasket fastenings, had not yet been braced round to the breeze.

Soldiers were seen standing along the decks; some in full equipments, clutching the bright barrels of their muskets, while others were buckling on their white belts, or cramming their cartouche-boxes.

Officers, in sash and sword, paced the polished quarter-decks, or talked earnestly in groups, or watched with eager eyes the motions of the various ships.

Unusual sounds were heard on all sides. The deep-toned chorus of the sailor, the creaking of the capstan, and the clanking of the iron cogs; the “heave-ho!” at the windlass, and the grating of the huge anchor-chain, as link after link rasped through the rusty ring—sounds that warned us to make ready for a change.

In the midst of these came the brisk rolling of a drum. It was answered by another, and another, and still another, until all voices were drowned by the deafening noise. Then followed the mingling shouts of command, a rushing over the decks, and

streams of blue-clad men poured down the dark sides, and seated themselves in the surf-boats. These were filled in a twinkling, and all was silent as before. Every voice was hushed in expectation, and every eye bent upon the little black steamer which carried the commander-in-chief.

Suddenly a cloud of smoke rose up from her quarter; a sheet of flame shot out horizontally; and the report of a heavy gun shook the atmosphere like an earthquake. Before its echoes had subsided, a deafening cheer ran simultaneously through the fleet; and the ships, all together, as if impelled by some hidden and supernatural power, broke from their moorings, and dashed through the water with the velocity of the wind. Away to the north-west, in an exciting race; away for the island of Sacrificios!

On struggled the ships, bending to the breeze and cleaving the crystal water with their bold bows; on the steamers, beating the blue waves into a milky way, and dragging the laden boats in their foamy track. On followed the boats through the hissing and frothy caldron. Loud rolled the drum, loud brayed the bugle, and loud huzzas echoed from the adjacent shores.

Already the foe was alarmed and alert. Light horsemen with streaming haste galloped up the coast. Lancers, with gay trappings and long pennons, appeared through the openings of the hills. Foaming, prancing steeds flew with light artillery over the naked ridges, dashing madly down deep defiles, and crushing the cactus with their whirling wheels. “Andela! Andela!” was their cry. In vain they urged their horses, in vain they drove the spur deep and bloody into their smoking sides. The elements were against them, and in favour of their foes.

The earth and the water were their impediments, while the air and the water were the allies of their enemies. They clung and sweltered through the hot and yielding sand or sank in the marshy borders of the Mandinga and the Medellin, while steam and the wind drove the ships of their adversaries like arrows through the water.

The alarm spread up the coast. Bugles were sounding, and horsemen galloped through the streets of Vera Cruz. The alarm-drum beat in the plaza, and the long roll echoed in every cuartel.

Signal rockets shot up from San Juan, and were answered by others from Santiago and Concepcion.

Thousands of dark forms clustered upon the roofs of the city and the ramparts of the castle; and thousands of pale lips whispered in accents of terror, “They come! they come!”

As yet they knew not how the attack was to be made, or where to look for our descent.

They imagined that we were about to bombard their proud fortress of San Juan, and expected soon to see the ships of these rash invaders shattered and sunk before its walls.

The fleet was almost within long range, the black buoyant hulls bounded fearlessly over the water. The eager crowd thickened upon the walls. The artillerists of Santiago had gathered around their guns, silent and waiting orders. Already the burning fuse was sending forth its sulphurous smell, and the dry powder lay temptingly on the touch, when a quick, sharp cry was heard along the walls and battlements, a cry of mingled rage, disappointment, and dismay.

The foremost ship had swerved suddenly from the track; and bearing sharply to the left, under the manège of a skilful helmsman, was running down under the shelter of Sacrificios.

The next ship followed her guide, and the next, and the next; and, before the astonished multitude recovered from their surprise, the whole fleet had come to within pistol-shot of the island!

The enemy now, for the first time, perceived the ruse, and began to calculate its results. Those giant ships, that but a moment ago seemed rushing to destruction, had

rounded to at a safe distance, and were preparing, with the speed and skilfulness of a perfect discipline, to pour a hostile host upon the defenceless shores. In vain the cavalry bugle called their horsemen to the saddle; in vain the artillery car rattled along the streets; both would be too late!

Meanwhile, the ships let fall their anchors, with a plunge, and a rasping, and a rattle. The sails came down upon the yards; and sailors swung themselves into the great surf-boats, and mixed with the soldiers, and seized the oars.

Then the blades were suddenly and simultaneously dropped on the surface of the wave, a naval officer in each boat directing the movements of the oarsmen.

And the boats pulled out nearer, and by an echelon movement took their places in line.

Light ships of war were thrown upon our flanks, to cover the descent by a cross fire. No enemy had yet appeared, and all eyes were turned landward with fiery expectation. Bounding hearts waited impatiently for the signal.

The report of a single gun was at length heard from the ship of the commander-in-chief; and, as if by one impulse, a thousand oars struck the water, and flung up the spray upon their broad blades. A hundred boats leaped forward simultaneously. The powerful stroke was repeated, and propelled them with lightning speed. Now was the exciting race, the regatta of war! The Dardan rowers would have been distanced here.

On! on! with the velocity of the wind, over the blue waves, through the snowy surf—on!

And now we neared the shore, and officers sprang to their feet, and stood with their swords drawn; and soldiers half sat, half crouched, clutching their muskets. And the keels gritted upon the gravelly bed; and, at the signal, a thousand men, in one plunge, flung themselves into the water, and dashed madly through the surf. Thousands followed, holding their cartridge-boxes breast-high; and blades were

glancing, and bayonets gleaming, and banners waving; and under glancing blades, and gleaming bayonets, and waving banners, the dark mass rushed high upon the beach.

Then came a cheer, loud, long, and exulting. It pealed along the whole line, uttered from five thousand throats, and answered by twice that number from the anchored ships. It echoed along the shores, and back from the distant battlements.

A colour-sergeant, springing forward, rushed up the steep sides of a sand-hill, and planted his flag upon its snowy ridge.

As the well-known banner swung out upon the breeze, another cheer, wild and thrilling, ran along the line; a hundred answering flags were hauled up through the fleet; the ships of war saluted with full broadsides; and the guns of San Juan, now for the first time waking from their lethargic silence, poured forth their loudest thunder.

The sun was just setting as our column commenced its advance inward. After winding for a short distance through the defiles of the sand-hills, we halted for the night, our left wing resting upon the beach.

The soldiers bivouacked without tents—sleeping upon their arms, with the soft sand for their couch and the cartridge-box for their pillow.

Note. Cuartel is the quarter of the city.

Chapter Seven.

The City of the True Cross.

Vera Cruz is a fortified city. Round and round it is girt by a wall, with regular batteries placed at intervals. You enter it from the land side by three gates (garitas), and from the sea by a beautiful pier or mole that projects some distance into the water. The latter is a modern construction; and when the sun is descending behind the Mexican Cordilleras to the west, and the breeze blows in from the Gulf, this

mole—the seat of but little commercial activity—becomes the favourite promenade of the dark-eyed Vera-Cruzanas and their pallid lovers.

The city stands on the very beach. The sea at full tide washes its battlements, and many of the houses overlook the water. On almost every side a plain of sand extends to a mile's distance from the walls, where it terminates in those lofty white sand-ridges that form a feature of the shores of the Mexican Gulf. During high tides and "northers" the sea washes over the surrounding sand-plain, and Vera Cruz appears almost isolated amid the waves. On one side, however, towards the south, there is variety in the aspect. Here appear traces of vegetation—some low trees and bushes, a view of the forest inward into the country, a few buildings outside the walls, a railway-station, a cemetery, an aqueduct, a small sluggish stream, marshes and stagnant pools.

In front of the city, built upon the coral reef, stands the celebrated fortress-castle of San Juan de Ulloa. It is about one thousand yards out from the mole, and over one of its angles towers a lighthouse. Its walls, with the reef on which it stands (Gallega), shelter the harbour of Vera Cruz—which, in fact, is only a roadstead—from the north winds. Under the lee of San Juan the ships of commerce lie at anchor. There are but few of them at any time.

Another large fort (Concepcion) stands upon the beach at the northern angle of the city, and a third (Santiago) defends it towards the south. A circular bastion, with heavy pieces of ordnance, sweeps the plain to the rear, commanding it as far as the sand-ridges.

Vera Cruz is a pretty picture to look at, either from the sea or from the sand-hills in the interior. Its massive domes—its tall steeples and turreted roofs—its architecture, half Moorish, half modern—the absence of scattered suburbs or other salient objects to distract the eye—all combine to render the City of the True Cross an unique and striking picture. In fact, its numerous architectural varieties, bound as they are into

compact unity by a wall of dark lava-stone, impress you with the idea that some artist had arranged them for the sake of effect. The coup d'oeil often reminded me of the engravings of cities in Goldsmith's Epitome, that used to be considered the bright spots in my lessons of school geography.

At break of day, on the 10th, the army took up its line of march through hills of sand-drift. Division lapped upon division, regiment upon regiment, extending the circle of investment by an irregular echelon. Foot rifles and light infantry drove the enemy from ridge to ridge, and through the dark mazes of the chaparral gorge. The column continued its tortuous track, winding through deep denies, and over hot white hills, like a bristling snake. It moved within range of the guns of the city, screened by intervening heights. Now and then the loud cannon of Santiago opened upon it, as some regiment displayed itself, crossing a defile or pushing over the spur of a sand-hill. The constant rattling of rifles and musketry told that our skirmishers were busy in the advance. The arsenal was carried by a brilliant charge, and the American flag waved over the ruins of the Convent Malibran. On the 11th the Orizava road was crossed, and the light troops of the enemy were brushed from the neighbouring hills. They retired sullenly under shelter of their heavy guns, and within the walls of the city.

On the morning of the 12th the investment was complete. Vera Cruz lay within a semicircle, around its centre. The half circumference was a chain of hostile regiments that embraced the city in their concave arc. The right of this chain pitched its tents opposite the isle of Sacrificios; while five miles off to the north, its left rested upon the hamlet Vergara. The sea covered the complement of this circle, guarded by a fleet of dark and warlike ships.

The diameter hourly grew shorter. The lines of circum-vallation lapped closer and closer around the devoted city, until the American pickets appeared along the ridges of the nearest hills, and within range of the guns of Santiago, Concepcion, and

Xjuoa.

A smooth sand-plain, only a mile in width, lay between the besiegers and the walls of the besieged.

After tattoo-beat on the night of the 12th, with a party of my brother officers, I ascended the high hill around which winds the road leading to Orizava.

This hill overlooks the city of Vera Cruz.

After dragging ourselves wearily through the soft, yielding sand, we reached the summit, and halted on a projecting ridge.

With the exception of a variety of exclamations expressing surprise and delight, not a word for awhile was uttered by any of our party, each individual being wrapped up in the contemplation of a scene of surpassing interest. It was moonlight, and sufficiently clear to distinguish the minutest objects on the picture that lay rolled out before us like a map.

Below our position, and seeming almost within reach of the hand, lay the City of the True Cross, rising out of the white plain, and outlined upon the blue background of the sea.

The dark grey towers and painted domes, the Gothic turret and Moorish minaret, impressed us with the idea of the antique; while here and there the tamarind, nourished on some azotea, or the fringed fronds of the palm-tree, drooping over the notched parapet, lent to the city an aspect at once southern and picturesque.

Domes, spires, and cupolas rose over the old grey walls, crowned with floating banners—the consular flags of France, and Spain, and Britain, waving alongside the eagle of the Aztecs.

Beyond, the blue waters of the Gulf rippled lightly against the sea-washed battlements of San Juan, whose brilliant lights glistened along the combing of the surf.

To the south we could distinguish the isle of Sacrificios, and the dark hulls that slept silently under the shelter of its coral reef.

Outside the fortified wall, which girt the city with its cincture of grey rock, a smooth plain stretched rearward to the foot of the hill on which we stood, and right and left along the crest of the ridge from Punta Hornos to Vergara, ranged a line of dark forms—the picket sentries of the American outposts, as they stood knee-deep in the soft, yielding sand-drift.

It was a picture of surprising interest; and, as we stood gazing upon it, the moon suddenly disappeared behind a bank of clouds; and the lamps of the city, heretofore eclipsed by her brighter beam, now burned up and glistened along the walls.

Bells rang merrily from church-towers, and bugles sounded through the echoing streets. At intervals we could hear the shrill cries of the guard, “Centinela! alerte!” (Sentinel, look out), and the sharp challenge, “Quien viva?” (Who goes there?)

Then the sound of sweet music, mingled with the soft voices of women, was wafted to our ears, and with beating hearts we fancied we could hear the light tread of silken feet, as they brushed over the polished floor of the ball-room.

It was a tantalising moment, and wistful glances were cast on the beleaguered town; while more than one of our party was heard impatiently muttering a wish that it might be carried by assault.

As we continued gazing, a bright jet of flame shot out horizontally from the parapet over Puerto Nuevo.

“Look out!” cried Twing, at the same instant flinging his wiry little carcase squat under the brow of a sand-wreath.

Several of the party followed his example; but, before all had housed themselves, a shot came singing past, along with the loud report of a twenty-four.

The shot struck the comb of the ridge, within several yards of the group, and

ricocheted off into the distant hills.

“Try it again!” cried one.

“That fellow has lost a champagne supper,” said Twing.

“More likely he has had it, or his aim would be more steady,” suggested an officer.

“Oysters, too—only think of it!” said Clayley.

“Howld your tongue, Clayley, or by my sowl I’ll charge down upon the town!”

This came from Hennessy, upon whose imagination the contrast between champagne and oysters and the gritty pork and biscuit he had been feeding upon for several days past acted like a shock.

“There again!” cried Twing, whose quick eye caught the blaze upon the parapet.

“A shell, by the powers!” exclaimed Hennessy. “Let it dhrop first, or it may dhrop on ye,” he continued, as several officers were about to fling themselves on their faces.

The bomb shot up with a hissing, hurtling sound. A little spark could be seen as it traced its graceful curves through the dark heavens.

The report echoed from the walls, and at the same instant was heard a dull sound, as the shell buried itself in the sand-drift.

It fell close to one of the picket sentinels, who was standing upon his post within a few paces of the group. The man appeared to be either asleep or stupefied, as he remained stock-still. Perhaps he had mistaken it for the ricochet of a round shot.

“It’s big shooting for them to hit the hill!” exclaimed a young officer.

The words had scarcely passed when a loud crash, like the bursting of a cannon, was heard under our feet; the ground opened like an earthquake, and, amidst the whistling of the fragments, the sand was dashed into our faces.

A cloud of dust hung for a moment above the spot. The moon at this instant reappeared, and as the dust slowly settled away, the mutilated body of the soldier

was seen upon the brow of the hill, at the distance of twenty paces from his post.

A low cheer reached us from Concepcion, the fort whence the shell had been projected.

Chagrined at the occurrence, and mortified that it had been caused by our imprudence, we were turning to leave the hill, when the “whish” of a rocket attracted our attention.

It rose from the chaparral, about a quarter of a mile in rear of the camp, and, before it had reached its culminating point, an answering signal shot up from the Puerto Nuevo.

At the same instant a horseman dashed out of the thicket, and headed his horse at the steep sand-hills. After three or four desperate plunges, the fiery mustang gained the crest of the ridge upon which lay the remains of the dead soldier.

Here the rider, seeing our party, suddenly reined up and balanced for a moment in the stirrup, as if uncertain whether to advance or retreat.

We, on the other hand, taking him for some officer of our own, and wondering who it could be galloping about at such an hour, stood silent and waiting.

“By heavens, that’s a Mexican!” muttered Twing, as the ranchero dress became apparent under a brighter beam of the moon.

Before anyone could reply, the strange horseman wheeled sharply to the left, and drawing a pistol, fired it into our midst. Then spurring his wild horse, he galloped past us into a deep defile of the hills.

“You’re a set of Yankee fools!” he shouted back, as he reached the bottom of the dell.

Half a dozen shots replied to the taunting speech; but the retreating object was beyond pistol range before our astonished party had recovered from their surprise at such an act of daring audacity.

In a few minutes we could see both horse and rider near the walls of the city—a speck on the white plain; and shortly after we heard the grating hinges of the Puerto Nuevo, as the huge gate swung open to receive him. No one was hit by the shot of his pistol. Several could be heard gritting their teeth with mortification as we commenced descending the hill.

“Did you know that voice, Captain?” whispered Clayley to me, as we returned to camp.

“Yes.”

“You think it was—”

“Dubrosc.”

Chapter Eight.

Major Blossom.

On reaching the camp I found a mounted orderly in front of my tent.

“From the general,” said the soldier, touching his cap, and handing me a sealed note.

The orderly, without waiting a reply, leaped into his saddle and rode off.

I broke the seal with delight:

“Sir,—You will report, with fifty men, to Major Blossom, at 4 a.m. to-morrow.

“By order,—”

(Signed) “A.A.A.-G.

“Captain Haller, commanding Co. Rifle Rangers.”

“Old Bios, eh? Quartermaster scouting, I hope,” said Clayley, looking over the contents of the note.

“Anything but the trenches; I am sick of them.”

“Had it been anybody else but Blossom—fighting Daniels, for instance—we might have reckoned on a comfortable bit of duty; but the old whale can hardly climb into

his saddle—it does look bad."

"I will not long remain in doubt. Order the sergeant to warn the men for four."

I walked through the camp in search of Blossom's marquee, which I found in a grove of caoutchouc-trees, and out of range of the heaviest metal in Vera Cruz. The major himself was seated in a large Campeachy chair, that had been "borrowed" from some neighbouring rancho, and perhaps it was never so well filled as by its present occupant.

It would be useless to attempt an elaborate description of Major Blossom. That would require an entire chapter.

Perhaps the best that can be done to give the reader an idea of him is to say that he was a great, fat, red man, and known among his brother officers as "the swearing major". If anyone in the army loved good living, it was Major Blossom; and if anyone hated hard living, that man was Major George Blossom. He hated Mexicans, too, and mosquitoes, and scorpions, and snakes, and sand-flies, and all enemies to his rest and comfort; and the manner in which he swore at these natural foes would have entitled him to a high commission in the celebrated army of Flanders.

Major Blossom was a quarter-master in more senses than one, as he occupied more quarters than any two men in the army, not excepting the general-in-chief; and when many a braver man and better officer was cut down to "twenty-five pounds of baggage", the private lumber of Major Blossom, including himself, occupied a string of wagons like a siege-train.

As I entered the tent he was seated at supper. The viands before him were in striking contrast to the food upon which the army was then subsisting. There was no gravel gritting between the major's teeth as he masticated mess-pork or mouldy biscuit. He found no débris of sand and small rocks at the bottom of his coffee-cup. No; quite the contrary.

A dish of pickled salmon, a side of cold turkey, a plate of sliced tongue, with a fine

Virginia ham, were the striking features of the major's supper, while a handsome French coffee-urn, containing the essence of Mocha, simmered upon the table. Out of this the major from time to time replenished his silver cup. A bottle of eau-de-vie, that stood near his right hand, assisted him likewise in swallowing his ample ration.

"Major Blossom, I presume?" said I.

"My name," ejaculated the major, between two swallows, so short and quick that the phrase sounded like a monosyllable.

"I have received orders to report to you, sir."

"Ah! bad business! bad business!" exclaimed the major, qualifying the words with an energetic oath.

"How, sir?"

"Atrocious business! dangerous service! Can't see why they sent me."

"I came, Major, to inquire the nature of the service, so that I may have my men in order for it."

"Dangerous service!"

"It is?"

"Infernal cut-throats! thousands of 'em in the bushes—bore a man through as soon as wink. Those yellow devils are worse than—!" and again the swearing major wound up with an exclamation not proper to be repeated.

"Can't see why they picked me out. There's Myers, and Wayne, and Wood, not half my size, and that thin scare-the-crows Allen; but no—the general wants me killed. Die soon enough in this infernal nest of centipedes without being shot in the chaparral! I wish the chaparral was—!" and again the major's unmentionable words came pouring forth in a volley.

I saw that it was useless to interrupt him until the first burst was over. From his frequent anathemas on the "bushes" and the "chaparral", I could gather that the

service I was called upon to perform lay at some distance from the camp; but beyond this I could learn nothing, until the major had sworn himself into a degree of composure, which after some minutes he accomplished. I then re-stated the object of my visit.

“We’re going into the country for mules,” replied the major. “Mules, indeed! Heaven knows there isn’t a mule within ten miles, unless with a yellow-hided Mexican on his back, and such mules we don’t want. The volunteers—curse them!—have scared everything to the mountains: not a stick of celery nor an onion to be had at any price.”

“How long do you think we may be gone?” I inquired.

“Long? Only a day. If I stay overnight in the chaparral, may a wolf eat me! Oh, no! if the mules don’t turn up soon, somebody else may go fetch ’em—that’s all.”

“I may ration them for one day?” said I.

“Two—two; your fellows’ll be hungry. Roberts, of the Rifles, who’s been out in the country, tells me there isn’t enough forage to feed a cat. So you’d better take two days’ biscuit. I suppose we’ll meet with beef enough on the hoof, though I’d rather have a rump-steak out of the Philadelphia market than all the beef in Mexico. Hang their beef! it’s as tough as tan leather!”

“At four o’clock then, Major, I’ll be with you,” said I, preparing to take my leave.

“Make it a little later, Captain. I get no sleep with these cursed gally-nippers and things; but, stay—how many men have you got?”

“In my company eighty; but my order is to take only fifty.”

“There again! I told you so; want me killed—they want old Bios killed! Fifty men, when a thousand of the leather-skinned devils have been seen not ten miles off! Fifty men! great heavens! fifty men! There’s an escort to take the chaparral with!”

“But they are fifty men worth a hundred, I promise you.”

“Bring all—every son of a gun—bugler and all.”

“But that, Major, would be contrary to the general’s orders.”

“Hang the general’s orders! Obey some generals’ orders in this army, and you would do queer things. Bring them all; take my advice. I tell you, if you don’t, our lives may answer for it. Fifty men!”

I was about to depart when the major stopped me with a loud “Hilloa!”

“Why,” cried he, “I have lost my senses! Your pardon, Captain! This unlucky thing has driven me crazy. They must pick upon me! What will you drink? Here’s some good brandy; sorry I can’t say as much for the water.”

I mixed a glass of brandy and water; the major did the same; and, having pledged each other, we bade “good night”, and separated.

Chapter Nine.

Scouting in the Chaparral.

Between the shores of the Mexican Gulf and the “foot-hills” (piedmont) of the great chain of the Andes lies a strip of low lands. In many places this belt is nearly a hundred miles in breadth, but generally less than fifty. It is of a tropical character, termed in the language of the country tierra caliente. It is mostly covered with jungly forests, in which are found the palm, the tree-ferns, the mahogany and india-rubber trees, dyewoods, canes, llianas, and many other gigantic parasites. In the underwood you meet thorny aloes, the “pita” plant, and wild mezcal; various Cactacese, and flora of singular forms, scarcely known to the botanist. There are swamps, dark and dank, overshadowed by the tall cypress, with its pendent streamers of silvery moss (Tillandsia usneoïdes). From these arise the miasma—the mother of the dreaded “vomito.”

This unhealthy region is but thinly inhabited; but here you meet with people of the African race, and nowhere else in Mexico. In the towns—and there are but

few—you see the yellow mulatto, and the pretty quadroon with her black waving hair; but in the spare settlements of the country you meet with a strange race—the cross of the negro with the ancient inhabitants of the country—the “zamboes.”

Along the coast and in the black country, behind Vera Cruz, you will find these people living a half-indolent, half-savage life, as small cultivators, cattle-herds, fishermen, or hunters. In riding through the forest you may often chance upon such a picture as the following:—

There is an opening in the woods that presents an aspect of careless cultivation—a mere patch cleared out of the thick jungle—upon which grow yams, the sweet-potato (Convolvulus batata), chilé, melons, and the calabash. On one side of the clearing there is a hut—a sort of shed. A few upright poles forked at their tops; a few others laid horizontally upon them; a thatch of palm leaves to shadow the burning rays of the sun—that is all.

In this shadow there are human beings—men, women, children. They wear rude garments of white cotton cloth; but they are half-naked, and their skins are dark, almost black. Their hair is woolly and frizzled. They are not Indians, they are not negroes, they are “zamboes”—a mixture of both. They are coarse-featured, and coarsely clad. You would find it difficult, at a little distance, to distinguish their sex, did you not know that those who swing in the hammocks and recline indolently upon the palm-mats (petatés) are the men, and those who move about and do the work are the females. One of the former occasionally stimulates the activity of the latter by a stroke of the “cuarto” (mule-whip).

A few rude implements of furniture are in the shed: a “metaté” on which the boiled maize is ground for the “tortilla” cakes; some “ollas” (pots) of red earthenware; dishes of the calabash; a rude hatchet or two; a “macheté”; a banjo made from the gourd-shell; a high-peaked saddle, with bridle and “lazo”; strings of red-pepper pods hanging from the horizontal beams—not much more. A lank dog on the ground in

front; a lean “mustang” tied to the tree; a couple of “burros” (donkeys); and perhaps a sorry galled mule in an inclosure adjoining.

The zambo enjoys his dolce far niente while his wife does his work—what work there is, but that is not much. There is an air of neglect that impresses you; an air of spontaneity about the picture—for the yams and the melons, and the chilé-plants, half choked with weeds, seem to grow without culture, and the sun gives warmth, so as to render almost unnecessary the operations of the spindle and the loom.

The forest opens again, and another picture—a prettier one—presents itself. It bears the aspect of a better cultivation, though still impressing you with ideas of indolence and neglect. This picture is the “rancho”, the settlement of the small farmer, or “vaquero” (cattle-herd). Its form is that of an ordinary house, with gables and sloping roof, but its walls are peculiar. They are constructed of gigantic bamboo canes, or straight poles of the Fouquiera splendens. These are laced together by cords of the “pita” aloe; but the interstices between are left open, so as freely to admit the breeze. Coolness, not warmth, is the object of these buildings. The roof is a thatch of palm-leaves, and with far-impending eaves casts off the heavy rain of the tropics. The appearance is striking—more picturesque even than the chalet of Switzerland.

There is but little furniture within. There is no table; there are few chairs, and these of raw hide nailed upon a rude frame. There are bedsteads of bamboo; the universal tortilla-stone; mats of palm-leaf; baskets of the same material; a small altar-like fireplace in the middle of the floor; a bandolin hanging by the wall; a saddle of stamped leather, profusely ornamented with silver nails and plates; a hair bridle, with huge Mameluke bit; an escopette and sword, or macheté; an endless variety of gaily-painted bowls, dishes, and cups, but neither knife, fork, nor spoon. Such are the movables of a “rancho” in the tierra caliente.

You may see the ranchero by the door, or attending to his small, wiry, and spirited

horse, outside. The man himself is either of Spanish blood or a “mestizo” (half-breed). He is rarely a pure Indian, who is most commonly a peon or labourer, and who can hardly be termed a “ranchero” in its proper sense.

The ranchero is picturesque—his costume exceedingly so. His complexion is swarthy, his hair is black, and his teeth are ivory white. He is often moustached, but rarely takes the trouble to trim or keep these ornaments in order. His whisker is seldom bushy or luxuriant. His trousers (calzoneros) are of green or dark velvet, open down the outside seams, and at the bottoms overlaid with stamped black leather, to defend the ankles of the wearer against the thorny chaparral. A row of bell buttons, often silver, close the open seams when the weather is cold. There are wide drawers (calzoncillos) of fine white cotton underneath; and these puff out through the seams, forming a tasty contrast with the dark velvet. A silken sash, generally of scarlet colour, encircles the waist; and its fringed ends hang over the hips. The hunting-knife is stuck under it. There is a short jacket of velveteen, tastefully embroidered and buttoned; a white cambric shirt, elaborately worked and plaited; and over all a heavy, broad-brimmed hat (sombrero), with silver or gold band, and tags of the same material sticking out from the sides. He wears boots of red leather, and huge spurs with bell rowels; and he is never seen without the “seraph”. The last is his bed, his blanket, his cloak, and his umbrella.

His wife may be seen moving about the rancho, or upon her knees before the metaté kneading tortillas, and besmearing them with chilé Colorado (red capsicum). She wears a petticoat or skirt of a naming bright colour, very short, showing her well-turned but stockingless ankles, with her small slippered feet. Her arms, neck, and part of her bosom are nude, but half concealed by the bluish-grey scarf (rebozo) that hangs loosely over her head.

The ranchero leads a free, easy life, burthened with few cares. He is the finest rider in the world, following his cattle on horseback, and never makes even the shortest

journey on foot. He plays upon the bandolin, sings an Andalusian ditty, and is fond of chingarito (mezcal whisky) and the “fandango.”

Such is the ranchero of the tierra caliente around Vera Cruz, and such is he in all other parts of Mexico, from its northern limits to the Isthmus.

But in the tierra caliente you may also see the rich planter of cotton, or sugar-cane, or cocoa (cacao), or the vanilla bean. His home is the “hacienda”. This is a still livelier picture. There are many fields inclosed and tilled. They are irrigated by the water from a small stream. Upon its banks there are cocoa-trees; and out of the rich moist soil shoot up rows of the majestic plantain, whose immense yellow-green leaves, sheathing the stem and then drooping gracefully over, render it one of the most ornamental productions of the tropics, as its clustering legumes of farinaceous fruit make it one of the most useful. Low walls, white or gaily painted, appear over the fields, and a handsome spire rises above the walls. That is the “hacienda” of the planter—the “rico” of the tierra caliente, with its out-buildings and chapel belfry. You approach it through scenes of cultivation. “Peons”, clad in white cotton and reddish leathern garments, are busy in the fields. Upon their heads are broad-brimmed hats, woven from the leaf of the sombrero palm. Their legs are naked, and upon their feet are tied rude sandals (guarachés) with leathern thongs. Their skins are dark, though not black; their eyes are wild and sparkling; their looks grave and solemn; their hair coarse, long, and crow-black; and, as they walk, their toes turn inward. Their downcast looks, their attitudes and demeanour, impress you with the conviction that they are those who carry the water and hew the wood of the country. It is so. They are the “Indios mansos” (the civilised Indians): slaves, in fact, though freemen by the letter of the law. They are the “peons”, the labourers, the serfs of the land—the descendants of the conquered sons of Anahuac.

Such are the people you find in the tierra caliente of Mexico—in the environs of Vera Cruz. They do not differ much from the inhabitants of the high plains, either in

costume, customs, or otherwise. In fact, there is a homogeneousness about the inhabitants of all Spanish America—making allowance for difference of climate and other peculiarities—rarely found in any other people.

Before daybreak of the morning after my interview with the “swearing major”, a head appeared between the flaps of my tent. It was that of Sergeant Bob Lincoln.

“The men air under arms, Cap’n.”

“Very well,” cried I, leaping from my bed, and hastily buckling on my accoutrements.

I looked forth. The moon was still brightly shining, and I could see a number of uniformed men standing upon the company parade, in double rank. Directly in front of my tent a small boy was saddling a very small horse. The boy was “Little Jack”, as the soldiers called him; and the horse was little Jack’s mustang, “Twidget.”

Jack wore a tight-fitting green jacket, trimmed with yellow lace, and buttoned up to the throat; pantaloons of light green, straight cut, and striped along the seams; a forage-cap set jauntily upon a profusion of bright curls; a sabre with a blade of eighteen inches, and a pair of clinking Mexican spurs. Besides these, he carried the smallest of all rifles. Thus armed and accoutred, he presented the appearance of a miniature Ranger.

Twidget had his peculiarities. He was a tight, wiry little animal, that could live upon mezquite beans or maguey leaves for an indefinite time; and his abstemiousness was often put to the test. Afterwards, upon an occasion during the battles in the valley of Mexico, Jack and Twidget had somehow got separated, at which time the mustang had been shut up for four days in the cellar of a ruined convent with no other food than stones and mortar! How Twidget came by his name is not clear. Perhaps it was some waif of the rider’s own fancy.

As I appeared at the entrance of my tent, Jack had just finished strapping on his Mexican saddle; and seeing me, up he ran to assist in serving my breakfast. This was

hastily despatched, and our party took the route in silence through the sleeping camp. Shortly after, we were joined by the major, mounted on a tall, raw-boned horse; while a darkie, whom the major addressed as “Doc”, rode a snug, stout cob, and carried a large basket. This last contained the major’s commissariat.

We were soon travelling along the Orizava road, the major and Jack riding in advance. I could not help smiling at the contrast between these two equestrians; the former with his great gaunt horse, looming up in the uncertain light of the morning like some huge centaur; while Jack and Twidget appeared the two representatives of the kingdom of Lilliput.

On turning an angle of the forest, a horseman appeared at some distance along the road. The major gradually slackened his pace, until he was square with the head of the column, and then fell back into the rear. This manoeuvre was executed in the most natural manner, but I could plainly see that the mounted Mexican had caused the major no small degree of alarm.

The horseman proved to be a zambo, in pursuit of cattle that had escaped from a neighbouring corral. I put some inquiries to him in relation to the object of our expedition. The zambo pointed to the south, saying in Spanish that mules were plenty in that direction.

“Hay muchos, muchissimos,” (There are many), said he, as he indicated a road which led through a strip of forest on our left.

Following his direction, we struck into the new path, which soon narrowed into a bridle-road or trail. The men were thrown into single file, and marched à l’Indienne. The road darkened, passing under thick-leaved trees, that met and twined over our heads.

At times the hanging limbs and joined parasites caused the major to flatten his huge body upon the horn of the saddle; and once or twice he was obliged to alight, and walk under the impeding branches of the thorny acacias.

Our journey continued without noise, silence being interrupted only by an occasional oath from the major—uttered, however, in a low tone, as we were now fairly “in the woods”. The road at length opened upon a small prairie or glade, near the borders of which rose a “butte”, covered with chaparral.

Leaving the party in ambuscade below, I ascended the butte, to obtain a view of the surrounding country. The day had now fairly broken, and the sun was just rising over the blue waters of the Gulf.

His rays, prinkling over the waves, caused them to dance and sparkle with a metallic brightness; and it was only after shading my eyes that I could distinguish the tall masts of ships and the burnished towers of the city.

To the south and west stretched a wide expanse of champaign country, glowing in all the brilliance of tropical vegetation. Fields of green, and forests of darker green; here and there patches of yellow, and belts of olive-coloured leaves; at intervals a sheet of silver—the reflection from a placid lake, or the bend of some silent stream—was visible upon the imposing picture at my feet.

A broad belt of forest, dotted with the lifelike frondage of the palm, swept up to the foot of the hill. Beyond this lay an open tract of meadow, or prairie, upon which were browsing thousands of cattle. The distance was too great to distinguish their species; but the slender forms of some of them convinced me that the object of our search would be found in that direction.

The meadow, then, was the point to be reached.

The belt of forest already mentioned must be crossed; and to effect this I struck into a trail that seemed to lead in the direction of the meadow.

The trail became lighter as we entered the heavy timber. Some distance farther on we reached a stream. Here the trail entirely disappeared. No “signs” could be found on the opposite bank. The underwood was thick; and vines, with broad green leaves and huge clusters of scarlet flowers, barred up the path like a wall.

It was strange! The path had evidently led to this point, but where beyond?

Several men were detached across the stream to find an opening. After a search of some minutes a short exclamation from Lincoln proclaimed success; I crossed over, and found the hunter standing near the bank, holding back a screen of boughs and vine-leaves, beyond which a narrow but plain track was easily distinguished, leading on into the forest. The trellis closed like a gate, and it seemed as if art had lent a hand to the concealment of the track. The footprints of several horses were plainly visible in the sandy bottom of the road.

The men entered in single file. With some difficulty Major Blossom and his great horse squeezed themselves through, and we moved along under the shady and silent woods.

After a march of several miles, fording numerous streams, and working our way through tangled thickets of nopal and wild maguey, an opening suddenly appeared through the trees. Emerging from the forest, a brilliant scene burst upon us. A large clearing, evidently once cultivated, but now in a state of neglect, stretched out before us. Broad fields, covered with flowers of every hue—thickets of blooming rose-trees—belts of the yellow helianthus—and groups of cocoa-trees and half-wild plantains, formed a picture singular and beautiful.

On one side, and close to the border of the forest, could be seen the roof of a house, peering above groves of glistening foliage, and thither we marched.

We entered a lane, with its guardarayas of orange-trees planted in rows upon each side, and meeting overhead.

The sunlight fell through this leafy screen with a mellowed and delicious softness, and the perfume of flowers was wafted on the air.

The rich music of birds was around us; and the loveliness of the scene was heightened by the wild neglect which characterised it.

On approaching the house we halted; and after charging the men to remain silent, I

advanced alone to reconnoitre.

Chapter Ten.

Adventure with a Cayman.

The lane suddenly opened upon a pasture, but within this a thick hedge of jessamines, forming a circle, barred the view.

In this circle was the house, whose roof only could be seen from without.

Not finding any opening through the jessamines, I parted the leaves with my hands, and looked through. The picture was dream-like; so strange, I could scarcely credit my senses.

On the crest of the little hillock stood a house of rare construction—unique and unlike anything I had ever seen. The sides were formed of bamboos, closely picketed, and laced together by fibres of the pita. The roof—a thatch of palm-leaves—projected far over the eaves, rising to a cone, and terminating in a small wooden cupola with a cross. There were no windows. The walls themselves were translucent; and articles of furniture could be distinguished through the interstices of the bamboos.

A curtain of green barège, supported by a rod and rings, formed the door. This was drawn, discovering an ottoman near the entrance, and an elegant harp.

The whole structure presented the coup-d'oeil of a huge birdcage, with its wires of gold!

The grounds were in keeping with the house. In these, the evidence of neglect, which had been noticed without, existed no longer. Every object appeared to be under the training of a watchful solicitude.

A thick grove of olives, with their gnarled and spreading branches and dark-green leaves, stretched rearward, forming a background to the picture. Right and left grew clumps of orange and lime trees. Golden fruit and flowers of brilliant hues mingled

with their yellow leaves; spring and autumn blended upon the same branches!

Rare shrubs—exotics—grew out of large vessels of japanned earthenware, whose brilliant tints added to the voluptuous colouring of the scene.

A jet d'eau, crystalline, rose to the height of twenty feet, and, returning in a shower of prismatic globules, stole away through a bed of water-lilies and other aquatic plants, losing itself in a grove of lofty plantain-trees. These, growing from the cool watery bed, flung out their broad glistening leaves to the length of twenty feet.

So signs of human life met the eye. The birds alone seemed to revel in the luxuriance of this tropical paradise. A brace of pea-fowl stalked over the parterre in all the pride of their rainbow plumage. In the fountain appeared the tall form of a flamingo, his scarlet colour contrasting with the green leaves of the water-lily. Songsters were trilling in every tree. The mock-bird, perched upon the highest limb, was mimicking the monotonous tones of the parrot. The toucans and trogons flashed from grove to grove, or balanced their bodies under the spray of the jet d'eau; while the humming-birds hung upon the leaves of some honeyed blossom, or prinkled over the parterre like straying sunbeams.

I was running my eye over this dream-like picture, in search of a human figure, when the soft, metallic accents of a female voice reached me from the grove of plantains. It was a burst of laughter—clear and ringing. Then followed another, with short exclamations, and the sound of water as if dashed and sprinkled with a light hand.

What must be the Eve of a paradise like this! The silver tones were full of promise. It was the first female voice that had greeted my ears for a month, and chords long slumbering vibrated under the exquisite touch.

My heart bounded. My first impulse was "forward", which I obeyed by springing through the jessamines. But the fear of intruding upon a scene à la Diane changed my determination, and my next thought was to make a quiet retreat.

I was preparing to return, and had thrust one leg back through the hedge, when a harsh voice—apparently that of a man—mingled with the silvery tones.

“Anda!—anda!—hace mucho calor. Vamos á volver.” (Hasten!—it is hot. Let us return.)

“Ah, no, Pepe! un ratito mas.” (Ah, no, Pepe! a little while longer.)

“Vaya, carrambor!” (Quick, then!)

Again the clear laughter rang out, mingled with the clapping of hands and short exclamations of delight.

“Come,” thought I, once more entering the parterre, “as there appears to be one of my own sex here already, it cannot be very mal à propos to take a peep at this amusement, whatever it be.”

I approached the row of plantain-trees, whose leaves screened the speakers from view.

“Lupé! Lupé! mira! que bonito!” (Lupé! Lupé! look here! What a pretty thing!)

“Ah, pobrecito! echalo, Luz, echalo.” (Ah! poor little thing! fling it back, Luz.)

“Voy luego,” (Presently.)

I stooped down, and silently parted the broad, silken leaves. The sight was divine!

Within lay a circular tank, or basin, of crystal water, several rods in diameter, and walled in on all sides by the high screen of glossy plantains, whose giant leaves, stretching out horizontally, sheltered it from the rays of the sun.

A low parapet of mason-work ran around, forming the circumference of the circle. This was japanned with a species of porcelain, whose deep colouring of blue and green and yellow was displayed in a variety of grotesque figures.

A strong jet boiled up in the centre, by the refraction of whose ripples the gold and red fish seemed multiplied into myriads.

At a distant point a bed of water-lilies hung out from the parapet; and the long, thin

neck of a swan rose gracefully over the leaves. Another, his mate, stood upon the bank drying her snowy pinions in the sun.

A different object attracted me, depriving me, for awhile, of the power of action.

In the water, and near the jet, were two beautiful girls clothed in a sort of sleeveless, green tunic, loosely girdled. They were immersed to the waist. So pellucid was the water that their little feet were distinctly visible at the bottom, shining like gold.

Luxuriant hair fell down in broad flakes, partially shrouding the snowy development of their arms and shoulders. Their forms were strikingly similar—tall, graceful, fully developed, and characterised by that elliptical line of beauty that, in the female form more than in any other earthly object, illustrates the far-famed curve of Hogarth.

Their features, too, were alike. “Sisters!” one would exclaim, and yet their complexions were strikingly dissimilar. The blood, mantling darker in the veins of one, lent an olive tinge to the soft and wax-like surface of her skin, while the red upon her cheeks and lips presented an admixture of purple. Her hair, too, was black; and a dark shading along the upper lip—a moustache, in fact—soft and silky as the tracery of a crayon, contrasted with the dazzling whiteness of her teeth. Her eyes were black, large, and almond-shaped, with that expression which looks over one; and her whole appearance formed a type of that beauty which we associate with the Abencerrage and the Alhambra. This was evidently the elder.

The other was the type of a distinct class of beauty—the golden-haired blonde. Her eyes were large, globular, and blue as turquoise. Her hair of a chastened yellow, long and luxuriant; while her skin, less soft and waxen than that of her sister, presented an effusion of roseate blushes that extended along the snowy whiteness of her arms. These, in the sun, appeared as bloodless and transparent as the tiny gold-fish that quivered in her uplifted hand.

I was riveted to the spot. My first impulse was to retire, silently and modestly, but the power of a strange fascination for a moment prevented me. Was it a dream?

“Ah! que barbara! pobrecito—ito—ito!” (Ah! what a barbarian you are! poor little thing!)

“Comeremos.” (We shall eat it.)

“Por Dios! no! echalo, Luz, ó tirare la agua en sus ojos.” (Goodness! no! fling it in, Luz, or I shall throw water in your eyes.) And the speaker stooped as if to execute the threat.

“Ya—no,” (Now I shall not), said Luz resolutely.

“Guarda te!” (Look out, then!)

The brunette placed her little hands close together, forming with their united palms a concave surface, and commenced dashing water upon the perverse blonde.

The latter instantly dropped the gold-fish, and retaliated.

An exciting and animated contest ensued. The bright globules flew around their heads, and rolled down their glittering tresses, as from the pinions of a swan; while their clear laughter rang out at intervals, as one or the other appeared victorious.

A hoarse voice drew my attention from this interesting spectacle. Looking whence it came, my eye rested upon a huge negress stretched under a cocoa-tree, who had raised herself on one arm, and was laughing at the contest.

It was her voice, then, I had mistaken for that of a man!

Becoming sensible of my intrusive position, I turned to retreat, when a shrill cry reached me from the pond.

The swans, with a frightened energy shrieked and flapped over the surface, the gold-fish shot to and fro like sunbeams, and leaped out of the water, quivering and terrified, and the birds on all sides screamed and chattered.

I sprang forward to ascertain the cause of this strange commotion. My eye fell upon the negress, who had risen, and, running out upon the parapet with uplifted arms, shouted in terrified accents:

“Valgame Dios—niñas! El cayman! el cayman!”

I looked across to the other side of the pond. A fearful object met my eyes—the cayman of Mexico! The hideous monster was slowly crawling over the low wall, dragging his lengthened body from a bed of aquatic plants.

Already his short fore-arms, squamy and corrugated, rested upon the inner edge of the parapet, his shoulders projecting as if in the act to spring! His scale-covered back, with its long serrated ridge, glittered with a slippery moistness; and his eyes, usually dull, gleamed fierce and lurid from their prominent sockets.

I had brought with me a light rifle. It was but the work of a moment to unsling and level it. The sharp crack followed, and the ball impinged between the monster’s eyes, glancing harmlessly from his hard skull as though it had been a plate of steel. The shot was an idle one, perhaps worse; for, stung to madness with the stunning shock, the reptile sprang far out into the water, and made directly for its victims.

The girls, who had long since given over their mirthful contest, seemed to have lost all presence of mind; and, instead of making for the bank, stood locked in each other’s arms terrified and trembling.

Their symmetrical forms fell into an agonised embrace; and their rounded arms, olive and roseate, laced each other, and twined across their quivering bodies.

Their faces were turned to heaven, as though they expected succour from above—a group that rivalled the Laocoon.

With a spring I cleared the parapet, and, drawing my sword, dashed madly across the basin.

The girls were near the centre; but the cayman had got the start of me, and the water, three feet deep, impeded my progress. The bottom of the tank, too, was slippery, and I fell once or twice on my hands. I rose again, and with frantic energy plunged forward, all the while calling upon the bathers to make for the parapet.

Notwithstanding my shouts, the terrified girls made no effort to save themselves. They were incapable from terror.

On came the cayman with the velocity of vengeance. It was a fearful moment. Already he swam at a distance of less than six paces from his prey, his long snout projecting from the water, his gaunt jaws displaying their quadruple rows of sharp glistening teeth.

I shouted despairingly. I was baffled by the deep water. I had nearly twice the distance before I could interpose myself between the monster and its victims.

“I shall be too late!”

Suddenly I saw that the cayman had swerved. In his eagerness he had struck a subaqueous pipe of the jet.

It delayed him only a moment; but in that moment I had passed the statue-like group, and stood ready to receive his attack.

“A la orilla! á la orilla!” (To the bank! to the bank!) I shouted, pushing the terrified girls with one hand, while with the other I held my sword at arm’s-length in the face of the advancing reptile.

The girls now, for the first time awaking from their lethargy of terror, rushed towards the bank.

On came the monster, gnashing his teeth in the fury of disappointment, and uttering fearful cries.

As soon as he had got within reach I aimed a blow at his head; but the light sabre glinted from the fleshless skull with the ringing of steel to steel.

The blow, however, turned him out of his course, and, missing his aim, he passed me like an arrow. I looked around with a feeling of despair. “Thank heaven, they are safe!”

I felt the clammy scales rub against my thigh; and I leaped aside to avoid the stroke

of his tail, as it lashed the water into foam.

Again the monster turned, and came on as before.

This time I did not attempt to cut, but thrust the sabre directly for his throat. The cold blade snapped between his teeth like an icicle. Not above twelve inches remained with the hilt; and with this I hacked and fought with the energy of despair.

My situation had now grown critical indeed. The girls had reached the bank, and stood screaming upon the parapet.

At length the elder seized upon a pole, and, lifting it with all her might, leaped back into the basin, and was hastening to my rescue, when a stream of fire was poured through the leaves of the plantains: I heard a sharp crack—the short humming whiz of a bullet—and a large form, followed by half a dozen others, emerged from the grove, and, rushing over the wall, plunged into the pond.

I heard a loud plashing in the water—the shouts of men, the clashing of bayonets; and then saw the reptile roll over, pierced by a dozen wounds.

Chapter Eleven.

Don Cosmé Rosales.

“Yur safe, Cap’n!” It was Lincoln’s voice. Around me stood a dozen of the men, up to their waists. Little Jack, too, (his head and forage-cap just appearing above the surface of the water), stood with his eighteen inches of steel buried in the carcase of the dead reptile. I could not help smiling at the ludicrous picture.

“Yes, safe,” answered I, panting for breath; “safe—you came in good time, though!”

“We heern yur shot, Cap’n,” said Lincoln, “an’ we guessed yur didn’t shoot without somethin’ ter shoot for; so I tuk half a dozen files and kim up.”

“You acted right, sergeant; but where are the—”

I was looking towards the edge of the tank where I had last seen the girls. They had

disappeared.

“If yez mane the faymales,” answered Chane, “they’re vamosed through the threes. Be Saint Patrick, the black one’s a thrump anyhow! She looks for all the world like them bewtiful crayoles of Dimmerary.”

Saying this, he turned suddenly round, and commenced driving his bayonet furiously into the dead cayman, exclaiming between the thrusts:

“Och, ye divil! bad luck to yer ugly carcase! You’re a nate-looking baste to interfere with a pair of illigant craythers! Be the crass! he’s all shill, boys. Och, mother o’ Moses! I can’t find a saft spot in him!”

We climbed out upon the parapet, and the soldiers commenced wiping their wet guns.

Clayley appeared at this moment, filing round the pond at the head of the detachment. As I explained the adventure to the lieutenant, he laughed heartily.

“By Jove! it will never do for a despatch,” said he; “one killed on the side of the enemy, and on ours not a wound. There is one, however, who may be reported ‘badly scared’.”

“Who?” I asked.

“Why, who but the bold Blossom?”

“But where is he?”

“Heaven only knows! The last I saw of him, he was screening himself behind an old ruin. I wouldn’t think it strange if he was off to camp—that is, if he believes he can find his way back again.”

As Clayley said this, he burst into a loud yell of laughter.

It was with difficulty I could restrain myself; for, looking in the direction indicated by the lieutenant, I saw a bright object, which I at once recognised as the major’s face.

He had drawn aside the broad plantain-leaves, and was peering cautiously through, with a look of the most ludicrous terror. His face only was visible, round and luminous, like the full moon; and, like her, too, variegated with light and shade, for fear had produced spots of white and purple over the surface of his capacious cheeks.

As soon as the major saw how the “land lay”, he came blowing and blustering through the bushes like an elephant; and it now became apparent that he carried his long sabre drawn and nourishing.

“Bad luck, after all!” said he as he marched round the pond with a bold stride. “That’s all—is it?” he continued, pointing to the dead cayman. “Bah! I was in hopes we’d have a brush with the yellow-skins.”

“No, Major,” said I, trying to look serious, “we are not so fortunate.”

“I have no doubt, however,” said Clayley with a malicious wink, “but that we’ll have them here in a squirrel’s jump. They must have heard the report of our guns.”

A complete change became visible in the major’s bearing. The point of his sabre dropped slowly to the ground, and the blue and white spots began to array themselves afresh on his great red cheeks.

“Don’t you think, Captain,” said he, “we’ve gone far enough into the cursed country? There’s no mules in it—I can certify there’s not—not a single mule. Had we not better return to camp?”

Before I could reply, an object appeared that drew our attention, and heightened the mosaic upon the major’s cheeks.

A man, strangely attired, was seen running down the slope towards the spot where we were standing.

“Guerillas, by Jove!” exclaimed Clayley, in a voice of feigned terror; and he pointed to the scarlet sash which was twisted around the man’s waist.

The major looked round for some object where he might shelter himself in case of a skirmish. He was sidling behind a high point of the parapet, when the stranger rushed forward, and, throwing both arms about his neck, poured forth a perfect cataract of Spanish, in which the word gracias (thanks) was of frequent occurrence.

“What does the man mean with his grashes?” exclaimed the major, struggling to free himself from the Mexican.

But the latter did not hear him, for his eyes at that moment rested upon my dripping habiliments; and dropping the major, he transferred his embrace and gracias to me.

“Señor Capitan,” he said, still speaking in Spanish, and hugging me like a bear, “accept my thanks. Ah, sir! you have saved my children; how can I show you my gratitude?”

Here followed a multitude of those complimentary expressions peculiar to the language of Cervantes, which ended by his offering me his house and all it contained.

I bowed in acknowledgment of his courtesy, apologising for being so ill prepared to receive his “hug”, as I observed that my saturated vestments had wet the old fellow to the skin.

I had now time to examine the stranger, who was a tall, thin, sallow old gentleman, with a face at once Spanish and intelligent. His hair was white and short, while a moustache, somewhat grizzled, shaded his lips. Jet-black brows projected over a pair of keen and sparkling eyes. His dress was a roundabout of the finest white linen, with waistcoat and pantaloons of the same material—the latter fastened round the waist by a scarf of bright red silk. Shoes of green morocco covered his small feet, while a broad Guayaquil hat shaded his face from the sun.

Though his costume was transatlantic—speaking in reference to Old Spain—there was that in his air and manner that bespoke him a true hidalgo.

After a moment’s observation I proceeded, in my best Spanish, to express my regret

for the fright which the young ladies—his daughters, I presumed—had suffered.

The Mexican looked at me with a slight appearance of surprise.

“Why, Señor Capitan,” said he, “your accent!—you are a foreigner?”

“A foreigner! To Mexico, did you mean?”

“Yes, Señor. Is it not so?”

“Oh! of course,” answered I, smiling, and somewhat puzzled in turn.

“And how long have you been in the army, Señor Capitan?”

“But a short time.”

“How do you like Mexico, Señor?”

“I have seen but little of it as yet.”

“Why, how long have you been in the country, then?”

“Three days,” answered I; “we landed on the 9th.”

“Por Dios! three days, and in our army already!” muttered the Spaniard, throwing up his eyes in unaffected surprise.

I began to think I was interrogated by a lunatic.

“May I ask what countryman you are?” continued the old gentleman.

“What countryman? An American, of course!”

“An American?”

“Un Americano,” repeated I, for we were conversing in Spanish.

“Y son esos Americanos?” (And are these Americans?) quickly demanded my new acquaintance.

“Si, Señor,” replied I.

“Carrambo!” shouted the Spaniard, with a sudden leap, his eyes almost starting from their sockets.

“I should say, not exactly Americans,” I added. “Many of them are Irish, and French, and Germans, and Swedes, and Swiss; yet they are all Americans now.”

But the Mexican did not stay to hear my explanation. After recovering from the first shock of surprise, he had bounded through the grove; and with a wave of his hand, and the ejaculation “Esperate!” (wait!) disappeared among the plantains. The men, who had gathered around the lower end of the basin, burst out into a roar of laughter, which I did not attempt to repress. The look of terrified astonishment of the old Don had been too much for my own gravity, and I could not help being amused at the conversation that ensued among the soldiers. They were at some distance, yet I could overhear their remarks.

“That Mexikin’s an unhospitable cuss!” muttered Lincoln, with an expression of contempt.

“He might av axed the captain to dhrink, after savin’ such a pair of illigant craythers,” said Chane.

“Sorra dhrap’s in the house, Murt; the place looks dry,” remarked another son of the Green Isle.

“Och! an’ it’s a beautiful cage, anyhow,” returned Chane; “and beautiful birds in it, too. It puts me in mind of ould Dimmerary; but there we had the liquor, the raal rum—oshins of it, alanna!”

“That ’ere chap’s a greelye, I strongly ’spect,” whispered one, a regular down-east Yankee.

“A what?” asked his companion.

“Why, a greelye—one o’ them ’ere Mexikin robbers.”

“Arrah, now! did yez see the rid sash?” inquired an Irishman.

“Thim’s captin’s,” suggested the Yankee. “He’s a captin or a kurnel; I’ll bet high on that.”

“What did he say, Nath, as he was running off?”

“I don’t know ’zactly—somethin’ that sounded mighty like ’spearin’ on us.”

“He’s a lanzeer then, by jingo!”

“He had better try on his spearin’,” said another; “there’s shootin’ before spearin’—mighty good ground, too, behind this hyur painted wall.”

“The old fellow was mighty frindly at first; what got into him, anyhow?”

“Raoul says he offered to give the captain his house and all the furnishin’s.”

“Och, mother o’ Moses! and thim illigant girls, too!”

“Ov coorse.”

“By my sowl! an’ if I was the captain, I’d take him at his word, and lave off fightin’ intirely.”

“It is delf,” said a soldier, referring to the material of which the parapet was constructed.

“No, it ain’t.”

“It’s chaney, then.”

“No, nor chaney either.”

“Well, what is it?”

“It’s only a stone wall painted, you greenhorn!”

“Stone-thunder! it’s solid delf, I say.”

“Try it with your bayonet, Jim.”

Crick—crick—crick—crinell! reached my ears. Turning round, I saw that one of the men had commenced breaking off the japanned work of the parapet with his bayonet.

“Stop that!” I shouted to the man.

The remark of Chane that followed, although uttered sotto voce, I could distinctly

hear. It was sufficiently amusing.

“The captain don’t want yez to destroy what’ll be his own some day, when he marries one of thim young Dons. Here comes the owld one, and, by the powers! he’s got a big paper; he’s goin’ to make over the property!”

Laughing, I looked round, and saw that the Don was returning, sure enough. He hurried up, holding out a large sheet of parchment.

“Well, Señor, what’s this?” I inquired.

“No soy Mexicano—soy Español!” (I am no Mexican—I am a Spaniard), said he, with the expression of a true hidalgo.

Casting my eye carelessly over the document, I perceived that it was a safeguard from the Spanish consul at Vera Cruz, certifying that the bearer, Don Cosmé Rosales, was a native of Spain.

“Señor Rosales,” said I, returning the paper, “this was not necessary. The interesting circumstances under which we have met should have secured you good treatment, even were you a Mexican and we the barbarians we have been represented. We have come to make war, not with peaceful citizens, but with a rabble soldiery.”

“Es verdad (Indeed). You are wet, Señor? you are hungry?”

I could not deny that I was both the one and the other.

“You need refreshment, gentlemen; will you come to my house?”

“Permit me, Señor, to introduce you to Major Blossom—Lieutenant Clayley—Lieutenant Oakes: Don Cosmé Rosales, gentlemen.”

My friends and the Don bowed to each other. The major had now recovered his complacency.

“Vamonos, caballeros!” (Come on, gentlemen), said the Don, starting towards the house.

“But your soldiers, Capitan?” added he, stopping suddenly.

“They will remain here,” I rejoined.

“Permit me to send them some dinner.”

“Oh! certainly,” replied I; “use your own pleasure, Don Cosmé, but do not put your household to any inconvenience.”

In a few minutes we found our way to the house, which was neither more nor less than the cage-looking structure already described.

Chapter Twelve.

A Mexican Dinner.

“Pasan adentro, Señores,” said Don Cosmé, drawing aside the curtain of the rancho, and beckoning us to enter.

“Ha!” exclaimed the major, struck with the coup-d’oeil of the interior.

“Be seated, gentlemen. Ya vuelvo.” (I will return in an instant.)

So saying, Don Cosmé disappeared into a little porch in the back, partially screened from observation by a close network of woven cane.

“Very pretty, by Jove!” said Clayley, in a low voice.

“Pretty indeed!” echoed the major, with one of his customary asseverations.

“Stylish, one ought rather to say, to do it justice.”

“Stylish!” again chimed in the major, repeating his formula.

“Rosewood chairs and tables,” continued Clayley; “a harp, guitar, piano, sofas, ottomans, carpets knee-deep—whew!”

Not thinking of the furniture, I looked around the room strangely bewildered.

“Ha! Ha! what perplexes you, Captain?” asked Clayley.

“Nothing.”

“Ah! the girls you spoke of—the nymphs of the pond; but where the deuce are

they?”

“Ay, where?” I asked, with a strange sense of uneasiness.

“Girls! what girls?” inquired the major, who had not yet learned the exact nature of our aquatic adventure.

Here the voice of Don Cosmé was heard calling out—

“Pepe! Ramon! Francisco! bring dinner. Anda! anda!” (Be quick!)

“Who on earth is the old fellow calling?” asked the major, with some concern in his manner. “I see no one.”

Nor could we; so we all rose up together, and approached that side of the building that looked rearward.

The house, to all appearance, had but one apartment—the room in which we then were. The only point of this screened from observation was the little veranda into which Don Cosmé had entered; but this was not large enough to contain the number of persons who might be represented by the names he had called out.

Two smaller buildings stood under the olive-trees in the rear; but these, like the house, were transparent, and not a human figure appeared within them. We could see through the trunks of the olives a clear distance of a hundred yards. Beyond this, the mezquite and the scarlet leaves of the wild maguey marked the boundary of the forest.

It was equally puzzling to us whither the girls had gone, or whence “Pepe, Ramon, and Francisco” were to come.

The tinkling of a little bell startled us from our conjectures, and the voice of Don Cosmé was heard inquiring:

“Have you any favourite dish, gentlemen?”

Someone answered, “No.”

“Curse me!” exclaimed the major, “I believe he can get anything we may call

for—raise it out of the ground by stamping his foot or ringing a bell. Didn't I tell you?"

This exclamation was uttered in consequence of the appearance of a train of well-dressed servants, five or six in number, bringing waiters with dishes and decanters. They entered from the porch; but how did they get into it? Certainly not from the woods without, else we should have seen them as they approached the cage.

The major uttered a terrible invocation, adding in a hoarse whisper, "This must be the Mexican Aladdin!"

I confess I was not less puzzled than he. Meantime the servants came and went, going empty, and returning loaded. In less than half an hour the table fairly creaked under the weight of a sumptuous dinner. This is no figure of speech. There were dishes of massive silver, with huge flagons of the same metal, and even cups of gold!

"Señores, vamos á comer" (Come, let us eat, gentlemen), said Don Cosmé, politely motioning us to be seated. "I fear that you will not be pleased with my cuisine—it is purely Mexican—estilo del pais."

To say that the dinner was not a good one would be to utter a falsehood, and contradict the statement of Major George Blossom, of the U.S. quarter-master's department, who afterwards declared that it was the best dinner he had ever eaten in his life.

Turtle-soup first.

"Perhaps you would prefer julienne or vermicelli, gentlemen?" inquired the Don.

"Thank you; your turtle is very fine," replied I, necessarily the interpreter of the party.

"Try some of the aguacate—it will improve the flavour of your soup."

One of the waiters handed round a dark, olive-coloured fruit of an oblong shape, about the size of a large pear.

“Ask him how it is used, Captain,” said the major to me.

“Oh, I beg your pardon, gentlemen. I had forgotten that some of our edibles may be strange to you. Simply pare off the rind, and slice it thus.”

We tried the experiment, but could not discover any peculiar improvement in the flavour of the soup. The pulp of the aguacate seemed singularly insipid to our northern palates.

Fish, as with us, and of the finest quality, formed the second course.

A variety of dishes were now brought upon the table; most of them new to us, but all piquant, pleasant to the taste, and peculiar.

The major tried them all, determined to find out which he might like best—a piece of knowledge that he said would serve him upon some future occasion.

The Don seemed to take a pleasure in helping the major, whom he honoured by the title of “Señor Coronel.”

“Puchero, Señor Coronel?”

“Thank you, sir,” grunted the major, and tried the puchero.

“Allow me to help you to a spoonful of molé.”

“With pleasure, Don Cosmé.”

The molé suddenly disappeared down the major’s capacious throat.

“Try some of this chilé relleno.”

“By all means,” answered the major. “Ah, by Jove! hot as fire!—whew!”

“Pica! Pica!” answered Don Cosmé, pointing to his thorax, and smiling at the wry faces the major was making. “Wash it down, Señor, with a glass of this claret—or here, Pepe! Is the Johannisberg cool yet? Bring it in, then. Perhaps you prefer

champagne, Señores?”

“Thank you; do not trouble yourself, Don Cosmé.”

“No trouble, Capitan—bring champagne. Here, Señor Coronel, try the guisado de pato.”

“Thank you,” stammered the major; “you are very kind. Curse the thing! how it burns!”

“Do you think he understands English?” inquired Clayey of me in a whisper.

“I should think not,” I replied.

“Well, then, I wish to say aloud that this old chap’s a superb old gent. What say you, Major? Don’t you wish we had him on the lines?”

“I wish his kitchen were a little nearer the lines,” replied the other, with a wink.

“Señor Coronel, permit me—”

“What is it, my dear Don?” inquired the major.

“Pasteles de Moctezuma.”

“Oh, certainly. I say, lads, I don’t know what the plague I’m eating—it’s not bad to take, though.”

“Señor Coronel, allow me to help you to a guana steak.”

“A guana steak!” echoed the major, in some surprise.

“Si, Señor,” replied Don Cosmé, holding the steak on his fork.

“A guana steak! Do you think, lads, he means the ugly things we saw at Lobos.”

“To be sure—why not?”

“Then, by Jove, I’m through! I can’t go lizards. Thank you, my dear Don Cosmé; I believe I have dined.”

“Try this; it is very tender, I assure you,” insisted Don Cosmé.

“Come, try it, Major, and report,” cried Clayey.

“Good—you’re like the apothecary that poisoned his dog to try the effect of his nostrums. Well,”—with an oath—“here goes! It can’t be very bad, seeing how our friend gets it down. Delicious, by Jupiter! tender as chicken—good, good!”—and amidst sundry similar ejaculations the major ate his first guana steak.

“Gentlemen, here is an ortolan pie. I can recommend it—the birds are in season.”

“Reed-birds, by Jove!” said the major, recognising his favourite dish.

An incredible number of these creatures disappeared in an incredibly short time.

The dinner dishes were at length removed, and dessert followed: cakes and creams, and jellies of various kinds, and blancmange, and a profusion of the most luxurious fruits. The golden orange, the ripe pine, the pale-green lime, the juicy grape, the custard-like cherimolla, the zapoté, the granadilla, the pitahaya, the tuna, the mamay; with dates, figs, almonds, plantains, bananas, and a dozen other species of fruits, piled upon salvers of silver, were set before us: in fact, every product of the tropical clime that could excite a new nerve of the sense of taste. We were fairly astonished at the profusion of luxuries that came from no one knew where.

“Come, gentlemen, try a glass of curaçoa. Señor Coronel, allow me the pleasure.”

“Sir, your very good health.”

“Señor Coronel, would you prefer a glass of Majorca?”

“Thank you.”

“Or perhaps you would choose Pedro Ximenes. I have some very old Pedro Ximenes.”

“Either, my dear Don Cosmé—either.”

“Bring both, Ramon; and bring a couple of bottles of the Madeira—sello verde,” (green seal).

“As I am a Christian, the old gentleman’s a conjuror!” muttered the major, now in the best humour possible.

“I wish he would conjure up something else than his infernal wine bottles,” thought I, becoming impatient at the non-appearance of the ladies.

“Café, Señores?” A servant entered.

Coffee was handed round in cups of Sèvres china.

“You smoke, gentlemen? Would you prefer a Havanna? Here are some sent me from Cuba by a friend. I believe they are good; or, if you would amuse yourself with a cigaritto, here are Campeacheanos. These are the country cigars—puros, as we call them. I would not recommend them.”

“A Havanna for me,” said the major, helping himself at the same time to a fine-looking “regalia.”

I had fallen into a somewhat painful reverie.

I began to fear that, with all his hospitality, the Mexican would allow us to depart without an introduction to his family; and I had conceived a strong desire to speak with the two lovely beings whom I had already seen, but more particularly with the brunette, whose looks and actions had deeply impressed me. So strange is the mystery of love! My heart had already made its choice.

I was suddenly aroused by the voice of Don Cosmé, who had risen, and was inviting myself and comrades to join the ladies in the drawing-room.

I started up so suddenly as almost to overturn one of the tables.

“Why, Captain, what’s the matter!” said Clayley. “Don Cosmé is about to introduce us to the ladies. You’re not going to back out?”

“Certainly not,” stammered I, somewhat ashamed at my gaucherie.

“He says they’re in the drawing-room,” whispered the major, in a voice that betokened a degree of suspicion; “but where the plague that is, Heaven only knows! Stand by, my boys!—are your pistols all right?”

“Pshaw, Major! for shame!”

Chapter Thirteen.

A Subterranean Drawing-Room.

The mystery of the drawing-room, and the servants, and the dishes, was soon over. A descending stairway explained the enigma.

“Let me conduct you to my cave, gentlemen,” said the Spaniard: “I am half a subterranean. In the hot weather, and during the northers, we find it more agreeable to live under the ground. Follow me, Señores.”

We descended, with the exception of Oakes, who returned to look after the men.

At the foot of the staircase we entered a hall brilliantly lighted. The floor was without a carpet, and exhibited a mosaic of the finest marble. The walls were painted of a pale blue colour, and embellished by a series of pictures from the pencil of Murillo. These were framed in a costly and elegant manner. From the ceiling were suspended chandeliers of a curious and unique construction, holding in their outstretched branches wax candles of an ivory whiteness.

Large vases of waxen flowers, covered with crystals, stood around the hall upon tables of polished marble. Other articles of furniture, candelabra, girandoles, gilded clocks, filled the outline. Broad mirrors reflected the different objects; so that, instead of one apartment, this hall appeared only one of a continuous suite of splendid drawing-rooms.

And yet, upon closer observation, there seemed to be no door leading from this hall, which, as Don Cosmé informed his guests, was the ante-sala.

Our host approached one of the large mirrors, and slightly touched a spring. The tinkling of a small bell was heard within; and at the same instant the mirror glided back, reflecting in its motion a series of brilliant objects, that for a moment bewildered our eyes with a blazing light.

“Pasan adentro, Señores,” said Don Cosmé, stepping aside, and waving us to enter.

We walked into the drawing-room. The magnificence that greeted us seemed a vision—a glorious and dazzling hallucination—more like the gilded brilliance of some enchanted palace than the interior of a Mexican gentleman's habitation.

As we stood gazing with irresistible wonderment, Don Cosmé opened a side-door, and called aloud, "Niñas, niñas, ven aca!" (Children, come hither!)

Presently we heard several female voices, blending together like a medley of singing birds.

They approached. We heard the rustling of silken dresses, the falling of light feet in the doorway, and three ladies entered—the señora of Don Cosmé, followed by her two beautiful daughters, the heroines of our aquatic adventure.

These hesitated a moment, scanning our faces; then, with a cry of "Nuestro Salvador!" both rushed forward, and knelt, or rather crouched, at my feet, each of them clasping one of my hands and covering it with kisses.

Their panting agitation, their flashing eyes, the silken touch of their delicate fingers, sent the blood rushing through my veins like a stream of lava; but in their gentle accents, the simple ingenuousness of their expressions, the childlike innocence of their faces, I regarded them only as two beautiful children kneeling in the abandon of gratitude.

Meanwhile Don Cosmé had introduced Clayley and the major to his señora, whose baptismal name was Joaquina; and taking the young ladies one in each hand, he presented them as his daughters, Guadalupe and Maria de la Luz (Mary of the Light).

"Mama," said Don Cosmé, "the gentlemen had not quite finished their cigars."

"Oh! they can smoke here," replied the señora.

"Will the ladies not object to that?" I inquired.

"No—no—no!" ejaculated they simultaneously.

“Perhaps you will join us?—we have heard that such is the custom of your country.”

“It was the custom,” said Don Cosmé. “At present the young ladies of Mexico are rather ashamed of the habit.”

“We no smoke—Mamma, yes,” added the elder—the brunette—whose name was Guadalupe.

“Ha! you speak English?”

“Little Englis speak—no good Englis,” was the reply.

“Who taught you English?” I inquired, prompted by a mysterious curiosity.

“Un American us teach—Don Emilio.”

“Ha! an American?”

“Yes, Señor,” said Don Cosmé: “a gentleman from Vera Cruz, who formerly visited our family.”

I thought I could perceive a desire upon the part of our host not to speak further on this subject, and yet I felt a sudden, and, strange to say, a painful curiosity to know more about Don Emilio, the American, and his connection with our newly-made acquaintance. I can only explain this by asking the reader if he or she has not experienced a similar feeling while endeavouring to trace the unknown past of some being in whom either has lately taken an interest—an interest stronger than friendship?

That mamma smoked was clear, for the old lady had already gone through the process of unrolling one of the small cartouche-like cigars. Having re-rolled it between her fingers, she placed it within the gripe of a pair of small golden pincers.

This done, she held one end to the coals that lay upon the brazero, and ignited the paper. Then, taking the other end between her thin, purlish lips, she breathed forth a blue cloud of aromatic vapour.

After a few whiffs she invited the major to participate, offering him a cigarrito from

her beaded cigar-case.

This being considered an especial favour, the major's gallantry would not permit him to refuse. He took the cigarrito, therefore; but, once in possession, he knew not how to use it.

Imitating the señora, he opened the diminutive cartridge, spreading out the edges of the wrapper, but attempted in vain to re-roll it.

The ladies, who had watched the process, seemed highly amused, particularly the younger, who laughed outright.

"Permit me, Señor Coronel," said the Dona Joaquina, taking the cigarrito from the major's hand, and giving it a turn through her nimble fingers, which brought it all right again.

"Thus—now—hold your fingers thus. Do not press it: suave, suave. This end to the light—so—very well!"

The major lit the cigar, and, putting it between his great thick lips, began to puff in a most energetic style.

He had not cast off half a dozen whiffs when the fire, reaching his fingers, burned them severely, causing him to remove them suddenly from the cigar. The wrapper then burst open; and the loose pulverised tobacco by a sudden inhalation rushed into his mouth and down his throat, causing him to cough and splutter in the most ludicrous manner.

This was too much for the ladies, who, encouraged by the cachinnations of Clayley, laughed outright; while the major, with tears in his eyes, could be heard interlarding his coughing solo with all kinds of oaths and expressions.

The scene ended by one of the young ladies offering the major a glass of water, which he drank off, effectually clearing the avenue of his throat.

"Will you try another, Señor Coronel?" asked Dona Joaquina, with a smile.

“No, ma’am, thank you,” replied the major, and then a sort of internal subterraneous curse could be heard in his throat.

The conversation continued in English, and we were highly amused at the attempts of our new acquaintances to express themselves in that language.

After failing, on one occasion, to make herself understood, Guadalupe said, with some vexation in her manner:

“We wish brother was home come; brother speak ver better Englis.”

“Where is he?” I inquired.

“In the ceety—Vera Cruz.”

“Ha! and when did you expect him?”

“Thees day—to-night—he home come.”

“Yes,” added the Señora Joaquina, in Spanish: “he went to the city to spend a few days with a friend; but he was to return to-day, and we are looking for him to arrive in the evening.”

“But how is he to get out?” cried the major, in his coarse, rough manner.

“How?—why, Señor?” asked the ladies in a breath, turning deadly pale.

“Why, he can’t pass the pickets, ma’am,” answered the major.

“Explain, Captain; explain!” said the ladies, appealing to me with looks of anxiety.

I saw that concealment would be idle. The major had fired the train.

“It gives me pain, ladies,” said I, speaking in Spanish, “to inform you that you must be disappointed. I fear the return of your brother to-day is impossible.”

“But why, Captain?—why?”

“Our lines are completely around Vera Cruz, and all intercourse to and from the city is at an end.”

Had a shell fallen into Don Cosmé’s drawing-room it could not have caused a

greater change in the feelings of its inmates. Knowing nothing of military life, they had no idea that our presence there had drawn an impassable barrier between them and a much-loved member of their family. In a seclusion almost hermetical they knew that a war existed between their country and the United States; but that was far away upon the Rio Grande. They had heard, moreover, that our fleet lay off Vera Cruz, and the pealing of the distant thunder of San Juan had from time to time reached their ears; but they had not dreamed, on seeing us, that the city was invested by land. The truth was now clear; and the anguish of the mother and daughters became afflicting when we informed them of what we were unable to conceal—that it was the intention of the American commander to bombard the city.

The scene was to us deeply distressing.

Dona Joaquina wrung her hands, and called upon the Virgin with all the earnestness of entreaty. The sisters clung alternately to their mother and Don Cosmé, weeping and crying aloud, “Pobre Narcisso! nuestro hermanito—le asesinaran!” (Poor Narcisso, our little brother!—they will murder him!)

In the midst of this distressing scene the door of the drawing-room was thrown suddenly open, and a servant rushed in, shouting in an agitated voice, “El norté! el norté!”

Chapter Fourteen.

“The Norther.”

We hurried after Don Cosmé towards the ante-sala, both myself and my companions ignorant of this new object of dread.

When we emerged from the stairway the scene that hailed us was one of terrific sublimity. Earth and heaven had undergone a sudden and convulsive change. The face of nature, but a moment since gay with summer smiles, was now hideously distorted. The sky had changed suddenly from its blue and sunny brightness to an

aspect dark and portentous.

Along the north-west a vast volume of black vapour rolled up over the Sierra Madre, and rested upon the peaks of the mountains. From this, ragged masses, parting in fantastic forms and groupings, floated off against the concavity of the sky as though the demons of the storm were breaking up from an angry council. Each of these, as it careered across the heavens, seemed bent upon some spiteful purpose.

An isolated fragment hung lowering above the snowy cone of Orizava, like a huge vampire suspended over his sleeping victim.

From the great “parent cloud” that rested upon the Sierra Madre, lightning-bolts shot out and forked hither and thither or sank into the detached masses—the messengers of the storm-king bearing his fiery mandates across the sky.

Away along the horizon of the east moved the yellow pillars of sand, whirled upward by the wind, like vast columnar towers leading to heaven.

The storm had not yet reached the rancho. The leaves lay motionless under a dark and ominous calm; but the wild screams of many birds—the shrieks of the swans, the discordant notes of the frightened pea-fowl, the chattering of parrots as they sought the shelter of the thick olives in terrified flight—all betokened the speedy advent of some fearful convulsion.

The rain in large drops fell upon the broad leaves with a soft, plashing sound; and now and then a quick, short puff came snorting along, and, seizing the feathery frondage of the palms, shook them with a spiteful and ruffian energy.

The long green stripes, after oscillating a moment, would settle down again in graceful and motionless curves.

A low sound like the “sough” of the sea or the distant falling of water came from the north; while at intervals the hoarse bark of the coyoté and the yelling of terrified monkeys could be heard afar off in the woods.

“Tapa la casa! tapa la casa!” (Cover the house!) cried Don Cosmé as soon as he had fairly got his head above ground. “Anda!—anda con los macates!” (Quick with the cords!) With lightning quickness a roll of palmetto mats came down on all sides of the house, completely covering the bamboo walls, and forming a screen impervious to both wind and rain. This was speedily fastened at all corners, and strong stays were carried out and warped around the trunks of trees. In five minutes the change was complete. The cage-looking structure had disappeared, and a house with walls of yellow petaté stood in its place.

“Now, Señores, all is secured,” said Don Cosmé. “Let us return to the drawing-room.”

“I should like to see the first burst of this tornado,” I remarked, not wishing to intrude upon the scene of sorrow we had left.

“So be it, Captain. Stand here under the shelter, then.”

“Hot as thunder!” growled the major, wiping the perspiration from his broad, red cheeks.

“In five minutes, Señor Coronel, you will be chilled. At this point the heated atmosphere is now compressed. Patience! it will soon be scattered.”

“How long will the storm continue?” I asked. “Por Dios! Señor, it is impossible to tell how long the ‘norté’ may rage: sometimes for days; perhaps only for a few hours. This appears to be a ‘huracana’. If so, it will be short, but terrible while it lasts. Carrambo!”

A puff of cold, sharp wind came whistling past like an arrow. Another followed, and another, like the three seas that roll over the stormy ocean. Then, with a loud, rushing sound, the broad, full blast went sweeping—strong, dark, and dusty—bearing upon its mane the screaming and terrified birds, mingled with torn and flouted leaves.

The olives creaked and tossed about. The tall palms bowed and yielded, flinging out

their long pinions like streamers. The broad leaves of the plantains flapped and whistled, and, bending gracefully, allowed the fierce blast to pass over.

Then a great cloud came rolling down; a thick vapour seemed to fill the space; and the air felt hot and dark and heavy. A choking, sulphureous smell rendered the breathing difficult, and for a moment day seemed changed to night.

Suddenly the whole atmosphere blazed forth in a sheet of flame, and the trees glistened as though they were on fire. An opaque darkness succeeded. Another flash, and along with it the crashing thunder—the artillery of heaven—deafening all other sounds.

Peal followed peal; the vast cloud was breached and burst by a hundred fiery bolts; and like an avalanche the heavy tropical rain was precipitated to the earth.

It fell in torrents, but the strength of the tempest had been spent on the first onslaught. The dark cloud passed on to the south, and a piercing cold wind swept after it.

“Vamos á bajar, señores!” (Let us descend, gentlemen), said Don Cosmé with a shiver, and he conducted us back to the stairway.

Clayley and the major looked towards me with an expression that said, “Shall we go in?” There were several reasons why our return to the drawing-room was unpleasant to myself and my companions. A scene of domestic affliction is ever painful to a stranger. How much more painful to us, knowing, as we did, that our countrymen—that we—had been the partial agents of this calamity! We hesitated a moment on the threshold.

“Gentlemen, we must return for a moment: we have been the bearers of evil tidings—let us offer such consolation as we may think of. Come!”

Chapter Fifteen.

A Little Fair Weather again.

On re-entering the sala the picture of woe was again presented, but in an altered aspect. A change, sudden as the atmospheric one we had just witnessed, had taken place; and the scene of wild weeping was now succeeded by one of resignation and prayer.

On one side was Dona Joaquina, holding in her hands a golden rosary with its crucifix. The girls were kneeling in front of a picture—a portrait of Dolores with the fatal dagger; and the "Lady of Grief" looked not more sorrowful from the canvas than the beautiful devotees that bent before her.

With their heads slightly leaning, their arms crossed upon their swelling bosoms, and their long loose hair trailing upon the carpet, they formed a picture at once painful and prepossessing.

Not wishing to intrude upon this sacred sorrow, we made a motion to retire.

"No, Señores," said Don Cosmé, interrupting us. "Be seated; let us talk calmly—let us know the worst."

We then proceeded to inform Don Cosmé of the landing of the American troops and the manner in which our lines were drawn around the city, and pointed out to him the impossibility of anyone passing either in or out.

"There is still a hope, Don Cosmé," said I, "and that, perhaps, rests with yourself."

The thought had struck me that a Spaniard of Don Cosmé's evident rank and wealth might be enabled to procure access to the city by means of his consul, and through the Spanish ship of war that I recollected was lying off San Juan.

"Oh! name it, Captain; name it!" cried he, while at the word "hope" the ladies had rushed forward, and stood clinging around me.

"There is a Spanish ship of war lying under the walls of Vera Cruz."

"We know it—we know it!" replied Don Cosmé eagerly.

"Ah! you know it, then?"

“Oh, yes!” said Guadalupe. “Don Santiago is on board of her.”

“Don Santiago?” inquired I; “who is he?”

“He is a relation of ours, Captain,” said Don Cosmé; “an officer in the Spanish navy.”

This information pained me, although I scarcely knew why.

“You have a friend, then, aboard the Spanish ship,” said I to the elder of the sisters. “’Tis well; it will be in his power to restore to you your brother.”

A ring of brightening faces was around me while I uttered these cheering words; and Don Cosmé, grasping me by the hand, entreated me to proceed.

“This Spanish ship,” I continued, “is still allowed to keep up a communication with the town. You should proceed aboard at once, and by the assistance of this friend you may bring away your son before the bombardment commences. I see no difficulty; our batteries are not yet formed.”

“I will go this instant!” said Don Cosmé, leaping to his feet, while Dona Joaquina and her daughters ran out to make preparations for his journey.

Hope—sweet hope—was again in the ascendant.

“But how, Señor?” asked Don Cosmé, as soon as they were gone; “how can I pass your lines? Shall I be permitted to reach the ship?”

“It will be necessary for me to accompany you, Don Cosmé,” I replied; “and I regret exceedingly that my duty will not permit me to return with you at once.”

“Oh, Señor!” exclaimed the Spaniard, with a painful expression.

“My business here,” continued I, “is to procure pack-mules for the American army.”

“Mules?”

“Yes. We were crossing for that purpose to a plain on the other side of the woods, where we had observed some animals of that description.”

"'Tis true, Captain; there are a hundred or more; they are mine—take them all!"

"But it is our intention to pay for them, Don Cosmé. The major here has the power to contract with you."

"As you please, gentlemen; but you will then return this way, and proceed to your camp?"

"As soon as possible," I replied. "How far distant is this plain?"

"Not more than a league. I would go with you, but—" Here Don Cosmé hesitated, and, approaching, said in a low tone: "The truth is, Señor Capitan, I should be glad if you could take them without my consent. I have mixed but little in the politics of this country; but Santa Anna is my enemy—he will ask no better motive for despoiling me."

"I understand you," said I. "Then, Don Cosmé, we will take your mules by force, and carry yourself a prisoner to the American camp—a Yankee return for your hospitality."

"It is good," replied the Spaniard, with a smile.

"Señor Capitan," continued he, "you are without a sword. Will you favour me by accepting this?"

Don Cosmé held out to me a rapier of Toledo steel, with a golden scabbard richly chased, and bearing on its hilt the eagle and nopal of Mexico.

"It is a family relic, and once belonged to the brave Guadalupe Victoria."

"Ha! indeed!" I exclaimed, taking the sword; "I shall value it much. Thanks, Señor! thanks! Now, Major, we are ready to proceed."

"A glass of maraschino, gentlemen?" said Don Cosmé, as a servant appeared with a flask and glasses. "Thank you—yes," grunted the major; "and while we are drinking it, Señor Don, let me give you a hint. You appear to have plenty of pewter." Here the major significantly touched a gold sugar-dish, which the servant was carrying

upon a tray of chased silver. “Take my word for it, you can’t bury it too soon.”

“It is true, Don Cosmé,” said I, translating to him the major’s advice. “We are not French, but there are robbers who hang on the skirts of every army.”

Don Cosmé promised to follow the hint with alacrity, and we prepared to take our departure from the rancho.

“I will give you a guide, Señor Capitan; you will find my people with the mulada. Please compel them to lasso the cattle for you. You will obtain what you want in the corral. Adios, Señores!”

“Farewell, Don Cosmé!”

“A dios, Capitan! adios! adios!”

I held out my hand to the younger of the girls, who instantly caught it and pressed it to her lips. It was the action of a child. Guadalupe followed the example of her sister, but evidently with a degree of reserve. What, then, should have caused this difference in their manner?

In the next moment we were ascending the stairway.

“Lucky dog!” growled the major. “Take a ducking myself for that.”

“Both beautiful, by Jove!” said Clayley; “but of all the women I ever saw, give me ‘Mary of the Light’!”

Chapter Sixteen.

The Scout continued, with a Variety of Reflections.

Love is a rose growing upon a thorny bramble. There is jealousy in the very first blush of a passion. No sooner has a fair face made its impress on the heart than hopes and fears spring up in alternation. Every action, every word, every look is noted and examined with a jealous scrutiny; and the heart of the lover, changing like the chameleon, takes its hues from the latest sentiment that may have dropped from

the loved one's lips. And then the various looks, words, and actions, the favourable with the unfavourable, are recalled, and by a mental process classified and marshalled against each other, and compared and balanced with as much exactitude as the pros and contras of a miser's bank-book; and in this process we have a new alternation of hopes and fears.

Ah, love! we could write a long history of thy rise and progress; but it is doubtful whether any of our readers would be a jot the wiser for it. Most of them ere this have read that history in their own hearts.

I felt and knew that I was in love. It had come like a thought, as it comes upon all men whose souls are attuned to vibrate under the mystical impressions of the beautiful. And well I knew she was beautiful. I saw its unfailing index in those oval developments—the index, too, of the intellectual; for experience had taught me that intellect takes a shape; and that those peculiarities of form that we admire, without knowing why, are but the material illustrations of the diviner principles of mind.

The eye, too, with its almond outline, and wild, half-Indian, half Arab expression—the dark tracery over the lip, so rarely seen in the lineaments of her sex—even these were attractions. There was something picturesque, something strange, something almost fierce, in her aspect; and yet it was this indefinable something, this very fierceness, that had challenged my love. For I must confess mine is not one of those curious natures that I have read of, whose love is based only upon the goodness of the object. That is not love.

My heart recognised in her the heroine of extremes. One of those natures gifted with all the tenderness that belongs to the angel idea—woman; yet soaring above her sex in the paralysing moments of peril and despair. Her feelings, in relation to her sister's cruelty to the gold-fish, proved the existence of the former principle; her actions, in attempting my own rescue when battling with the monster, were evidence of the latter. One of those natures that may err from the desperate intensity of one

passion, that knows no limit to its self-sacrifice short of destruction and death. One of those beings that may fall—but only once.

“What would I not give—what would I not do—to be the hero of such a heart?”

These were my reflections as I quitted the house.

I had noted every word, every look, every action, that could lend me a hope; and my memory conjured up, and my judgment canvassed, each little circumstance in its turn.

How strange her conduct at bidding adieu! How unlike her sister! Less friendly and sincere; and yet from this very circumstance I drew my happiest omen.

Strange—is it not? My experience has taught me that love and hate for the same object can exist in the same heart, and at the same time. If this be a paradox, I am a child of error.

I believed it then; and her apparent coldness, which would have rendered many another hopeless, produced with me an opposite effect.

Then came the cloud—the thought of Don Santiago—and a painful feeling shot through my heart.

“Don Santiago, a naval officer, young, handsome. Bah! hers is not a heart to be won by a face.”

Such were my reflections and half-uttered expressions as I slowly led my soldiers through the tangled path.

Don Santiago’s age and his appearance were the creations of a jealous fancy. I had bidden adieu to my new acquaintances knowing nothing of Don Santiago beyond the fact that he was an officer on board the Spanish ship of war, and a relation of Don Cosmé.

“Oh, yes! Don Santiago is on board! Ha! there was an evident interest. Her look as she said it; her manner—furies! But he is a relation, a cousin—a cousin—I hate

cousins!”

I must have pronounced the last words aloud, as Lincoln, who walked in my rear, stepped hastily up, and asked:

“What did yer say, Cap’n?”

“Oh! nothing, Sergeant,” stammered I, in some confusion.

Notwithstanding my assurance, I overheard Lincoln whisper to his nearest comrade:

“What ther old Harry hes got into the cap?”

He referred to the fact that I had unconsciously hooked myself half a dozen times on the thorny claws of the pita-plant, and my overalls began to exhibit a most tattered condition.

Our route lay through a dense chaparral—now crossing a sandy spur, covered with mezquite and acacia; then sinking into the bed of some silent creek, shaded with old cork-trees, whose gnarled and venerable trunks were laced together by a thousand parasites. Two miles from the rancho we reached the banks of a considerable stream, which we conjectured was a branch of the Jamapa River.

On both sides a fringe of dark forest-trees flung out long branches extending half-way across the stream. The water flowed darkly underneath.

Huge lilies stood out from the banks—their broad, wax-like leaves trailing upon the glassy ripple.

Here and there were pools fringed with drooping willows and belts of green tulé. Other aquatic plants rose from the water to the height of twenty feet; among which we distinguished the beautiful “iris”, with its tall, spear-like stem, ending in a brown cylinder, like the pompon of a grenadier’s cap.

As we approached the banks the pelican, scared from his lonely haunt, rose upon heavy wing, and with a shrill scream flapped away through the dark aisles of the forest. The cayman plunged sullenly into the sedgy water; and the “Sajou” monkey,

suspended by his prehensile tail from some overhanging bough, oscillated to and fro, and filled the air with his hideous, half-human cries.

Halting for a moment to refill the canteens, we crossed over and ascended the opposite bank. A hundred paces farther on the guide, who had gone ahead, cried out from an eminence, “Mira la caballada!” (Yonder’s the drove!)

Chapter Seventeen.

One Way of Taming a Bull.

Pushing through the jungle, we ascended the eminence. A brilliant picture opened before us. The storm had suddenly lulled, and the tropical sun shone down upon the flowery surface of the earth, bathing its verdure in a flood of yellow light. It was several hours before sunset, but the bright orb had commenced descending towards the snowy cone of Orizava, and his rays had assumed that golden red which characterises the ante-twilight of the tropics. The short-lived storm had swept the heavens, and the blue roof of the world was without a cloud. The dark masses had rolled away over the south-eastern horizon, and were now spending their fury upon the dyewood forests of Honduras and Tabasco.

At our feet lay the prairie, spread before us like a green carpet, and bounded upon the farther side by a dark wall of forest-trees. Several clumps of timber grew like islands on the plain, adding to the picturesque character of the landscape.

Near the centre of the prairie stood a small rancho, surrounded by a high picket fence. This we at once recognised as the “corral” mentioned by Don Cosmé.

At some distance from the inclosure thousands of cattle were browsing upon the grassy level, their spotted flanks and long upright horns showing their descent from the famous race of Spanish bulls. Some of them, straggling from the herd, rambled through the “mottes”, or lay stretched out under the shade of some isolated palm-tree. Ox-bells were tinkling their cheerful but monotonous music. Hundreds of

horses and mules mingled with the herd; and we could distinguish a couple of leather-clad vaqueros (herdsmen) galloping from point to point on their swift mustangs.

These, as we appeared upon the ridge, dashed out after a wild bull that had just escaped from the corral.

All five—the vaqueros, the mustangs, and the bull—swept over the prairie like wind, the bull bellowing with rage and terror; while the vaqueros were yelling in his rear, and whirling their long lazos. Their straight black hair floating in the wind—their swarthy, Arab-like faces—their high Spanish hats—their red leather calzoneros, buttoned up the sides—their huge jingling spurs, and the ornamental trappings of their deep saddles—all these, combined with the perfect manège of their dashing steeds, and the wild excitement of the chase in which they were engaged, rendered them objects of picturesque interest; and we halted a moment to witness the result.

The bull came rushing past within fifty paces of where we stood, snorting with rage, and tossing his horns high in the air—his pursuers close upon him. At this moment one of the vaqueros launched his lazo, which, floating gracefully out, settled down over one horn. Seeing this, the vaquero did not turn his horse, but sat facing the bull, and permitted the rope to run out. It was soon carried taut; and, scarcely checking the animal, it slipped along the smooth horn and spun out into the air. The cast was a failure.

The second vaquero now flung his lazo with more success. The heavy loop, skilfully projected, shot out like an arrow, and embraced both horns in its curving noose. With the quickness of thought the vaquero wheeled his horse, buried his spurs deep into his flanks, and, pressing his thighs to the saddle, galloped off in an opposite direction. The bull dashed on as before. In a moment the lariat was stretched. The sudden jerk caused the thong to vibrate like a bowstring, and the bull lay motionless

on the grass. The shock almost dragged the mustang upon his flanks.

The bull lay for some time where he had fallen; then, making an effort, he sprang up, and looked around him with a bewildered air. He was not yet conquered. His eye, flashing with rage, rolled around until it fell upon the rope leading from his horns to the saddle; and, suddenly lowering his head, with a furious roar he rushed upon the vaquero.

The latter, who had been expecting this attack, drove the spurs into his mustang, and started in full gallop across the prairie. On followed the bull, sometimes shortening the distance between him and his enemy, while at intervals the lazo, tightening, would almost jerk him upon his head.

After running for a hundred yards or so, the vaquero suddenly wheeled and galloped out at right angles to his former course. Before the bull could turn, himself the rope again tightened with a jerk and flung him upon his side. This time he lay but an instant, and, again springing to his feet, he dashed off in fresh pursuit.

The second vaquero now came up, and, as the bull rushed past, launched his lazo after, and snared him around one of the legs, drawing the noose upon his ankle.

This time the bull was flung completely over, and with such a violent shock that he lay as if dead. One of the vaqueros then rode cautiously up, and, bending over in the saddle, unfastened both of the lariats, and set the animal free.

The bull rose to his feet, and, looking around in the most cowed and pitiful manner, walked quietly off, driven unresistingly towards the corral.

We commenced descending into the place, and the vaqueros, catching a glimpse of our uniforms, simultaneously reined up their mustangs with a sudden jerk. We could see from their gestures that they were frightened at the approach of our party. This was not strange, as the major, mounted upon his great gaunt charger, loomed up against the blue sky like a colossus. The Mexicans, doubtless, had never seen anything in the way of horseflesh bigger than the mustangs they were riding; and

this apparition, with the long line of uniformed soldiers descending the hill, was calculated to alarm them severely.

“Them fellers is gwine to put, Cap’n,” said Lincoln, touching his cap respectfully.

“You’re right, Sergeant,” I replied; “and without them we might as well think of catching the wind as one of these mules.”

“If yer’ll just let me draw a bead on the near mustang, I kin kripple him ’ithout hurtin’ the thing thet’s in the saddle.”

“It would be a pity. No, Sergeant,” answered I. “I might stop them by sending forward the guide,” I continued, addressing myself rather than Lincoln; “but no, it will not do; there must be the appearance of force. I have promised. Major, would you have the goodness to ride forward, and prevent those fellows from galloping off?”

“Lord, Captain!” said the major, with a terrified look, “you don’t think I could overtake such Arabs as them? Hercules is slow—slow as a crab!”

Now, this was a lie, and I knew it! for Hercules, the major’s great, raw-boned steed, was as fleet as the wind.

“Then, Major, perhaps you will allow Mr Clayley to make trial of him,” I suggested. “He is light weight. I assure you that, without the assistance of these Mexicans, we shall not be able to catch a single mule.”

The major, seeing that all eyes were fixed upon him, suddenly straightened himself up in his stirrups, and, swelling with courage and importance, declared, “If that was the case, he would go himself.” Then, calling upon “Doc” to follow him, he struck the spurs into Hercules, and rode forward at a gallop.

It proved that this was just the very course to start the vaqueros, as the major had inspired them with more terror than all the rest of our party. They showed evident symptoms of taking to their heels, and I shouted to them at the top of my voice:

“Alto! somos amigos!” (Halt! we are friends).

The words were scarcely out of my mouth when the Mexicans drove the rowels into their mustangs, and galloped off as if for their lives in the direction of the corral.

The major followed at a slashing pace, Doc bringing up the rear; while the basket which the latter carried over his arm began to eject its contents, scattering the commissariat of the major over the prairie. Fortunately, the hospitality of Don Cosmé had already provided a substitute for this loss.

After a run of about half a mile Hercules began to gain rapidly upon the mustangs, whereas Doc was losing distance in an inverse ratio. The Mexicans had got within a couple of hundred yards of the rancho, the major not over a hundred in their rear, when I observed the latter suddenly pull up, and, jerking the long body of Hercules round, commence riding briskly back, all the while looking over his shoulder towards the in closure.

The vaqueros did not halt at the corral, as we expected, but kept across the prairie, and disappeared among the trees on the opposite side.

“What the deuce has got into Blossom?” inquired Clayley; “he was clearly gaining upon them. The old bloat must have burst a blood-vessel.”

Chapter Eighteen.

A Brush with the Guerilleros.

“Why, what was the matter, Major?” inquired I, as the major rode up blowing like a porpoise.

“Matter!” replied he, with one of his direst imprecations; “matter, indeed! You wouldn’t have me ride plump into their works, would you?”

“Works!” echoed I, in some surprise; “what do you mean by that, Major?”

“I mean works—that’s all. There’s a stockade ten feet high, as full as it can stick of them.”

“Full of what?”

“Full of the enemy—full of rancheros. I saw their ugly copper faces—a dozen of them at least—looking at me over the pickets; and, sure as heaven, if I had gone ten paces farther they would have riddled me like a target.”

“But, Major, they were only peaceable rancheros—cow-herds—nothing more.”

“Cow-herds! I tell you, Captain, that those two that galloped off had a sword apiece strapped to their saddles. I saw them when I got near: they were decoys to bring us up to that stockade—I’ll bet my life upon it!”

“Well, Major,” rejoined I, “they’re far enough from the stockade now; and the best we can do in their absence will be to examine it, and see what chances it may offer to corral these mules, for, unless they can be driven into it, we shall have to return to camp empty-handed.”

Saying this, I moved forward with the men, the major keeping in the rear.

We soon reached the formidable stockade, which proved to be nothing more than a regular corral, such as are found on the great haciendas de ganados (cattle farms) of Spanish America. In one corner was a house, constructed of upright poles, with a thatch of palm-leaves. This contained the lazos, alparejas, saddles, etcetera, of the vaqueros; and in the door of this house stood a decrepit old zambo, the only human thing about the place. The zambo’s woolly head over the pickets had reflected itself a dozen times on the major’s terrified imagination.

After examining the corral, I found it excellent for our purpose, provided we could only succeed in driving the mules into it; and, throwing open the bars, we proceeded to make the attempt. The mules were browsing quietly at the distance of a quarter of a mile from the corral.

Marching past the drove, I deployed the company in the form of a semicircle, forming a complete cordon round the animals; then, closing in upon them slowly, the soldiers commenced driving them towards the pen.

We were somewhat awkward at this new duty; but by means of a shower of small rocks, pieces of bois de vache, and an occasional “heigh, heigh!” the mules were soon in motion and in the required direction.

The major, with Doc and little Jack, being the mounted men of the party, did great service, especially Jack, who was highly delighted with this kind of thing, and kept Twidget in a constant gallop from right to left.

As the mulado neared the gates of the inclosure, the two extremes of the semi-circumference gradually approached each other, closing in toward the corral.

The mules were already within fifty paces of the entrance, the soldiers coming up about two hundred yards in the rear, when a noise like the tramping of many hoofs arrested our attention. The quick, sharp note of a cavalry bugle rang out across the plain, followed by a wild yell, as though a band of Indian warriors were sweeping down upon the foe.

In an instant every eye was turned, and we beheld with consternation a cloud of horsemen springing out from the woods, and dashing along in the headlong velocity of a charge.

It required but a single glance to satisfy me that they were guerilleros. Their picturesque attire, their peculiar arms, and the parti-coloured bannerets upon their lances were not to be mistaken.

We stood for a moment as if thunderstruck; a sharp cry rose along the deployed line.

I signalled to the bugler, who gave the command, “Rally upon the centre!”

As if by one impulse, the whole line closed in with a run upon the gates of the inclosure. The mules, impelled by the sudden rush, dashed forward pell-mell, blocking up the entrance.

On came the guerilleros, with streaming pennons and lances couched, shouting their wild cries:

“Andela! andela! Mueran los Yankees!” (Forward! forward! Death to the Yankees!)

The foremost of the soldiers were already upon the heels of the crowded mules, pricking them with bayonets. The animals began to kick and plunge in the most furious manner, causing a new danger in front.

“Face about—fire!” I commanded at this moment.

An irregular but well-directed volley emptied half a dozen saddles, and for a moment staggered the charging line; but, before my men could reload, the guerilleros had leaped clear over their fallen comrades, and were swooping down with cries of vengeance. A dozen of their bravest men were already within shot-range, firing their escopettes and pistols as they came down.

Our position had now grown fearfully critical. The mules still blocked up the entrance, preventing the soldiers from taking shelter behind the stockade; and before we could reload, the rearmost would be at the mercy of the enemy’s lances.

Seizing the major’s servant by the arm, I dragged him from his horse, and, leaping into the saddle, flung myself upon the rear. Half a dozen of my bravest men, among whom were Lincoln, Chane, and the Frenchman Raoul, rallied around the horse, determined to receive the cavalry charge on the short bayonets of their rifles. Their pieces were all empty!

At this moment my eye rested on one of the soldiers, a brave but slow-footed German, who was still twenty paces in the rear of his comrades, making every effort to come up. Two of the guerilleros were rushing upon him with couched lances. I galloped out to his rescue; but before I could reach him the lance of the foremost Mexican crashed through the soldier’s skull, shivering it like a shell. The barb and bloody pennon came out on the opposite side. The man was lifted from the ground, and carried several paces upon the shaft of the lance.

The guerillero dropped his entangled weapon; but before he could draw any other, the sword of Victoria was through his heart.

His comrade turned upon me with a cry of vengeance. I had not yet disengaged my weapon to ward off the thrust. The lance's point was within three feet of my breast, when a sharp crack was heard from behind; the lancer threw out his arms with a spasmodic jerk; his long spear was whirled into the air, and he fell back in his saddle, dead.

"Well done, Jack! fire and scissors! who showed yer that trick? whooray! whoop!" and I heard the voice of Lincoln, in a sort of Indian yell, rising high above the din.

At this moment a guerillo, mounted upon a powerful black mustang, came galloping down. This man, unlike most of his comrades, was armed with the sabre, which he evidently wielded with great dexterity. He came dashing on, his white teeth set in a fierce smile.

"Ha! Monsieur le Capitaine," shouted he, as he came near, "still alive? I thought I had finished you on Lobos; not too late yet!"

I recognised the deserter, Dubrosc!

"Villain!" I ejaculated, too full of rage to utter another word.

We met at full speedy but with my unmanageable horse I could only ward off his blow as he swept past me. We wheeled again, and galloped towards each other—both of us impelled by hatred; but my horse again shied, frightened by the gleaming sabre of my antagonist. Before I could rein him round, he had brought me close to the pickets of the corral; and on turning to meet the deserter, I found that we were separated by a band of dark objects.

It was a detachment of mules that had backed from the gates of the corral and were escaping to the open plain. We reined up, eyeing each other with impatient vengeance; but the bullets of my men began to whistle from the pickets; and Dubrosc, with a threatening gesture, wheeled his horse and galloped off to his comrades. They had retired beyond range, and were halted in groups upon the prairie, chafing with disappointment and rage.

Chapter Nineteen.

A Herculean Feat.

The whole skirmish did not occupy two minutes. It was like most charges of Mexican cavalry—a dash, a wild yelling, half a dozen empty saddles, and a hasty retreat.

The guerilleros had swerved off as soon as they perceived that we had gained a safe position, and the bullets of our reloaded pieces began to whistle around their ears. Dubrosc alone, in his impetuosity, galloped close up to the inclosure; and it was only on perceiving himself alone, and the folly of exposing himself thus fruitlessly, that he wheeled round and followed the Mexicans. The latter were now out upon the prairie, beyond the range of small-arms, grouped around their wounded comrades, or galloping to and fro, with yells of disappointed vengeance.

I entered the corral, where most of my men had sheltered themselves behind the stockades. Little Jack sat upon Twidget, reloading his rifle, and trying to appear insensible to the flattering encomiums that hailed him from all sides. A compliment from Lincoln, however, was too much for Jack, and a proud smile was seen upon the face of the boy.

“Thank you, Jack,” said I, as I passed him; “I see you can use a rifle to some purpose.”

Jack held down his head, without saying a word, and appeared to be very busy about the lock of his piece.

In the skirmish, Lincoln had received the scratch of a lance, at which he was chafing in his own peculiar way, and vowing revenge upon the giver. It might be said that he had taken this, as he had driven his short bayonet through his antagonist’s arm, and sent him off with this member hanging by his side. But the hunter was not content; and, as he retired sullenly into the inclosure, he turned round, and, shaking his fist at the Mexican, muttered savagely:

“Yer darned skunk! I’ll know yer agin. See if I don’t git yer yit!”

Gravenitz, a Prussian soldier, had also been too near a lance, and several others had received slight wounds. The German was the only one killed. He was still lying out on the plain, where he had fallen, the long shaft of the lance standing up out of his skull. Not ten feet distant lay the corpse, of his slayer, glistening in its gaudy and picturesque attire.

The other guerillero, as he fell, had noosed one of his legs in the lazo that hung from the horn of his saddle, and was now dragged over the prairie after his wild and snorting mustang. As the animal swerved, at every jerk his limber body bounded to the distance of twenty feet, where it would lie motionless until slung into the air by a fresh pluck on the lazo.

As we were watching this horrid spectacle, several of the guerilleros galloped after, while half a dozen others were observed spurring their steeds towards the rear of the corral. On looking in this direction we perceived a huge red horse, with an empty saddle, scouring at full speed across the prairie. A single glance showed us that this horse was Hercules.

“Good heavens! the Major!”

“Safe somewhere,” replied Clayley; “but where the deuce can he be? He is not hors de combat on the plain, or one could see him even ten miles off. Ha! ha! ha!—look yonder!”

Clayley, yelling with laughter, pointed to the corner of the rancho.

Though after a scene so tragic, I could hardly refrain from joining Clayley in his boisterous mirth. Hanging by the belt of his sabre upon a high picket was the major, kicking and struggling with all his might. The waist-strap, tightly drawn by the bulky weight of the wearer, separated his body into two vast rotundities, while his face was distorted and purple with the agony of suspense and suspension. He was loudly bellowing for help, and several soldiers were running towards him; but, from

the manner in which he jerked his body up, and screwed his neck, so as to enable him to look over the stockade, it was evident that the principal cause of his uneasiness lay on the “other side of the fence.”

The truth was, the major, on the first appearance of the enemy, had galloped towards the rear of the corral, and, finding no entrance, had thrown himself from the back of Hercules upon the stockade, intending to climb over; but, having caught a glance of some guerilleros, he had suddenly let go his bridle, and attempted to precipitate himself into the corral.

His waist-belt, catching upon a sharp picket, held him suspended midway, still under the impression that the Mexicans were close upon his rear. He was soon unhooked, and now waddled across the corral, uttering a thick and continuous volley of his choicest oaths.

Our eyes were now directed towards Hercules. The horsemen had closed upon him within fifty yards, and were winding their long lazos in the air. The major, to all appearance, had lost his horse.

After galloping to the edge of the woods, Hercules suddenly halted, and threw up the trailing-bridle with a loud neigh. His pursuers, coming up, flung out their lazos. Two of these, settling over his head, noosed him around the neck. The huge brute, as if aware of the necessity of a desperate effort to free himself, dropped his nose to the ground, and stretched himself out in full gallop.

The lariats, one by one tightening over his bony chest, snapped like threads, almost jerking the mustangs from their feet. The long fragments sailed out like streamers as he careered across the prairie, far ahead of his yelling pursuers.

He now made directly for the corral. Several of the soldiers ran towards the stockade, in order to seize the bridle when he should come up; but Hercules, spying his old comrade—the horse of the “Doctor”—within the inclosure, first neighed loudly, and then, throwing all his nerve into the effort, sprang high over the picket

fence.

A cheer rose from the men, who had watched with interest his efforts to escape, and who now welcomed him as if he had been one of themselves.

“Two months’ pay for your horse, Major!” cried Clayley.

“Och, the bewtiful baste! He’s worth the full of his skin in goold! By my sowl! the capten ought to have ’im,” ejaculated Chane; and various other encomiums were uttered in honour of Hercules.

Meanwhile, his pursuers, not daring to approach the stockade, drew off towards their comrades with gestures of disappointment and chagrin.

Chapter Twenty.

Running the Gauntlet.

I began to reflect upon the real danger of our situation—corralled upon a naked prairie, ten miles from camp, with no prospect of escape. I knew that we could defend ourselves against twice the number of our cowardly adversaries; they would never dare to come within range of our rifles. But how to get out? how to cross the open plain? Fifty infantry against four times that number of mounted men—lancers at that—and not a bush to shelter the foot-soldier from the long spear and the iron hoof!

The nearest motte was half a mile off, and that another half a mile from the edge of the woods. Even could the motte be reached by a desperate run, it would be impossible to gain the woods, as the enemy would certainly cordon our new position, and thus completely cut us off. At present they had halted in a body about four hundred yards from the corral; and, feeling secure of having us in a trap, most of them had dismounted, and were running out their mustangs upon their lazos. It was plainly their determination to take us by siege.

To add to our desperate circumstances, we discovered that there was not a drop of

water in the corral. The thirst that follows a fight had exhausted the scanty supply of our canteens, and the heat was excessive.

As I was running over in my mind the perils of our position, my eye rested upon Lincoln, who stood with his piece at a carry, his left hand crossed over his breast, in the attitude of a soldier waiting to receive orders.

“Well, Sergeant, what is it?” I inquired.

“Will yer allow me, Cap’n, ter take a couple o’ files, and fetch in the Dutchman? The men ’ud like ter put a sod upon him afore them thievin’ robbers kin git at him.”

“Certainly. But will you be safe? He’s at some distance from the stockade.”

“I don’t think them fellers ’ll kum down—they’ve had enuf o’ it just now. We’ll run out quick, and the boys kin kiver us with their fire.”

“Very well, then; set about it.”

Lincoln returned to the company and selected four of the most active of his men, with whom he proceeded towards the entrance. I ordered the soldiers to throw themselves on that side of the inclosure, and cover the party in case of an attack; but none was made. A movement was visible among the Mexicans, as they perceived Lincoln and his party rush out towards the body; but, seeing they would be too late to prevent them from carrying it off, they wisely kept beyond the reach of the American rifles.

The body of the German was brought into the inclosure and buried with due ceremony, although his comrades believed that before many hours it would be torn from its “warrior grave”, dragged forth to feed the coyoté and vulture, and his bones left to whiten upon the naked prairie. Which of us knew that it might not in a few hours be his own fate?

“Gentlemen,” said I to my brother officers, as we came together, “can you suggest any mode of escape?”

“Our only chance is to fight them where we stand. There are four to one,” replied Clayey.

“We have no other chance, Captain,” said Oakes, with a shake of the head.

“But it is not their intention to fight us. Their design is to starve us. See! they are picketing their horses, knowing they can easily overtake us if we attempt to leave the inclosure.”

“Cannot we move in a hollow square?”

“But what is a hollow square of fifty men? and against four times that number of cavalry, with lances and lazos? No, no; they would shiver it with a single charge. Our only hope is that we may be able to hold out until our absence from camp may bring a detachment to our relief.”

“And why not send for it?” inquired the major, who had scarcely been asked for his advice, but whose wits had been sharpened by the extremity of his danger. “Why not send for a couple of regiments?”

“How are we to send, Major?” asked Clayley, looking on the major’s proposition as ridiculous under the circumstances. “Have you a pigeon in your pocket?”

“Why?—how? There’s Hercules runs like a hare; stick one of your fellows in the saddle, and I’ll warrant him to camp in an hour.”

“You are right, Major,” said I, catching at the major’s proposal; “thank you for the thought. If he could only pass that point in the woods! I hate it, but it is our only chance.”

The last sentence I muttered to myself.

“Why do you hate it, Captain?” inquired the major, who had overheard me.

“You might not understand my reasons, Major.”

I was thinking upon the disgrace of being trapped as I was, and on my first scout, too.

“Who will volunteer to ride an express to camp?” I inquired, addressing the men.

Twenty of them leaped out simultaneously.

“Which of you remembers the course, that you could follow it in a gallop?” I asked.

The Frenchman, Raoul, stood forth, touching his cap.

“I know a shorter one, Captain, by Mata Cordera.”

“Ha! Raoul, you know the country. You are the man.”

I now remembered that this man joined us at Sacrificios, just after the landing of the expedition. He had been living in the country previous to our arrival, and was well acquainted with it.

“Are you a good horseman?” I inquired.

“I have seen five years of cavalry service.”

“True. Do you think you can pass them? They are nearly in your track.”

“As we entered the prairie, Captain; but my route will lie past this motte to the left.”

“That will give you several points. Do not stop a moment after you have mounted, or they will take the hint and intercept you.”

“With the red horse there will be no danger, Captain.”

“Leave your gun; take these pistols. Ha! you have a pair in the holsters. See if they are loaded. These spurs—so—cut loose that heavy piece from the saddle: the cloak, too; you must have nothing to encumber you. When you come near the camp, leave your horse in the chaparral. Give this to Colonel C.”

I wrote the following words on a scrap of paper:—

“Dear Colonel,

“Two hundred will be enough. Could they be stolen out after night? If so, all will be well—if it gets abroad...

“Yours,

“H.H.”

As I handed the paper to Raoul, I whispered in his ear—

“To Colonel C’s own hand. Privately, Raoul—privately, do you hear?”

Colonel C. was my friend, and I knew that he would send a private party to my rescue.

“I understand, Captain,” was the answer of Raoul.

“Ready, then! now mount and be off.”

The Frenchman sprang nimbly to the saddle, and, driving his spurs into the flanks of his horse, shot out from the pen like a bolt of lightning.

For the first three hundred yards or so he galloped directly towards the guerilleros. These stood leaning upon their saddles, or lay stretched along the green-sward. Seeing a single horseman riding towards them, few of them moved, believing him to be some messenger sent to treat for our surrender.

Suddenly the Frenchman swerved from his direct course, and went sweeping around them in the curve of an ellipse.

They now perceived the ruse, and with a yell leaped into their saddles. Some fired their escopettes; others, unwinding their lazos, started in pursuit.

Raoul had by this time set Hercules’s head for the clump of timber which he had taken as his guide, and now kept on in a track almost rectilinear. Could he but reach the motte or clump in safety, he knew that there were straggling trees beyond, and these would secure him in some measure from the lazos of his pursuers.

We stood watching his progress with breathless silence. Our lives depended on his escape. A crowd of the guerilleros was between him and us; but we could still see the green jacket of the soldier, and the great red flanks of Hercules, as he bounded on towards the edge of the woods. Then we saw the lazos launched out, and spinning around Raoul’s head, and straggling shots were fired; and we fancied at

one time that our comrade sprang up in the saddle, as if he had been hit. Then he appeared again, all safe, rounding the little islet of timber, and the next moment he was gone from our sight. There followed a while of suspense—of terrible suspense—for the motte hid from view both pursuers and pursued. Every eye was straining towards the point where the horseman had disappeared, when Lincoln, who had climbed to the top of the rancho, cried out:

“He’s safe, Cap’n! The dod-rotted skunks air kummin ’ithout him.”

It was true. A minute after, the horsemen appeared round the motte, riding slowly back, with that air and attitude that betoken disappointment.

Note. A motte is an eminence.

Chapter Twenty One.

A Short Fight at “Long Shot”.

The escape of Raoul and Hercules produced an affect almost magical upon the enemy. Instead of the listless defensive attitude lately assumed, the guerilleros were now in motion like a nest of roused hornets, scouring over the plain, and yelling like a war-party of Indians.

They did not surround the corral, as I had anticipated they would. They had no fear that we should attempt to escape; but they knew that, instead of the three days in which they expected to kill us with thirst at their leisure, they had not three hours left to accomplish that object. Raoul would reach the camp in little more than an hour’s time, and either infantry or mounted men would be on them in two hours after.

Scouts were seen galloping off in the direction taken by Raoul, and others dashed into the woods on the opposite side of the prairie. All was hurry and scurry.

Along with Clayley I had climbed upon the roof of the rancho, to watch the motions of the enemy, and to find out, if possible, his intentions. We stood for some time

without speaking, both of us gazing at the manoeuvres of the guerilleros. They were galloping to and fro over the prairie, excited by the escape of Raoul.

“Splendidly done!” exclaimed my companion, struck with their graceful horsemanship. “One of those fellows, Captain, as he sits, at this minute, would—”

“Ha! what—?” shouted he, suddenly turning and pointing towards the woods.

I looked in the direction indicated. A cloud of dust was visible at the débouchement of the Medellin road. It appeared to hang over a small body of troops upon the march. The sun was just setting, and, as the cloud lay towards the west, I could distinguish the sparkling of bright objects through its dun volume. The guerilleros had reined up their horses, and were eagerly gazing towards the same point.

Presently the dust was wafted aside, a dozen dark forms became visible, and in the midst a bright object flashed under the sun like a sheet of gold. At the same instant an insulting shout broke from the guerilleros, and a voice was heard exclaiming:

“Cenobio! Cenobio! Los canones!” (Cenobio! Cenobio! the cannon!)

Clayley turned towards me with an inquiring look.

“It is true, Clayley; by heavens, we’ll have it now!”

“What did they say?”

“Look for yourself—well?”

“A brass piece, as I live!—a six-pound carronade!”

“We are fighting the guerilla (Note 1) of Cenobio, a small army of itself. Neither stockade nor motte will avail us now.”

“What is to be done?” asked my companion.

“Nothing but die with arms in our hands. We will not die without a struggle, and the sooner we prepare for it the better.”

I leaped from the roof, and ordered the bugler to sound the assembly.

In a moment the clear notes rang out, and the soldiers formed before me in the corral.

“My brave comrades!” cried I, “they have got the advantage of us at last. They are bringing down a piece of artillery, and I fear these pickets will offer us but poor shelter. If we are driven out, let us strike for that island of timber; and, mark me—if we are broken, let every man fight his way as he best can, or die over a fallen enemy.”

A determined cheer followed this short harangue, and I continued:

“But let us first see how they use their piece. It is a small one, and will not destroy us all at once. Fling yourselves down as they fire. By lying flat on your faces you may not suffer so badly. Perhaps we can hold the corral until our friends reach us. At all events we shall try.”

Another cheer rang along the line.

“Great heaven, Captain! it’s terrible!” whispered the major.

“What is terrible?” I asked, feeling at the moment a contempt for this blaspheming coward.

“Oh! this—this business—such a fix to be—”

“Major! remember you are a soldier.”

“Yes; and I wish I had resigned, as I intended to do, before this cursed war commenced.”

“Never fear,” said I, tempted to smile at the candour of his cowardice; “you’ll drink wine at Hewlett’s in a month. Get behind this log—it’s the only point shot-proof in the whole stockade.”

“Do you think, Captain, it will stop a shot?”

“Ay—from a siege-gun. Look out, men, and be ready to obey orders!”

The six-pounder had now approached within five hundred yards of the stockade, and

was leisurely being unlimbered in the midst of a group of the enemy's artillerists.

At this moment the voice of the major arrested my attention.

"Great heaven, Captain! Why do you allow them to come so near?"

"How am I to prevent them?" I asked, with some surprise.

"Why, my rifle will reach farther than that. It might keep them off, I think."

"Major, you are dreaming!" said I. "They are two hundred yards beyond range of our rifles. If they would only come within that, we should soon send them back for you."

"But, Captain, mine will carry twice the distance."

I looked at the major, under the belief that he had taken leave of his senses.

"It's a zündnadel, I assure you, and will kill at eight hundred yards."

"Is it possible?" cried I, starting; for I now recollected the curious-looking piece which I had ordered to be cut loose from the saddle of Hercules. "Why did you not tell me that before? Where is Major Blossom's rifle?" I shouted, looking around.

"This hyur's the major's gun" answered Sergeant Lincoln. "But if it's a rifle, I never seed sich. It looks more like a two-year old cannon."

It was, as the major had declared, a Prussian needle-gun—then a new invention, but of which I had heard something.

"Is it loaded, Major?" I asked, taking the piece from Lincoln.

"It is."

"Can you hit that man with the sponge?" said I, returning the piece to the hunter.

"If this hyur thing'll carry fur enuf, I kin," was the reply.

"It will kill at a thousand yards, point blank," cried the major, with energy.

"Ha! are you sure of that, Major?" I asked.

"Certainly, Captain. I got it from the inventor. We tried it at Washington. It is loaded

with a conical bullet. It bored a hole through an inch plank at that distance."

"Well. Now, Sergeant, take sure aim; this may save us yet."

Lincoln planted himself firmly on his feet, choosing a notch of the stockade that ranged exactly with his shoulder. He then carefully wiped the dust from the sights; and, placing the heavy barrel in the notch, laid his cheek slowly against the stock.

"Sergeant, the man with the shot!" I called out.

As I spoke, one of the artillerists was stooping to the muzzle of the six-pounder, holding in his hand a spherical case-shot. Lincoln pressed the trigger. The crack followed, and the artillerist threw out his arms, and doubled over on his head without giving a kick.

The shot that he had held rolled out upon the green-sward. A wild cry, expressive of extreme astonishment, broke from the guerilleros. At the same instant a cheer rang through the corral.

"Well done!" cried a dozen of voices at once.

In a moment the rifle was wiped and reloaded.

"This time, Sergeant, the fellow with the linstock."

During the reloading of the rifle, the Mexicans around the six-pounder had somewhat recovered from their surprise, and had rammed home the cartridge. A tall artillerist stood, with linstock and fuse, near the breech, waiting for the order to fire.

Before he received that order the rifle again cracked; his arm new up with a sudden jerk, and the smoking rod, flying from his grasp, was projected to the distance of twenty feet.

The man himself spun round, and, staggering a pace or two, fell into the arms of his comrades.

"Cap'n, jest allow me ter take that ere skunk next time."

"Which one, Sergeant?" I asked.

“Him thet’s on the black, makin’ such a dot-rotted muss.”

I recognised the horse and figure of Dubrosc.

“Certainly, by all means,” said I, with a strange feeling at my heart as I gave the order.

But before Lincoln could reload, one of the Mexicans, apparently an officer, had snatched up the burning fuse, and, running up, applied it to the touch.

“On your faces, men!”

The ball came crashing through the thin pickets of the corral, and, whizzing across the inclosure, struck one of the mules on the flank, tearing open its hip, causing it to kick furiously as it tumbled over the ground.

Its companions, stampeding, galloped for a moment through the pen; then, collecting in a corner, stood cowered up and quivering. A fierce yell announced the exultation of the guerilleros.

Dubrosc was sitting on his powerful mustang, facing the corral, and watching the effects of the shot.

“If he wur only ’ithin range ov my own rifle!” muttered Lincoln, as he glanced along the sights of the strange piece.

The crack soon followed—the black horse reared, staggered, and fell back on his rider.

“Ten strike, set ’em up!” exclaimed a soldier.

“Missed the skunk!” cried Lincoln, gritting his teeth as the horseman was seen to struggle from under the fallen animal.

Rising to his feet, Dubrosc sprang out to the front, and shook his fist in the air with a shout of defiance.

The guerilleros galloped back; and the artillerists, wheeling the six-pounder, dragged it after, and took up a new position about three hundred yards farther to the rear.

A second shot from the piece again tore through the pickets, striking one of our men, and killing him instantly.

“Aim at the artillerists, Sergeant. We have nothing to fear from the others.”

Lincoln fired again. The shot hit the ground in front of the enemy’s gun; but, glancing, it struck one of the cannoniers, apparently wounding him badly, as he was carried back by his comrades.

The Mexicans, terror-struck at this strange instrument of destruction, took up a new position, two hundred yards still farther back.

Their third shot ricocheted, striking the top of the strong plank behind which the major was screening himself, and only frightening the latter by the shock upon the timber.

Lincoln again fired.

This time his shot produced no visible effect, and a taunting cheer from the enemy told that they felt themselves beyond range.

Another shot was fired from the zündnadel, apparently with a similar result.

“It’s beyond her carry, Cap’n,” said Lincoln, bringing the butt of his piece to the ground, with an expression of reluctant conviction.

“Try one more shot. If it fail, we can reserve the other for closer work. Aim high!”

This resulted as the two preceding ones; and a voice from the guerilleros was heard exclaiming:

“Yankees bobos! mas adelante!” (A little farther, you Yankee fools!)

Another shot from the six-pounder cracked through the planks, knocking his piece from the hands of a soldier, and shivering the dry stock-wood into fifty fragments.

“Sergeant, give me the rifle,” said I. “They must be a thousand yards off; but, as they are as troublesome with that carronade as if they were only ten, I shall try one more shot.”

I fired, but the ball sank at least fifty paces in front of the enemy.

“We expect too much. It is not a twenty-four pounder. Major, I envy you two things—your rifle and your horse.”

“Hercules?”

“Of course.”

“Lord, Captain! you may do what you will with the rifle; and if ever we get out of the reach of these infernal devils, Hercules shall be—.”

At this moment a cheer came from the guerilleros, and a voice was heard shouting above the din:

“La metralla! la metralla!” (The howitzer!)

I leaped upon the roof, and looked out upon the plain. It was true. A howitzer-carriage, drawn by mules, was debouching from the woods, the animals dragging it along at a gallop.

It was evidently a piece of some size, large enough to tear the light picketing that screened us to atoms.

I turned towards my men with a look of despair. My eye at this moment rested on the drove of mules that stood crowded together in a corner of the pen. A sudden thought struck me. Might we not mount them and escape? There were more than enough to carry us all, and the rancho was filled with bridles and ropes. I instantly leaped from the roof, and gave orders to the men.

“Speedily, but without noise!” cried I, as the soldiers proceeded to fling bridles upon the necks of the animals.

In five minutes each man, with his rifle slung, stood by a mule, some of them having buckled on tapadas, to prevent the animals from kicking.

The major stood ready by his horse.

“Now, my brave fellows,” shouted I in a loud voice, “we must take it cavalry

fashion—Mexican cavalry, I mean." The men laughed. "Once in the woods, we shall retreat no farther. At the words 'Mount and follow', spring to your seats and follow Mr Clayley. I shall look to your rear—don't stop to fire—hold on well. If anyone fall, let his nearest comrade take him up. Ha! anyone hurt there?" A shot had whistled through the ranks. "Only a scratch," was the reply.

"All ready, then, are you? Now, Mr Clayley, you see the high timber—make direct for that. Down with the bars! 'Mount and follow'!"

As I uttered the last words, the men leaped to their seats; and Clayley, riding the bell-mule, dashed out of the corral, followed by the whole train, some of them plunging and kicking, but all galloped forward at the sound of the bell upon their guide.

As the dark cavalcade rushed out upon the prairie, a wild cry from the guerilleros told that this was the first intimation they had had of the singular ruse. They sprang to their saddles with yells, and galloped in pursuit. The howitzer, that had been trailed upon the corral, was suddenly wheeled about and fired; but the shot, ill-directed in their haste, whistled harmlessly over our heads.

The guerilleros, on their swift steeds, soon lessened the distance between us.

With a dozen of the best men I hung in the rear, to give the foremost of the pursuers a volley, or pick up any soldier who might be tossed from his mule. One of these, at intervals, kicked as only a Mexican mule can; and when within five hundred yards of the timber, his rider, an Irishman, was flung upon the prairie.

The rearmost of our party stopped to take him up. He was seized by Chane, who mounted him in front of himself. The delay had nearly been fatal. The pursuers were already within a hundred yards, firing their pistols and escopettes without effect. A number of the men turned in their seats and blazed back. Others threw their rifles over their shoulders, and pulled trigger at random. I could perceive that two or three guerilleros dropped from their saddles. Their comrades, with shouts of vengeance,

closed upon us nearer and nearer. The long lazos, far in advance, whistled around our heads.

I felt the slippery noose light upon my shoulders. I flung out my arms to throw it off, but with a sudden jerk it tightened around my neck. I clutched the hard thong, and pulled with all my might. It was in vain.

The animal I rode, freed from my manège, seemed to plunge under me, and gather up its back with a vicious determination to fling me. It succeeded; and I was launched in the air, and dashed to the earth with a stunning violence.

I felt myself dragged along the gravelly ground. I grasped the weeds, but they came away in my hands, torn up by the roots. There was a struggle above and around me. I could hear loud shouts and the firing of guns. I felt that I was being strangled.

A bright object glistened before my eyes. I felt myself seized by a strong, rough hand, and swung into the air and rudely shaken, as if in the grasp of some giant's arm.

Something twitched me sharply over the cheeks. I heard the rustling of trees. Branches snapped and crackled, and leaves swept across my face. Then came the flash—flash, and the crack—crack—crack of a dozen rifles, and under their blazing light I was dashed a second time with violence to the earth.

Note 1. Troop of guerillas, who in Spanish are properly guerilleros.

Chapter Twenty Two.

The Rescue.

"Rough handlin', Cap'n. Yer must excuse haste."

It was the voice of Lincoln.

"Ha! in the timber? Safe, then!" ejaculated I in return.

"Two or three wounded—not bad neither. Chane has got a stab in the hip—he gin

the feller goss for it. Let me louze the darned thing off o' your neck. It kum mighty near chokin' yer, Cap'n."

Bob proceeded to unwind the noose end of a lazo that, with some six feet of a raw hide thong, was still tightly fastened around my neck.

"But who cut the rope?" demanded I.

"I did, with this hyur toothpick. Yer see, Cap'n, it warn't yer time to be hung just yet."

I could not help smiling as I thanked the hunter for my safety.

"But where are the guerilleros?" asked I, looking around, my brain still somewhat confused.

"Yander they are, keepin' safe out o' range o' this long gun. Just listen to 'em!—what a hillerballoo!"

The Mexican horsemen were galloping out on the prairie, their arms glistening under the clear moonlight.

"Take to the trees, men!" cried I, seeing that the enemy had again unlimbered, and were preparing to discharge their howitzer.

In a moment the iron shower came whizzing through the branches without doing any injury, as each of the men had covered his body with a tree. Several of the mules that stood tied and trembling were killed by the discharge.

Another shower hurtled through the bushes, with a similar effect.

I was thinking of retreating farther into the timber, and was walking back to reconnoitre the ground, when my eye fell upon an object that arrested my attention. It was the body of a very large man lying flat upon his face, his head buried among the roots of a good-sized tree. The arms were stiffly pressed against his side, and his legs projected at full stretch, exhibiting an appearance of motionless rigidity, as though a well-dressed corpse had been rolled over on its face. I at once recognised it

as the body of the major, whom I supposed to have fallen dead where he lay.

“Good heavens! Clayley, look here!” cried I; “poor Blossom’s killed!”

“No, I’ll be hanged if I am!” growled the latter, screwing his neck round like a lizard, and looking up without changing the attitude of his body. Clayley was convulsed with laughter. The major sheathed his head again, as he knew that another shot from the howitzer might soon be expected.

“Major,” cried Clayley, “that right shoulder of yours projects over at least six inches.”

“I know it,” answered the major, in a frightened voice. “Curse the tree!—it’s hardly big enough to cover a squirrel;” and he squatted closer to the earth, pressing his arms tighter against his sides. His whole attitude was so ludicrous that Clayley burst into a second yell of laughter. At this moment a wild shout was heard from the guerilleros.

“What next?” cried I, running toward the front, and looking out upon the prairie.

“Them wild-cats are gwine to cla’r out, Cap’n,” said Lincoln, meeting me. “I kin see them hitchin’ up.”

“It is as you say! What can be the reason?”

A strange commotion was visible in the groups of horsemen. Scouts were galloping across the plain to a point of the woods about half a mile distant, and I could see the artillerists fastening their mules to the howitzer-carriage. Suddenly a bugle rang out, sounding the “Recall”, and the guerilleros, spurring their horses, galloped off towards Medellin.

A loud cheer, such as was never uttered by Mexican throats, came from the opposite edge of the prairie; and looking in that direction I beheld a long line of dark forms debouching from the woods at a gallop. Their sparkling blades, as they issued from the dark forest, glistened like a cordon of fireflies, and I recognised the heavy footfall of the American horse. A cheer from my men attracted their attention; and

the leader of the dragoons, seeing that the guerilleros had got far out of reach, wheeled his column to the right and came galloping down.

“Is that Colonel Rawley?” inquired I, recognising a dragoon officer.

“Why, bless my soul!” exclaimed he, “how did you get out? We heard you were jugged. All alive yet?”

“We have lost two,” I replied.

“Pah! that’s nothing. I came out expecting to bury the whole kit of you. Here’s Clayley, too. Clayley, your friend Twing’s with us; you’ll find him in the rear.”

“Ha! Clayley, old boy!” cried Twing, coming up; “no bones broken? all right? Take a pull; do you good—don’t drink it all, though—leave a thimbleful for Haller there. How do you like that?”

“Delicious, by Jove!” ejaculated Clayey, tugging away at the major’s flask.

“Come, Captain, try it.”

“Thank you,” I replied, eagerly grasping the welcome flask.

“But where is old Bios? killed, wounded, or missing?”

“I believe the major is not far off, and still uninjured.”

I despatched a man for the major, who presently came up, blowing and swearing like a Flanders trooper.

“Hilloa, Bios!” shouted Twing, grasping him by the hand.

“Why, bless me, Twing, I’m glad to see you!” answered Blossom, throwing his arms around the diminutive major. “But where on earth is your pewter?” for during the embrace he had been groping all over Twing’s body for the flask.

“Here, Cudjo! That flask, boy!”

“Faith, Twing, I’m near choked; we’ve been fighting all day—a devil of a fight! I chased a whole squad of the cursed scoundrels on Hercules, and came within a

squirrel's jump of riding right into their nest. We've killed dozens; but Haller will tell you all. He's a good fellow, that Haller; but he's too rash—rash as blazes! Hilloa, Hercules! glad to see you again, old fellow; you had a sharp brush for it."

"Remember your promise, Major," said I, as the major stood patting Hercules upon the shoulder.

"I'll do better, Captain. I'll give you a choice between Hercules and a splendid black I have. Faith! it's hard to part with you, old Herky, but I know the captain will like the black better: he's the handsomest horse in the whole army; bought him from poor Ridgely, who was killed at Monterey."

This speech of the major was delivered partly in soliloquy, partly in an apostrophe to Hercules, and partly to myself.

"Very well, Major," I replied. "I'll take the black. Mr Clayley, mount the men on their mules: you will take command of the company, and proceed with Colonel Rawley to camp. I shall go myself for the Don."

The last was said in a whisper to Clayley.

"We may not get in before noon to-morrow. Say nothing of my absence to anyone. I shall make my report at noon tomorrow."

"And, Captain—" said Clayley.

"Well, Clayley?"

"You will carry back my—."

"What? To which friend?"

"Of course, to Mary of the Light."

"Oh, certainly!"

"In your best Spanish."

"Rest assured," said I, smiling at the earnestness of my friend.

I was about moving from the spot, when the thought occurred to me to send the company to camp under command of Oakes, and take Clayley along with me.

“Clayley, by the way,” said I, calling the lieutenant back, “I don’t see why you may not carry your compliments in person. Oakes can take the men back. I shall borrow half a dozen dragoons from Rawley.”

“With all my heart!” replied Clayley.

“Come, then; get a horse, and let us be off.”

Taking Lincoln and Raoul, with half a dozen of Rawley’s dragoons, I bade my friends good-night.

These started for camp by the road of Mata Cordera, while I with my little party brushed for some distance round the border of the prairie, and then climbed the hill, over which lay the path to the house of the Spaniard.

As I reached the top of the ridge I turned to look upon the scene of our late skirmish.

The cold, round moon, looking down upon the prairie of La Virgen, saw none of the victims of the fight.

The guerilleros in their retreat had carried off their dead and wounded comrades, and the Americans slept underground in the lone corral: but I could not help fancying that gaunt wolves were skulking round the inclosure, and that the claws of the coyote were already tearing up the red earth that had been hurriedly heaped over their graves.

Chapter Twenty Three.

The Cocuyo.

A night-ride through the golden tropical forest, when the moon is bathing its broad and wax-like frondage—when the winds are hushed and the long leaves hang drooping and silent—when the paths conduct through dark aisles and arbours of green vine-leaves, and out again into bright and flowery glades—is one of those

luxuries that I wish we could obtain without going beyond the limits of our own land.

But no. The romance of the American northern forest—the romance that lingers around the gnarled limbs of the oak, and the maple, and the elm—that sighs with the wintry wind high up among the twigs of the shining sycamore—that flits along the huge fallen trunks—that nestles in the brown and rustling leaves—that hovers above the bold cliff and sleeps upon the grey rock—that sparkles in the diamond stalactites of the frost, or glides along the bosom of the cold black river—is a feeling or a fancy of a far different character.

These objects—themselves the emblems of the stony and iron things of nature—call up associations of the darker passions: strange scenes of strife and bloodshed; struggles between red and white savages; and struggles hardly less fierce with the wild beasts of the forest. The rifle, the tomahawk, and the knife are the visions conjured up, while the savage whoop and the dread yell echo in your ear; and you dream of war.

Far different are the thoughts that suggest themselves as you glide along under the aromatic arbours of the American southern forest, brushing aside the silken foliage, and treading upon the shadows of picturesque palms.

The cocuyo lights your way through the dark aisles, and the nightingale cheers you with his varied and mimic song. A thousand sights and sounds, that seem to be possessed of some mysterious and narcotic power, lull you into silence and sleep—a sleep whose dream is love.

Clayey and I felt this as we rode silently along. Even the ruder hearts of our companions seemed touched by the same influence.

We entered the dark woods that fringed the arroyo, and the stream was crossed in silence. Raoul rode in advance, acting as our guide.

After a long silence Clayey suddenly awoke from his reverie and straightened

himself up in the saddle.

“What time is it, Captain?” he inquired.

“Ten—a few minutes past,” answered I, holding my watch under the moonlight.

“I wonder if the Don’s in bed yet.”

“Not likely: he will be in distress; he expected us an hour ago.”

“True, he will not sleep till we come; all right then.”

“How all right then?”

“For our chances of a supper; a cold pasty, with a glass of claret. What think you?”

“I do not feel hungry.”

“But I do—as a hawk. I long once more to sound the Don’s larder.”

“Do you not long more to see—”

“Not to-night—no—that is until after supper. Everything in its own time and place; but a man with a hungry stomach has no stomach for anything but eating. I pledge you my word, Haller, I would rather at this moment see that grand old stewardess, Pepe, than the loveliest woman in Mexico, and that’s ‘Mary of the Light’.”

“Monstrous!”

“That is, until after I have supped. Then my feelings will doubtless take a turn.”

“Ah! Clayey, you can never love!”

“Why so, Captain?”

“With you, love is a sentiment, not a passion. You regard the fair blonde as you would a picture or a curious ornament.”

“You mean to say, then, that my love is ‘all in my eye’?”

“Exactly so, in a literal sense. I do not think it has reached your heart, else you would not be thinking of your supper. Now, I could go for days without food—suffer any hardship; but, no—you cannot understand this.”

“I confess not. I am too hungry.”

“You could forget—nay, I should not be surprised if you have already forgotten—all but the fact that your mistress is a blonde, with bright golden hair. Is it not so?”

“I confess, Captain, that I should make but a poor portrait of her from memory.”

“And, were I a painter, I could throw her features upon the canvas as truly as if they were before me. I see her face outlined upon these broad leaves—her dark eyes burning in the flash of the cocuyo—her long black hair drooping from the feathery fringes of the palm—and her—”

“Stop! You are dreaming, Captain! Her eyes are not dark—her hair is not black.”

“What! Her eyes not dark?—as ebony, or night!”

“Blue as a turquoise!”

“Black! What are you thinking of?”

“‘Mary of the Light’.”

“Oh, that is quite a different affair!” and my friend and I laughed heartily at our mutual misconceptions.

We rode on, again relapsing into silence. The stillness of the night was broken only by the heavy hoof bounding back from the hard turf, the jingling of spurs, or the ringing of the iron scabbard as it struck against the moving flanks of our horses.

We had crossed the sandy spur, with its chaparral of cactus and mezquite, and were entering a gorge of heavy timber, when the practised eye of Lincoln detected an object in the dark shadow of the woods, and communicated the fact to me.

“Halt!” cried I, in a low voice.

The party reined up at the order. A rustling was heard in the bushes ahead.

“Quien viva?” challenged Raoul, in the advance.

“Un amigo,” (A friend), was the response.

I sprang forward to the side of Raoul and called out:

“Acercate! acercate!” (Come near!)

A figure moved out of the bushes, and approached.

“Está el Capitan?” (Is it the captain?)

I recognised the guide given me by Don Cosmé.

The Mexican approached, and handed me a small piece of paper. I rode into an opening, and held it up to the moonlight; but the writing was in pencil, and I could not make out a single letter.

“Try this, Clayley. Perhaps your eyes are better than mine.”

“No,” said Clayley, after examining the paper. “I can hardly see the writing upon it.”

“Esperate mi amo!” (Wait, my master), said the guide, making me a sign. We remained motionless.

The Mexican took from his head his heavy sombrero, and stepped into a darker recess of the forest. After standing for a moment, hat in hand, a brilliant object shot out from the leaves of the palma redonda. It was the cocuyo—the great firefly of the tropics. With a low, humming sound it came glistening along at the height of seven or eight feet from the ground. The man sprang up, and with a sweep of his arm jerked it suddenly to the earth. Then, covering it with his hat, and inverting his hand, he caught the gleaming insect, and presented it to me with the ejaculation:

“Ya!” (Now!)

“No muerde,” (It does not bite), added he, as he saw that I hesitated to touch the strange, beetle-shaped insect.

I took the cocuyo in my hand, the green, golden fire flashing from its great round eyes. I held it up before the writing, but the faint glimmer was scarcely discernible upon the paper.

“Why, it would require a dozen of these to make sufficient light,” I said to the guide.

“No, Señor; uno basti—asi;” (No, sir; one is enough—thus); and the Mexican, taking the cocuyo in his fingers, pressed it gently against the surface of the paper. It produced a brilliant light, radiating over a circle of several inches in diameter!

Every point in the writing was plainly visible.

“See, Clayley!” cried I, admiring this lamp of Nature’s own making. “Never trust the tales of travellers. I have heard that half a dozen of these insects in a glass vessel would enable you to read the smallest type. Is that true?” added I, repeating what I had said in Spanish.

“No, Señor; ni cincuenta,” (No, sir; nor fifty), replied the Mexican.

“And yet with a single cocuyo you may. But we are forgetting—let us see what’s here.”

I bent my head to the paper, and read in Spanish:

“I have made known your situation to the American commander.”

There was no signature nor other mark upon the paper.

“From Don Cosmé?” I inquired, in a whisper to the Mexican.

“Yes, Señor,” was the reply.

“And how did you expect to reach us in the corral?”

“Asi,” (So), said the man, holding up a shaggy bull’s hide, which he carried over his arm.

“We have friends here, Clayley. Come, my good fellow, take this!” and I handed a gold eagle to the peon.

“Forward!”

The tinkling of canteens, the jingling of sabres, and the echo of bounding hoofs recommenced. We were again in motion, filing on through the shadowy woods.

Chapter Twenty Four.

Lupé and Luz.

Shortly after, we debouched from the forest, entering the open fields of Don Cosmé's plantation. There was a flowery brilliance around us, full of novelty. We had been accustomed to the ruder scenes of a northern clime. The tropical moon threw a gauzy veil over objects that softened their outlines; and the notes of the nightingale were the only sounds that broke the stillness of what seemed a sleeping elysium.

Once a vanilla plantation, here and there the aromatic bean grew wild, its ground usurped by the pita-plant, the acacia, and the thorny cactus. The dry reservoir and the ruined acequia proved the care that had in former times been bestowed on its irrigation. Guardarayas of palms and orange-trees, choked up with vines and jessamines, marked the ancient boundaries of the fields. Clusters of fruit and flowers hung from the drooping branches, and the aroma of a thousand sweet-scented shrubs was wafted upon the night air. We felt its narcotic influence as we rode along. The helianthus bowed its golden head, as if weeping at the absence of its god; and the cereus spread its bell-shaped blossom, joying in the more mellow light of the moon.

The guide pointed to one of the guardarayas that led to the house. We struck into it, and rode forward. The path was pictured by the moonbeams as they glanced through the half-shadowing leaves. A wild roe bounded away before us, brushing his soft flanks against the rustling thorns of the mezquite.

Farther on we reached the grounds, and, halting behind the jessamines, dismounted. Clayley and myself entered the inclosure.

As we pushed through a copse we were saluted by the hoarse bark of a couple of mastiffs, and we could perceive several forms moving in front of the rancho. We stopped a moment to observe them.

"Quitate, Carlo! Pompo!" (Be off, Carlo! Pompo!) The dogs growled fiercely, barking at intervals.

“Papa, mandalos!” (Papa, order them off!)

We recognised the voices, and pressed forward.

“Afuera, malditos perros! abajo!” (Out of the way, wicked dogs!—down!) shouted Don Cosmé, chiding the fierce brutes and driving them back.

The dogs were secured by several domestics, and we advanced.

“Quien es?” inquired Don Cosmé.

“Amigos” (Friends), I replied.

“Papa! papa! es el capitan!” (Papa, it is the captain!) cried one of the sisters, who had run out in advance, and whom I recognised as the elder one.

“Do not be alarmed, Señorita,” said I, approaching.

“Oh! you are safe—you are safe!—papa, he is safe!” cried both the girls at once; while Don Cosmé exhibited his joy by hugging my comrade and myself alternately.

Suddenly letting go, he threw up his hands, and inquired with a look of anxiety:

“Y el señor gordo?” (And the fat gentleman?)

“Oh! he’s all right,” replied Clayley, with a laugh; “he has saved his bacon, Don Cosmé; though I imagine about this time he wouldn’t object to a little of yours.”

I translated my companion’s answer. The latter part of it seemed to act upon Don Cosmé as a hint, and we were immediately hurried to the dining-room, where we found the Dona Joaquina preparing supper.

During our meal I recounted the principal events of the day. Don Cosmé knew nothing of these guerilleros, although he had heard that there were bands in the neighbourhood. Learning from the guide that we had been attacked, he had despatched a trusty servant to the American camp, and Raoul had met the party coming to our rescue.

After supper Don Cosmé left us to give some orders relative to his departure in the morning. His lady set about preparing the sleeping apartments, and my companion

and I were left for some time in the sweet companionship of Lupé and Luz.

Both were exquisite musicians, playing the harp and guitar with equal cleverness. Many a pure Spanish melody was poured into the delighted ears of my friend and myself. The thoughts that arose in our minds were doubtless of a similar kind; and yet how strange that our hearts should have been warmed to love by beings so different in character! The gay, free spirit of my comrade seemed to have met a responsive echo. He and his brilliant partner laughed, chatted, and sang in turns. In the incidents of the moment this light-hearted creature had forgotten her brother, yet the next moment she would weep for him. A tender heart—a heart of joys and sorrows—of ever-changing emotions, coming and passing like shadows thrown by straggling clouds upon the sun-lit stream!

Unlike was our converse—more serious. We may not laugh, lest we should profane the holy sentiment that is stealing upon us. There is no mirth in love. There are joy, pleasure, luxury; but laughter finds no echo in the heart that loves. Love is a feeling of anxiety—of expectation. The harp is set aside. The guitar lies untouched for a sweeter music—the music that vibrates from the strings of the heart. Are our eyes not held together by some invisible chain? Are not our souls in communion through some mysterious means? It is not language—at least, not the language of words; for we are conversing upon indifferent things—not indifferent, either. Narcisso, Narcisso—a theme fraternal. His peril casts a cloud over our happiness.

“Oh! that he were here—then we could be happy indeed.”

“He will return; fear not—grieve not; to-morrow your father will easily find him. I shall leave no means untried to restore him to so fond a sister.”

“Thanks! thanks! Oh! we are already indebted to you so much.”

Are those eyes swimming with love, or gratitude, or both at once? Surely gratitude alone does not speak so wildly. Could this scene not last for ever?

“Good-night—good-night!”

“Señores, pasan Vds. buena noche!” (Gentlemen, may you pass a pleasant night!)

They are gone, and those oval developments of face and figure are floating before me, as though the body itself were still present. It is the soft memory of love in all its growing distinctness!

We were shown to our sleeping apartments. Our men picketed their horses under the olives, and slept in the bamboo rancho, a single sentry walking his rounds during the night.

Note. Vds. Usted, contraction of Vuestra merced, “your grace”, usually written as Vd., is the polite form of address in Spanish.

Chapter Twenty Five.

A Tough Night of it after all.

I entered my chamber—to sleep? No. And yet it contained a bed fit for Morpheus—a bed canopied and curtained with cloth from the looms of Damascus: shining rods roofed upwards, that met in an ornamental design, where the god of sleep, fanned by virgins of silver, reclined upon a couch of roses.

I drew aside the curtains—a bank of snow—pillows, as if prepared for the cheek of a beautiful bride. I had not slept in a bed for two months. A close crib in a transport ship—a “shake-down” among the scorpions and spiders of Lobos—a single blanket among the sand-hills, where it was not unusual to wake up half-buried by the drift.

These were my souvenirs. Fancy the prospect! It certainly invited repose; and yet I was in no humour to sleep. My brain was in a whirl. The strange incidents of the day—some of them were mysterious—crowded into my mind. My whole system, mental as well as physical, was flushed; and thought followed thought with nervous rapidity.

My heart shared the excitement—chords long silent had been touched—the divine element was fairly enthroned. I was in love!

It was not the first passion of my life, and I easily recognised it. Even jealousy had begun to distil its poison—"Don Santiago!"

I was standing in front of a large mirror, when I noticed two small miniatures hanging against the wall—one on each side of the glass.

I bent over to examine, first, that which hung upon the right. I gazed with emotion. They were her features; "and yet," thought I, "the painter has not flattered her; it might better represent her ten years hence: still, the likeness is there. Stupid artist!" I turned to the other. "Her fair sister, no doubt. Gracious heaven! Do my eyes deceive me? No, the black wavy hair—the arching brows—the sinister lip—Dubrosc!"

A sharp pang shot through my heart. I looked at the picture again and again with a kind of incredulous bewilderment; but every fresh examination only strengthened conviction. "There is no mistaking those features—they are his!" Paralysed with the shock, I sank into a chair, my heart filled with the most painful emotions.

For some moments I was unable to think, much less to act.

"What can it mean? Is this accomplished villain a fiend?—the fiend of my existence?—thus to cross me at every point, perhaps in the end to—."

Our mutual dislike at first meeting—Lobos—his reappearance upon the sand-hills, the mystery of his passing the lines and again appearing with the guerilla—all came forcibly upon my recollection; and now I seized the lamp and rushed back to the pictures.

"Yes, I am not mistaken; it is he—it is she, her features—all—all. And thus, too!—the position—side by side—counterparts! There are no others on the wall; matched—mated—perhaps betrothed! His name, too, Don Emilio! The American who taught them English! His is Emile—the voice on the island cried 'Emile!' Oh, the coincidence is complete! This villain, handsome and accomplished as he is, has been here before me! Betrothed—perhaps married—perhaps—Torture! horrible!"

I reeled back to my chair, dashing the lamp recklessly upon the table. I know not

how long I sat, but a world of wintry thoughts passed through my heart and brain. A clock striking from a large picture awoke me from my reverie. I did not count the hours. Music began to play behind the picture. It was a sad, sweet air, that chimed with my feelings, and to some extent soothed them. I rose at length, and, hastily undressing, threw myself upon the bed, mentally resolving to forget all—to forget that I had ever seen her.

"I will rise early—return to camp without meeting her, and, once there, my duties will drive away this painful fancy. The drum and the fife and the roar of the cannon will drown remembrance. Ha! it was only a passing thought at best—the hallucination of a moment. I shall easily get rid of it. Ha! ha!"

I laid my fevered cheek upon the soft, cold pillow. I felt composed—almost happy.

"A Creole of New Orleans! How could he have been here? Oh! have I not the explanation already? Why should I dwell on it?"

Ah, jealous heart—it is easy to say "forget!"

I tried to prevent my thoughts from returning to this theme. I directed them to a thousand things: to the ships—to the landing—to the army—to the soldiers—to the buttons upon their jackets and the swabs upon their shoulders—to everything I could think of: all in vain. Back, back, back! in painful throes it came, and my heart throbbed, and my brain burned with bitter memories freshly awakened.

I turned and tossed upon my couch for many a long hour. The clock in the picture struck, and played the same music again and again, still soothing me as before. Even despair has its moments of respite; and, worn with fatigue, mental as well as physical, I listened to the sad, sweet strain, until it died away into my dreams.

Chapter Twenty Six.

The Light after the Shade.

When I awoke all was darkness around me. I threw out my arms and opened the

damask curtains. Not a ray of light entered the room. I felt refreshed, and from this I concluded I must have slept long. I slipped out upon the floor and commenced groping for my watch. Someone knocked.

“Come in!” I called.

The door opened, and a flood of light gushed into the apartment. It was a servant bearing a lamp.

“What is the hour?” I demanded.

“Nine o’clock, mi amo,” (my master), was the reply.

The servant set down the lamp and went out. Another immediately entered, carrying a salver with a small gold cup.

“What have you there?”

“Chocolate, master; Dona Joaquina has sent it.”

I drank off the beverage, and hastened to dress myself. I was reflecting whether I should pass on to camp without seeing any one of the family. Somehow, my heart felt less heavy. I believe the morning always brings relief to pain, either mental or bodily. It seems to be a law of nature—at least, so my experience tells me. The morning air, buoyant and balmy, dulls the edge of anguish. New hopes arise and new projects appear with the sun. The invalid, couch-tossing through the long watches of the night, will acknowledge this truth.

I did not approach the mirror. I dared not.

“I will not looked upon the loved, the hated face—no, on to the camp!—let Lethe—. Has my friend arisen?”

“Yes, master; he has been up for hours.”

“Ha! where is he?”

“In the garden, master.”

“Alone?”

“No, master; he is with the niñas.”

“Happy, light-hearted Clayley! No jealous thoughts to torture him!” mused I, as I buckled on my stock.

I had observed that the fair-haired sister and he were kindred spirits—sympathetic natures, who only needed to be placed en rapport to “like each other mightily”—beings who could laugh, dance, and sing together, romp for months, and then get married, as a thing of course; but, should any accident prevent this happy consummation, could say “good-bye” and part without a broken heart on either side; an easy thing for natures like theirs; a return exchange of numerous billets-doux, a laugh over the past, and a light heart for the future. Such is the history of many a love. I can vouch for it. How different with—

“Tell my friend, when he returns to the house, that I wish to see him.”

“Yes, master.”

The servant bowed and left the room.

In a few minutes Clayley made his appearance, gay as a grasshopper.

“So, good lieutenant, you have been improving your time, I hear?”

“Haven’t I, though? Such a delicious stroll! Haller, this is a paradise.”

“Where have you been?”

“Feeding the swans,” replied Clayley, with a laugh. “But, by the way, your chère amie hangs her pretty head this morning. She seems hurt that you have not been up. She kept constantly looking towards the house.”

“Clayley, will you do me the favour to order the men to their saddles?”

“What! going so soon? Not before breakfast, though?”

“In five minutes.”

“Why, Captain, what’s the matter? And such a breakfast as they are getting! Oh, Don Cosmé will not hear of it.”

“Don Cosmé—.”

Our host entered at that moment, and, listening to his remonstrances, the order was rescinded, and I consented to remain.

I saluted the ladies with as much courtesy as I could assume. I could not help the coldness of my manner, and I could perceive that with her it did not pass unobserved.

We sat down to the breakfast-table; but my heart was full of bitterness, and I scarcely touched the delicate viands that were placed before me.

“You do not eat, Captain. I hope you are well?” said Don Cosmé, observing my strange and somewhat rude demeanour.

“Thank, you, Señor, I never enjoyed better health.”

I studiously avoided looking towards her, paying slight attentions to her sister. This is the game of piques. Once or twice I ventured a side-glance. Her eyes were bent upon me with a strange, inquiring look.

They are swimming in tears, and soft, and forgiving. They are swollen. She has been weeping. That is not strange. Her brother’s danger is, no doubt, the cause of her sorrow.

Yet, is there not reproach in her looks? Reproach! How ill does my conduct of last night correspond with this affected coldness—this rudeness! Can she, too, be suffering?

I arose from the table, and, walking forth, ordered Lincoln to prepare the men for marching.

I strolled down among the orange-trees. Clayley followed soon after, accompanied by both the girls. Don Cosmé remained at the house to superintend the saddling of his mule, while Dona Joaquina was packing the necessary articles into his portmanteau.

Following some silent instinct, we—Guadalupe and I—came together. Clayley and his mistress had strayed away, leaving us alone. I had not yet spoken to her. I felt a strange impulse—a desire to know the worst. I felt as one looking over a fearful precipice.

Then I will brave the danger; it can be no worse than this agony of suspicion and suspense.

I turned towards her. Her head was bent to one side. She was crushing an orange-flower between her fingers, and her eyes seemed to follow the dropping fragments.

How beautiful was she at that moment!

“The artist certainly has not flattered you.”

She looked at me with a bewildered expression. Oh, those swimming eyes!

She did not understand me.

I repeated the observation.

“Señor Capitan, what do you mean?”

“That the painter has not done you justice. The portrait is certainly a likeness, yet the expression, I think, should have been younger.”

“The painter! What painter? The portrait! What portrait, Señor?”

“I refer to your portrait, which I accidentally found hanging in my apartment.”

“Ah! by the mirror?”

“Yes, by the mirror,” I answered sullenly.

“But, it is not mine, Señor Capitan.”

“Ha!—how? Not yours?”

“No; it is the portrait of my cousin, Maria de Merced. They say we were much alike.”

My heart expanded. My whole frame quivered under the influence of joyful emotions.

“And the gentleman?” I faltered out.

“Don Emilio? He was cousin’s lover—huyeron,” (they eloped).

As she repeated the last word she turned her head away, and I thought there was a sadness in her manner.

I was about to speak, when she continued:

“It was her room—we have not touched anything.”

“And where is your cousin now?”

“We know not.”

“There is a mystery,” thought I. I pressed the subject no farther. It was nothing to me now. My heart was happy.

“Let us walk farther, Lupita.”

She turned her eyes upon me with an expression of wonder. The change in my manner—so sudden—how was she to account for it? I could have knelt before her and explained all. Reserve disappeared, and the confidence of the preceding night was fully restored.

We wandered along under the guardarayas, amidst sounds and scenes suggestive of love and tenderness. Love! We heard it in the songs of the birds—in the humming of the bees—in the voices of all nature around us. We felt it in our own hearts. The late cloud had passed, making the sky still brighter than before; the reaction had heightened our mutual passion to the intensity of non-resistance; and we walked on, her hand clasped in mine. We had eyes only for each other.

We reached a clump of cocoa-trees; one of them had fallen, and its smooth trunk offered a seat, protected from the sun by the shadowy leaves of its fellows. On this we sat down. There was no resistance—no reasoning process—no calculation of

advantages and chances, such as is too often mingled with the noble passion of love. We felt nothing of this—nothing but that undefinable impulse which had entered our hearts, and to whose mystical power neither of us dreamed of offering opposition. Delay and duty were alike forgotten.

“I shall ask the question now—I shall know my fate at once,” were my thoughts.

In the changing scenes of a soldier’s life there is but little time for the slow formalities, the zealous vigils, the complicated finesse of courtship. Perhaps this consideration impelled me. I have but little confidence in the cold heart that is won by a series of assiduities. There is too much calculation of after-events—too much selfishness.

These reflections passed through my mind. I bent towards my companion, and whispered to her in that language—rich above all others in the vocabulary of the heart:

“Guadalupe, tu me amas?” (Guadalupe, do you love me?)

“Yo te amo!” was the simple reply. Need I describe the joyful feelings that filled my heart at that moment? My happiness was complete.

The confession rendered her sacred in my eyes, and we sat for some time silent, enjoying that transport only known to those who have truly, purely loved.

The trampling of hoofs! It was Clayley at the head of the troop. They were mounted, and waiting for me. Don Cosmé was impatient; so was the Dona Joaquina. I could not blame them, knowing the cause.

“Ride forward! I shall follow presently.”

The horsemen filed off into the fields, headed by the lieutenant, beside whom rode Don Cosmé, on his white mule.

“You will soon return, Enrique?”

“I shall lose no opportunity of seeing you. I shall long for the hour more than you, I

fear."

"Oh! no, no!"

"Believe me yes, Lupita! Say again you will never cease to love me."

"Never, never! Tuya—tuya—hasta la muerte!" (Yours—yours—till death!)

How often has this question been asked! How often answered as above!

I sprang into the saddle. A parting look—another from a distance—a wave of the hand—and the next moment I was urging my horse in full gallop under the shadowy palms.

Chapter Twenty Seven.

A Disappointment and a New Plan.

I overtook my companions as they were entering the woods. Clayley, who had been looking back from time to time, brushed alongside, as if wishing to enter into conversation.

"Hard work, Captain, to leave such quarters. By Jove! I could have stayed for ever."

"Come, Clayley—you are in love."

"Yes; they who live in glass houses—. Oh! if I could only speak the lingo as you do!"

I could not help smiling, for I had overheard him through the trees making the most he could of his partner's broken English. I was curious to know how he had sped, and whether he had been as 'quick upon the trigger' as myself. My curiosity was soon relieved.

"I tell you, Captain," he continued, "if I could only have talked it, I would have put the question on the spot. I did try to get a 'yes' or a 'no' out of her; but she either couldn't or wouldn't understand me. It was all bad luck."

"Could you not make her understand you? Surely she knows English enough for

that?"

"I thought so too; but when I spoke about love she only laughed and slapped me on the face with her fan. Oh, no; the thing must be done in Spanish, that's plain; and you see I am going to set about it in earnest. She loaned me these."

Saying this, he pulled out of the crown of his foraging-cap a couple of small volumes, which I recognised as a Spanish grammar and dictionary. I could not resist laughing aloud.

"Comrade, you will find the best dictionary to be the lady herself."

"That's true; but how the deuce are we to get back again? A mule-hunt don't happen every day."

"I fancy there will be some difficulty in it."

I had already thought of this. It was no easy matter to steal away from camp—one's brother-officers are so solicitous about your appearance at drills and parades. Don Cosmé's rancho was at least ten miles from the lines, and the road would not be the safest for the solitary lover. The prospect of frequent returns was not at all flattering.

"Can't we steal out at night?" suggested Clayley. "I think we might mount half a dozen of our fellows, and do it snugly. What do you say, Captain?"

"Clayley, I cannot return without this brother. I have almost given my word to that effect."

"You have? That is bad! I fear there is no prospect of getting him out as you propose."

My companion's prophetic foreboding proved but too correct, for on nearing the camp we were met by an aide-de-camp of the commander-in-chief, who informed me that, on that very morning, all communication between the foreign ships of war and the besieged city had been prohibited.

Don Cosmé's journey, then, would be in vain. I explained this, advising him to

return to his family.

“Do not make it known—say that some time is required, and you have left the matter in my hands. Be assured I shall be among the first to enter the city, and I shall find the boy, and bring him to his mother in safety.”

This was the only consolation I could offer.

“You are kind, Capitan—very kind; but I know that nothing can now be done. We can only hope and pray.”

The old man had dropped into a bent attitude, his countenance marked by the deepest melancholy.

Taking the Frenchman, Raoul, along with me, I rode back until I had placed him beyond the danger of the straggling plunderer, when we shook hands and parted. As he left me, I turned to look after him. He still sat in that attitude that betokens deep dejection, his shoulders bent forward over the neck of his mule, while he gazed vacantly on the path. My heart sank at the spectacle, and, sad and dispirited, I rode at a lagging pace towards the camp.

Not a shot had as yet been fired against the town, but our batteries were nearly perfected, and several mortars were mounted and ready to fling in their deadly missiles. I knew that every shot and shell would carry death into the devoted city, for there was not a point within its walls out of range of a ten-inch howitzer. Women and children must perish along with armed soldiers; and the boy—he, too, might be a victim. Would this be the tidings I should carry to his home? And how should I be received by her with such a tale upon my lips? Already had I sent back a sorrowing father.

“Is there no way to save him, Raoul?”

“Captain?” inquired the man, starting at the vehemence of my manner.

A sudden thought had occurred to me.

“Are you well acquainted with Vera Cruz?”

“I know every street, Captain.”

“Where do those arches lead that open from the sea? There is one on each side of the mole.”

I had observed these when visiting a friend, an officer of the navy, on board his ship.

“They are conductors, Captain, to carry off the overflow of the sea after a norther. They lead under the city, opening at various places. I have had the pleasure of passing through them.”

“Ha! How?”

“On a little smuggling expedition.”

“It is possible, then, to reach the town by these?”

“Nothing easier, unless they may have a guard at the mouth; but that is not likely. They would not dream of anyone’s making the attempt.”

“How would you like to make it?”

“If the Captain wishes it, I will bring him a bottle of eau-de-vie from the Café de Santa Anna.”

“I do not wish you to go alone. I would accompany you.”

“Think of it, Captain; there is risk for you in such an undertaking. I may go safely. No one knows that I have joined you, I believe. If you are taken—.”

“Yes, yes; I know well the result.”

“The risk is not great, either,” continued the Frenchman, in a half-soliloquy. “Disguised as Mexicans, we might do it; you speak the language as well as I. If you wish it, Captain—.”

“I do.”

“I am ready, then.”

I knew the fellow well: one of those dare-devil spirits, ready for anything that promised adventure—a child of fortune—a stray waif tumbling about upon the waves of chance—gifted with head and heart of no common order—ignorant of books, yet educated in experience. There was a dash of the heroic in his character that had won my admiration, and I was fond of his company.

It was a desperate adventure—I knew that; but I felt stronger interest than common in the fate of this boy. My own future fate, too, was in a great degree connected with his safety. There was something in the very danger that lured me on to tempt it. I felt that it would be adding another chapter to a life which I have termed “adventurous.”

Chapter Twenty Eight.

A Foolhardy Adventure.

At night Raoul and I, disguised in the leathern dresses of two rancheros, stole round the lines, and reached Punta Hornos, a point beyond our own pickets. Here we “took the water”, wading waist-deep.

This was about ten o’clock. The tide was just setting out, and the night, by good fortune, was as dark as pitch.

As the swell rolled in we were buried to the neck, and when it rolled back again we bent forward; so that at no time could much of our bodies be seen above the surface.

In this manner, half wading, half swimming, we kept up to the town.

It was a toilsome journey, but the water was warm, and the sand on the bottom firm and level. We were strengthened—I at least—by hope and the knowledge of danger. Doubtless my companion felt the latter stimulant as much as I.

We soon reached the battlements of Santiago, where we proceeded with increased caution. We could see the sentry up against the sky, pacing along the parapet. His shrill cry startled us. We thought we had been discovered. The darkness alone prevented this.

At length we passed him, and came opposite the city, whose battlements rested upon the water's edge.

The tide was at ebb, and a bed of black, weed-covered rocks lay between the sea and the bastion.

We approached these with caution, and, crawling over the slippery boulders, after a hundred yards or so found ourselves in the entrance of one of the conductors.

Here we halted to rest ourselves, sitting down upon a ledge of rock. We were in no more danger here than in our own tents, yet within twenty feet were men who, had they known our proximity, would have strung us up like a pair of dogs.

But our danger was far from lying at this end of the adventure.

After a rest of half an hour we kept up into the conductor. My companion seemed perfectly at home in this subterranean passage, walking along as boldly as if it had been brilliantly lighted with gas.

After proceeding some distance we approached a grating, where a light shot in from above.

"Can we pass out here?" I inquired.

"Not yet, Captain," answered Raoul in a whisper. "Farther on."

We passed the grating, then another and another, and at length reached one where only a feeble ray struggled downward through the bars.

Here my guide stopped, and listened attentively for several minutes. Then, stretching out his hand, he undid the fastening of the grate, and silently turned it upon its hinge. He next swung himself up until his head projected above ground. In this position he again listened, looking cautiously on all sides.

Satisfied at length that there was no one near, he drew his body up through the grating and disappeared. After a short interval he returned, and called down:

"Come, Captain."

I swung myself up to the street. Raoul shut down the trap with care.

“Take marks, Captain,” whispered he; “we may get separated.”

It was a dismal suburb. No living thing was apparent, with the exception of a gang of prowling dogs, lean and savage, as all dogs are during a siege. An image, decked in all the glare of gaud and tinsel, looked out of a glazed niche in the opposite wall. A dim lamp burned at its feet, showing to the charitable a receptacle for their offerings. A quaint old steeple loomed in the darkness overhead.

“What church?” I asked Raoul.

“La Magdalena.”

“That will do. Now onward.”

“Buenas noches, Señor!” (good-night) said Raoul to a soldier who passed us, wrapped in his great-coat.

“Buenas noches!” returned the man in a gruff voice.

We stole cautiously along the streets, keeping in the darker ones to avoid observation. The citizens were mostly in their beds; but groups of soldiers were straggling about, and patrols met us at every corner.

It became necessary to pass through one of the streets that was brilliantly lighted. When about half-way up it a fellow came swinging along, and, noticing our strange appearance, stopped and looked after us.

Our dresses, as I have said, were of leather; our calzoneros, as well as jackets, were shining with the sea-water, and dripping upon the pavement at every step.

Before we could walk beyond reach, the man shouted out:

“Carajo! caballeros, why don’t you strip before entering the baño?”

“What is it?” cried a soldier, coming up and stopping us.

A group of his comrades joined him, and we were hurried into the light.

“Mil diablos!” exclaimed one of the soldiers, recognising Raoul; “our old friend the Frenchman! Parlez-vous français, Monsieur?”

“Spies!” cried another.

“Arrest them!” shouted a sergeant of the guard, at the moment coming up with a patrol, and we were both jumped upon and held by about a dozen men.

In vain Raoul protested our innocence, declaring that we were only two poor fishermen, who had wet our clothes in drawing the nets.

“It’s not a fisherman’s costume, Monsieur,” said one.

“Fishermen don’t usually wear diamonds on their knuckles,” cried another, snatching a ring from my finger.

On this ring, inside the circlet, were engraven my name and rank!

Several men, now coming forward, recognised Raoul, and stated, moreover, that he had been missing for some days.

“He must, therefore,” said they, “have been with the Yankees.”

We were soon handcuffed and marched off to the guard-prison. There we were closely searched, but nothing further was found, except my purse containing several gold eagles—an American coin that of itself would have been sufficient evidence to condemn me.

We were now heavily chained to each other, after which the guard left us to our thoughts. They could not have left us in much less agreeable companionship.

Chapter Twenty Nine.

Help from Heaven.

“I would not care a claco for my own life,” said Raoul, as the gate closed upon us, “but that you, Captain—hélas! hélas!” and the Frenchman groaned and sank upon the stone bench, dragging me down also.

I could offer no consolation. I knew that we should be tried as spies; and, if convicted—a result almost certain—we had not twenty hours to live. The thought that I had brought this brave fellow to such a fate enhanced the misery of my situation. To die thus ingloriously was bitter indeed. Three days ago I could have spent my life recklessly; but now, how changed were my feelings! I had found something worth living to enjoy; and to think I should never again—"Oh! I have become a coward!" I cursed my rashness bitterly.

We passed the night in vain attempts at mutual consolation. Even our present sufferings occupied us. Our clothes were wet through, and the night had become piercingly cold. Our bed was a bench of stone; and upon this we lay as our chains would allow us, sleeping close together to generate warmth. It was to us a miserable night; but morning came at last, and at an early hour we were examined by the officer of the guard.

Our court-martial was fixed for the afternoon, and before this tribunal we were carried, amidst the jeers of the populace. We told our story, giving the name of the boy Narcisso, and the house where he was lodged. This was verified by the court, but declared to be a ruse invented by my comrade—whose knowledge of the place and other circumstances rendered the thing probable enough. Raoul, moreover, was identified by many of the citizens, who proved his disappearance coincident with the landing of the American expedition. Besides, my ring and purse were sufficient of themselves to condemn us—and condemned we were. We were to be garrotted on the following morning!

Raoul was offered life if he would turn traitor and give information of the enemy. The brave soldier indignantly spurned the offer. It was extended to me, with a similar result.

All at once I observed a strange commotion among the people. Citizens and soldiers rushed from the hall, and the court, hastily pronouncing our sentence, ordered us to

be carried away. We were seized by the guard, pulled into the street, and dragged back towards our late prison. Our conductors were evidently in a great hurry. As we passed along we were met by citizens running to and fro, apparently in great terror—women and children uttering shrieks and suddenly disappearing behind walls and battlements. Some fell upon their knees, beating their breasts and praying loudly. Others, clasping their infants, stood shivering and speechless.

“It is just like the way they go in an earthquake,” remarked Raoul, “but there is none. What can it be, Captain?”

Before I could reply, the answer came from another quarter.

Far above, an object was hissing and hurtling through the air.

“A shell from ours! Hurrah!” cried Raoul.

I could scarcely refrain from cheering, though we ourselves might be the victims of the missile.

The soldiers who were guarding us had flung themselves down behind walls and pillars, leaving us alone in the open street!

The bomb fell beyond us, and, striking the pavement, burst. The fragments went crashing through the side of an adjoining house; and the wail that came back told how well the iron messengers had done their work. This was the second shell that had been projected from the American mortars. The first had been equally destructive; and hence the extreme terror of both citizen and soldier. Every missile seemed charged with death.

Our guard now returned and dragged us onward, treating us with increased brutality. They were enraged at the exultation visible in our manner; and one, more ferocious than the rest, drove his bayonet into the fleshy part of my comrade’s thigh. After several like acts of inhumanity, we were thrown into our prison and locked up as before.

Since our capture we had tasted neither food nor drink, and hunger and thirst added to the misery of our situation.

The insult had maddened Raoul, and the pain of his wound now rendered him furious. He had not hands to touch it or dress it. Frenzied by anger and pain to a strength almost superhuman, he twisted off his iron manacles, as if they had been straws. This done, the chain that bound us together was soon broken, and our ankle "jewellery" followed.

"Let us live our last hours, Captain, as we have our lives, free and unfettered!"

I could not help admiring the spirit of my brave comrade.

We placed ourselves close to the door and listened.

We could hear the heavy cannonade all around, and now and then the distant shots from the American batteries. We would wait for the bursting of the bombs, and, as the hoarse thunder of crumbling walls reached our ears, Raoul would spring up, shouting his wild, half-French, half-Indian cries.

A thought occurred to me.

"We have arms, Raoul." I held up the fragments of the heavy chain that had yoked us. "Could you reach the trap on a run, without the danger of mistaking your way?"

Raoul started.

"You are right, Captain—I can. It is barely possible they may visit us to-night. If so, any chance for life is better than none at all."

By a tacit understanding each of us took a fragment of the chain—there were but two—and sat down by the door to be ready in case our guards should open it. We sat for over an hour, without exchanging a word. We could hear the shells as they burst upon the housetops, the crashing of torn timbers, and the rumbling of walls rolling over, struck by the heavy shot. We could hear the shouts of men and the wailing of women, with now and then a shriek louder than all others, as some missile carried

death into the terror-struck crowd.

“Sacre!” said Raoul; “if they had only allowed us a couple of days, our friends would have opened these doors for us. Sacr–r–r–e!”

This last exclamation was uttered in a shriek. Simultaneously a heavy object burst through the roof, tearing the bricks and plaster, and falling with the ring of iron on the floor.

Then followed a deafening crash. The whole earth seemed to shake, and the whizzing of a thousand particles filled the air. A cloud of dust and lime, mixed with the smoke of sulphur, was around us. I gasped for breath, nearly suffocated. I endeavoured to cry out, but my voice, husky and coarse, was scarcely audible to myself. I succeeded at length in ejaculating:

“Raoul! Raoul!”

I heard the voice of my comrade, seemingly at a great distance. I threw out my arms and groped for him. He was close by me, but, like myself, choking for want of air.

“It was a shell,” said he, in a wheezing voice, “Are you hurt, Captain?”

“No,” I replied; “and you?”

“Sound as a bell—our luck is good—it must have struck every other part of the cell.”

“Better it had not missed us,” said I, after a pause; “we are only spared for the garrotte.”

“I am not so sure of that, Captain,” replied my companion, in a manner that seemed to imply he had still hopes of an escape.

“Where that shell came in,” he continued, “something else may go out. Let us see—was it the roof?”

“I think so.”

We groped our way hand in hand towards the centre of the room, looking upwards.

“Peste!” ejaculated Raoul; “I can’t see a foot before me—my eyes are filled—bah!”

So were mine. We stood waiting. The dust was gradually settling down, and we could perceive a faint glimmer from above. There was a large hole through the roof!

Slowly its outlines became defined, and we could see that it was large enough to pass the body of a man; but it was at least fourteen feet from the floor, and we had not timber enough to make a walking-stick!

“What is to be done? We are not cats, Raoul. We can never reach it!”

My comrade, without making a reply, lifted me up in his arms, telling me to climb. I mounted upon his shoulders, balancing myself like a Bedouin; but with my utmost stretch I could not touch the roof.

“Hold!” cried I, a thought striking me. “Let me down, Raoul. Now, if they will only give us a little time.”

“Never fear for them; they’ve enough to do taking care of their own yellow carcases.”

I had noticed that a beam of the roof formed one side of the break, and I proceeded to twist our handcuffs into a clamp, while Raoul peeled off his leather breeches and commenced, tearing them into strips. In ten minutes our “tackle” was ready, and, mounting upon my comrade’s shoulders, I flung it carefully at the beam. It failed to catch, and I came down to the floor, my balance being lost in the effort. I repeated the attempt. Again it failed, and I staggered down as before.

“Sacre!” cried Raoul through his teeth. The iron had struck him on the head.

“Come, we shall try and try—our lives depend upon it.”

The third attempt, according to popular superstition, should be successful. It was so with us. The clamp caught, and the string hung dangling downwards. Mounting again upon my comrade’s shoulders, I grasped the thong high up to test its hold. It was secure; and, cautioning Raoul to hold fast lest the hook might be detached by

my vibration, I climbed up and seized hold of the beam. By this I was enabled to squeeze myself through the roof.

Once outside I crawled cautiously along the azotea, which, like all others in Spanish houses, was flat, and bordered by a low parapet of mason-work. I peeped over this parapet, looking down into the street. It was night, and I could see no one below; but up against the sky, upon distant battlements, I could distinguish armed soldiers busy around their guns. These blazed forth at intervals, throwing their sulphureous glare over the city.

I returned to assist Raoul, but, impatient of my delay, he had already mounted, and was dragging up the thong after him.

We crawled from roof to roof, looking for a dark spot to descend into the street. None of the houses in the range of our prison were more than one story high, and, after passing several, we let ourselves down into a narrow alley. It was still early, and the people were running to and fro, amidst the frightful scenes of the bombardment. The shrieks of women were in our ears, mingled with the shouts of men, the groans of the wounded, and the fierce yelling of an excited rabble. The constant whizzing of bombs filled the air, and parapets were hurled down. A round-shot struck the cupola of a church as we passed nearly under it, and the ornaments of ages came tumbling down, blocking up the thoroughfare. We clambered over the ruins and went on. There was no need of our crouching into dark shadows. No one thought of observing us now.

“We are near the house—will you still make the attempt to take him along?” inquired Raoul, referring to the boy Narcisso.

“By all means! Show me the place,” replied I, half-ashamed at having almost forgotten, in the midst of our own perils, the object of our enterprise.

Raoul pointed to a large house with portals and a great door in the centre.

“There, Captain—there it is.”

“Go under that shadow and wait. I shall be better alone.”

This was said in a whisper. My companion did as directed.

I approached the great door and knocked boldly.

“Quien?” cried the porter within the saguan.

“Yo,” I responded.

The door was opened slowly and with caution.

“Is the Señorito Narcisso within?” I inquired.

The man answered in the affirmative.

“Tell him a friend wishes to speak with him.”

After a moment’s hesitation the porter dragged himself lazily up the stone steps. In a few seconds the boy—a fine, bold-looking lad, whom I had seen during our trial—came leaping down. He started on recognising me.

“Hush!” I whispered, making signs to him to be silent. “Take leave of your friends, and meet me in ten minutes behind the church of La Magdalena.”

“Why, Señor,” inquired the boy without listening, “how have you got out of prison? I have just been to the governor on your behalf, and—.”

“No matter how,” I replied, interrupting him; “follow my directions—remember your mother and sisters are suffering.”

“I shall come,” said the boy resolutely.

“Hasta luego!” (Lose no time then). “Adios!”

We parted without another word. I rejoined Raoul, and we walked on towards La Magdalena. We passed through the street where we had been captured on the preceding night, but it was so altered that we should not have known it. Fragments of walls were thrown across the path, and here and there lay masses of bricks and mortar freshly torn down.

Neither patrol nor sentry thought of troubling us now, and our strange appearance did not strike the attention of the passengers.

We reached the church, and Raoul descended, leaving me to wait for the boy. The latter was true to his word, and his slight figure soon appeared rounding the corner. Without losing a moment we all three entered the subterranean passage, but the tide was still high, and we had to wait for the ebb. This came at length, and, clambering over the rocks, we entered the surf and waded as before. After an hour's toil we reached Punta Hornos, and a little beyond this point I was enabled to hail one of our own pickets, and to pass the lines in safety.

At ten o'clock I was in my own tent—just twenty-four hours from the time I had left it, and, with the exception of Clayley, not one of my brother officers knew anything of our adventure.

Clayley and I agreed to "mount" a party the next night and carry the boy to his friends. This we accordingly did, stealing out of camp after tattoo. It would be impossible to describe the rejoicing of our new acquaintances—the gratitude lavishly expressed—the smiles of love that thanked us.

We should have repeated our visits almost nightly; but from that time the guerilleros swarmed in the back-country, and small parties of our men, straggling from camp, were cut off daily. It was necessary, therefore, for my friend and myself to chafe under a prudent impatience, and wait for the fall of Vera Cruz.

Chapter Thirty.

A Shot in the Dark.

The "City of the True Cross" fell upon the 29th of March, 1847, and the American flag waved over the castle of San Juan de Ulloa. The enemy's troops marched out upon parole, most of them taking their way to their distant homes upon the table-lands of the Andes.

The American garrison entered the town, but the body of our army encamped upon the green plains to the south.

Here we remained for several days, awaiting the order to march into the interior.

A report had reached us that the Mexican forces, under the celebrated Santa Anna, were concentrating at Puente Nacional; but shortly after it was ascertained that the enemy would make his next stand in the pass of the Cerro Gordo, about half-way between Vera Cruz and the mountains.

After the surrender of the city we were relieved from severe duty, and Clayley and I, taking advantage of this, resolved upon paying another stolen visit to our friends.

Several parties of light horse had been sent out to scour the country, and it had been reported that the principal guerilla of the enemy had gone farther up towards the Puente Nacional. We did not, therefore, anticipate any danger from that source.

We started after nightfall, taking with us three of our best men—Lincoln, Chane, and Raoul. The boy Jack was also of the party. We were mounted on such horses as could be had. The major had kept his word with me, and I bestrode the black—a splendid thoroughbred Arab.

It was a clear moonlight, and as we rode along we could not help noticing many changes.

War had left its black mark upon the objects around. The ranchos by the road were tenantless—many of them wrecked, not a few of them entirely gone; where they had stood, a ray of black ashes marking the outline of their slight walls. Some were represented by a heap of half-burned rubbish still smoking and smouldering.

Various pieces of household furniture lay along the path torn or broken—articles of little value, strewed by the wanton hand of the ruthless robber. Here a petaté, or a palm hat—there a broken olla; a stringless bandolon, the fragments of a guitar crushed under the angry heel, or some flimsy articles of female dress cuffed into the dust; leaves of torn books—misas, or lives of the Santisima Maria—the labours of

some zealous padre; old paintings of the saints, Guadalupe, Remedios, and Dolores—of the Niño of Guatepec—rudely torn from the walls and perforated by the sacrilegious bayonet, flung into the road, kicked from foot to foot—the dishonoured penates of a conquered people.

A painful presentiment began to harass me. Wild stories had lately circulated through the army—stories of the misconduct of straggling parties of our soldiers in the back-country. These had stolen from camp, or gone out under the pretext of "beef-hunting."

Hitherto I had felt no apprehension, not believing that any small party would carry their foraging to so distant a point as the house of our friends. I knew that any detachment, commanded by an officer, would act in a proper manner; and, indeed, any respectable body of American soldiers, without an officer. But in all armies, in war-time, there are robbers, who have thrown themselves into the ranks for no other purpose than to take advantage of the licence of a stolen foray.

We were within less than a league of Don Cosmé's rancho, and still the evidence of ruin and plunder continued—the evidence, too, of a retaliatory vengeance; for on entering a glade, the mutilated body of a soldier lay across the path. He was upon his back, with open eyes glaring upon the moon. His tongue and heart were cut out, and his left arm had been struck off at the elbow-joint. Not ten steps beyond this we passed another one, similarly disfigured. We were now on the neutral ground.

As we entered the forest my forebodings became painfully oppressive. I imparted them to Clayley. My friend had been occupied with similar thoughts.

"It is just possible," said he, "that nobody has found the way. By heavens!" he added, with an earnestness unusual in his manner, "I have been far more uneasy about the other side—those half-brigands and that villain Dubrosc."

"On! on!" I ejaculated, digging the spurs into the flanks of my horse, who sprang forward at a gallop.

I could say no more. Clayley had given utterance to my very thoughts, and a painful feeling shot through my heart.

My companions dashed after me, and we pressed through the trees at a reckless pace.

We entered an opening. Raoul, who was then riding in the advance, suddenly checked his horse, waving on us to halt. We did so.

“What is it, Raoul?” I asked in a whisper.

“Something entered the thicket, Captain.”

“At what point?”

“There, to the left;” and the Frenchman pointed in this direction. “I did not see it well; it might have been a stray animal.”

“I seed it, Cap’n,” said Lincoln, closing up; “it wur a mustang.”

“Mounted, think you?”

“I ain’t confident; I only seed its hips. We were a-gwine too fast to get a good sight on the critter; but it wur a mustang—I seed that cl’ar as daylight.”

I sat for a moment, hesitating.

“I kin tell yer whether it wur mounted, Cap’n,” continued the hunter, “if yer’ll let me slide down and take a squint at the critter’s tracks.”

“It is out of our way. Perhaps you had better,” I added, after a little reflection. “Raoul, you and Chane dismount and go with the sergeant. Hold their horses, Jack.”

“If yer’ll not object, Cap’n,” said Lincoln, addressing me in a whisper, “I’d rayther go ’ithout kump’ny. Thar ain’t two men I’d like, in a tight fix, better’n Rowl and Chane; but I hev done a smart chance o’ trackin’ in my time, an’ I allers gets along better when I’m by myself.”

“Very well, Sergeant; as you wish it, go alone. We shall wait for you.”

The hunter dismounted, and having carefully examined his rifle, strode off in a direction nearly opposite to that where the object had been seen.

I was about to call after him, impatient to continue our journey; but, reflecting a moment, I concluded it was better to leave him to his “instincts”. In five minutes he had disappeared, having entered the chaparral.

We sat in our saddles for half an hour, not without feelings of impatience. I was beginning to fear that some accident had happened to our comrade, when we heard the faint crack of a rifle, but in a direction nearly opposite to that which Lincoln had taken.

“It’s the sergeant’s rifle, Captain,” said Chane.

“Forward!” I shouted; and we dashed into the thicket in the direction whence the report came.

We had ridden about a hundred yards through the chaparral, when we met Lincoln coming up, with his rifle shouldered.

“Well?” I asked.

“’Twur mounted, Cap’n—’tain’t now.”

“What do you mean, Sergeant?”

“That the mustang hed a yeller-belly on his back, and that he hain’t got ne’er a one now, as I knows on. He got cl’ar away from me—that is, the mustang. The yeller-belly didn’t.”

“What! you haven’t—?”

“But I hev, Cap’n. I had good, soun’ reason.”

“What reason?” I demanded.

“In the first place, the feller wur a gurillye; and in the next, he wur an outpost picket.”

“How know you this?”

“Wal, Cap’n, I struck his trail on the edge of the thicket. I knowed he hedn’t kum fur, as I looked out for sign whar we crossed the crik bottom, an’ seed none. I tuk the back track, an’ soon come up with him under a big button-wood. He had been thar some time, for the ground wur stamped like a bullock-pen.”

“Well?” said I, impatient to hear the result.

“I follered him up till I seed him leanin’ for’ard on his horse, clost to the track we oughter take. From this I suspicioned him; but, gettin’ a leetle closter, I seed his gun an’ fixin’s strapped to the saddle. So I tuk a sight, and whumelled him. The darned mustang got away with his traps. This hyur’s the only thing worth takin’ from his carcage: it wudn’t do much harm to a grizzly b’ar.”

“Good heaven!” I exclaimed, grasping the glittering object which the hunter held towards me; “what have you done?”

It was a silver-handled stiletto. I recognised the weapon. I had given it to the boy Narcisso.

“No harm, I reckin, Cap’n?”

“The man—the Mexican? How did he look?—what like?” I demanded anxiously.

“Like?” repeated the hunter. “Why, Cap’n, I ’ud call him as ugly a skunk as yer kin skeer up any whar—’ceptin’ it mout be among the Digger Injuns; but yer kin see for yurself—he’s clost by.”

I leaped from my horse, and followed Lincoln through the bushes. Twenty paces brought us to the object of our search, upon the border of a small glade. The body lay upon its back, where it had been flung by the rearing mustang. The moon was shining full upon the face. I stooped down to examine it. A single glance was sufficient. I had never seen the features before. They were coarse and swart, and the long black locks were matted and woolly. He was a zambo; and, from the half-military equipments that clung around his body, I saw that he had been a guerillero. Lincoln was right.

“Wal, Cap’n,” said he, after I had concluded my examination of the corpse, “ain’t he a picter?”

“You think he was waiting for us?”

“For us or some other game—that’s sartin.”

“There’s a road branches off here to Medellin,” said Raoul, coming up.

“It could not have been for us: they had no knowledge of our intention to come out.”

“Possibly enough, Captain,” remarked Clayley in a whisper to me. “That villain would naturally expect us to return here. He will have learned all that has passed: Narcisso’s escape—our visits. You know he would watch night and day to trap either of us.”

“Oh, heavens!” I exclaimed, as the memory of this man came over me; “why did I not bring more men? Clayley, we must go on now. Slowly, Raoul—slowly, and with caution—do you hear.”

The Frenchman struck into the path that led to the rancho, and rode silently forward. We followed in single file, Lincoln keeping a look-out some paces in the rear.

Chapter Thirty One.

Captured by Guerilleros.

We emerged from the forest and entered the fields. All silent. No sign or sound of a suspicion. The house still standing and safe.

“The guerillero must have been waiting for someone whom he expected by the Medellin road. Ride on, Raoul!”

“Captain,” said the man in a whisper, and halting at the end of the guardaraya (enclosure).

“Well?”

“Someone passed out at the other end.”

“Some of the domestics, no doubt. You may ride on, and—never mind; I will take the advance myself.”

I brushed past, and kept up the guardaraya. In a few minutes we had reached the lower end of the pond, where we halted. Here we dismounted; and, leaving the men, Clayley and I stole cautiously forward. We could see no one, though everything about the house looked as usual.

“Are they abed, think you?” asked Clayley.

“No, it is too early—perhaps below, at supper.”

“Heaven send! we shall be most happy to join them. I am as hungry as a wolf.”

We approached the house. Still all silent.

“Where are the dogs?”

We entered.

“Strange!—no one stirring. Ha! the furniture gone!”

We passed into the porch in the rear, and approached the stairway.

“Let us go below—can you see any light?”

I stooped and looked down. I could neither hear nor see any signs of life. I turned, and was gazing up at my friend in wonderment, when my eye was attracted by a strange movement upon the low branches of the olive-trees. The next moment a dozen forms dropped to the ground; and, before we could draw sword or pistol, myself and comrade were bound hand and foot and flung upon our backs.

At the same instant we heard a scuffle down by the pond. Two or three shots were fired; and a few minutes after a crowd of men came up, bringing with them Chane, Lincoln, and Raoul as prisoners.

We were all dragged out into the open ground in front of the rancho, where our horses were also brought and picketed.

Here we lay upon our backs, a dozen guerilleros remaining to guard us. The others

went back among the olives, where we could hear them laughing, talking, and yelling. We could see nothing of their movements, as we were tightly bound, and as helpless as if under the influence of nightmare.

As we lay, Lincoln was a little in front of me. I could perceive that they had doubly bound him in consequence of the fierce resistance he had made. He had killed one of the guerilleros. He was banded and strapped all over, like a mummy, and he lay gnashing his teeth and foaming with fury. Raoul and the Irishman appeared to take things more easily, or rather more recklessly.

“I wonder if they are going to hang us to-night, or keep us till morning? What do you think, Chane?” asked the Frenchman, laughing as he spoke.

“Be the crass! they’ll lose no time—ye may depind on that same. There’s not an ounce av tinder mercy in their black hearts; yez may swear till that, from the way this eel-skin cuts.”

“I wonder, Murt,” said Raoul, speaking from sheer recklessness, “if Saint Patrick couldn’t help us a bit. You have him round your neck, haven’t you?”

“Be the powers, Rowl! though ye be only jokin’, I’ve a good mind to thry his holiness upon thim. I’ve got both him and the mother undher me jacket, av I could only rache thim.”

“Good!” cried the other. “Do!”

“It’s aisy for ye to say ‘Do’, when I can’t budge so much as my little finger.”

“Never mind. I’ll arrange that,” answered Raoul. “Hola, Señor!” shouted he to one of the guerilleros.

“Quien?” (Who?) said the man, approaching.

“Usted su mismo,” (Yourself), replied Raoul.

“Que cosa?” (What is it?)

“This gentleman,” said Raoul, still speaking in Spanish, and nodding towards

Chane, “has a pocket full of money.”

A hint upon that head was sufficient; and the guerilleros, who, strangely enough, seemed to have overlooked this part of their duty, immediately commenced rifling our pockets, ripping them open with their long knives. They were not a great deal the richer for their pains, our joint purse yielding about twenty dollars. Upon Chane there was no money found; and the man whom Raoul had deceived repaid the latter by a curse and a couple of kicks.

The saint, however, turned up, attached to the Irishman’s neck by a leathern string; and along with him a small crucifix, and a pewter image of the Virgin Mary.

This appeared to please the guerilleros; and one of them, bending over the Irishman, slackened his fastenings a little—still, however, leaving him bound.

“Thank yer honner,” said Chane; “that’s dacent of ye. That’s what Misther O’Connell wud call amaylioration. I’m a hape aysier now.”

“Mucho bueno,” said the man, nodding and laughing.

“Och, be my sowl, yes!—mucho bueno. But I’d have no objecshun if yer honner wud make it mucho bettero. Couldn’t ye just take a little turn aff me wrist here?—it cuts like a rayzyer.”

I could not restrain myself from laughing, in which Clayley and Raoul joined me; and we formed a chorus that seemed to astonish our captors. Lincoln alone preserved his sullenness. He had not spoken a word.

Little Jack had been placed upon the ground near the hunter. He was but loosely tied, our captors not thinking it worth while to trouble themselves about so diminutive a subject. I had noticed him wriggling about, and using all his Indian craft to undo his fastenings; but he appeared not to have succeeded, as he now lay perfectly still again.

While the guerilleros were occupied with Chane and his saints, I observed the boy

roll himself over and over, until he lay close up against the hunter. One of the guerilleros, noticing this, picked Jack up by the waistbelt, and, holding him at arm's length, shouted out:

"Mira, camarados! qui briboncito!" (Look, comrades! what a little rascal!)

Amidst the laughing of the guerilleros, Jack was swung out, and fell in a bed of shrubs and flowers, where we saw no more of him. As he was bound, we concluded that he could not help himself, and was lying where he had been thrown.

My attention was called away from this incident by an exclamation of Chane.

"Och! blood, turf, and murther! If there isn't that Frinch scoundhrel Dubrosc!"

I looked up. The man was standing over us.

"Ah, Monsieur le Capitaine!" cried he, in a sneering voice, "comment vous portez-vous? You came up dove-hunting—eh? The birds, you see, are not in the cot."

Had there been only a thread around my body, I could not have moved at that moment. I felt cold and rigid as marble. A thousand agonising thoughts crowded upon me at once—my doubts, my fears on her account, drowning all ideas of personal danger. I could have died at that moment, and without a groan, to have ensured her safety.

There was something so fiendish in the character of this man—a polished brutality, too—that caused me to fear the worst.

"Oh, heaven!" I muttered, "in the power of such a man!"

"Ho!" cried Dubrosc, advancing a pace or two, and seizing my horse by the bridle, "a splendid mount! An Arab, as I live! Look here, Yañez!" he continued, addressing a guerillero who accompanied him, "I claim this, if you have no objection."

"Take him," said the other, who was evidently the leader of the party.

"Thank you. And you, Monsieur le Capitaine," he added ironically, turning to me,

“thank you for this handsome present. He will just replace my brave mustang, for whose loss I expect I am indebted to you, you great brute!—sacre!”

The last words were addressed to Lincoln; and, as though maddened by the memory of La Virgen, he approached the latter, and kicked him fiercely in the side.

The wanton foot had scarcely touched his ribs, when the hunter sprang up, as if by galvanic action, the thongs flying from his body in fifty spiral fragments. With a bound he leaped to his rifle; and, clutching it—he knew it was empty—struck the astonished Frenchman a blow upon the head. The latter fell heavily to the earth. In an instant a dozen knives and swords were aimed at the hunter’s throat. Sweeping his rifle around him, he cleared an opening, and, dashing past his foes with a wild yell, bounded off through the shrubbery. The guerilleros followed, screaming with rage; and we could hear an occasional shot, as they continued the pursuit into the distant woods. Dubrosc was carried back into the rancho, apparently lifeless.

We were still wondering how our comrade had untied himself, when one of the guerilleros, lifting a piece of the thong, exclaimed:

“Carajo! ha cortado el briboncito!” (The little rascal has cut it!) and the man darted into the shrubbery in search of little Jack. It was with us a moment of fearful suspense. We expected to see poor Jack sacrificed instantly. We watched the man with intense emotion, as he ran to and fro.

At length he threw up his arms with a gesture of surprise, calling out at the same time:

“Por todos santos! se fue!” (By all the saints! he’s gone!)

“Hurrah!” cried Chane; “holies!—such a gossoon as that boy!”

Several of the guerilleros dived into the thicket; but their search was in vain.

We were now separated, so that we could no longer converse, and were more strictly watched, two sentries standing over each of us. We spent about an hour in this way.

Straggling parties at intervals came back from the pursuit, and we could gather, from what we overheard, that neither Lincoln nor Jack had yet been retaken.

We could hear talking in the rear of the rancho, and we felt that our fate was being determined upon. It was plain Dubrosc was not in command of the party. Had he been so, we should never have been carried beyond the olive-grove. It appeared we were to be hung elsewhere.

At length a movement was visible that betokened departure. Our horses were taken away, and saddled mules were led out in front of the rancho. Upon these we were set, and strapped tightly to the saddles. A serape was passed over each of us, and we were blinded by tapojos. A bugle then sounded the “forward”. We could hear a confusion of noises, the prancing of many hoofs, and the next moment we felt ourselves moving along at a hurried pace through the woods.

Chapter Thirty Two.

A Blind Ride.

We rode all night. The mule-blinds, although preventing us from seeing a single object, proved to be an advantage. They saved our eyes and faces from the thorny claws of the acacia and mezquite. Without hands to fend them off, these would have torn us badly, as we could feel them, from time to time, penetrating even the hard leather of the tapojos. Our thongs chafed us, and we suffered great pain from the monotonous motion. Our road lay through thick woods. This we could perceive from the constant rustle of the leaves and the crackling of branches, as the cavalcade passed on.

Towards morning our route led over hills, steep and difficult, we could tell from the attitudes of our animals. We had passed the level plains, and were entering among the “foothills” of the Mexican mountains. There was no passing or repassing of one another. From this I concluded that we were journeying along a narrow road, and in

single file.

Raoul was directly in front of me, and we could converse at times.

“Where do you think they are taking us, Raoul?” I inquired, speaking in French.

“To Cenobio’s hacienda. I hope so, at least!”

“Why do you hope so?”

“Because we shall stand some chance for our lives. Cenobio is a noble fellow.”

“You know him, then?”

“Yes, Captain; I have helped him a little in the contraband trade.”

“A smuggler, is he?”

“Why, in this country it is hardly fair to call it by so harsh a name, as the Government itself dips out of the same dish. Smuggling here, as in most other countries, should be looked upon rather as the offspring of necessity and maladministration than as a vice in itself. Cenobio is a contrabandisto, and upon a large scale.”

“And you are a political philosopher, Raoul!”

“Bah! Captain; it would be bad if I could not defend my own calling,” replied my comrade, with a laugh.

“You think, then, that we are in the hands of Cenobio’s men.”

“I am sure of it, Captain. Sacre! had it been Jarauta’s band, we would have been in heaven—that is, our souls—and our bodies would now be embellishing some of the trees upon Don Cosmé’s plantation. Heaven protect us from Jarauta! The robber-priest gives but short shrift to any of his enemies; but if he could lay his hands on your humble servant, you would see hanging done in double-quick time.”

“Why think you we are with Cenobio’s guerilla?”

“I know Yañez, whom we saw at the rancho. He is one of Cenobio’s officers, and

the leader of this party, which is only a detachment. I am rather surprised that he has brought us away, considering that Dubrosc is with him; there must have been some influence in our favour which I cannot understand."

I was struck by the remark, and began to reflect upon it in silence. The voice of the Frenchman again fell upon my ear.

"I cannot be mistaken. No—this hill—it runs down to the San Juan River."

Again, after a short interval, as we felt ourselves fording a stream, Raoul said:

"Yes, the San Juan—I know the stony bottom—just the depth, too, at this season."

Our mules plunged through the swift current, flinging the spray over our heads. We could feel the water up to the saddle-flaps, cold as ice; and yet we were journeying in the hot tropic. But we were fording a stream fed by the snows of Orizava.

"Now I am certain of the road," continued Raoul, after we had crossed. "I know this bank well. The mule slides. Look out, Captain."

"For what?" I asked, with some anxiety.

The Frenchman laughed as he replied:

"I believe I am taking leave of my senses. I called to you to look out, as if you had the power to help yourself in case the accident should occur."

"What accidents?" I inquired, with a nervous sense of some impending danger.

"Falling over: we are on a precipice that is reckoned dangerous on account of the clay; if your mule should stumble here, the first thing you would strike would be the branches of some trees five hundred feet below, or thereabout."

"Good heaven!" I ejaculated; "is it so?"

"Never fear, Captain; there is not much danger. These mules appear to be sure-footed; and certainly," he added, with a laugh, "their loads are well packed and tied."

I was in no condition just then to relish a joke, and my companion's humour was

completely thrown away upon me. The thought of my mule missing his foot and tumbling over a precipice, while I was stuck to him like a centaur, was anything else than pleasant. I had heard of such accidents, and the knowledge did not make the reflection any easier. I could not help muttering to myself:

“Why, in the name of mischief, did the fellow tell me this till we had passed it?”

I crouched closer to the saddle, allowing my limbs to follow every motion of the animal, lest some counteracting shock might disturb our joint equilibrium. I could hear the torrent, as it roared and hissed far below, appearing directly under us; and the “sough” grew fainter and fainter as we ascended.

On we went, climbing up—up—up; our strong mules straining against the precipitous path. It was daybreak. There was a faint glimmer of light under our tapojos. At length we could perceive a brighter beam. We felt a sudden glow of heat over our bodies; the air seemed lighter; our mules walked on a horizontal path. We were on the ridge, and warmed by the beams of the rising sun.

“Thank heaven we have passed it!”

I could not help feeling thus: and yet perhaps we were riding to an ignominious death!

Chapter Thirty Three.

A Drink à la Cheval.

The guerilleros now halted and dismounted. We were left in our saddles. Our mules were picketed upon long lazos, and commenced browsing. They carried us under the thorny branches of the wild locust. The maguey, with its bill-shaped claws, had torn our uniform overalls to shreds. Our limbs were lacerated, and the cactus had lodged its poisoned prickles in our knees. But these were nothing to the pain of being compelled to keep our saddles, or rather saddle-trees—for we were upon the naked wood. Our hips ached intensely, and our limbs smarted under the chafing thong.

There was a crackling of fires around us. Our captors were cooking their breakfasts, and chattering gaily over their chocolate. Neither food nor drink was offered to us, although we were both thirsty and hungry. We were kept in this place for about an hour.

“They have joined another party here,” said Raoul, “with pack-mules.”

“How know you?” I inquired.

“I can tell by the shouts of the arrieros. Listen!—they are making ready to start.”

There was a mingling of voices—exclamations addressed to their animals by the arrieros, such as:

“Mula! anda! vaya! levantate! carrai! mula—mulita!—anda!—st!—st!”

In the midst of this din I fancied that I heard the voice of a woman.

“Can it be—?”

The thought was too painful.

A bugle at length sounded, and we felt ourselves again moving onward.

Our road appeared to run along the naked ridge. There were no trees, and the heat became intense. Our serapes, that had served us during the night, should have been dispensed with now, had we been consulted in relation to the matter. I did not know, until some time after, why these blankets had been given to us, as they had been hitherto very useful in the cold. It was not from any anxiety in regard to our comfort, as I learned afterwards.

We began to suffer from thirst, and Raoul asked one of the guerilleros for water.

“Carajo!” answered the man, “it’s no use: you’ll be choked by and by with something else than thirst.”

The brutal jest called forth a peal of laughter from his comrades.

About noon we commenced descending a long hill. I could hear the sound of water ahead.

“Where are we, Raoul?” I inquired faintly.

“Going down to a stream—a branch of the Antigua.”

“We are coming to another precipice?” I asked, with some uneasiness, as the roar of the torrent began to be heard more under our feet, and I snuffed the cold air from below.

“There is one, Captain. There is a good road, though, and well paved.”

“Paved! why, the country around is wild—is it not?”

“True; but the road was paved by the priests.”

“By the priests!” I exclaimed with some astonishment.

“Yes, Captain; there’s a convent in the valley, near the crossing; that is, there was one. It is now a ruin.”

We crept slowly down, our mules at times seeming to walk on their heads. The hissing of the torrent grew gradually louder, until our ears were filled with its hoarse rushing.

I heard Raoul below me shouting some words in a warning voice, when suddenly he seemed borne away, as if he had been tumbled over the precipice.

I expected to feel myself next moment launched after him into empty space, when my mule, uttering a loud whinny, sprang forward and downward.

Down—down! the next leap into eternity! No—she keeps her feet! she gallops along a level path! I am safe!

I was swung about until the thongs seemed to cut through my limbs; and with a heavy plunge I felt myself carried thigh-deep into water.

Here the animal suddenly halted.

As soon as I could gain breath I shouted at the top of my voice for the Frenchman.

“Here, Captain!” he answered, close by my side, but, as I fancied, with a strange,

gurgling voice.

“Are you hurt, Raoul?” I inquired.

“Hurt? No, Captain.”

“What was it, then?”

“Oh! I wished to warn you, but I was too late. I might have known they would stampede, as the poor brutes have been no better treated than ourselves. Hear how they draw it up!”

“I am choking!” I exclaimed, listening to the water as it filtered through the teeth of my mule.

“Do as I do, Captain,” said Raoul, speaking as if from the bottom of a well.

“How?” I asked.

“Bend down, and let the water run into your mouth.”

This accounted for Raoul’s voice sounding so strangely.

“They may not give us a drop,” continued he. “It is our only chance.”

“I have not even that,” I replied, after having vainly endeavoured to reach the surface with my face.

“Why?” asked my comrade.

“I cannot reach it.”

“How deep are you?”

“To the saddle-flaps.”

“Ride this way, Captain. It’s deeper here.”

“How can I? My mule is her own master, as far as I am concerned.”

“Parbleu!” said the Frenchman. “I did not think of that.”

But, whether to oblige me, or moved by a desire to cool her flanks, the animal plunged forward into a deeper part of the stream.

After straining myself to the utmost, I was enabled to “duck” my head. In this painful position I contrived to get a couple of swallows; but I should think I took in quite as much at my nose and ears.

Clayley and Chane followed our example, the Irishman swearing loudly that it was a “burnin’ shame to make a dacent Christyin dhrink like a horse in winkers.”

Our guards now commenced driving our mules out of the water. As we were climbing the bank, someone touched me lightly upon the arm; and at the same instant a voice whispered in my ear, “Courage, Captain!”

I started—it was the voice of a female. I was about to reply, when a soft, small hand was thrust under the tapojo, and pushed something between my lips. The hand was immediately withdrawn, and I heard the voice urging a horse onward.

The clatter of hoofs, as of a horse passing me in a gallop, convinced me that this mysterious agent was gone, and I remained silent.

“Who can it be Jack? No. Jack has a soft voice—a small hand; but how could he be here, and with his hands free? No—no—no! Who then? It was certainly the voice of a woman—the hand, too. What other should have made this demonstration? I know no other—it must—it must have been—.”

I continued my analysis of probabilities, always arriving at the same result. It was both pleasant and painful: pleasant to believe she was thus, like an angel, watching over me—painful to think that she might be in the power of my fiendish enemy.

But is she so? Lincoln’s blow may have ended him. We have heard nothing of him since. Would to heaven—!

It was an impious wish, but I could not control it.

“What have I got between my lips? A slip of paper! Why was it placed there, and not in my bosom or my button-hole? Ha! there is more providence in the manner of the act than at first thought appears. How could I have taken it from either the one or

the other, bound as I am? Moreover it may contain what would destroy the writer, if known to—. Cunning thought—for one so young and innocent, too—but love—."

I pressed the paper against the tapojo, covering it with my lips, so as to conceal it in case the blind should be removed.

"Halted again?"

"It is the ruin, Captain—the old convent of Santa Bernardina."

"But why do they halt here?"

"Likely to noon and breakfast—that on the ridge was only their desayuna. The Mexicans of the tierra caliente never travel during mid-day. They will doubtless rest here until the cool of the evening."

"I trust they will extend the same favour to us," said Clayley: "God knows we stand in need of rest. I'd give them three months' pay for an hour upon the treadmill, only to stretch my limbs."

"They will take us down, I think—not on our account, but to ease the mules. Poor brutes! they are no parties to this transaction."

Raoul's conjecture proved correct. We were taken out of our saddles, and, being carefully bound as before, we were hauled into a damp room, and flung down upon the floor. Our captors went out. A heavy door closed after them, and we could hear the regular footfall of a sentry on the stone pavement without. For the first time since our capture we were left alone. This my comrades tested by rolling themselves all over the floor of our prison to see if anyone was present with us. It was but a scant addition to our liberty; but we could converse freely, and that was something.

Note. Desayuna is a slight early meal.

Chapter Thirty Four.

An odd Way of opening a Letter.

“Has any of you heard of Dubrosc on the route?” I inquired of my comrades.

No; nothing had been heard of him since the escape of Lincoln.

“Faix, Captain,” said the Irishman, “it’s meself that thinks Mister Dubrosc won’t throuble any ov us any more. It was a purty lick that same, ayquil to ould Donnybrook itself.”

“It is not easy to kill a man with a single blow of a clubbed rifle,” observed Clayley; “unless, indeed, the lock may have struck into his skull. But we are still living, and I think that is some evidence that the deserter is dead. By the way, how has the fellow obtained such influence as he appeared to have among them, and so soon, too?”

“I think, Lieutenant,” replied Raoul, “Monsieur Dubrosc has been here before.”

“Ha! say you so?” I inquired, with a feeling of anxiety.

“I remember, Captain, some story current at Vera Cruz, about a Creole having married or run away with a girl of good family there. I am almost certain Dubrosc was the name; but it was before my time, and I am unacquainted with the circumstances, I remember, however, that the fellow was a gambler, or something of the sort; and the occurrence made much noise in the country.”

I listened with a sickening anxiety to every word of these details. There was a painful correspondence between them and what I already knew. The thought that this monster could be in any way connected with her was a disagreeable one. I questioned Raoul no further. Even could he have detailed every circumstance, I should have dreaded the relation.

Our conversation was interrupted by the creaking of a rusty hinge. The door opened, and several men entered. Our blinds were taken off, and, oh, how pleasant to look upon the light! The door had been closed again, and there was only one small grating, yet the slender beam through this was like the bright noonday sun. Two of the men carried earthen platters filled with frijoles, a single tortilla in each platter. They were placed near our heads, one for each of us.

“It’s blissid kind of yez, gentlemen,” said Chane; “but how are we goin’ to ate it, if ye plaze?”

“The plague!” exclaimed Clayley; “do they expect us to lick this up without either hands, spoons, or knives?”

“Won’t you allow us the use of our fingers?” asked Raoul, speaking to one of the guerilleros.

“No,” replied the man gruffly.

“How do you expect us to eat, then?”

“With your mouths, as brutes should. What else?”

“Thank you, sir; you are very polite.”

“If you don’t choose that, you can leave it alone,” added the Mexican, going out with his companions, and closing the door behind them.

“Thank you, gentlemen!” shouted the Frenchman after them, in a tone of subdued anger. “I won’t please you so much as to leave it alone. By my word!” he continued, “we may be thankful—it’s more than I expected from Yañez—that they’ve given us any. Something’s in the wind.” So saying, the speaker rolled himself on his breast, bringing his head to the dish.

“Och! the mane haythins!” cried Chane, following the example set by his comrade; “to make dacent men ate like brute bastes! Och! murder an’ ouns!”

“Come, Captain; shall we feed?” asked Clayley.

“Go on. Do not wait for me,” I replied.

Now was my time to read the note. I rolled myself under the grating, and, after several efforts, succeeded in gaining my feet. The window, which was not much larger than a pigeon-hole, widened inwards like the embrasure of a gun-battery. The lower slab was just the height of my chin; and upon this, after a good deal of dodging and lip-jugglery, I succeeded in spreading out the paper to its full extent.

“What on earth are you at, Captain?” inquired Cayley, who had watched my manoeuvres with some astonishment.

Raoul and the Irishman stopped their plate-licking and looked up.

“Hush! go on with your dinners—not a word!” I read as follows:

To-night your cords shall be cut, and you must escape as you best can afterwards. Do not take the road back, as you will be certain to be pursued in that direction; moreover, you run the risk of meeting other parties of the guerilla. Make for the National Road at San Juan or Manga de Clavo. Your posts are already advanced beyond these points. The Frenchman can easily guide you. Courage, Captain! Adieu!

P.S.—They waited for you. I had sent one to warn you; but he has either proved traitor or missed the road. Adieu! adieu!

“Good heavens!” I involuntarily exclaimed; “the man that Lincoln—.”

I caught the paper into my lips again, and chewed it into a pulp, to avoid the danger of its falling into the hands of the guerilla.

I remained turning over its contents in my mind. I was struck with the masterly style—the worldly cunning exhibited by the writer. There was something almost unfeminine about it. I could not help being surprised that one so young, and hitherto so secluded from the world, should possess such a knowledge of men and things. I was already aware of the presence of a powerful intellect, but one, as I thought, altogether unacquainted with practical life and action. Then there was the peculiarity of her situation.

Is she a prisoner like myself? or is she disguised, and perilling her life to save mine? or can she be—Patience! To-night may unravel the mystery.

Chapter Thirty Five.

The Cobra-di-Capello.

Up to this moment my intention had been engrossed with the contents of the note, and I had no thought of looking outward. I raised myself on tiptoe, stretching my neck as far as I could into the embrasure.

A golden sunlight was pouring down upon broad, green leaves, where the palms grew wildly. Red vines hung in festoons, like curtains of scarlet satin. There were bands of purple and violet—the maroon-coloured morus, and the snowy flowers of the magnolia—a glittering opal. Orange-trees, with white, wax-like flowers, were bending under their golden globes. The broad plumes of the corozo palm curved gracefully over, their points trailing downwards, and without motion.

A clump of these grew near, their naked stems laced by a parasite of the lliana species, which rose from the earth, and, traversing diagonally, was lost in the feathery frondage above. These formed a canopy, underneath which, from tree to tree, three hammocks were extended. One was empty; the other two were occupied. The elliptical outlines, traceable through the gauzy network of Indian grass, proved that the occupants were females.

Their faces were turned from me. They lay motionless: they were asleep.

As I stood gazing upon this picture, the occupant of the nearest hammock awoke, and turning, with a low murmur upon her lips, again fell asleep. Her face was now towards me. My heart leaped, and my whole frame quivered with emotion. I recognised the features of Guadalupe Rosales.

One limb, cased in silk, had fallen over the selvage of her pendent couch, and hung negligently down. The small satin slipper had dropped off, and was lying on the ground. Her head rested upon a silken pillow, and a band of her long black hair, that had escaped from the comb, straggling over the cords of the hammock, trailed along the grass. Her bosom rose with a gentle heaving above the network as she breathed and slept.

My heart was full of mixed emotions—surprise, pleasure, love, pain. Yes, pain; for

she could thus sleep—sleep sweetly, tranquilly—while I, within a few paces of her couch, was bound and brutally treated!

“Yes, she can sleep!” I muttered to myself, as my chagrin predominated in the tumult of emotions. “Ha! heavens!”

My attention was attracted from the sleeper to a fearful object. I had noticed a spiral-like appearance upon the lliana. It had caught my eye once or twice while looking at the sleeper; but I had not dwelt upon it, taking it for one vine twined round another—a peculiarity often met with in the forests of Mexico.

A bright sparkle now attracted my eye; and, on looking at the object attentively, I discovered, to my horror, that the spiral protuberance upon the vine was nothing else than the folds of a snake! Squeezing himself silently down the parasite—for he had come from above—the reptile slowly uncoiled two or three of the lowermost rings, and stretched his glistening neck horizontally over the hammock. Now, for the first time, I perceived the horned protuberance on his head, and recognised the dreaded reptile—the macaurel (the cobra of America).

In this position he remained for some moments, perfectly motionless, his neck proudly curved like that of a swan, while his head was not twelve inches from the face of the sleeper. I fancied that I could see the soft down upon her lip playing under his breath!

He now commenced slowly vibrating from side to side, while a low, hissing sound proceeded from his open jaws. His horns projected out, adding to the hideousness of his appearance; and at intervals his forked tongue shot forth, glancing in the sun like a purple diamond.

He appeared to be gloating over his victim, in the act of charming her to death. I even fancied that her lips moved, and her head began to stir backward and forward, following the oscillations of the reptile.

All this I witnessed without the power to move. My soul as well as my body was

chained; but, even had I been free, I could have offered no help. I knew that the only hope of her safety lay in silence. Unless disturbed and angered, the snake might not bite; but was he not at that moment distilling some secret venom upon her lips?

"Oh, Heaven!" I gasped out, in the intensity of my fears, "is this the fiend himself? She moves!—now he will strike! Not yet—she is still again. Now—now!—mercy! she trembles!—the hammock shakes—she is quivering under the fascin— Ha!"

A shot rang from the walls—the snake suddenly jerked back his head—his rings flew out, and he fell to the earth, writhing as if in pain!

The girls started with a scream, and sprang simultaneously from their hammocks.

Grasping each other by the hand, with terrified looks they rushed from the spot and disappeared.

Several men ran up, ending the snake with their sabres. One of them stooped, and examining the carcase of the dead reptile, exclaimed:

"Carai! there is a hole in his head—he has been shot!"

A moment after, half a dozen of the guerilleros burst open the door and rushed in, crying out as they entered:

"Quien tira?" (Who fired?)

"What do you mean?" angrily asked Raoul, who had been in ill-humour ever since the guerillero had refused him a draught of water.

"I ask you who fired the shot?" repeated the man.

"Fired the shot!" echoed Raoul, knowing nothing of what had occurred outside. "We look like firing a shot, don't we? If I possessed that power, my gay friend, the first use I should make of it would be to send a bullet through that clumsy skull of yours."

"Santissima!" ejaculated the Mexican, with a look of astonishment. "It could not be these—they are all tied!"

And the Mexicans passed out again, leaving us to our reflections.

Chapter Thirty Six.

The Head-Quarters of the Guerilla.

Mine were anything but agreeable. I was pained and puzzled. I was pained to think that she—dearer to me than life—was thus exposed to the dangers that surrounded us. It was her sister that had occupied the other hammock.

“Are they alone? Are they prisoners in the hands of these half-robbers? May not their hospitality to us have brought them under proscription? And are they not being carried—father, mother, and all—before some tribunal? Or are they travelling for protection with this band—protection against the less scrupulous robbers that infest the country?”

It was not uncommon upon the Rio Grande, when rich families journeyed from point to point, to pay for an escort of this sort. This may elucidate—.

“But I tell yez I did hear a crack; and, be my sowl! it was the sargint’s rifle, or I’ve lost me sinses intirely.”

“What is it?” I asked, attracted to the conversation of my comrades.

“Chane says he heard a shot, and thinks it was Lincoln’s,” answered Clayley.

“His gun has a quare sound, Captain,” said the Irishman, appealing to me. “It’s diffirint intirely from a Mexican piece, and not like our own nayther. It’s a way he has in loadin’ it.”

“Well—what of that?”

“Why, Raowl says one of them axed him who fired. Now, I heerd a shot, for my ear was close till the door here. It was beyant like; but I cud swear upon the blissed crass it was ayther the sargint’s rifle or another as like it as two pays.”

“It is very strange!” I muttered, half in soliloquy, for the same thought had occurred

to myself.

“I saw the boy, Captain,” said Raoul; “I saw him crossing when they opened the door.”

“The boy!—what boy?” I asked.

“The same we brought out of the town.”

“Ha! Narcisso!—you saw him?”

“Yes; and, if I’m not mistaken, the white mule that the old gentleman rode to camp. I think that the family is with the guerilla, and that accounts for our being still alive.”

A new light flashed upon me. In the incidents of the last twenty hours I had never once thought of Narcisso. Now all was clear—clear as daylight. The zambo whom Lincoln had killed—poor victim!—was our friend, sent to warn us of danger; the dagger, Narcisso’s—a token for us to trust him. The soft voice—the small hand thrust under the tapojo—yes, all were Narcisso’s!

A web of mystery was torn to shreds in a single moment. The truth did not yield gratification. No—but the contrary. I was chagrined at the indifference exhibited in another quarter.

“She must know that I am here, since her brother is master of the fact—here, bleeding and bound. Yet where is her sympathy? She sleeps! She journeys within a few paces of me, where I am tied painfully; yet not a word of consolation. No! She is riding upon her soft cushion, or carried upon a litera, escorted, perhaps, by this accomplished villain, who plays the gallant cavalier upon my own barb! They converse together, perhaps of the poor captives in their train, and with jest and ridicule—he at least; and she can hear it, and then fling herself into her soft hammock and sleep—sleep sweetly—calmly?”

These bitter reflections were interrupted. The door creaked once more upon its hinges. Half a dozen of our captors entered. Our blinds were put on, and we were

carried out and mounted as before.

In a few minutes a bugle rang out, and the route was resumed.

We were carried up the stream bottom—a kind of glen, or Cañada. We could feel by the cool shade and the echoes that we were travelling under heavy timber. The torrent roared in our ears, and the sound was not unpleasant. Twice or thrice we forded the stream, and sometimes left it, returning after having travelled a mile or so. This was to avoid the cañons, where there is no path by the water. We then ascended a long hill, and after reaching its summit commenced going downwards.

“I know this road well,” said Raoul. “We are going down to the hacienda of Cenobio.”

“Pardieu!” he continued. “I ought to know this hill!”

“For what reason?”

“First, Captain, because I have carried many a bulto of cochineal and many a bale of smuggled tobacco over it; ay, and upon nights when my eyes were of as little service to me as they are at present.”

“I thought that you contrabandistas hardly needed the precaution of dark nights?”

“True, at times; but there were other times when the Government became lynx-eyed, and then smuggling was no joke. We had some sharp skirmishing. Sacre! I have good cause to remember this very hill. I came near making a jump into purgatory from the other side of it.”

“Ha! how was that?”

“Cenobio had got a large lot of cochineal from a crafty trader at Oaxaca. It was cachéd about two leagues from the hacienda in the hills, and a vessel was to drop into the mouth of the Medellin to take it on board.

“A party of us were engaged to carry it across to the coast; and, as the cargo was very valuable, we were all of us armed to the teeth, with orders from the patrone to

defend it at all hazards. His men were just the fellows who would obey that order, coming, as it did, from Cenobio.

“The Government somehow or other got wind of the affair, and slipped a strong detachment out of Vera Cruz in time to intercept us. We met them on the other side of this very hill, where a road strikes off towards Medellin.”

“Well! and what followed?”

“Why, the battle lasted nearly an hour; and, after having lost half a score of their best men, the valiant lancers rode back to Vera Cruz quicker than they came out of it.”

“And the smugglers?”

“Carried the goods safe on board. Three of them—poor fellows!—are lying not far off, and I came near sharing their luck. I have a lance-hole through my thigh, here, that pains me at this very moment.”

My ear at this moment caught the sound of dogs barking hoarsely below. Horses of the cavalcade commenced neighing, answered by others from the adjacent fields, who recognised their old companions.

“It must be near night,” I remarked to Raoul.

“I think, about sunset, Captain,” rejoined he. “It feels about that time.”

I could not help smiling. There was something ludicrous in my comrade’s remark about “feeling” the sunset.

The barking of the dogs now ceased, and we could hear voices ahead welcoming the guerilleros.

The hoofs of our mules struck upon a hard pavement, and the sounds echoed as if under an arched way.

Our animals were presently halted, and we were unpacked and flung rudely down upon rough stones, like so many bundles of merchandise.

We lay for some minutes listening to the strange voices around. The neighing of horses, the barking and growling of dogs, the lowing of cattle, the shouts of the arrieros unpacking their mules, the clanking of sabres along the stone pavement, the tinkling of spurs, the laughter of men, and the voices of women—all were in our ears at once.

Two men approached us, conversing.

“They are of the party that escaped us at La Virgen. Two of them are officers.”

“Chingaro! I got this at La Virgen, and a full half-mile off. ’Twas some black jugglery in their bullets. I hope the patrone will hang the Yankee savages.”

“Quien sabe?” (Who knows?) replied the first speaker. “Pinzon has been taken this morning at Puenta Moreno, with several others. They had a fandango with the Yankee dragoons. You know what the old man thinks of Pinzon. He’d sooner part with his wife.”

“You think he will exchange them, then?”

“It is not unlikely.”

“And yet he wouldn’t trouble much if you or I had been taken. No—no; he’d let us be hanged like dogs!”

“Well; that’s always the way, you know.”

“I begin to get tired of him. By the Virgin! José, I’ve half a mind to slip off and join the Padré.”

“Jarauta?”

“Yes; he’s by the Bridge, with a brave set of Jarochos—some of our old comrades upon the Rio Grande among them. They are living at free quarters along the road, and having gay times of it, I hear. If Jarauta had taken these Yankees yesterday, the zopiloté would have made his dinner upon them to-day.”

“That’s true,” rejoined the other; “but come—let us un-blind the devils and give

them their beans. It may be the last they'll ever eat."

With this consoling remark, José commenced unbuckling our tapojos, and we once more looked upon the light. The brilliance at first dazzled us painfully, and it was some minutes before we could look steadily at the objects around us.

We had been thrown upon the pavement in the corner of the patio—a large court, surrounded by massive walls and flat-roofed houses.

These buildings were low, single-storied, except the range in front, which contained the principal dwellings. The remaining three sides were occupied by stables, granaries, and quarters for the guerilleros and servants. A portale extended along the front range, and large vases, with shrubs and flowers, ornamented the balustrade. The portale was screened from the sun by curtains of bright-coloured cloth. These were partially drawn, and objects of elegant furniture appeared within.

Near the centre of the patio was a large fountain, boiling up into a reservoir of hewn mason-work; and around this fountain were clumps of orange-trees, their leaves in some places dropping down into the water. Various arms hung or leaned against the walls—guns, pistols, and sabres—and two small pieces of cannon, with their caissons and carriages, stood in a prominent position. In these we recognised our old acquaintances of La Virgen.

A long trough stretched across the patio, and out of this a double row of mules and mustangs were greedily eating maize. The saddle-tracks upon their steaming sides showed them to be the companions of our late wearisome journey.

Huge dogs lay basking upon the hot stones, growling at intervals as someone galloped in through the great doorway. Their broad jaws and tawny hides bespoke the Spanish bloodhound—the descendants of that race with which Cortez had harried the conquered Aztecs.

The guerilleros were seated or standing in groups around the fires, broiling jerked beef upon the points of their sabres. Some mended their saddles, or were wiping out

an old carbine or a clumsy escopette. Some strutted around the yard, swinging their bright mangas, or trailing after them the picturesque serape. Women in rebozos and coloured skirts walked to and fro among the men.

The women carried jars filled with water. They knelt before smooth stones, and kneaded tortillas. They stirred chilé and chocolate in earthen ollas. They cooked frijoles in flat pans; and amidst all these occupations they joked and laughed and chatted with the men.

Several men—officers, from their style of dress—came out of the portale, and, after delivering orders to the guerilleros on guard, returned to the house.

Packages of what appeared to be merchandise lay in one corner of the court. Around this were groups of arrieros, in their red leathern garments, securing their charge for the night, and laying out their alparejas in long rows by the wall.

Over the opposite roofs—for our position was elevated—we could see the bright fields and forest, and far beyond, the Cofre de Perote and the undulating outlines of the Andes. Above all, the white-robed peak of Orizava rose up against the heavens like a pyramid of spotless snow.

The sun had gone down behind the mountains, but his rays still rested upon Orizava, bathing its cone with a yellow light, like a mantle of burnished gold. Clouds of red and white and purple hung like a glory upon his track, and, descending, rested upon the lower summits of the Cordillera. The peak of the “Burning Star” alone appeared above the clouds, towering in sublime and solitary grandeur.

There was a picturesque loveliness about the scene—an idea of sublimity—that caused me for the moment to forget where I was or that I was a captive. My dream was dispelled by the harsh voice of José, who at that moment came up with a couple of peons, carrying a large earthen dish that contained our supper.

This consisted of black beans, with half a dozen tortillas; but as we were all half-famished we did not offer any criticism on the quality of the viands. The dish

was placed in our midst, and our arms were untied for the first time since our capture. There were neither knives, forks, nor spoons; but Raoul showed us the Mexican fashion of “eating our spoons”, and, twisting up the tortillas, we scooped and swallowed “right ahead.”

Chapter Thirty Seven.

Chane’s Courtship.

The dish was emptied, as Clayley observed, in a “squirrel’s jump.”

“Be my sowl! it ates purty well, black as it is,” said Chane, looking ruefully into the empty vessel. “It’s got a worse complaint than the colour, didn’t yez fetch us a thrifle more of it, my darlint boy?” he added, squinting up at José.

“No entiende,” (Don’t understand), said the Mexican, shaking his head.

“No in tin days!” cried Chane, mistaking the “no entiende” for a phrase of broken English, to which, indeed, its pronunciation somewhat assimilates it. “Och! git out wid you! Bad luck to yer picther! In tin days it’s Murtagh Chane that’ll ayther be takin’ his tay in purgathory or atin’ betther than black banes in some other part of the world.”

“No entiende,” repeated the Mexican as before.

“Tin days, indade! Sure we’d be did wid hunger in half the time. We want the banes now.”

“Qué quiere?” (What do you want?) asked the Mexican, speaking to Raoul, who was by this time convulsed with laughter.

“Phwhat’s that he sez, Raowl?” inquired Chane sharply.

“He says he don’t understand you.”

“Thin spake to him yerself, Raowl. Till him we want more banes, and a few more ov thim pancakes, if he plazes.”

Raoul translated the Irishman's request.

"No hay" (There are none), answered the Mexican, shaking his forefinger in front of his nose.

"No I—is that phwhat ye say, my darlint? Well, iv yez won't go yerself, sind somebody else; it's all the same thing, so yez bring us the ateables."

"No entiende" said the man, with the same shake of the head.

"Oh! there agin with your tin days—but it's no use; yez understand me well enough, but yez don't want to bring the banes."

"He tells you there is no more," said Raoul.

"Oh! the desavin' Judas! and five hundred ov thim grazers atin' over beyant there. No more banes! oh, the lie!"

"Frijoles—no hay," said the Mexican, guessing at the purport of Chane's remarks.

"Fray holeys!" repeated Chane, imitating the Mexican's pronunciation of the word "frijoles". "Och! git out wid your fray holeys! There isn't the size of a flay of holiness about the place. Git out!"

Raoul, and indeed all of us except the Irishman himself, were bursting with laughter.

"I'm chokin'," said the latter, after a pause; "ask him for wather, Raowl—sure he can't deny that, with that purty little sthrame boilin' up undher our noses, as clear as the potteen of Ennishowen."

Raoul asked for water, which we all needed. Our throats were as dry as charcoal. The Mexican made a sign to one of the women, who shortly came up with an earthen jar filled with water.

"Give it first to the captin, misthress," said Chane, pointing to me; "sarve all ayqually, but respict rank."

The woman understood the sign, and handed me the jar. I drank copiously, passing it to my comrades, Clayley and Raoul. Chane at length took the jar; but instead of

drinking immediately, as might have been expected, he set it between his knees and looked quizzically up at the woman.

“I say, my little darlint,” said he, winking, and touching her lightly under the ribs with his outstretched palm, “my little moochacha—that’s what they call thim—isn’t it, Raowl?”

“Muchacha? oh yes!”

“Well, thin, my purty little moochacha, cudn’t yez?—ye know what I mane—cudn’t yez? Och! ye know well enough—only a little—jist a mouthful to take the cowld taste aff the wather.”

“No entiende,” said the woman, smiling good-naturedly at Chane’s comical gestures.

“Och, the plague! there’s that tin days agin. Talk to her, Raowl. Tell her what I mane.”

Raoul translated his comrade’s wishes.

“Tell her, Raowl, I’ve got no money, becase I have been rabbed, de ye see? but I’ll give her ayther of these saints for the smallest thrifle of agwardent;” and he pulled the images out of his jacket as he spoke.

The woman, seeing these, bent forward with an exclamation; and, recognising the crucifix, with the images of the saint and Virgin, dropped upon her knees and kissed them devoutly, uttering some words in a language half Spanish, half Aztec.

Rising up, she looked kindly at Chane, exclaiming, “Bueno Catolico!” She then tossed the rebozo over her left shoulder, and hurried off across the yard.

“De yez think, Raowl, she’s gone after the licker?”

“I am sure of it,” answered the Frenchman.

In a few minutes the woman returned, and, drawing a small flask out of the folds of her rebozo, handed it to Chane.

The Irishman commenced undoing the string that carried his “relics.”

“Which ov them de yez want, misthress?—the saint, or the Howly Mother, or both?—it’s all the same to Murtagh.”

The woman, observing what he was after, rushed forward, and, placing her hands upon his, said in a kind tone:

“No, Señor. Su proteccion necesita usted.”

“Phwhat diz she say, Raowl?”

“She says, keep them; you will need their protection yourself.”

“Och, be me sowl! she’s not far asthray there. I need it bad enough now, an’ a hape ov good they’re likely to do me. They’ve hung there for tin years—both of thim; and this nate little flask’s the first raal binifit I iver resaved from ayther of them. Thry it, Captin. It’ll do yez good.”

I took the bottle and drank. It was the chingarito—a bad species of aguardiente from the wild aloe—and hot as fire. A mouthful sufficed. I handed the flask to Clayley, who drank more freely. Raoul followed suit, and the bottle came back to the Irishman.

“Your hilth, darlint!” said he, nodding to the Mexican woman. “May yez live till I wish ye dead!”

The woman smiled, and repeated, “No entiende.”

“Och! nivir mind the tin days—we won’t quarrel about that. Ye’re a swate crayteur,” continued he, winking at the woman; “but sure yer petticoats is mighty short, an’ yez want a pair of stockin’s bad, too; but nivir mind—yez stand well upon thim illigant ankles—’dade ye do; and yez have a purty little futt into the bargain.”

“Qué dice?” (What does he say?) asked the Mexican, speaking to Raoul.

“He is complimenting you on the smallness of your feet,” answered the Frenchman.

The woman was evidently pleased, and commenced cramping up what was in fact a

very small foot into its faded satin slipper.

“Tell me, my dear,” continued Chane, “are yez married?”

“Qué dice?” again asked the woman.

“He wants to know if you are married.”

She smiled, waving her forefinger in front of her nose.

Raoul informed the Irishman that this was a negative answer to his question.

“By my sowl, thin,” said Chane, “I wudn’t mind marryin’ ye meself, an’ joinin’ the thribe—that is, if they’ll let me off from the hangin’. Tell her that, Raowl.”

As desired, Raoul explained his comrade’s last speech, at which the woman laughed, but said nothing.

“Silence gives consint. But tell her, Raowl, that I won’t buy a pig in a poke: they must first let me off from the hangin’, de ye hear?—tell her that.”

“El señor está muy alegre,” (The gentleman is very merry), said the woman; and, picking up her jar, with a smile, she left us.

“I say, Raowl, does she consint?”

“She hasn’t made up her mind yet.”

“By the holy vistment! thin it’s all up wid Murt. The saints won’t save him. Take another dhrap, Raowl!”

Chapter Thirty Eight.

The Dance of the Tagarota.

Night fell, and the blazing fagots threw their glare over the patio, striking upon objects picturesque at all times, but doubly so under the red light of the pine fires. The grouping of guerilleros—their broad, heavy hats, many of them plumed—their long black hair and pointed beards—their dark, flashing eyes—their teeth, fierce and white—the half-savage expression of their features—their costumes, high-coloured

and wild-like—all combined in impressing us with strange feelings.

The mules, the mustangs, the dogs, the peons, the slippered wenches, with their coarse trailing tresses, the low roofs, the iron-barred windows, the orange-trees by the fountain, the palms hanging over the wall, the glistening cocuyos, were all strange sights to us.

The sounds that rang in our ears were not more familiar. Even the voices of the men, unlike the Saxon, sounded wild and sharp. It was the Spanish language, spoken in the patois of the Aztec Indians. In this the guerilleros chatted, and sang, and swore. There was a medley of other sounds, not less strange to our ears, as the dogs howled and barked their bloodhound notes—as the mustangs neighed or the mules whinnied—as the heavy sabre clanked or the huge spur tinkled its tiny bells—as the poblanas (peasant-women), sitting by some group, touched the strings of their bandolons, and chanted their half-Indian songs.

By a blazing pile, close to where we sat, a party of guerilleros, with their women, were dancing the tagarota, a species of fandango.

Two men, seated upon raw-hide stools, strummed away upon a pair of bandolons, while a third pinched and pulled at the strings of an old guitar—all three aiding the music with their shrill, disagreeable voices.

The dancers formed the figure of a parallelogram, each standing opposite his partner, or rather moving, for they were never at rest, but kept constantly beating time with feet, head, and hands. The last they struck against their cheeks and thighs, and at intervals clapped them together.

One would suddenly appear as a hunchback, and, dancing out into the centre of the figure, perform various antics to attract his partner. After a while she would dance up—deformed also—and the two, bringing their bodies into contact, and performing various disgusting contortions, would give place to another pair. These would appear without arms or legs, walking on their knees, or sliding along on their hips!

One danced with his head under his arm, and another with one leg around his neck; all eliciting more or less laughter, as the feat was more or less comical. During the dance every species of deformity was imitated and caricatured, for this is the tagarota. It was a series of grotesque and repulsive pictures. Some of the dancers, flinging themselves flat, would roll across the open space without moving hand or foot. This always elicited applause, and we could not help remarking its resemblance to the gymnastics we had lately been practising ourselves.

“Och, be me sowl! we can bate yez at that!” cried Chane, who appeared to be highly amused at the tagarota, making his comments as the dance went on.

I was sick of the scene, and watched it no longer. My eyes turned to the portale, and I looked anxiously through the half-drawn curtains.

“It is strange I have seen nothing of them! Could they have turned off on some other route? No—they must be here. Narcisso’s promise for to-night! He at least is here. And she?—perhaps occupied within—gay, happy, indifferent—oh!”

The pain shot afresh through my heart.

Suddenly the curtain was drawn aside, and a brilliant picture appeared within—brilliant, but to me like the glimpse which some condemned spirit might catch over the walls of Paradise. Officers in bright uniforms, and amongst these I recognised the elegant person of Dubrosc. Ladies in rich dresses, and amongst these—. Her sister, too, was there, and the Dona Joaquiana, and half a dozen other ladies, rustling in silks and blazing with jewels.

Several of the gentlemen—young officers of the band—wore the picturesque costume of the guerilleros.

They were forming for the dance.

“Look, Captain!” cried Clayley; “Don Cosmé and his people, by the living earthquake!”

“Hush! do not touch me—do not speak to me!”

I felt as though my heart would stop beating. It rose in my bosom, and seemed to hang for minutes without moving. My throat felt dry and husky, and a cold perspiration broke out upon my skin.

He approaches her—he asks her to dance—she consents! No: she refuses. Brave girl! She has strayed away from the dancers, and looks over the balustrade. She is sad. Was it a sigh that caused her bosom to rise? Ha! he comes again. She is smiling!—he touches her hand!

“Fiend! false woman!” I shouted at the top of my voice as I sprang up, impelled by passion. I attempted to rush towards them. My feet were bound, and I fell heavily upon my face!

The guards seized me, tying my hands. My comrades, too, were re-bound. We were dragged over the stones into a small room in one corner of the patio.

The door was bolted and locked, and we were left alone.

Chapter Thirty Nine.

A Kiss in the Dark.

It would be impossible to describe my feelings as I was flung upon the floor of our prison. This was cold, damp, and filthy; but I heeded not these grievances. Greater sorrows absorbed the less. There is no torture so racking, no pain so painful as the throbbings of a jealous heart; but how much harder to bear under circumstances like mine! She could sleep, smile, dance—dance by my prison, and with my jailer!

I felt spiteful—vengeful. I was stung to a desire for retaliation, and along with this came an eagerness to live for the opportunity of indulging in this passion.

I began to look around our prison, and see what chances it afforded for escape.

“Good heavens! if our being transferred to the cell should destroy the plans of Narcisso! How is he to reach us? The door is double-locked, and a sentry is pacing

without."

After several painful efforts I raised myself upon my feet, propping my body against the side of the prison. There was an aperture—a window about as large as a loophole for musketry. I spun myself along the wall until I stood directly under it. It was just the height of my chin. Cautioning my companions to silence, I placed my ear to the aperture and listened. A low sound came wailing from the fields without. I did not heed this. I knew it was the wolf. It rose again, louder than before. A peculiarity in the howl struck me, and I turned, calling to Raoul.

"What is it, Captain?" inquired he.

"Do you know if the prairie wolf is found here?"

"I do not know if it be the true prairie wolf, Captain. There is one something like the coyote."

I returned to the aperture and listened.

"Again the howl of the prairie wolf—the bark! By heavens! it is Lincoln!"

Now it ceased for several minutes, and then came again, but from another direction.

"What is to be done? if I answer him, it will alarm the sentry. I will wait until he comes closer to the wall."

I could tell that he was creeping nearer and nearer.

Finding he had not been answered, the howling ceased. I stood listening eagerly to every sound from without. My comrades, who had now become apprised of Lincoln's proximity, had risen to their feet and were leaning against the walls.

We were about half an hour in this situation, without exchanging a word, when a light tap was heard from without, and a soft voice whispered:

"Hola, Capitan!"

I placed my ear to the aperture. The whisper was repeated. It was not Lincoln—that was clear.

It must be Narcisso.

“Quien?” I asked.

“Yo, Capitan.”

I recognised the voice that had addressed me in the morning.

It is Narcisso.

“Can you place your hands in the aperture?” said he.

“No; they are tied behind my back.”

“Can you bring them opposite, then?”

“No; I am standing on my toes, and my wrists are still far below the sill.”

“Are your comrades all similarly bound?”

“All.”

“Let one get on each side of you, and raise you up on their shoulders.”

Wondering at the astuteness of the young Spaniard, I ordered Chane and Raoul to lift me as he directed.

When my wrists came opposite the window I cautioned them to hold on. Presently a soft hand touched mine, passing all over them. Then I felt the blade of a knife pressed against the thong, and in an instant it leaped from my wrists. I ordered the men to set me down, and I listened as before.

“Here is the knife. You can release your own ankles and those of your comrades. This paper will direct you further. You will find the lamp inside.”

A knife, with a folded and strangely shining note, was passed through by the speaker.

“And now, Capitan—one favour,” continued the voice, in a trembling tone.

“Ask it! ask it!”

“I would kiss your hand before we part.”

“Dear, noble boy!” cried I, thrusting my hand into the aperture.

“Boy! ah, true—you think me a boy. I am no boy, Capitan, but a woman—one who loves you with all her blighted, broken heart!”

“Oh, heavens! It is, then—dearest Guadalupe!”

“Ha! I thought as much. Now I will not. But no; what good would it be to me? No—no—no! I shall keep my word.”

This appeared to be uttered in soliloquy, and the tumult of my thoughts prevented me from noticing the strangeness of these expressions. I thought of them afterwards.

“Your hand! your hand!” I ejaculated.

“You would kiss my hand? Do so!” The little hand was thrust through, and I could see it in the dim light, flashing with brilliants. I caught it in mine, covering it with kisses. It seemed to yield to the fervid pressure of my lips.

“Oh!” I exclaimed, in the transport of my feelings, “let us not part; let us fly together! I was wronging you, loveliest, dearest Guadalupe—!”

A slight exclamation, as if from some painful emotion, and the hand was plucked away, leaving one of the diamonds in my fingers. The next moment the voice whispered, with a strange sadness of tone, as I thought:

“Adieu, Capitan! adieu! In this world of life we never know who best loves us!”

I was puzzled, bewildered. I called out, but there was no answer. I listened until the patience of my comrades was well-nigh exhausted, but still there was no voice from without; and with a strange feeling of uneasiness and wonderment I commenced cutting the thongs from my ankles.

Having set Raoul at liberty, I handed him the knife, and proceeded to open the note. Inside I found a cocuyo; and, using it as I had been already instructed, I read:

“The walls are adobe. You have a knife. The side with the loop-hole fronts outward. There is a field of magueys, and beyond this you will find the forest. You may then

trust to yourselves. I can help you no farther. Carissimo caballero, adios!"

I had no time to reflect upon the peculiarities of the note, though the boldness of the style struck me as corresponding with the other. I flung down the firefly, crushing the paper into my bosom; and, seizing the knife, was about to attack the adobe wall, when voices reached me from without. I sprang forward, and placed my ear to listen. It was an altercation—a woman—a man! "By heaven! it is Lincoln's voice!"

"Yer cussed whelp! ye'd see the cap'n hung, would yer?—a man that's good vally for the full of a pararer of green-gutted greasers; but I ain't a-gwine to let you look at his hangin'. If yer don't show me which of these hyur pigeon-holes is his'n, an' help me to get him outer it, I'll skin yer like a mink!"

"I tell you, Mister Lincoln," replied a voice which I recognised as the one whose owner had just left me, "I have this minute given the captain the means of escape, through that loophole."

"Whar!"

"This one," answered the female voice.

"Wal, that's easy to circumstantiate. Kum along hyur! I ain't a-gwine to let yer go till it's all fixed. De ye hear?"

I heard the heavy foot of the hunter as he approached, and presently his voice calling through the loophole in a guarded whisper:

"Cap'n!"

"Hush, Bob! it's all right," I replied, speaking in a low tone, for the sentries were moving suspiciously around the door.

"Good!" ejaculated he. "Yer kin go now," he added to the other, whose attention I endeavoured to attract, but dared not call to loud enough, lest the guards should hear me. "Dash my buttons! I don't want yer to go—yer a good 'un arter all. Why can't yer kum along? The cap'n 'll make it all straight agin about the desartion."

“Mr Lincoln, I cannot go with you. Please suffer me to depart!”

“Wal! yer own likes! but if I can do yer a good turn, you can depend on Bob Linkin—mind that.”

“Thank you! thank you!”

And before I could interfere to prevent it, she was gone. I could hear the voice, sad and sweet in the distance, calling back, “Adios!”

I had no time for reflection, else the mystery that surrounded me would have occupied my thoughts for hours. It was time to act. Again I heard Lincoln’s voice at the loophole.

“What is it?” I inquired.

“How are yer ter get out, Cap’n?”

“We are cutting a hole through the wall.”

“If yer can give me the spot, I’ll meet yer half-ways.”

I measured the distance from the loophole, and handed the string to Lincoln. We heard no more from the hunter until the moonlight glanced through the wall upon the blade of his knife. Then he uttered a short ejaculation, such as may be heard from the “mountain men” at peculiar crises; and after that we could hear him exclaiming:

“Look out, Rowl! Hang it, man! ye’re a-cuttin’ my claws!”

In a few minutes the hole was large enough to pass our bodies; and one by one we crawled out, and were once more at liberty.

Chapter Forty.

Maria de Merced.

There was a deep ditch under the wall, filled with cactus-plants and dry grass. We lay in the bottom of this for some minutes, panting with fatigue. Our limbs were stiff

and swollen, and we could hardly stand upright. A little delay then was necessary, to bring back the blood and determine our future course.

“We had best ter keep the gully,” whispered Lincoln. “I kum across the fields myself, but that ’ar kiver’s thin, and they may sight us.”

“The best route is the ditch,” assented Raoul: “there are some windows, but they are high, and we can crawl under them.”

“Forward, then!” I whispered to Raoul.

We crept down the ditch on all-fours, passing several windows that were dark and shut. We reached one, the last in the row, where the light streamed through. Notwithstanding our perilous situation, I resolved to look in. There was an impulse upon me which I could not resist. I was yearning for some clue to the mystery that hung around me.

The window was high up, but it was grated with heavy bars; and, grasping two of these, I swung myself to its level. Meanwhile my comrades had crept into the magueys to wait for me.

I raised my head cautiously and looked in. It was a room somewhat elegantly furnished, but my eye did not dwell long on that. A man sitting by the table engrossed my attention. This man was Dubrosc. The light was full upon his face, and I gazed upon its hated lines until I felt my frame trembling with passion.

I can give no idea of the hate this man had inspired me with. Had I possessed firearms, I could not have restrained myself from shooting him; and but for the iron grating, I should have sprung through the sash and grappled him with my hands. I have thought since that some providence held me back from making a demonstration that would have baffled our escape. I am sure at that moment I possessed no restraint within myself.

As I gazed at Dubrosc, the door of the apartment opened, and a young man entered. He was strangely attired, in a costume half-military, half-ranchero. There was a

fineness, a silky richness, about the dress and manner of this youth that struck me. His features were dark and beautiful.

He advanced and sat down by the table, placing his hand upon it. Several rings sparkled upon his fingers. I observed that he was pale, and that his hand trembled.

After looking at him for a moment, I began to fancy I had seen the features before. It was not Narcisso; him I should have known; and yet there was a resemblance. Yes—he even resembled her! I started as this thought crossed me. I strained my eyes; the resemblance grew stronger.

Oh, Heaven! could it be?—dressed thus? No, no! those eyes—ha! I remember! The boy at the rendezvous—on board the transport—the island—the picture! It is she—the cousin—María de Merced!

These recollections came with the suddenness of a single thought, and passed as quickly. Later memories crowded upon me. The adventure of the morning—the strange words uttered at the window of my prison—the small hand! This, then, was the author of our deliverance.

A hundred mysteries were explained in a single moment. The unexpected elucidation came like a shock—like a sudden light. I staggered back, giving way to new and singular emotions.

“Guadalupe knows nothing of my presence, then. She is innocent.”

This thought alone restored me to happiness. A thousand others rushed through my brain in quick succession—some pleasant, others painful.

There was an altercation of voices over my head. I caught the iron rods, and, resting my toes upon a high bank, swung my body up, and again looked into the room. Dubrosc was now angrily pacing over the floor.

“Bah!” he ejaculated, with a look of cold brutality; “you think to make me jealous, I believe. That isn’t possible. I was never so, and you can’t do it. I know you love the

cursed Yankee. I watched you in the ship—on the island, too. You had better keep him company where he is going. Ha, ha! Jealous, indeed! Your pretty cousins have grown up since I saw them last."

The insinuation sent the blood in a hot stream through my veins.

It appeared to have a similar effect upon the woman; for, starting from her seat, she looked towards Dubrosc, her eyes flashing like globes of fire.

"Yes!" she exclaimed; "and if you dare whisper your polluting thoughts to either of them, lawless as is this land, you know that I still possess the power to punish you. You are villain enough, Heaven knows, for anything; but they shall not fall: one victim is enough—and such a one!"

"Victim, indeed!" replied the man, evidently cowed by the other's threat. "You call yourself victim, Marie? The wife of the handsomest man in Mexico? Ha, ha!"

There was something of irony in the latter part of the speech, and the emphasis placed on the word "wife."

"Yes; you may well taunt me with your false priest, you unfeeling wretch! Oh, Santisima Madre!" continued she, dropping back into her chair, and pressing her head between her hands. "Beguiled—beggared—almost unsexed! and yet I never loved the man! It was not love, but madness—madness and fascination!"

The last words were uttered in soliloquy, as though she regarded not the presence of her companion.

"I don't care a claco," cried he fiercely, and evidently piqued at her declaration; "not one claco whether you ever loved me or not! That's not the question now, but this is: You must make yourself known to your Croesus of an uncle here, and demand that part of your fortune that he still clutches within his avaricious old fingers. You must do this to-morrow."

"I will not!"

“But you shall, or—.”

The woman rose suddenly, and walked towards the door as if she intended to go out.

“No, not to-night, dearest!” said Dubrosc, grasping her rudely by the arm. “I have my reasons for keeping you here. I noted you to-day speaking with that cursed Yankee, and you’re just traitor enough to help him to escape. I’ll look to him myself, so you may stay where you are. If you should choose to rise early enough to-morrow morning, you will have the felicity of seeing him dance upon the tight-rope. Ha! ha! ha!”

And with a savage laugh the Creole walked out of the room, locking the door behind him.

A strange expression played over the features of the woman—a blending of triumph with anxiety. She ran forward to the window, and, pressing her small lips close to the glass, strained her eyes outward.

I held the diamond in my fingers, and, stretching up until my hand was opposite her face, I wrote the word “Gracias.”

At first seeing me she had started back. There was no time to be lost. My comrades were already chafing at my delay; and, joining them, we crept through the magueys, parting the broad, stiff leaves with our fingers. We were soon upon the edge of the chaparral wood.

I looked back towards the window. The woman stood holding the lamp, and its light was full upon her face. She had read the scrawl, and was gazing out with an expression I shall never forget. Another bound, and we were “in the woods.”

Chapter Forty One.

The Pursuit.

For a time there was a strange irresolution in my flight. The idea of leaving Guadalupe in such company—that after all they might be prisoners, or, even if not,

the thought that they were in the power of Dubrosc to any extent—was enough to render me wretched and irresolute. But what could we do—five men, almost unarmed?

"It would be madness to remain—madness and death. The woman—she possesses some mysterious power over this brute, her paramour: she will guard them."

This thought decided me, and I yielded myself freely to flight. We had but little fear of being caught again. We had too much confidence, particularly Lincoln and myself, in our forest-craft. Raoul knew all the country, the thickets and the passes. We stopped a moment to deliberate on the track we should take. A bugle rang out behind us, and the next instant the report of a cannon thundered in a thousand echoes along the glen.

"It is from the hacienda," said Raoul; "they have missed us already."

"Is that a 'sign', Rowl," asked Lincoln.

"It is," replied the other; "it's to warn their scouts. They're all over these hills. We must look sharp."

"I don't like this hyur timber; it's too scant. Cudn't yer put us in the crik bottom, Rowl?"

"There's a heavy chaparral," said the Frenchman, musing; "it's ten miles off. If we could reach that we're safe—a wolf can hardly crawl through it. We must make it before day."

"Lead on, then, Rowl!"

We stole along with cautious steps. The rustling of a leaf or the cracking of a dead stick might betray us; for we could hear signals upon all sides, and our pursuers passing us in small parties, within earshot.

We bore to the right, in order to reach the creek bottom of which Lincoln had spoken. We soon came into this, and followed the stream down, but not on the bank.

Lincoln would not hear of our taking the bank path, arguing that our pursuers would be “sartin ter foller the cl’ar trail.”

The hunter was right, for shortly after a party came down the stream. We could hear the clinking of their accoutrements, and even the conversation of some of the men, as follows:

“But, in the first place, how did they get loose within? and who cut the wall from the outside, unless someone helped them? Carajo! it’s not possible.”

“That’s true, José,” said another voice. “Someone must, and I believe it was that giant that got away from us at the rancho. The shot that killed the snake came from the chaparral, and yet we searched and found nobody. Mark my words, it was he; and I believe he has hung upon our track all the way.”

“Vaya!” exclaimed another; “I shouldn’t much like to be under the range of his rifle; they say he can kill a mile off, and hit wherever he pleases. He shot the snake right through the eyes.”

“By the Virgin!” said one of the guerilleros, laughing, “he must have been a snake of good taste, to be caught toying around that dainty daughter of the old Spaniard! It reminds me of what the Book tells about Mother Eve and the old serpent. Now, if the Yankee’s bullet—.”

We could hear no more, as the voices died away in the distance and under the sound of the water.

“Ay,” muttered Lincoln, finishing the sentence; “if the Yankee’s bullet hadn’t been needed for the varmint, some o’ yer wudn’t a’ been waggin’ yer clappers as ye air.”

“It was you, then?” I asked, turning to the hunter.

“’Twur, Cap’n; but for the cussed catawampus, I ’ud ’a gin Mister Dubrosc his ticket. I hed a’most sighted him when I seed the flash o’ the thing’s eye, an’ I knowed it wur a-gwine to strike the gal.”

“And Jack?” I inquired, now for the first time thinking of the boy.

“I guess he’s safe enuf, Cap’n. I sent the little feller back with word ter the kurnel.”

“Ha! then we may expect them from camp?”

“No doubt on it, Cap’n; but yer see, if they kum, they may not be able to foller us beyond the rancho. So it’ll be best for us not to depend on them, but ter take Rowl’s track.”

“You are right. Lead on, Raoul!”

After a painful journey we reached the thicket of which Raoul had spoken; and, dragging ourselves into it, we came to a small opening, covered with long dry grass. Upon this luxurious couch we resolved to make a bivouac. We were all worn down by the fatigues of the day and night preceding, and, throwing ourselves upon the grass, in a few minutes were asleep.

Chapter Forty Two.

A New and Terrible Enemy.

It was daylight when I awoke—broad daylight. My companions, all but Clayley, were already astir, and had kindled a fire with a species of wood known to Raoul, that produced hardly any smoke. They were preparing breakfast. On a limb close by hung the hideous, human-like carcass of an iguana, still writhing. Raoul was whetting a knife to skin it, while Lincoln was at some distance, carefully reloading his rifle. The Irishman lay upon the grass, peeling bananas and roasting them over the fire.

The iguana was soon skinned and broiled, and we all of us commenced eating with good appetites.

“Be Saint Pathrick!” said Chane, “this bates frog-atin’ all hollow. It’s little meself dhramed, on the Owld Sod, hearin’ of thim niggers in furrin parts, that I’d be turning kannybawl meself some day!”

“Don’t you like it, Murtagh?” asked Raoul jocosely.

“Och! indade, yes; it’s betther than an empty brid-basket; but if yez could only taste a small thrifle ov a Wicklow ham this mornin’, an’ a smilin’ pratie, instid of this brown soap, yez—.”

“Hisht!” said Lincoln, starting suddenly, and holding the bite half-way to his mouth.

“What is it?” I asked.

“I’ll tell yer in a minit, Cap’n.”

The hunter waved his hand to enjoin silence, and, striding to the edge of the glade, fell flat to the ground. We knew he was listening, and waited for the result. We had not long to wait, for he had scarce brought his ear in contact with the earth when he sprang suddenly up again, exclaiming:

“Houn’s trailin’ us!”

He wore a despairing look unusual to the bold character of his features. This, with the appalling statement, acted on us like a galvanic shock, and by one impulse we leaped from the fire and threw ourselves flat upon the grass.

Not a word was spoken as we strained our ears to listen.

At first we could distinguish a low moaning sound, like the hum of a wild bee; it seemed to come out of the earth. After a little it grew louder and sharper; then it ended in a yelp and ceased altogether. After a short interval it began afresh, this time still clearer; then came the yelp, loud, sharp, and vengeful. There was no mistaking that sound. It was the bark of the Spanish bloodhound.

We sprang up simultaneously, looking around for weapons, and then staring at each other with an expression of despair.

The rifle and two case-knives were all the weapons we had.

“What’s to be done!” cried one, and all eyes were turned upon Lincoln.

The hunter stood motionless, clutching his rifle and looking to the ground.

“How fur’s the crik, Rowl?” he asked after a pause.

“Not two hundred yards; this way it lies.”

“I kin see no other chance, Cap’n, than ter take the water: we may bamfoozle the houn’s a bit, if thar’s good wadin’.”

“Nor I.” I had thought of the same plan.

“If we hed hed bowies, we mouter fit the dogs whar we air, but yer see we hain’t; an’ I kin tell by thar growl thar ain’t less nor a dozen on ’em.”

“It’s no use to remain here; lead us to the creek, Raoul;” and, following the Frenchman, we dashed recklessly through the thicket.

On reaching the stream we plunged in. It was one of those mountain torrents common in Mexico—spots of still water alternating with cascades, that dash, and foam over shapeless masses of amygdaloidal basalt. We waded through the first pool, and then, clambering among the rocks, entered a second. This was a good stretch, a hundred yards or more of still, crystal water, in which we were waist-deep.

We took the bank at the lower, and on the same side, and, striking back into the timber, kept on parallel to the course of the stream. We did not go far away from the water, lest we might be pushed again to repeat the ruse.

All this time the yelping of the bloodhounds had been ringing in our ears. Suddenly it ceased.

“They have reached the water,” said Clayley.

“No,” rejoined Lincoln, stopping a moment to listen: “they’re chawin’ the bones of the varmint.”

“There again!” cried one, as their deep voices rang down the glen in the chorus of the whole pack. The next minute the dogs were mute a second time, speaking at intervals in a fierce growl that told us they were at fault.

Beyond an occasional bark we heard nothing of the bloodhounds until we had

gained at least two miles down the stream. We began to think we had baffled them in earnest, when Lincoln, who had kept in the rear, was seen to throw himself flat upon the grass. We all stopped, looking at him with breathless anxiety. It was but a minute. Rising up with a reckless air, he struck his rifle fiercely upon the ground, exclaiming:

“They’re arter us agin!”

By one impulse we all rushed back to the creek, and, scrambling over the rocks, plunged into the water and commenced wading down.

A sudden exclamation burst from Raoul in the advance. We soon learnt the cause, and to our dismay. We had struck the water at a point where the stream cañoned.

On each side rose a frowning precipice, straight as a wall. Between these the black torrent rushed through a channel only a few feet in width so swiftly that, had we attempted to descend by swimming, we should have been dashed to death against the rocks below.

To reach the stream farther down it would be necessary to make a circuit of miles; and the hounds would be on our heels before we could gain three hundred yards.

We looked at each other and at Lincoln, all panting and pale.

“Stumped at last!” cried the hunter, gritting his teeth with fury.

“No!” I shouted, a thought at that moment flashing upon me. “Follow me, comrades! We’ll fight the bloodhounds upon the cliff.”

I pointed upward. A yell from Lincoln announced his approval.

“Hooray!” he cried, leaping on the bank; “that idee’s jest like yer, Cap. Hooray! Now, boys, for the bluff!”

Next moment we were straining up the gorge that led to the precipice; and the next we had reached the highest point, where the cliff, by a bold projection, butted over the stream. There was a level platform covered with tufted grass, and upon this we

took our stand.

Chapter Forty Three.

A Battle with Bloodhounds.

We stood for some moments gathering breath and nerving ourselves for the desperate struggle. I could not help looking over the precipice. It was a fearful sight. In a vertical line two hundred feet below, the stream rushing through the cañon broke upon a bed of sharp, jagged rocks, and then glided on in seething, snow-white foam. There was no object between the eye and the water; no jutting ledge, not even a tree, to break the fall—nothing but the spiky boulders below, and the foaming torrent that washed them.

It was some minutes before our unnatural enemies made their appearance, but every howl sounded nearer and nearer. Our trail was warm, and we knew they were scenting it on a run. At length the bushes crackled, and we could see their white breasts gleaming through the leaves. A few more springs, and the foremost bloodhound bounded out upon the bank, and, throwing up his broad jaw, uttered a hideous “growl.”

He was at fault where we had entered the water. His comrades now dashed out of the thicket, and, joining in a chorus of disappointment, scattered among the stones.

An old dog, scarred and cunning, kept along the bank until he had reached the top of the cañon. This was where we had made our crossing. Here the hound entered the channel, and, springing from rock to rock, reached the point where we had dragged ourselves out of the water. A short yelp announced to his comrades that he had lifted the scent, and they all threw up their noses and came galloping down.

There was a swift current between two large boulders of basalt. We had leaped this. The old dog reached it, and stood straining upon the spring, when Lincoln fired, and the hound, with a short “wough”, dropped in upon his head, and was carried off like

a flash.

“Counts one less to pitch over,” said the hunter, hastily reloading his rifle.

Without appearing to notice the strange conduct of their leader, the others crossed in a string, and, striking the warm trail, came yelling up the pass. It was a grassy slope, such as is often seen between two tables of a cliff; and as the dogs strained upward we could see their white fangs and the red blood that had baited them clotted along their jaws. Another crack from Lincoln’s rifle, and the foremost hound tumbled back down the gorge.

“Two rubbed out!” cried the hunter; and at the same moment I saw him fling his rifle to the ground.

The hounds kept the trail no longer. Their quarry was before them; their howling ended, and they sprang upon us with the silence of the assassin. The next moment we were mingled together, dogs and men, in the fearful struggle of life and death!

I know not how long this strange encounter lasted. I felt myself grappling with the tawny monsters, and hurling them over the cliff. Now they sprang at my throat, and I threw out my arms, thrusting them fearlessly between the shining rows of teeth. Then I was free again, and, seizing a leg, or a tail, or the loose flaps of the neck, I dragged a savage brute towards the brink, and, summoning all my strength, dashed him against its brow, and saw him tumble howling over.

Once I lost my balance and nearly staggered over the precipice, and at length, panting, bleeding, and exhausted, I fell to the earth. I could struggle no longer.

I looked around for my comrades. Clayley and Raoul had sunk upon the grass, and lay torn and bleeding. Lincoln and Chane, holding a hound between them, were balancing him over the bluff.

“Now, Murter,” cried the hunter, “giv’ him a good heist, and see if we kin pitch him cl’ar on t’other side; hee-woop!—hoo!”

And with this ejaculation the kicking animal was launched into the air. I could not resist looking after. The yellow body bounded from the face of the opposite cliff, and fell with a heavy plash upon the water below.

He was the last of the pack!

Chapter Forty Four.

An Indian Ruse.

A wild shout now drew our attention, and, looking up the creek, we saw our pursuers just debouching from the woods. They were all mounted, and pressing their mustangs down to the bank, where they halted with a strange cry.

“What is that, Raoul? Can you tell the meaning of that cry?”

“They are disappointed, Captain. They must dismount and foot it like ourselves; there is no crossing for horses.”

“Good! Oh, if we had but a rifle each! This pass—.” I looked down the gorge. We could have defended it against the whole party, but we were unarmed.

The guerilleros now dismounted, tying their horses to the trees and preparing to cross over. One, who seemed to be their leader, judging from his brilliant dress and plumes, had already advanced into the stream, and stood upon a projecting rock with his sword drawn. He was not more than three hundred yards from the position we occupied on the bluff.

“Do you think you can reach him?” I said to Lincoln, who had reloaded his gun, and stood eyeing the Mexican, apparently calculating the distance.

“I’m feerd, Cap’n, he’s too fur. I’d guv a half-year’s sodger-pay for a crack out o’ the major’s Dutch gun. We can lose nothin’ in tryin’. Murter, will yer stan’ afore me? Thar ain’t no kiver, an’ the feller’s watchin’. He’ll dodge like a duck if he sees me takin’ sight on ’im.”

Chane threw his large body in front, and Lincoln, cautiously slipping his rifle over

his comrade's shoulder, sighted the Mexican.

The latter had noticed the manoeuvre, and, perceiving the danger he had thrust himself into, was about turning to leap down from the rock when the rifle cracked—his plumed hat flew off, and throwing out his arms, he fell with a dead plunge upon the water! The next moment his body was sucked into the current, and, followed by his hat and plumes, was borne down the cañon with the velocity of lightning.

Several of his comrades uttered a cry of terror; and those who had followed him out into the open channel ran back towards the bank, and screened themselves behind the rocks. A voice, louder than the rest, was heard exclaiming:

"Carajo! guardaos!—esta el rifle del diablo!" (Look out! it is the devil's rifle!)

It was doubtless the comrade of José, who had been in the skirmish of La Virgen, and had felt the bullet of the zündnadel.

The guerilleros, awed by the death of their leader—for it was Yañez who had fallen—crouched behind the rocks. Even those who had remained with the horses, six hundred yards off, sheltered themselves behind trees and projections of the bank. The party nearest us kept loading and firing their escopettes. Their bullets flattened upon the face of the cliff or whistled over our heads. Clayley, Chane, Raoul, and myself, being unarmed, had thrown ourselves behind the scarp to avoid catching a stray shot. Not so Lincoln, who stood boldly out on the highest point of the bluff, as if disdaining to dodge their bullets.

I never saw a man so completely soaring above the fear of death. There was a sublimity about him that I remember being struck with at the time; and I remember, too, feeling the inferiority of my own courage. It was a stupendous picture, as he stood like a colossus clutching his deadly weapon, and looking over his long brown beard at the skulking and cowardly foe. He stood without a motion—without even winking—although the leaden hail hurtled past his head, and cut the grass at his feet

with that peculiar “zip-zip” so well remembered by the soldier who has passed the ordeal of a battle.

There was something in it awfully grand—awful even to us; no wonder that it awed our enemies.

I was about to call upon Lincoln to fall back and shelter himself, when I saw him throw up his rifle to the level. The next instant he dropped the butt to the ground with a gesture of disappointment. A moment after, the manoeuvre was repeated with a similar result, and I could hear the hunter gritting his teeth.

“The cowardly skunks!” muttered he; “they keep a-gwine like a bull’s tail in fly-time.”

In fact, every time Lincoln brought his piece to a level, the guerilleros ducked, until not a head could be seen.

“They ain’t as good as thar own dogs,” continued the hunter, turning away from the cliff. “If we hed a lot of loose rocks, Cap’n, we mout keep them down thar till doomsday.”

A movement was now visible among the guerilleros. About one-half of the party were seen to mount their horses and gallop off up the creek.

“They’re gone round by the ford,” said Raoul: “it’s not over a mile and a half. They can cross with their horses there and will be on us in half an hour.”

What was to be done? There was no timber to hide us now—no chaparral. The country behind the cliff was a sloping table, with here and there a stunted palm-tree or a bunch of “Spanish bayonet” (Yucca angustifolia). This would be no shelter, for from the point we occupied, the most elevated on the ridge, we could have descried an object of human size five miles off. At that distance from us the woods began; but could we reach them before our pursuers would overtake us?

Had the guerilleros all gone off by the ford we should have returned to the creek

bottom, but a party remained below, and we were cut off from our former hiding-place. We must therefore strike for the woods.

But it was necessary first to decoy the party below, otherwise they would be after us before the others, and experience had taught us that these Mexicans could run like hares.

This was accomplished by an old Indian trick that both Lincoln and myself had practised before. It would not have “fooled” a Texan Ranger, but it succeeded handsomely with the guerilleros.

We first threw ourselves on the ground in such a position that only our heads could be seen by the enemy, who still kept blazing away from their escopettes. After a short while our faces gradually sank behind the crest of the ridge, until nothing but our forage-caps appeared above the sward. We lay thus for some moments, showing a face or two at intervals. Our time was precious, and we could not perform the pantomime to perfection; but we were not dealing with Comanches, and for “Don Diego” it was sufficiently artistical.

Presently we slipped our heads one by one out of their covers, leaving the five caps upon the grass inclining to each other in the most natural positions. We then stole back lizard-fashion, and, after sprawling a hundred yards or so, rose to our feet and ran like scared dogs. We could tell that we had duped the party below, as we heard them firing away at our empty caps long after we had left the scene of our late adventure.

Chapter Forty Five.

A Coup d’Éclair.

Many an uneasy look was thrown over our shoulders as we struggled down that slope. Our strength was urged to its utmost; and this was not much, for we had all lost blood in our encounter with the sleuth-hounds, and felt weak and faint.

We were baffled, too, by a storm—a fierce, tropical storm. The rain, thick and heavy, plashed in our faces, and made the ground slippery under our feet. The lightning flashed in our eyes, and the electric sulphur shortened our breathing. Still we coughed and panted and staggered onward, nerved by the knowledge that death was behind us.

I shall never forget that fearful race. I thought it would never end. I can only liken it to one of those dreams in which we are always making endeavours to escape from some horrible monster, and are as often hindered by a strange and mysterious helplessness. I remember it now as then. I have often repeated that flight in my sleep, and always awoke with a feeling of shuddering horror.

We had got within five hundred yards of the timber. Five hundred yards is not much to a fresh runner; but to us, toiling along at a trot that much more resembled a walk, it seemed an infinity. A small prairie, with a stream beyond, separated us from the edge of the woods—a smooth sward without a single tree. We had entered upon it—Raoul, who was light of foot, being in the advance, while Lincoln from choice hung in the rear.

An exclamation from the hunter caused us to look back. We were too much fatigued and worn out to be frightened at the sight. Along the crest of the hill a hundred horsemen were dashing after us in full gallop, and the next moment their vengeful screams were ringing in our ears.

“Now, do yer best, boys!” cried Lincoln, “an’ I’ll stop the cavortin’ of that ’ere foremost feller afore he gits much furrer.”

We trailed our bodies on, but we could hear the guerilleros fast closing upon us. The bullets from their escopettes whistled in our ears, and cut the grass around our feet. I saw Raoul, who had reached the timber, turn suddenly round and walk back. He had resolved to share our fate.

“Save yourself, Raoul!” I called with my weak voice, but he could not have heard

me above the din.

I saw him still walking towards us. I heard the screams behind; I heard the shots, and the whizzing of bullets, and the fierce shouts.

I heard the clatter of hoofs and the rasping of sabres as they leaped out of their iron sheaths; and among these I heard the crack of Lincoln's rifle, and the wild yell of the hunter. Then a peal of thunder drowned all other sounds: the heavens one moment seemed on fire, then black—black. I felt the stifling smell of sulphur—a hot flash—a quick stroke from some invisible hand—and I sank senseless to the earth!

Something cool in my throat and over my face brought back the consciousness that I lived. It was water.

I opened my eyes, but it was some moments before I could see that Raoul was bending over me, and laving my temples with water from his boot. I muttered some half-coherent inquiries.

"It was a coup d'éclair, Captain," said Raoul.

Good heavens! We had been struck by lightning! Raoul, being in the advance, had escaped.

The Frenchman soon left me and went to Clayley, who, with Chane and the hunter, lay close by—all three, as I thought, dead. They were pale as corpses, with here and there a spot of purple, or a livid line traced over their skins, while their lips presented the whitish, bloodless hue of death.

"Are they dead?" I asked feebly.

"I think not—we shall see;" and the Frenchman poured some water into Clayley's mouth.

The latter sighed heavily, and appeared to revive.

Raoul passed on to the hunter, who, as soon as he felt the water, started to his feet, and, clutching his comrade fiercely by the throat, exclaimed:

“Yur cussed catamount! yer wud hang me, wud yur?”

Seeing who it was, he stopped suddenly, and looked round with an air of extreme bewilderment. His eye now fell upon the rifle, and, all at once seeming to recollect himself, he staggered towards it and picked it up. Then, as if by instinct, he passed his hand into his pouch and coolly commenced loading.

While Raoul was busy with Clayley and the Irishman, I had risen to my feet and looked back over the prairie. The rain was falling in torrents, and the lightning still flashed at intervals. At the distance of fifty paces a black mass was lying upon the ground motionless—a mass of men and horses, mingled together as they had fallen in their tracks. Here and there a single horse and his rider lay prostrate together. Beyond these, twenty or thirty horsemen were galloping in circles over the plain, and vainly endeavouring to head their frightened steeds towards the point where we were. These, like Raoul, had escaped the stroke.

“Come!” cried the Frenchman, who had now resuscitated Clayley and Chane; “we have not a moment to lose. The mustangs will get over their fright, and these fellows will be down upon us.”

His advice was instantly followed, and before the guerilleros could manage their scared horses we had entered the thicket, and were crawling along under the wet leaves.

Chapter Forty Six.

A Bridge of Monkeys.

Raoul thought that their superstition might prevent the enemy from pursuing us farther. They would consider the lightning as an interference from above—a stroke of the hrazos de Dios. But we had little confidence in this, and, notwithstanding our exhaustion, toiled on through the chaparral. Wearied with over-exertion, half-famished—for we had only commenced eating when roused from our repast in

the morning—wet to the skin, cut by the bushes, and bitten by the poisoned teeth of the bloodhounds—blinded, and bruised, and bleeding, we were in but poor travelling condition.

Even Lincoln, whose buoyancy had hitherto borne up, appeared cowed and broken. For the first mile or two he seemed vexed at something and "out of sorts", stopping every now and again, and examining his rifle in a kind of bewilderment.

Feeling that he was once more "in the timber", he began to come to himself.

"Thet sort o' an enemy's new ter me," he said, speaking to Raoul. "Dog-gone the thing! it makes the airth look yeller!"

"You'll see better by and by," replied his comrade.

"I had need ter, Rowl, or I'll butt my brainpan agin one of these hyur saplin's. Wagh! I cudn't sight a b'ar, if we were to scare him up jest now."

About five miles farther on we reached a small stream. The storm had abated, but the stream was swollen with the rain, and we could not cross it. We were now a safe distance from our pursuers—at least, we thought so—and we resolved to "pitch our camp" upon the bank.

This was a simple operation, and consisted in pitching ourselves to the ground under the shade of a spreading tree.

Raoul, who was a tireless spirit, kindled a fire, and commenced knocking down the nuts of the corozo palm, that hung in clusters over our heads. We dried our wet garments, and Lincoln set about dressing our numerous wounds. In this surgical process our shirts suffered severely; but the skill of the hunter soothed our swelling limbs, and after a frugal dinner upon palm-nuts and pitahayas we stretched ourselves along the greensward, and were soon asleep.

I was in that dreamy state, half-sleeping half-waking, when I was aroused by a strange noise that sounded like a multitude of voices—the voices of children.

Raising my head I perceived the hunter in an attitude of listening.

“What is it, Bob?” I inquired.

“Dod rot me if I kin tell, Cap’n! Hyur, Rowl! what’s all this hyur channerin?”

“It’s the araguatoes,” muttered the Frenchman, half-asleep.

“Harry-gwaters! an what i’ the name o’ Nick’s them? Talk plain lingo, Rowl. What are they?”

“Monkeys, then,” replied the latter, waking up, and laughing at his companion.

“Thar’s a good grist on ’em, then, I reckin,” said Lincoln, throwing himself back unconcernedly.

“They are coming towards the stream. They will most likely cross by the rocks yonder,” observed Raoul.

“How?—swim it?” I asked. “It is a torrent there.”

“Oh, no!” answered the Frenchman; “monkeys would rather go into fire than water. If they cannot leap the stream, they’ll bridge it.”

“Bridge it! and how?”

“Stop a moment, Captain; you shall see.”

The half-human voices now sounded nearer, and we could perceive that the animals were approaching the spot where we lay. Presently they appeared upon the opposite bank, headed by an old grey-bearded chieftain, and officered like a regiment of soldiers.

They were, as Raoul had stated, the araguatoes (Simia ursina) of the tribe of “alouattes,” or “howlers.” They were of that species known as “monos colorados” (red monkeys). They were about the size of foxhounds, though there was a difference in this respect between the males and females. Many of the latter were mothers, and carried their human-like infants upon their shoulders as they marched along, or, squatted upon their hams, tenderly caressed them, fondling and pressing

them against their mammas. Both males and females were of a tawny-red or lion-colour; both had long beards, and the hair upon their bodies was coarse and shaggy. Their tails were, each of them, three feet in length; and the absence of hair on the under side of these, with the hard, callous appearance of the cuticle, showed that these appendages were extremely prehensile. In fact, this was apparent from the manner in which the young "held on" to their mothers; for they appeared to retain their difficult seats as much by the grasp of their tails as by their arms and hands.

On reaching the bank of the "arroyo" the whole troop came to a sudden halt. One—an aide-de-camp, or chief pioneer, perhaps—ran forward upon a projecting rock; and, after looking across the stream, as if calculating its width, and then carefully examining the trees overhead, he scampered back to the troop, and appeared to communicate with the leader. The latter uttered a cry—evidently a command—which was answered by many individuals in the band, and these instantly made their appearance in front, and running forward upon the bank of the stream, collected around the trunk of a tall cotton-wood that grew over the narrowest part of the arroyo. After uttering a chorus of discordant cries, twenty or thirty of them were seen to scamper up the trunk of the cotton-wood. On reaching a high point, the foremost—a strong fellow—ran out upon a limb, and, taking several turns of his tail around it, slipped off and hung head downwards. The next on the limb—also a stout one—climbed down the body of the first, and, whipping his tail tightly around the neck and fore-arm of the latter, dropped off in his turn, and hung head down. The third repeated this manoeuvre upon the second, and the fourth upon the third, and so on, until the last one upon the string rested his fore-paws upon the ground.

The living chain now commenced swinging backwards and forwards, like the pendulum of a clock. The motion was slight at first, but gradually increased, the lowermost monkey striking his hands violently on the earth as he passed the tangent of the oscillating curve. Several others upon the limbs above aided the movement.

The absence of branches upon the lower part of the tree, which we have said was a cotton-wood (Populus angulata), enabled them to execute this movement freely.

The oscillation continued to increase until the monkey at the end of the chain was thrown among the branches of a tree on the opposite bank. Here, after two or three vibrations, he clutched a limb and held fast. This movement was executed adroitly, just at the culminating point of the “swing”, in order to save the intermediate links from the violence of a too sudden jerk.

The chain was now fast at both ends, forming a complete suspension-bridge, over which the whole troop, to the number of four or five hundred, passed with the rapidity of thought.

It was one of the most comical sights I ever beheld, to witness the quizzical expression of countenances along that living chain. To see the mothers, too, making the passage, with their tiny infants clinging to their backs, was a sight at once comical and curious.

The monkeys that formed the chain kept up an incessant talking, and, as we fancied, laughing, and frequently they would bite at the legs of the individuals passing over, as if to hurry them on!

The troop was soon on the other side; but how were the animals forming the bridge to get themselves over? This was the question that suggested itself. Manifestly, thought we, by number one letting go his tail. But then the point d’appui on the other side was much lower down, and number one, with half a dozen of his neighbours, would be dashed against the opposite bank, or soused into the water.

Here, then, was a problem, and we waited with some curiosity for its solution.

It was soon solved. A monkey was now seen attaching his tail to the lowest on the bridge; another girdled him in a similar manner, and another, and so on until a dozen more were added to the string. These last were all powerful fellows; and running up to a high limb, they lifted the bridge into a position almost horizontal.

Then a scream from the last monkey of the new formation warned the tail end that all was ready; and the next moment the whole chain was swung over, and landed safely on the opposite bank!

The lowermost links now dropped off to the ground, while the higher ones leaped to the branches and came down by the trunk. The whole troop then scampered off into the chaparral and disappeared.

“Aw, be the powers of Moll Kelly! iv thim little crayteurs hasn’t more sinse than the humans av these parts! It’s a quare counthry, anyhow. Be me sowl! it bates Banagher intirely!”

A general laugh followed the Irishman’s remarks; and we all sprang to our feet, refreshed by our sleep, and lighter in spirits.

The storm had disappeared, and the sun, now setting, gleamed in upon us through the broad leaves of the palms. The birds were abroad once more—brilliant creatures—uttering their sweet songs. Parrots and trogons, and tanagers flashed around our heads; and the great-billed and silly-looking toucans sat silent in the branches above.

The stream had become fordable, and leaving our “lair”, we crossed over, and struck into the woods on the opposite side.

Chapter Forty Seven.

The Jarachos.

We headed towards the National Bridge. Raoul had a friend half-way on the route—an old comrade upon whom he could depend. His rancho was in a secluded spot, near the road that leads to the rinconada (Note 1) of San Martin. We should find refreshment there; and, if not a bed, “at least”, said Raoul, “a roof and a petaté.” We should not be likely to meet anyone, as it was ten miles off, and it would be late when we reached it.

It was late—near midnight—when we dropped in upon the contrabandista, for such was the friend of Raoul; but he and his family were still astir, under the light of a very dull wax candle.

José Antonio—that was his name—was a little "sprung" at the five bareheaded apparitions that burst so suddenly upon him; but, recognising Raoul, we were cordially welcomed.

Our host was a spare, bony old fellow, in leathern jacket and calzoneros (breeches), with a keen, shrewd eye, that took in our situation at a single glance, and saved the Frenchman a great deal of explanation. Notwithstanding the cordiality with which his friend received him, I noticed that Raoul seemed uneasy about something as he glanced around the room; for the rancho, a small cane structure, had only one.

There were two women stirring about—the wife of the contrabandista, and his daughter, a plump, good-looking girl of eighteen or thereabout.

"No han cenado, caballeros?" (You have not supped, gentlemen), inquired, or rather affirmed, José Antonio, for our looks had answered the question before it was asked.

"Ni comido—ni almorzado!" (Nor dined—nor breakfasted!) replied Raoul, with a grin.

"Carambo! Rafaela! Jesusita!" shouted our host, with a sign, such as, among the Mexicans, often conveys a whole chapter of intelligence. The effect was magical. It sent Jesusita to her knees before the tortilla-stones; and Rafaela, José's wife, seized a string of tassajo, and plunged it into the olla. Then the little palm-leaf fan was handled, and the charcoal blazed and crackled, and the beef boiled, and the black beans simmered, and the chocolate frothed up, and we all felt happy under the prospect of a savoury supper.

I had noticed that, notwithstanding all this, Raoul seemed uneasy. In the corner I discovered the cause of his solicitude in the shape of a small, spare man, wearing the shovel-hat and black capote of a priest. I knew that my comrade was not partial to

priests, and that he would sooner have trusted Satan himself than one of the tribe; and I attributed his uneasiness to this natural dislike of the clerical fraternity.

“Who is he, Antone?” I heard him whisper to the contrabandista.

“The curé of San Martin,” was the reply.

“He is new, then?” said Raoul.

“Hombre de bien,” (A good man), answered the Mexican, nodding as he spoke.

Raoul seemed satisfied, and remained silent.

I could not help noticing the “hombre de bien” myself; and no more could I help fancying, after a short observation, that the rancho was indebted for the honour of his presence more to the black eyes of Jesusita than to any zeal on his part regarding the spiritual welfare of the contrabandista or his family.

There was a villainous expression upon his lips as he watched the girl moving over the floor; and once or twice I caught him scowling upon Chane, who, in his usual Irish way, was “blarneying” with Jesusita, and helping her to fan the charcoal.

“Where’s the padre?” whispered Raoul to our host.

“He was in the rinconada this morning.”

“In the rinconada!” exclaimed the Frenchman, starting.

“They’re gone down to the Bridge. The band has had a fandango with your people and lost some men. They say they have killed a good many stragglers along the road.”

“So he was in the rinconada, you say? and this morning, too?” inquired Raoul, in a half-soliloquy, and without heeding the last remark of the contrabandista.

“We’ve got to look sharp, then,” he added, after a pause.

“There’s no danger,” replied the other, “if you keep from the road. Your people have already reached El Plan, and are preparing to attack the Pass of the Cerro. ‘El Cojo,’ they say, has twenty thousand men to defend it.”

During this dialogue, which was carried on in whispers, I had noticed the little padre shifting about uneasily in his seat. At its conclusion he rose up, and bidding our host "buenas noches," was about to withdraw, when Lincoln, who had been quietly eyeing him for some time with that sharp, searching look peculiar to men of his kidney, jumped up, and, placing himself before the door, exclaimed in a drawling, emphatic tone:

"No, yer don't!"

"Qué cosa?" (What's the matter?) asked the padre indignantly.

"Kay or no kay—cosser or no cosser—yer don't go out o' hyur afore we do. Rowl, axe yur friend for a piece o' twine, will yer?"

The padre appealed to our host, and he in turn appealed to Raoul. The Mexican was in a dilemma. He dared not offend the curé, and on the other hand he did not wish to dictate to his old comrade Raoul. Moreover, the fierce hunter, who stood like a huge giant in the door, had a voice in the matter; and therefore José Antonio had three minds to consult at one time.

"It ain't Bob Linkin 'd infringe the rules of hospertality," said the hunter; "but this hyur's a peculiar case, an' I don't like the look of that 'ar priest, nohow yer kin fix it."

Raoul, however, sided with the contrabandista, and explained to Lincoln that the padre was the peaceable curé of the neighbouring village, and the friend of Don Antonio; and the hunter, seeing that I did not interpose—for at the moment I was in one of those moods of abstraction, and scarcely noticed what was going on—permitted the priest to pass out. I was recalled to myself more by some peculiar expression which I heard Lincoln muttering after it was over than by the incidents of the scene itself.

The occurrence had rendered us all somewhat uneasy; and we resolved upon swallowing our suppers hastily, and, after pushing forward some distance, to sleep

in the woods.

The tortillas were by this time ready, and the pretty Jesusita was pouring out the chocolate; so we set to work like men who had appetites.

The supper was soon despatched, but our host had some puros in the house—a luxury we had not enjoyed lately; and, hating to hurry away from such comfortable quarters, we determined to stay and take a smoke.

We had hardly lit our cigars when Jesusita, who had gone to the door, came hastily back, exclaiming:

“Papa—papa! hay gente fuera!” (Papa, there are people outside!)

As we sprang to our feet several shadows appeared through the open walls. Lincoln seized his rifle and ran to the door. The next moment he rushed back, shouting out:

“I told yer so!” And, dashing his huge body against the back of the rancho, he broke through the cane pickets with a crash.

We were hastening to follow him when the frail structure gave way; and we found ourselves buried, along with our host and his women, under a heavy thatch of saplings and palm-leaves.

We heard the crack of our comrade’s rifle without—the scream of a victim—the reports of pistols and escopettes—the yelling of savage men; and then the roof was raised again, and we were pulled out and dragged down among the trees, and tied to their trunks and taunted and goaded, and kicked and cuffed, by the most villainous-looking set of desperadoes it has ever been my misfortune to fall among. They seemed to take delight in abusing us—yelling all the while like so many demons let loose.

Our late acquaintance—the curé—was among them; and it was plain that he had brought the party on us. His “reverence” looked high and low for Lincoln; but, to his great mortification, the hunter had escaped.

Note 1. Rinconada. Literally corner; here it means a village.

Chapter Forty Eight.

Padre Jarauta.

We were not long in learning into whose hands we had fallen; for the name “Jarauta” was on every tongue. They were the dreaded “Jarochos” of the bandit priest.

“We’re in for it now,” said Raoul, deeply mortified at the part he had taken in the affair with the curé. “It’s a wonder they have kept us so long. Perhaps he’s not here himself, and they’re waiting for him.”

As Raoul said this the clatter of hoofs sounded along the narrow road; and a horseman came galloping up to the rancho, riding over everything and everybody with a perfect recklessness.

“That’s Jarauta,” whispered Raoul. “If he sees me—but it don’t matter much,” he added, in a lower tone: “we’ll have a quick shrift all the same: he can’t more than hang—and that he’ll be sure to do.”

“Where are these Yankees?” cried Jarauta, leaping out of his saddle.

“Here, Captain,” answered one of the Jarochos, a hideous-looking griffe (Note 1) dressed in a scarlet uniform, and apparently the lieutenant of the band.

“How many?”

“Four, Captain.”

“Very well—what are you waiting for?”

“To know whether I shall hang or shoot them.”

“Shoot them, by all means! Carambo! we have no time for neck-stretching!”

“There are some nice trees here, Captain,” suggested another of the band, with as much coolness as if he had been conversing about the hanging of so many dogs. He

wished—a curiosity not uncommon—to witness the spectacle of hanging.

“Madre de Dios! stupid! I tell you we haven’t time for such silly sport. Out with you there! Sanchez! Gabriel! Carlos! send your bullets through their Saxon skulls! Quick!”

Several of the Jarochos commenced unslinging their carbines, while those who guarded us fell back, to be out of range of the lead.

“Come,” exclaimed Raoul, “it can’t be worse than this—we can only die; and I’ll let the padre know whom he has got before I take leave of him. I’ll give him a souvenir that won’t make him sleep any sounder to-night. Oyez, Padré Jarauta!” continued he, calling out in a tone of irony; “have you found Marguerita yet?”

We could see between us and the dim rushlight that the Jarocho started, as if a shot had passed through his heart.

“Hold!” he shouted to the men, who were about taking aim; “drag those scoundrels hither! A light there!—fire the thatch! Vaya!”

In a moment the hut of the contrabandista was in flames, the dry palm-leaves blazing up like flax.

“Merciful Heaven! they are going to roast us!”

With this horrible apprehension, we were dragged up towards the burning pile, close to which stood our fierce judge and executioner.

The bamboos blazed and crackled, and under their red glare we could now see our captors with a terrible distinctness. A more demon-like set, I think, could not have been found anywhere out of the infernal regions.

Most of them were zamboes and mestizoes, and not a few pure Africans of the blackest hue, maroons from Cuba and the Antilles, many of them with their fronts and cheeks tattooed, adding to the natural ferocity of their features. Their coarse woolly hair sticking out in matted tufts, their white teeth set in savage grins, their

strange armour and grotesque attitudes, their wild and picturesque attire, formed a coup d'oeil that might have pleased a painter in his studio, but which at the time had no charm for us.

There were Pintoes among them, too—spotted men from the tangled forests of Acapulco—pied and speckled with blotches of red, and black, and white, like hounds and horses. They were the first of this race I had ever seen, and their unnatural complexions, even at that fearful moment, impressed me with feelings of disgust and loathing.

A single glance at this motley crew would have convinced us, had we not been quite sure of it already, that we had no favour to expect. There was not a countenance among them that exhibited the slightest trait of grace or mercy. No such expression could be seen around us, and we felt satisfied that our time had come.

The appearance of their leader did not shake this conviction. Revenge and hatred were playing upon his sharp sallow features, and his thin lips quivered with an expression of malice, plainly habitual. His nose, like a parrot's beak, had been broken by a blow, which added to its sinister shape; and his small black eyes twinkled with metallic brightness.

He wore a purplish-coloured manga, that covered his whole body, and his feet were cased in the red leather boots of the country, with heavy silver spurs strapped over them. A black sombrero, with its band of gold bullion and tags of the same material, completed the tout ensemble of his costume. He wore neither beard nor moustache; but his hair, black and snaky, hung down trailing over the velvet embroidery of his manga. (See Note 2).

Such was the Padré Jarauta.

Raoul's face was before him, upon which he looked for some moments without speaking. His features twitched as if under galvanic action, and we could see that his fingers jerked in a similar manner.

They were painful memories that could produce this effect upon a heart of such iron devilry, and Raoul alone knew them. The latter seemed to enjoy the interlude; for he lay upon the ground, looking up at the Jarocho with a smile of triumph upon his reckless features.

We were expecting the next speech of the padre to be an order for flinging us into the fire, which now burned fiercely. Fortunately, this fancy did not seem to strike him just then.

“Ha, monsieur!” exclaimed he at length, approaching Raoul. “I dreamt that you and I would meet again; I dreamt it—ha! ha! ha!—it was a pleasant dream, but not half so pleasant as the reality—ha! ha! ha! Don’t you think so?” he added, striking our comrade over the face with a mule quirt. “Don’t you think so?” he repeated, lashing him as before, while his eyes sparkled with a fiendish malignity.

“Did you dream of meeting Marguerita again?” inquired Raoul, with a satirical laugh, that sounded strange, even fearful, under the circumstances.

I shall never forget the expression of the Jarocho at that moment. His sallow face turned black, his lips white, his eyes burned like a demon’s, and, springing forward with a fierce oath, he planted his iron-shod heel upon the face of our comrade. The skin peeled off, and the blood followed.

There was something so cowardly—so redolent of a brutal ferocity—in the act, that I could not remain quiet. With a desperate wrench I freed my hands, skinning my wrists in the effort, and, flinging myself upon him, I clutched at the monster’s throat.

He stepped back; my ankles were tied, and I fell upon my face at his feet.

“Ho! ho!” cried he, “what have we here? An officer, eh? Come!” he continued, “rise up from your prayers and let me look at you. Ha! a captain? And this?—a lieutenant! Gentlemen, you’re too dainty to be shot like common dogs; we’ll not let the wolves have you; we’ll put you out of their reach; ha! ha! ha! Out of reach of wolves, do you hear! And what’s this?” continued he, turning to Chane and examining his

shoulders.

“Bah! soldado raso—Irlandes, carajo!” (A common soldier—an Irishman, too!) “What do you do fighting among these heretics against your own religion? There, renegade!” and he kicked the Irishman in the ribs.

“Thank yer honner!” said Chane, with a grunt, “small fayvours thankfully received; much good may it do yer honner!”

“Here, Lopez!” shouted the brigand.

“Now for the fire!” thought we.

“Lopez, I say!” continued he, calling louder.

“Aca, aca!” (here!) answered a voice, and the griffe who had guarded us came up, swinging his scarlet manga.

“Lopez, these I perceive are gentlemen of rank, and we must send them out of the world a little more gracefully, do you hear?”

“Yes, Captain,” answered the other, with stoical composure.

“Over the cliffs, Lopez. Facilis descensus Averni—but you don’t understand Latin, Lopez. Over the cliffs, do you hear? You understand that?”

“Yes, Captain,” repeated the Jarocho, moving only his lips.

“You will have them at the Eagle’s Cave by six in the morning; by six, do you hear?”

“Yes, Captain,” again replied the subordinate.

“And if any of them is missing—is missing, do you hear?”

“Yes, Captain.”

“You will take his place in the dance—the dance—ha! ha! ha! You understand that, Lopez?”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Enough then, good Lopez—handsome Lopez! beautiful Lopez!—enough, and good-night to you!”

So saying, the Jarocho drew his quirt several times across the red cheek of Raoul, and with a curse upon his lips he leaped upon his mustang and galloped off.

Whatever might be the nature of the punishment that awaited us at the Eagle’s Cave, it was evident that Lopez had no intention of becoming proxy in it for any of us. This was plain from the manner in which he set about securing us. We were first gagged with bayonet-shanks, and then dragged out into the bushes.

Here we were thrown upon our backs, each of us in the centre of four trees that formed a parallelogram. Our arms and legs were stretched to their full extent, and tied severally to the trees; and thus we lay, spread out like raw hides to dry. Our savage captors drew the cords so taut that our joints cracked under the cruel tension. In this painful position, with a Jarocho standing over each of us, we passed the remainder of the night.

Note 1. Griffe, a cross-breed between a negro and a Carib.

Note 2. Manga, a jacket with loose sleeves.

Chapter Forty Nine.

A Hang by the Heels.

It was a long night—the longest I can remember—a night that fully illustrated the horror of monotony. I can compare our feelings to those of one under the influence of the nightmare. But, no—worse than that. Our savage sentries occasionally sat down upon our bodies, and, lighting their cigaritos, chatted gaily while we groaned. We could not protest; we were gagged. But it would have made little difference; they would only have mocked us the more.

We lay glaring upon the moon as she coursed through a cloudy heaven. The wind whistled through the leaves, and its melancholy moaning sounded like our

death-dirge. Several times through the night I heard the howl of the prairie wolf, and I knew it was Lincoln; but the Jarochos had pickets all around, and the hunter dared not approach our position. He could not have helped us.

The morning broke at last; and we were taken up, tied upon the backs of vicious mules, and hurried off through the woods. We travelled for some distance along a ridge, until we had reached its highest point, where the cliff beetled over. Here we were unpacked, and thrown upon the grass. About thirty of the Jarochos guarded us, and we now saw them under the broad light of day; but they did not look a whit more beautiful than they had appeared under the glare of the blazing rancho on the preceding night.

Lopez was at their head, and never relaxed his vigilance for a moment. It was plain that he considered the padre a man of his word.

After we had remained about half an hour on the brow of the cliff, an exclamation from one of the men drew our attention; and, looking round, we perceived a band of horsemen straggling up the hill at a slow gallop. It was Jarauta, with about fifty of his followers. They were soon close up to us.

“Buenos dias, caballeros!” (Good day, gentlemen!) cried their leader in a mocking tone, leaping down and approaching us, “I hope you passed the night comfortably. Lopez, I am sure, provided you with good beds. Didn’t you, Lopez?”

“Yes, Captain,” answered the laconic Lopez.

“The gentlemen rested well; didn’t they, Lopez?”

“Yes, Captain.”

“No kicking or tumbling about, eh?”

“No, Captain.”

“Oh! then they rested well; it’s a good thing: they have a long journey before them—haven’t they, Lopez?”

“Yes, Captain.”

“I hope, gentlemen, you are ready for the road. Do you think you are ready?”

As each of us had the shank of a bayonet between his teeth, besides being tied neck and heels, it is not likely that this interrogatory received a reply; nor did his “reverence” expect any, as he continued putting similar questions in quick succession, appealing occasionally to his lieutenant for an answer. The latter, who was of the taciturn school, contented himself, and his superior too, with a simple “yes” or “no.”

Up to this moment we had no knowledge of the fate that awaited us. We knew we had to die—that we knew; but in what way we were still ignorant. I, for one, had made up my mind that the padre intended pitching us over the cliffs.

We were at length enlightened upon this important point. We were not to take that awful leap into eternity which I had been picturing to myself. A fate more horrible still awaited us. We were to be hanged over the precipice!

As if to aid the monster in his inhuman design, several pine-trees grew out horizontally from the edge of the cliff; and over the branches of these the Jarochos commenced reeving their long lazos. Expert in the handling of ropes, as all Mexicans are, they were not long in completing their preparations, and we soon beheld our gallows.

“According to rank, Lopez,” cried Jarauta, seeing that all was ready; “the captain first—do you hear?”

“Yes, Captain,” answered the imperturbable brigand who superintended the operations.

“I shall keep you to the last, Monsieur,” said the priest, addressing Raoul; “you will have the pleasure of bringing up the rear in your passage through purgatory. Ha! ha! ha! Won’t he, Lopez?”

"Yes, Captain."

"Maybe some of you would like a priest, gentlemen." This Jarauta uttered with an ironical grin that was revolting to behold. "If you would," he continued, "say so. I sometimes officiate in that capacity myself. Don't I, Lopez?"

"Yes, Captain."

A diabolical laugh burst from the Jarochos, who had dismounted, and were standing out upon the cliff, the better to witness the spectacle of our hanging.

"Well, Lopez, does any of them say 'yes'?"

"No, Captain."

"Ask the Irishman there; ask him—he ought to be a good Catholic."

The question was put to Chane, in mockery, of course, for it was impossible for him to answer it; and yet he did answer it, for his look spoke a curse as plainly as if it had been uttered through a trumpet. The Jarochos did not heed that, but only laughed the louder.

"Well, Lopez, what says Saint Patrick? 'Yes' or 'no'?"

"'No', Captain."

And a fresh peal of ruffian laughter rang out.

The rope was now placed around my neck in a running noose. The other end had been passed over the tree, and lay coiled near the edge of the cliff. Lopez held it in his hand a short distance above the coil, in order to direct its movements.

"All ready there, Lopez?" cried the leader.

"Yes, Captain."

"Swing off the captain, then—no, not yet; let him look at the floor on which he is going to dance; that is but fair."

I had been drawn forward until my feet projected over the edge of the precipice, and

close to the root of the tree. I was now forced into a sitting posture, so that I might look below, my limbs hanging over. Strange to say, I could not resist doing exactly what my tormentor wished. Under other circumstances the sight would have been to me appalling; but my nerves were strung by the protracted agony I had been forced to endure.

The precipice on whose verge I sat formed a side of one of those yawning gulfs common in Spanish America, and known by the name barrancas. It seemed as if a mountain had been scooped out and carried away. Not two hundred yards horizontally distant was the twin jaw of the chasm, like a black burnt wall; yet the torrent that roared and foamed between them was full six hundred feet below my position! I could have flung the stump of a cigar upon the water; in fact, an object dropping vertically from where I sat—for it was a projecting point—must have fallen plumb into the stream.

It was not unlike the cañon where we had tossed over the dogs; but it was higher, and altogether more hell-like and horrible.

As I looked down, several small birds, whose species I did not stay to distinguish, were screaming below, and an eagle on his broad, bold wing came soaring over the abyss, and flapped up to my very face.

“Well, Captain,” broke in the sharp voice of Jarauta, “what do you think of it? A nice soft floor to dance upon, isn’t it, Lopez?”

“Yes, Captain.”

“All ready there? Stop! some music; we must have music: how can he dance without music? Hola, Sanchez, where’s your bugle?”

“Here, Captain!”

“Strike up, then! Play ‘Yankee Doodle’. Ha! ha! ha! ‘Yankee Doodle’, do you hear?”

“Yes, Captain,” answered the man; and the next moment the well-known strains of the American national air sounded upon my ear, producing a strange, sad feeling I shall never forget.

“Now, Lopez!” cried the padre.

I was expecting to be swung out, when I heard him again shout, “Stay!” at the same time stopping the music.

“By heavens! Lopez, I have a better plan,” he cried: “why did I not think of it before? It’s not too late yet. Ha! ha! ha! Carambo! They shall dance upon their heads! That’s better—isn’t it, Lopez?”

“Yes, Captain.”

A cheer from the Jarochos announced their approval of this change in the programme.

The padre made a sign to Lopez, who approached him, appearing to receive some directions.

I did not at first comprehend the novelty that was about to be introduced. I was not kept long in ignorance. One of the Jarochos, seizing me by the collar, dragged me back from the ledge, and transferred the noose from my neck to my ankles. Horror heaped upon horror! I was to be hung head downwards!

“That will be much prettier—won’t it, Lopez?”

“Yes, Captain.”

“The gentleman will have time to make himself ready for heaven before he dies—won’t he, Lopez?”

“Yes Captain.”

“Take out the gag—let him have his tongue free; he’ll need that to pray with—won’t he, Lopez?”

“Yes, Captain.”

One of the Jarochos jerked the bayonet roughly from my mouth, almost dislocating my jaw. The power of speech was gone. I could not, if I had wished it, have uttered an intelligible word.

“Give him his hands, too; he’ll need them to keep off the zopilotes; won’t he, Lopez?”

“Yes, Captain.”

The thong that bound my wrists was cut, leaving my hands free. I was on my back, my feet towards the precipice. A little to my right stood Lopez, holding the rope that was about to launch me into eternity.

“Now the music—take the music for your cue, Lopez; then jerk him up!” cried the sharp voice of the fiend.

I shut my eyes, waiting for the pull. It was but a moment, but it seemed a lifetime. There was a dead silence—a stillness like that which precedes the bursting of a rock or the firing of a jubilee-gun. Then I heard the first note of the bugle, and along with it a crack—the crack of a rifle; a man staggered over me, besprinkling my face with blood, and, falling forward, disappeared!

Then came the pluck upon my ankles, and I was jerked head downwards into the empty air. I felt my feet touching the branches above, and, throwing up my arms, I grasped one, and swung my body upwards. After two or three efforts I lay along the main trunk, which I embraced with the hug of despair. I looked downward. A man was hanging below—far below—at the end of the lazo! It was Lopez. I knew his scarlet manga at a glance. He was hanging by the thigh in a snarl of the rope.

His hat had fallen off. I could see the red blood running over his face and dripping from his long, snaky locks. He hung head down. I could see that he was dead!

The hard thong was cutting my ankles, and—oh, heaven!—under our united weight the roots were cracking! Appalling thought! “The tree will give way!” I held fast with one arm. I drew forth my knife—fortunately I still had one—with the other. I

opened the blade with my teeth, and, stretching backward and downward, I drew it across the thong. It parted with a “snig”, and the red object left me like a flash of light. There was a plunge upon the black water below—a plunge and a few white bubbles; but the body of the Jarocho, with its scarlet trappings, was seen no more after that plunge.

Chapter Fifty.

A Very Short Trial.

During all this time shots were ringing over me. I could hear the shouts and cheering of men, the trampling of heavy hoofs, and the clashing of sabres. I knew that some strange deliverance had reached us. I knew that a skirmish was going on above me, but I could see nothing. I was below the level of the cliff.

I lay in a terrible suspense, listening. I dared not change my posture—I dared not move. The weight of the Jarocho’s body had hitherto held my feet securely in the notch; but that was gone, and my ankles were still tied. A movement and my legs might fall off the limb and drag me downward. I was faint, too, from the protracted struggle for life and death, and I hugged the tree and held on like a wounded squirrel.

The shots seemed less frequent, the shouts appeared to recede from the cliffs. Then I heard a cheer—an Anglo-Saxon cheer—an American cheer, and the next moment a well-known voice rang in my ears.

“By the livin’ catamount, he’s hyur yit! Whooray—whoop! Niver say die! Hold on, Cap’n, teeth an’ toenail! Hyur, boys! clutch on, a lot o’ yer! Quick!—hook my claws, Nat! Now pull—all thegether!—Hooray!”

I felt a strong hand grasping the collar of my coat, and the next moment I was raised from my perch and landed upon the top of the cliff.

I looked around upon my deliverers. Lincoln was dancing like a lunatic, uttering his

wild, half-Indian yells. A dozen men, in the dark-green uniform of the “mounted rifles”, stood looking on and laughing at this grotesque exhibition. Close by another party were guarding some prisoners, while a hundred others were seen in scattered groups along the ridge, returning from the pursuit of the Jarochos, whom they had completely routed.

I recognised Twing, and Hennessy, and Hillis, and several other officers whom I had met before. We were soon en rapport, and I could not have received a greater variety of congratulations had it been the hour after my wedding.

Little Jack was the guide of the rescue.

After a moment spent in explanation with the major, I turned to look for Lincoln. He was standing close by, holding in his hands a piece of lazo, which he appeared to examine with a strange and puzzled expression. He had recovered from his burst of wild joy and was “himself again.”

“What’s the matter, Bob?” I inquired, noticing his bewildered look.

“Why, Cap’n, I’m a sorter bamfoozled yeer. I kin understan’ well enuf how the feller; irked yer inter the tree afore he let go. But how did this hyur whang kum cuf? An’ whar’s the other eend?”

I saw that he held in his hand the noose of the lazo which he had taken from my ankles, and I explained the mystery of how it had “kum cut”. This seemed to raise me still higher in the hunter’s esteem. Turning to one of the riflemen, an old hunter like himself, he whispered—I overheard him:

“I’ll tell yer what it is, Nat: he kin whip his weight in wild-cats or grizzly b’ars any day in the year—he kin, or my name ain’t Bob Linkin.”

Saying this, he stepped forward on the cliff and looked over; and then he examined the tree, and then the piece of lazo, and then the tree again, and then he commenced dropping pebbles down, as if he was determined to measure every object, and fix it in his memory with a proper distinctness.

Twing and the others had now dismounted. As I turned towards them Clayley was taking a pull at the major's pewter—and a good long pull, too. I followed the lieutenant's example, and felt the better for it.

"But how did you find us, Major?"

"This little soldier," said he, pointing to Jack, "brought us to the rancho where you were taken. From there we easily tracked you to a large hacienda."

"Ha! you routed the guerilla, then?"

"Routed the guerilla! We saw no guerilla."

"What! at the hacienda?"

"Peons and women; nothing more. Yes, there was, too—what am I thinking about? There was a party there that routed us; Thornley and Hillis here have both been wounded, and are not likely to recover—poor fellows!"

I looked towards these gentlemen for an explanation. They were both laughing, and I looked in vain.

"Hennessy, too," said the major, "has got a stab under the ribs."

"Och, by my soul have I, and no mistake!" cried the latter.

"Come, Major—an explanation, if you please."

I was in no humour to enjoy this joke. I half divined the cause of their mirth, and it produced in me an unaccountable feeling of annoyance, not to say pain.

"Be my faith, then, Captain," said Hennessy, speaking for the major, "if ye must know all about it, I'll tell ye myself. We overhauled a pair of the most elegant crayteurs you ever clapped eyes upon; and rich—rich as Craysus—wasn't they, boys?"

"Oh, plenty of tin," remarked Hillis.

"But, Captain," continued Hennessy, "how they took on to your 'tiger'! I thought they would have eaten the little chap, body, bones, and all."

I was chafing with impatience to know more, but I saw that nothing worth knowing could be had in that quarter. I determined, therefore, to conceal my anxiety, and find an early opportunity to talk to Jack.

“But beyond the hacienda?” I inquired, changing the subject.

“We trailed you down stream to the cañon, where we found blood upon the rocks. Here we were at fault, when a handsome, delicate-looking lad, known somehow or other to your Jack, came up and carried us to the crossing above, where the lad gave us the slip, and we saw no more of him. We struck the hoofs again where he left us, and followed them to a small prairie on the edge of the woods, where the ground was strangely broken and trampled. There they had turned back, and we lost all trace.”

“But how, then, did you come here?”

“By accident altogether. We were striking to the nearest point on the National Road when that tall sergeant of yours dropped down upon us out of the branches of a tree.”

“Whom did you see, Jack?” I whispered to the boy, after having drawn him aside.

“I saw them all, Captain.”

“Well?”

“They asked where you were, and when I told them—”

“Well—well!”

“They appeared to wonder—”

“Well?”

“And the young ladies—”

“And the young ladies?”

“They ran round, and cried, and—”

Jack was the dove that brought the olive-branch.

“Did they say where they were going?” I inquired, after one of those sweet waking dreams.

“Yes, Captain, they are going up the country to live.”

“Where—where?”

“I could not recollect the name—it was so strange.”

“Jalapa? Orizava? Cordova? Puebla? Mexico?”

“I think it was one of them, but I cannot tell which. I have forgotten it, Captain.”

“Captain Haller!” called the voice of the major; “here a moment, if you please. These are some of the men who were going to hang you, are they not?”

Twing pointed to five of the Jarachos who had been captured in the skirmish.

“Yes,” replied I, “I think so; yet I could not swear to their identity.”

“By the crass, Major, I can swear to ivery mother’s son av thim! There isn’t a scoundhrel among thim but has given me rayzon to remimber him, iv a harty kick in the ribs might be called a rayzon. Oh! ye ugly spalpeens! kick me now, will yez?—will yez jist be plazed to trid upon the tail av my jacket?”

“Stand out here, my man,” said the major.

Chane stepped forward, and swore away the lives of the five Jarochos in less than as many minutes.

“Enough!” said the major, after the Irishman had given his testimony. “Lieutenant Claiborne,” continued he, addressing an officer the youngest in rank, “what sentence?”

“Hang!” replied the latter in a solemn voice.

“Lieutenant Hillis?”

“Hang!” was the reply.

“Lieutenant Clayley?”

“Hang!” said Clayley in a quick and emphatic tone.

“Captain Hennessy?”

“Hang them!” answered the Irishman.

“Captain Haller?”

“Have you determined, Major Twing?” I asked, intending, if possible, to mitigate this terrible sentence.

“We have no time, Captain Haller,” replied my superior, interrupting me, “nor opportunity to carry prisoners. Our army has reached Plan del Rio, and is preparing to attack the pass. An hour lost, and we may be too late for the battle. You know the result of that as well as I.”

I knew Twing’s determined character too well to offer further opposition, and the Jarochos were condemned to be hung.

The following extract from the major’s report of the affair will show how the sentence was carried out:

We killed five of them, and captured as many more, but the leader escaped. The prisoners were tried, and sentenced to be hung. They had a gallows already rigged for Captain Haller and his companions, and for want of a better we hanged them upon that.

Chapter Fifty One.

A Bird’s-eye View of a Battle.

It was still only an hour by sun as we rode off from the Eagle’s Cave. At some distance I turned in my saddle and looked back. It was a singular sight, those five hanging corpses, and one not easily forgotten. What an appalling picture it must have been to their own comrades, who doubtless watched the spectacle from some

distant elevation!

Motionless they hung, in all the picturesque drapery of their strange attire—draggling—dead! The pines bent slightly over, the eagle screamed as he swept past, and high in the blue air a thousand bald vultures wheeled and circled, descending at every curve.

Before we had ridden out of sight the Eagle's Cliff was black with zopilotes, hundreds clustering upon the pines, and whetting their fetid beaks over their prey, still warm. I could not help being struck with this strange transposition of victims.

We forded the stream below, and travelled for some hours in a westerly course over a half-naked ridge. At mid-day we reached an arroyo—a clear, cool stream that gurgled along under a thick grove of the palma redonda. Here we "nooned", stretching our bodies along the green-sward.

At sundown we rode into the pueblito (hamlet) of Jacomulco, where we had determined to pass the night. Twing levied on the alcalde for forage for "man and beast". The horses were picketed in the plaza, while the men bivouacked by their fires—strong mounted pickets having been thrown out on the roads or tracks that led to the village.

By daybreak we were again in our saddles, and, riding across another ridge, we struck the Plan River five miles above the bridge, and commenced riding down the stream. We were still far from the water, which roared and "soughed" in the bottom of a barranca, hundreds of feet below our path.

On crossing an eminence a sight suddenly burst upon us that caused us to leap in our saddles. Directly before us, and not a mile distant, rose a high round hill like a semi-globe, and from a small tower upon its top waved the standard of Mexico.

Long lines of uniformed men girdled the tower, formed in rank. Horsemen in bright dresses galloped up and down the hill. We could see the glitter of brazen helmets, and the glancing of a thousand bayonets. The burnished howitzer flashed in the

sunbeams, and we could discern the cannoniers standing by their posts. Bugles were braying and drums rolling. So near were they that we could distinguish the call. They were sounding the “long roll!”

“Halt! Great Heaven!” cried Twing, jerking his horse upon its haunches; “we are riding into the enemy’s camp! Guide,” he added, turning fiercely to Raoul, and half-drawing his sword, “what’s this?”

“The hill, Major,” replied the soldier coolly, “is ‘El Telegrafo’. It is the Mexican head-quarters, I take it.”

“And, sir, what mean you? It is not a mile distant?”

“It is ten miles, Major.”

“Ten! Why, sir, I can trace the eagle upon that flag! It is not one mile, by Heaven!”

“By the eye, true; but by the road, Major, it is what I have said—ten miles. We passed the crossing of the barranca some time ago; there is no other before we reach El Plan.”

It was true. Although within range of the enemy’s lightest metal, we were ten miles off!

A vast chasm yawned between us and them. The next moment we were upon its brink, and, wheeling sharply to the right, we trotted on as fast as the rocky road would allow us.

“O heavens! Haller, we shall be too late. Gallop!” shouted Twing, as we pressed our horses side by side.

The troop at the word sprang into a gallop. El Plan, the bridge, the hamlet, the American camp with its thousand white pyramids, all burst upon us like a flash—below, far below, lying like a map. We are still opposite El Telegrafo!

“By heavens!” cried Twing, “our camp is empty!”

A few figures only were visible, straggling among the tents: the teamster, the

camp-guard, the invalid soldier.

“Look! look!”

I followed the direction indicated. Against the long ridge that rose over the camp a dark-blue line could be traced—a line of uniformed men, glistening as they moved with the sparkle of ten thousand bayonets. It wound along the hill like a bristling snake, and, heading towards El Telegrafo, disappeared for a moment behind the ridge.

A gun from the globe-shaped hill—and then another! another! another!—a roll of musketry!—drums—bugles—shouts—cheering!

“The battle’s begun!”

“We are too late!”

We were still eight miles from the scene of action. We checked up, and sat chafing in our saddles.

And now the roll of musketry became incessant, and we could hear the crack! crack! of the American rifles. And bombs hurtled and rockets hissed through the air.

The round hill was shrouded in a cloud of sulphur, and through the smoke we could see small parties creeping up from rock to rock, from bush to bush, firing as they went. We could see some tumbling back under the leaden hail that was poured upon them from above.

And then a strong band debouched from the woods below, and strained upwards, daring all danger. Up, up!—and bayonets were crossed, and sabres glistened and grew red, and wild cries filled the air. And then came a cheer, long, loud, and exulting, and under the thinning smoke thousands were seen rushing down the steep, and flinging themselves into the woods.

We knew not as yet which party it was that were thus flying. We looked at the tower in breathless suspense. The cloud was around its base, where musketry was still

rolling, sending its deadly missiles after the fugitives below.

“Look! look!” cried a voice: “the Mexican flag—it is down! See! ‘the star-spangled banner!’”

The American standard was slowly unfolding itself over the blue smoke, and we could easily distinguish the stripes, and the dark square in the corner with its silvery stars; and, as if with one voice, our troops broke into a wild “Hurrah!”

In less time than you have taken in reading this account of it the battle of Cerro Gordo was lost and won.

Chapter Fifty Two.

An Odd Way of Escaping from a Battle-field.

We sat on our horses, facing the globe-shaped summit of El Telegrafo, and watching our flag as it swung out from the tower.

“Look yonder! what is that?” cried an officer, pointing across the barranca.

All eyes were now turned in the direction indicated. A white line was slowly moving down the face of the opposite cliff.

“Rein back, men! rein back!” shouted Twing, as his eye rested upon the strange object. “Throw yourselves under cover of the hill!”

In a minute our whole party—dragoons, officers, and all—had galloped our horses into the bed of a dry arroyo, where we were completely screened from observation. Three or four of us, dismounting, along with Twing, crept cautiously forward to the position we had just left, and, raising our heads over the bunch-grass, looked across the chasm. We were close to its edge, and the opposite “cheek” of the barranca, a huge wall of trap-rock, about a mile horizontally distant, rose at least a thousand feet from the river bottom. Its face was almost perpendicular, with the exception of a few stairs or platforms in the basaltic strata, and from these hung out stunted palms, cedars, and dark, shapeless masses of cacti and agave.

Down this front the living line was still moving—slowly, zigzag—along narrow ledges and over jutting points, as though some white liquid or a train of gigantic insects were crawling down the precipice. The occasional flash of a bright object would have told us the nature of this strange phenomenon, had we not guessed it already. They were armed men—Mexicans—escaping from the field of battle; and in a wood upon the escarpment of the cliff we could perceive several thousands of their comrades huddled up, and waiting for an opportunity to descend. They were evidently concealed, and out of all danger from their pursuers on the other side. Indeed, the main body of the American army had already passed their position, and were moving along the Jalapa road, following up the clouds of dust that hung upon the retreating squadrons of Santa Anna.

We lay for some time observing the motions of these cunning fugitives as they streamed downward. The head of their line had nearly reached the timbered bottom, through whose green fringes the Plan River swept onward, curving from cliff to cliff.

Impatient looks were cast towards the major, whose cold grey eye showed no signs of action.

“Well, Major—what’s to be done?” asked one.

“Nothing!” was the impressive reply.

“Nothing!” echoed everyone.

“Why, what could we do?”

“Take them prisoners—every one of them.”

“Whom prisoners?”

“These Mexicans—these before us.”

“Ha! before you they are—a long way, too. Bah! they are ten miles off, and, even if we could ride straight down the bluff with winged horses, what could our hundred

men do in that jungle below? Look yonder!—there are a thousand of them crawling over the rocks?"

"And what signify numbers?" asked I, now speaking for the first time. "They are already defeated and flying—half of them, I'll wager, without arms. Come, Major, let us go! We can capture the whole party without firing a shot."

"But, my dear Captain, we cannot reach them where they are."

"It is not necessary. If we ride up the cliffs, they will come to us."

"How?"

"You see this dark line. It is not three miles distant. You know that timber like that does not grow on the naked face of a cliff. It is a gorge, and, I'll warrant, a watercourse too. They will pass through it."

"Beautiful! We could meet them as they came up it," cried several at once.

"No, lads—no! You are all wrong. They will keep the bottom—the heavy timber, I warrant you. It's no use losing time. We must round to the road, and forward. Who knows that we may not find work enough yet? Come!"

So saying, our commanding officer rose up, and, walking back to the arroyo, leapt into his saddle. Of course we followed his example, but with no very amiable feelings. I, for one, felt satisfied that we might have made a dashing thing of it, and entered the camp with flying colours. I felt, and so did my friend Clayley, like a schoolboy who had come too late for his lesson, and would gladly have been the bearer of a present to his master: moreover, we had learned from our comrades that it was the expressed intention of the commander-in-chief to capture as many of the enemy as possible on this occasion. This determination arose from the fact, well authenticated, that hundreds who had marched out of Vera Cruz on parole had gone direct to Cerro Gordo, with the intention of fighting us again; and no doubt some of these honourable soldiers were among the gentry now climbing down the barranca.

With these feelings, Clayley and I were anxious to do something that might cover our late folly, and win our way back to favour at head-quarters.

“Let me take fifty of your men and try this. You know, Major Twing, I have a score to rub out.”

“I cannot, Captain—I cannot. We must on. Forward!”

And the next moment we were moving at a trot in the direction of El Plan.

For the first time I felt angry at Twing; and, drawing my bridle tighter, I fell back to the rear. What would I not have given for the “Rifle Rangers” at that moment?

I was startled from a very sullen reverie by a shot, the whistling of a rifle bullet, and the loud “Halt” of the major in front. Raising myself on the instant, I could see a greenish-looking object just disappearing over the spur of a ridge. It was a vidette, who had fired and run in.

“Do you think they are any of our people?”

“That ’ar’s one of our kump’ny, Cap’n; I seed the green on his cap,” said Lincoln.

I galloped to the front. Twing was just detaching a small party to reconnoitre. I fell in along with this, and after riding a hundred yards we looked over the ridge, and saw, not four hundred yards distant, a ten-inch howitzer, that had just been wheeled round, and now stood gaping at us. In the rear of the gun stood a body of artillerists, and on their flanks a larger body of what appeared to be light infantry or rifles. It would have been anything but a pleasing sight, but that a small flag with red and white stripes was playing over the gun; and our party, heedless of their orders, leaped their horses on the ridge, and, pulling off their caps, saluted it with a cheer.

The soldiers by the battery still stood undecided, not knowing what to make of our conduct, as they were the advanced outpost in this direction, when a mounted rifleman galloped up and displayed the flag of his regiment.

A wild cheer echoed back from the battery; and the next moment both parties had

met, and were shaking each other's hands with the hearty greetings of long-parted friends.

Not the least interesting to me was the fact that my own corps, under the command of its lieutenant, formed the principal guard of the gun; and the welcome of our old comrades was such as we should have received had we come back from the grave. They had long since made up their minds that they had seen the last of us; and it was quite amusing to witness these brave tirailleurs as they gathered around Lincoln and his comrades to hear the story of our adventures.

Chapter Fifty Three.

A Wholesale Capture.

In a few minutes our greetings were over. Twing moved on, taking with him his squadron of mounted men. I had made up my mind to take the opposite road—the "back track". I was now in command of a force—my own—and I felt keenly the necessity of doing something to redeem my late folly. Clayley was as anxious as myself.

"You do not need them any longer?" said I to Ripley, a gallant young fellow, who commanded the howitzer.

"No, Captain; I have thirty artillerists here. It is strange if we can't keep the piece and manage it against ten times that number of such heroes as we have seen over yonder." And he pointed to the flying enemy on the other side of the barranca.

"What say you to going with us?"

"I should like it well; but duty, my dear H.—duty! I must stay by the gun."

"Good-bye, then, comrade! We have no time to lose—farewell!"

"Good-bye; and if you're whipped, fall back on me. I'll keep the piece here until you return, and there'll be a good load of grape ready for anybody that may be in pursuit of you."

The company had by this time formed on the flank of the howitzer, and at the words “Forward!—quick time!” started briskly across the hills.

In a few minutes we had reached the point where the road trended for some distance along the brow of the precipice. Here we halted a moment; and taking Lincoln and Raoul, I crawled forward to our former point of observation.

Our time spent at the battery had been so short that, with the difficulty which the enemy experienced in descending the cliff, the head of their line had only now reached the bottom of the barranca. They were running in twos and threes towards the stream, which, near this point, impinged upon the foot of the precipice. With a small glass that I had obtained from Ripley I could see their every movement. Some of them were without arms—they had doubtless thrown them away—while others still carried their muskets, and not a few were laden with knapsacks, and heavy burdens too; the household gods—perhaps stolen ones—of their own camp. As they reached the green-sward, dropping down in a constant stream, they rushed forward to the water, scrambling into it in thirsty crowds, and falling upon their knees to drink. Some of them filled their canteens and went on.

“They intend to take the hills,” thought I. I knew there was no water for miles in that direction.

As I swept the glass round the bottom of the cliff, I was struck with an object that stood in a clump of palm-trees. It was a mule saddled, and guarded by several soldiers more richly uniformed than the masses who were struggling past them.

“They are waiting for some officer of rank,” thought I. I moved the glass slowly along the line of descending bodies, and upward against the rocks to a small platform, nearly halfway up the cliff. Several bright uniforms flashed upon the lens. The platform was shaded with palms; and I could see that this party had halted a moment for the purpose (as I then conjectured) of allowing the foremost fugitives to pioneer the wooded bottom. I was right. As soon as these had crossed the stream,

and made some way in the jungle along its banks, the former continued their descent; and now I saw what caused my pulse to beat feverishly—that one of these carried a dark object on his back. An object?—a man—and that man could be no other than the lame tyrant of Mexico.

I can scarcely describe my feelings at this moment. The young hunter who sees noble game—a bear, a panther, a buffalo—within reach of his rifle for the first time, might feel as I did. I hated this man, as all honest men must and should hate a cowardly despot. During our short campaign I had heard many a well-authenticated story of his base villainy, and I believe at that moment I would have willingly parted with my hand to have brought him as near to me as he appeared under the field of the telescope. I thought I could even distinguish the lines, deep furrowed by guilt, on his dark, malice-marked face; and, as I became sure of the identity, I drew back my head, cautioning my companions to do the same.

Now was the time for action, and, putting up the glass, we crawled back to our comrades. I had learned from Raoul that the dark line which I had noticed before was, as I had conjectured, the cañon of a small arroyo, heavily timbered, and forming a gap or pass that led to the Plan River. It was five miles distant, instead of three. So much the better, and with a quick, crouching gait we were once more upon our way. I had told my comrades enough to make some of them as eager as I. Many of them would have given half a life for a shot at game like that. Not a few of them remembered they had lost a brother on the plains of Goliad, or at the fortress of the Alamo.

The Rangers, moreover, had been chafing “all day for a fight”, and now, so unexpectedly led at something like it, they were just in the humour. They moved as one man, and the five miles that lay between us and the gorge were soon passed to the rear. We reached it, I think, in about half an hour. Considering the steep pass through which the enemy must come, we knew there was a breathing-time, though

not long, for us; and during this I matured my plans, part of which I had arranged upon the route.

A short survey of the ground convinced us that it could not have been better fitted for an ambuscade had we chosen it at our leisure. The gorge or cañon did not run directly up the cliff, but in a zigzag line, so that a man at the top could only alarm another coming up after him by shouting or firing his piece. This was exactly what we wanted, knowing that, although we might capture a few of the foremost, those in the rear, being alarmed, could easily take to the river bottom and make their escape through the thickets. It was our design to make our prisoners, if possible, without firing a single shot; and this, under the circumstances, we did not deem an impossible matter.

The pass was a dry arroyo, its banks fringed with large pines and cotton-woods, matted together by llianas and vines. Where the gorge debouched into the uplands its banks were high and naked, with here and there a few scattered palmettos that grew up from huge hassocks of bunch-grass.

Behind each of these branches a rifleman was stationed, forming a deployed line, with its concave arc facing the embouchure of the gorge, and gradually closing in, so that it ended in a clump of thick chaparral upon the very verge of the precipice. At this point, on each side of the path, were stationed half a dozen men, in such a position as to be hidden from any party passing upward, until it had cleared the cañon and its retreat was secured against. At the opposite end of the elliptical deployment a stronger party was stationed, Clayley in command and Raoul to act as interpreter. Oakes and I took our places, commanding the separate detachments on the brow.

Our arrangements occupied us only a few minutes. I had to deal with men, many of whom had “surrounded” buffaloes in a somewhat similar manner; and it did not require much tact to teach them a few modifications in the game. In five minutes we

were all in our places, waiting anxiously and in perfect silence.

As yet not a murmur had reached us from below, except the sighing of the wind through the tall trees, and the “sough” of the river as it tumbled away over its pebbly bed. Now and then we heard a stray shot, or the quick, sharp notes of a cavalry bugle; but these were far off, and only told of the wild work that was still going on along the road towards Encerro and Jalapa.

Not a word was spoken by us to each other. The men who were deployed along the hill lay hidden behind the hassocks of the palmettos, and from our position not one of them was to be seen.

I must confess I felt strange emotions at this moment—one of the most anxious of my life; and although I felt no hate towards the enemy—no desire to injure one of them, excepting him of whom I have spoken—there was something so wild, so thrilling, in the excitement of thus entrapping man, the highest of all animals, that I could not have foregone the inhuman sport. I had no intention that it should be inhuman. I well knew what would be their treatment as prisoners of war; and I had given orders that not a shot should be fired nor a blow struck, in case they threw down their arms and yielded without resistance. But for him—humanity had many a score to settle with him; and at the time I did not feel a very strong inclination to resist what would be the Rangers’ desire on that question.

“Is not all our fine ambuscade for nothing?” I said to myself, after a long period of waiting, and no signs of an enemy.

I had begun to fancy as much, and to suspect that the flying Mexicans had kept along the river, when a sound like the humming of bees came up the pass. Presently it grew louder, until I could distinguish the voices of men. Our hearts as yet beat louder than their voices. Now the stones rattled, as, loosened from their sloping beds, they rolled back and downwards.

“Guardaos, hombre!” (Look out, man!) shouted one.

"Carrajo!" cried another; "take care what you're about! I haven't escaped the Yankee bullets to-day to have my skull cloven in that fashion. Arriba! arriba!"

"I say, Antonio—you're sure this road leads out above?"

"Quite sure, camarado."

"And then on to Orizava?"

"On to Orizava—derecho, derecho" (straight).

"But how far—hombre?"

"Oh! there are halting-places—pueblitos."

"Vaya! I don't care how soon we reach them. I'm as hungry as a famished coyote."

"Carrai! the coyotes of these parts won't be hungry for some time. Vaya!"

"Who knows whether they've killed 'El Cojo'?"

"'Catch a fox, kill a fox.' No. He's found some hole to creep through, I warrant him.

"'El que mata un ladron Tiene cien años de perdon.'"

(He who kills a robber will receive a hundred years of pardon for the offence.)

This was hailed with a sally by the very men who, only one hour ago, were shouting themselves hoarse with the cries of "Viva el general, Viva Santa Anna!" And on they scrambled, talking as before, one of them informing his comrades with a laugh that if "los Tejanos" could lay their hands upon "El Cojo", they, the Mexicans, would have to look out for a new president.

They had now passed us. We were looking at their backs. The first party contained a string of fifteen or twenty, mostly soldiers of the "raw battalions"—conscripts who wore the white linen jackets and wide, sailor-looking pantaloons of the volunteer.

Raw as these fellows were, either from their position in the battle, or, more likely, from a better knowledge of the country, they had been able thus far to make their escape, when thousands of their veteran companions had been captured. But few of

them were armed; they had thrown their guns away in the hurry of flight.

At this moment we could distinguish the voice of Raoul:

“Alto! abajo las armas!” (Halt! down with your arms!)

At this challenge we could see—for they were still in sight—that some of the Mexicans leaped clear up from the ground. One or two looked back, as if with the intention of re-entering the gorge, but a dozen muzzles met their gaze.

“Adelante! adelante!—somos amigos.” (Forward!—we are friends), I said to them in a half-whisper, fearing to alarm their comrades in the rear, at the same time waving them onward.

As on one side Clayley presented a white flag, while on the other there was to be seen a bunch of dark yawning tubes, the Mexicans were not long in making their choice. In a minute they had disappeared from our sight, preferring the companionship of Clayley and Raoul, who would know how to dispose of them in a proper manner.

We had scarcely got rid of these when another string debouched up the glen, unsuspicious as were their comrades of the fate that awaited them.

These were managed in a similar manner; and another and another party, all of whom were obliged to give up their arms and fling themselves to the earth, as soon as they had reached the open ground above.

This continued until I began to grow fearful that we were making more prisoners than we could safely hold, and on the knowledge of this fact they might try to overpower us.

But the tempting prize had not yet appeared. He could not be far distant, and, allured by this prospect, I determined to hold out a while longer.

A termination, however, to our wholesale trapping was brought about by an unexpected event. A party, consisting of some ten or fifteen men, many of them

officers, suddenly appeared, and marched boldly out of the gorge.

As these struck the level ground we could hear the “Alto!” of Raoul; but instead of halting, as their companions had done, several of them drew their swords and pistols and rushed down the pass.

A volley from both sides stopped the retreat of some; others escaped along the sides of the cliff; and a few—not over half a dozen—succeeded in entering the gorge. It was, of course, beyond our power to follow them; and I ordered the deployed line to close in around the prisoners already taken, lest they should attempt to imitate their braver comrades.

We had no fear of being assailed from the ravine. Those who had gone down carried a panic along with them that would secure us from that danger. At the same time we knew that the tyrant would now be alarmed and escape.

Several of the Rangers—souvenirs of Santa Fé and San Jacinto—requested my permission to go upon his “trail” and pick him off.

This request, under the circumstances, I could not grant, and we set about securing our prisoners. Gun-slings and waist-belts were soon split into thongs, and with these our captives were tied two and two, forming in all a battalion of a hundred and fifteen files—two hundred and thirty men.

With these, arranged in such a manner as we could most conveniently guard them, we marched triumphantly into the American camp.

Chapter Fifty Four.

A Duel, with an odd Ending.

After the battle of Cerro Gordo, our victorious troops pursued the enemy on to Jalapa, where the army halted to bring up its wounded, and prepare for an advance upon the capital of Mexico.

The Jalapenos did not receive us inhospitably—nor the Jalapenas either. They

expected, as a matter of course, that we would sack their beautiful city. This we did not do, and their gratitude enabled our officers to pass their time somewhat agreeably. The gay round that always succeeds a battle—for dead comrades are soon forgotten amidst congratulations and new titles—had no fascination for me.

The balls, the tertulias, the dias de campo, were alike insipid and tiresome. She was not there—and where? I knew not. I might never see her again. All I knew was that they had gone up the country—perhaps to Cordova or Orizava.

Clayley shared my feelings. The bright eyes in the balconies, the sweet voices in the orange-shaded patios of Jalapa, had neither brightness nor music for us. We were both thoroughly miserable.

To add to this unhappy state of things, a bad feeling had sprung up among the officers of our army—a jealousy between the old and the new. Those of the old standing army, holding themselves as a species of military aristocracy, looked upon their brethren of the new regiments as “interlopers”; and this feeling pervaded all ranks, from the commander-in-chief down to the lowest subaltern.

It did not, however, interest all individuals. There were many honourable men on both sides who took no part in a question so ridiculous, but, on the contrary, endeavoured to frown it down. It was the child of idleness and a long spell of garrison duty. On the eve of a battle it always disappeared. I have adverted to this, not that it might interest the reader, but as explaining a result connected with myself.

One of the most prominent actors in this quarrel, on the side of the “old regulars”, was a young officer named Ransom, a captain in an infantry regiment. He was a good fellow in other respects, and a brave soldier, I believe; his chief weakness lay in a claim to be identified with the “aristocracy.”

It is strange that this miserable ambition is always strongest where it should exist with the least propriety. I have observed, in travelling through life—and so has the reader, no doubt—that parvenus are the greatest sticklers for aristocratic privilege;

and Captain Ransom was no exception to this rule. In tumbling over some old family papers, I had found a receipt from the gallant captain's grandfather to my own progenitor, acknowledging the payment of a bill for leather breeches.

It so happened that this very receipt was in my portmanteau at the time; and, nettled at the "carryings-on" of the tailor's grandson, I drew it forth and spread it out upon the mess-table. My brethren of the mess were highly tickled at the document, several of them copying it off for future use.

A copy soon reached Ransom, who, in his hour of indignation, made use of certain expressions that, in their turn, soon reached me.

The result was a challenge, borne by my friend Clayley, and the affair was arranged for the following morning.

The place chosen for our morning's diversion was a sequestered spot upon the banks of the river Zedena, and along the solitary road that leads out towards the Cofre de Perote.

At sunrise we rode out in two carriages, six of us, including our seconds and surgeons. About a mile from town we halted, and leaving the carriages upon the road, crossed over into a small glade in the midst of the chaparral.

It was as pretty a spot for our purpose as the heart could wish for, and had often, we were informed, been used for similar morning exercises—that was, before chivalry had died out among the descendants of Cortez and the conquerors.

The ground was soon lined off—ten paces—and we took our stands, back to back. We were to wheel at the word "Ready!" and fire at "One, two, three!"

We were waiting for the word with that death-like silence which always precedes a similar signal, when Little Jack, who had been left with the carriages, rushed into a glade, calling with all his might:

"Captain! Captain!"

Every face was turned upon him with scowling inquiry, when the boy, gasping for breath, shouted out:

“The Mexicans are on the road!”

The words had scarcely passed his lips when the trampling of hoofs sounded in our ears, and the next moment a band of horsemen came driving pell-mell into the opening. At a single glance we recognised the guerilla!

Ransom, who was nearest, blazed away at the foremost of the band, missing his aim. With a spring the guerillero was over him, his sabre raised for the blow. I fired, and the Mexican leapt from his saddle with a groan.

“Thank you, Haller,” cried my antagonist, as we rushed side by side towards the pistols.

There were four pairs in all, and the surgeons and seconds had already armed themselves, and were pointing their weapons at the enemy. We seized the remaining two, cocking them as we turned.

At this moment my eye fell upon a black horse, and, looking, I recognised the rider. He saw and recognised me at the same moment, and, driving the spurs into his horse’s flanks, sprang forward with a yell. With one bound he was over me, his white teeth gleaming like a tiger’s. His sabre flashed in my eyes—I fired—a heavy body dashed against me—I was struck senseless to the earth!

I was only stunned, and in a few moments I came to my senses. Shots and shouts rang around me. I heard the trampling of hoofs and the groans of wounded men.

I looked up. Horsemen in dark uniforms were galloping across the glade and into the woods beyond. I recognised the yellow facings of the American dragoons.

I drew my hand over my face; it was wet with blood. A heavy body lay across mine, which Little Jack, with all his strength, was endeavouring to drag off. I crawled from under it, and, bending over, looked at the features. I knew them at a glance. I

muttered to my servant:

“Dubrosc! He is dead!”

His body lay spread out in its picturesque attire. A fair form it was. A bullet—my own—had passed through his heart, killing him instantly. I placed my hand upon his forehead. It was cold already, and his beautiful features were white and ashy. His eyes glared with the ghastly expression of death.

“Close them!” I said to the boy, and turned away from the spot.

Wounded men lay around, dragoons and Mexicans, and some were already dead.

A party of officers was at the moment returning from the pursuit, and I recognised my late adversary, with our seconds and surgeons. My friend Clayley had been wounded in the mêlée, and I observed that he carried his arm in a sling. A dragoon officer galloped up.

It was Colonel Harding.

“These fellows, gentlemen,” cried he, reining up his horse, “just came in time to relieve me from a disagreeable duty. I have orders from the commander-in-chief to arrest Captains Haller and Ransom.

“Now, gentlemen,” he continued with a smile, “I think you have had fighting enough for one morning, and if you will promise me to be quiet young men, and keep the peace, I shall, for once in my life, take the liberty of disobeying a general’s orders. What say you, gentlemen?”

It needed not this appeal. There had been no serious cause of quarrel between my adversary and myself, and, moved by a similar impulse, we both stepped forward and grasped one another by the hand.

“Forgive me, my dear Haller,” said Ransom, “I retract all. I assure you my remarks were only made upon the spur of the moment, when I was angry about those cursed leather breeches.”

"And I regret to have given you cause," I replied. "Come with me to my quarters. Let us have a glass of wine together, and we shall light our cigars with the villainous document."

A burst of laughter followed, in which Ransom good-naturedly joined; and we were soon on our way to town, seated in the same carriage, and the best friends in creation!

Some of the soldiers who had "rifled" the body of Dubrosc found a paper upon him which proved that the Frenchman was a spy in the service of Santa Anna. He had thrown himself into the company at New Orleans with the intention of gaining information, and then deserting on his arrival at Mexico. This he succeeded in doing in the manner detailed. Had he been in command of the "Rifle Rangers", he would doubtless have found an opportunity to deliver them over to the enemy at La Virgen or elsewhere.

Chapter Fifty Five.

An Adios.

Clayley had now recovered, and I once more enjoyed the society of my light-hearted friend. But neither that nor the smiles of the hospitable Jalapenas could make me happy. My thoughts dwelt upon Guadalupe, and often was I harassed with the painful apprehension that I should never see her again. Better fortune, however, was in store for me.

One day Clayley and I were sitting over our wine, along with a gay party of friends, in the Fonda de Diligencias, the principal hotel of Jalapa, when Jack touched me on the shoulder, and whispered in my ear:

"Captain, there's a Mexican wants to see ye."

"Who is it?" I demanded, somewhat annoyed at the interruption.

"It's the brother," replied Jack, still speaking in a whisper.

“The brother! What brother?”

“Of the young ladies, Captain.”

I started from my chair, overturning a decanter and several glasses.

“Hilloa! what’s the matter?” shouted several voices in a breath.

“Gentlemen, will you excuse me?—one moment only—I—I—will—”

“Certainly! certainly!” cried my companions, all at once, wondering what was the matter.

The next moment I was in the ante-sala, embracing Narcisso. “And so you are all here! When did you arrive?”

“Yesterday, Captain. I came to town for you, but could not find you.”

“And they are well?—all well?”

“Yes, Captain. Papa expects you will come this evening, with the lieutenant and the other officer.”

“The other officer! Who, Narcisso!”

“I think he was with you on your first visit to La Virgen—un señor gordo.”

“Oh! the major! Yes, yes, we shall come; but where have you been since we met, Narcissito?”

“To Orizava. Papa has a tobacco-farm near Orizava; he always goes to it when he comes up here. But, Captain, we were so astonished to hear from your people that you had been a prisoner, and travelling along with us! We knew the guerillos had some American prisoners, but we never dreamt of its being you. Carambo! if I had known that!”

“But how came you, Narcisso, to be with the guerilla?”

“Oh! papa had many things to carry up the country; and he, with some other families, paid Colonel Cenobio for an escort—the country is so full of robbers.”

“Ah! sure. Tell me, Narcisso, how came I by this?”

I held out the dagger.

“I know not, Captain. I am ashamed to tell you that I lost it the day after you gave it to me!”

“Oh! never mind. Take it again, and say to your papa, I shall bring ‘el señor gordo’ (the fat gentleman) along with me.”

“You will know the way, Captain. Yonder is our house.” And the lad pointed to the white turrets of an aristocratic-looking mansion that appeared over the tree-tops, about a mile distant from the town.

“I shall easily find it.”

“Adieu, then, Captain; we shall be impatient till you arrive—hasta la tarde!” (till the evening).

So saying, the youth departed.

I communicated to Clayley the cause of my temporary withdrawal; and, seizing the earliest opportunity, we left our companions over their cups.

It was now near sundown, and we were about to jump into our saddles, when I recollected my promise to bring the major. Clayley proposed leaving him behind and planning an apology; but a hint that he might be useful in “keeping off” Don Cosmé and the señora caused the lieutenant suddenly to change his tactics, and we set out for Blossom’s quarters.

We had no difficulty in persuading “el señor gordo” to accompany us, as soon as he ascertained where we were going. He had never ceased to remember that dinner. Hercules was brought out and saddled, and we all three galloped off for the mansion of our friends.

After passing under the shadows, of green trees, and through copses filled with bright flowers, we arrived at the house, one of the fairest mansions it had ever been

our fortune to enter. We were just in time to enjoy the soft twilight of an eternal spring—of a landscape siempre verde; and, what was more to the major's mind, in time for a supper that rivalled the well-remembered dinner.

As I had anticipated, the major proved exceedingly useful during the visit. In his capacity of quarter-master he had already picked up a little Spanish—enough to hold Don Cosmé in check over the wine; while Clayley and myself, with "Lupé" and "Luz", walked out into the verandah to "take a peep at the moon". Her light was alluring, and we could not resist the temptation of a stroll through the gardens.

It was celestial night; and we dallied along dos y dos (two and two), under the pictured shadows of the orange-trees, and sat upon curiously-formed benches, and gazed upon the moon, and listened to the soft notes of the tropic night-birds.

The perils of the past were all forgotten, and the perils of the future—we thought not of them.

It was late when we said "buenas noches" to our friends, and we parted with a mutual "hasta la mañana." It is needless to say that we kept our promise in the morning, and made another for the following morning, and kept that too; and so on till the awful bugle summoned us once more to the "route."

The detail of our actions during these days would have no interest for the reader, though to us the most interesting part of our lives. There was a sameness—a monotony, it is true; but a monotony that both my friend and myself could have endured for ever.

I do not even remember the details. All I can remember is, that on the eve of our march I found myself "cornering" Don Cosmé, and telling him plainly, to his teeth, that I meant to marry one of his daughters; and that my friend—who had not yet learned the "lingo", and had duly commissioned me as his "go-between"—would be most happy to take the other off his hands.

I remember very well, too, Don Cosmé's reply, which was given with a half-smile,

half-grin—somewhat cold, though not disagreeable in its expression. It was thus:

“Captain—when the war is over.”

Don Cosmé had no intention that his daughters should become widows before they had fairly been wives.

And we bade adieu once more to the light of love, and walked in the shadow of war; and we toiled up to the high tables of the Andes, and crossed the burning plains of Perote; and we forded the cold streams of Rio Frio, and climbed the snowy spurs of Popocatepec; and, after many a toilsome march, our bayonets bristled along the borders of the Lake Tezcoco. Here we fought—a death-struggle, too—for we knew there was no retreat. But our struggle was crowned with victory, and the starry flag waved over the ancient city of the Aztecs.

Neither my friend nor myself escaped unhurt. We were shot “all over”; but, fortunately, no bones were broken, and neither of us was converted into a cripple.

And then came the “piping times of peace”, and Clayley and I spent our days in riding out upon the Jalapa road, watching for that great old family-carriage, which, it had been promised, should come.

And it came rumbling along at length, drawn by twelve mules, and deposited its precious load in a palace in the Calle Capuchinas.

And shortly after, two officers in shining uniforms entered the portals of that same palace, sent up their cards, and were admitted on the instant. Ah! these were rare times! But rarer still—for it should only occur once in a man’s lifetime—was an hour spent in the little chapel of San Bernardo.

There is a convent—Santa Catarina—the richest in Mexico; the richest, perhaps, in the world. There are nuns there—beautiful creatures—who possess property (some of them being worth a million of dollars); and yet these children of heaven never look upon the face of man!

About a week after my visit to San Bernardo, I was summoned to the convent, and permitted—a rare privilege for one of my sex—to enter its sacred precincts. It was a painful scene. Poor “Mary of Mercy”! How lovely she looked in her snow-white vestments!—lovelier in her sorrow than I had ever seen her before. May God pour out the balm of oblivion into the heart of this erring but repentant angel!

I returned to New Orleans in the latter part of 1848. I was walking one morning along the Levée, with a fair companion on my arm, when a well-known voice struck on my ear, exclaiming:

“I’ll be dog-goned, Rowl, if it ain’t the cap’n!”

I turned, and beheld Raoul and the hunter. They had doffed the regimentals, and were preparing to “start” on a trapping expedition to the Rocky Mountains.

I need not describe our mutual pleasure at meeting, which was more than shared by my wife, who had often made me detail to her the exploits of my comrades. I inquired for Chane. The Irishman, at the breaking up of the “war-troops”, had entered one of the old regiments, and was at this time, as Lincoln expressed it, “the first sargint of a kump’ny.”

I could not permit my old ranging comrades to depart without a souvenir. My companion drew off a pair of rings, and presented one to each on the spot. The Frenchman, with the gallantry of a Frenchman, drew his upon his finger; but Lincoln, after trying to do the same, declared, with a comical grin, that he couldn’t “git the eend of his wipin’ stick inter it.” He wrapped it up carefully, however, and deposited it in his bullet-pouch.

My friends accompanied us to our hotel, where I found them more appropriate presents than the rings. To Raoul I gave my revolving pistols, not expecting to have any further use for them myself; and to the hunter, that which he valued more than any other earthly object, the major’s “Dutch gun”. Doubtless, ere this, the zündnadel has slain many a “grisly b’ar” among the wild ravines of the Rocky Mountains.

Courteous reader! I was about to write the word “adieu”, when “Little Jack” handed me a letter, bearing the Vera Cruz post-mark. It was dated, “La Virgen, November 1, 1849.” It concluded as follows:

“You were a fool for leaving Mexico, and you’ll never be half as happy anywhere else as I am here. You would hardly know the ‘ranche’—I mean the fields. I have cleared off the weeds, and expect next year to take a couple of hundred bales off the ground. I believe I can raise as good cotton here as in Louisiana; besides, I have a little corner for vanilla. It would do your heart good to see the improvements; and little Luz, too, takes such an interest in all I do. Haller, I’m the happiest man in creation.

“I dined yesterday with our old friend Cenobio; and you should have seen him when I told him the man he had in his company. I thought he would have split his sides. He’s a perfect old trump this Cenobio, notwithstanding his smuggling propensities.

“By the way, you have heard, I suppose, that our ‘other old friend’, the padre, has been shot. He took part with Paredes against the Government. They caught him at Queretaro, and shot him with a dozen or so of his ‘beauties’ in less than a squirrel’s jump.

“And now, my dear Haller, a last word. We all want you to come back. The house at Jalapa is ready for you, and Dona Joaquina says it is yours, and she wants you to come back.

“Don Cosmé, too—with whom it appears Lupé was the favourite—he wants you to come back. Old Cenobio, who is still puzzled about how you got the knife to cut through the adobes, he wants you to come back. Luz is fretting after Lupé, and she wants you to come back. And, last of all, I want you to come back. So ‘stand not on the order’ of your coming, but come at once.

“Yours for ever,—

“Edward Clayley.”

Reader, do you want me to come back?

The End.

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