



**Томас Майн Рид**  
**Н. А. Самуэльян**  
**Лучшие романы Томаса Майна Рида /**  
**The Best of Thomas Mayne Reid**  
Серия «Иностранный язык: учимся у классиков»

*Издательский текст предоставлен издательством "Эксмо"*

*[http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio\\_book/?art=6001493](http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=6001493)*

*Лучшие романы Томаса Майна Рида / The Best of Thomas Mayne Reid: Эксмо; Москва; 2013*

*ISBN 978-5-699-63219-0*

### **Аннотация**

Книга «Лучшие романы Томаса Майна Рида» на английском языке станет эффективным и увлекательным пособием для изучающих иностранный язык на хорошем «продолжающем» и «продвинутом» уровне. Она поможет эффективно расширить словарный запас, подскажет, где и как правильно употреблять устойчивые выражения и грамматические конструкции, просто подарит радость от чтения. В конце книги дана краткая информация о культуроведческих, страноведческих, исторических и географических реалиях описываемого периода, которая поможет лучше ориентироваться в тексте произведения.

Серия «Иностранный язык: учимся у классиков» адресована широкому кругу читателей, хорошо владеющих английским языком и стремящихся к его совершенствованию.

## Содержание

The Headless Horseman	5
Prologue	5
Chapter 1	7
Chapter 2	12
Chapter 3	17
Chapter 4	21
Chapter 5	26
Chapter 6	31
Chapter 7	37
Chapter 8	42
Chapter 9	45
Chapter 10	50
Chapter 11	54
Chapter 12	59
Chapter 13	65
Chapter 14	68
Chapter 15	72
Chapter 16	76
Chapter 17	80
Chapter 18	84
Chapter 19	91
Chapter 20	96
Chapter 21	99
Chapter 22	102
Chapter 23	106
Chapter 24	109
Chapter 25	112
Chapter 26	116
Chapter 27	119
Chapter 28	122
Chapter 29	125
Chapter 30	127
Chapter 31	130
Chapter 32	133
Chapter 33	136
Chapter 34	140
Chapter 35	143
Chapter 36	146
Chapter 37	150
Chapter 38	153
Chapter 39	156
Chapter 40	160
Chapter 41	163
Chapter 42	167
Chapter 43	172
Chapter 44	176

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

179

# The Best of Thomas Mayne Reid

## The Headless Horseman

### Prologue

The stag of Texas<sup>1</sup>, reclining in midnight lair, is startled from his slumbers by the hoofstroke of a horse.

He does not forsake his covert, nor yet rise to his feet. His domain is shared by the wild steeds of the savannah<sup>2</sup>, given to nocturnal straying. He only uprears his head; and, with antlers o'ertopping the tall grass, listens for a repetition of the sound.

Again is the hoofstroke heard, but with altered intonation. There is a ring of metal – the clinking of steel against stone.

The sound, significant to the ear of the stag, causes a quick change in his air and attitude. Springing clear of his couch, and bounding a score of yards across the prairie<sup>3</sup>, he pauses to look back upon the disturber of his dreams.

In the clear moonlight of a southern sky, he recognises the most ruthless of his enemies – man. One is approaching upon horseback.

Yielding to instinctive dread, he is about to resume his flight: when something in the appearance of the horseman – some unnatural seeming – holds him transfixed to the spot.

With haunches in quivering contact with the sward, and frontlet faced to the rear, he continues to gaze – his large brown eyes straining upon the intruder in a mingled expression of fear and bewilderment.

What has challenged the stag to such protracted scrutiny?

The horse is perfect in all its parts – a splendid steed, saddled, bridled, and otherwise completely caparisoned. In it there appears nothing amiss – nothing to produce either wonder or alarm. But the man – the rider? Ah! About him there *is* something to cause both – something weird – something *wanting*!

By heavens! it is the head!

Even the unreasoning animal can perceive this; and, after gazing a moment with wildered eyes – wondering what abnormal monster thus mocks its cervine intelligence – terror-stricken it continues its retreat; nor again pauses, till it has plunged through the waters of the Leona<sup>4</sup>, and placed the current of the stream between itself and the ghastly intruder.

Heedless of the affrighted deer – either of its presence, or precipitate flight – the Headless Horseman rides on.

He, too, is going in the direction of the river. Unlike the stag, he does not seem pressed for time; but advances in a slow, tranquil pace: so silent as to seem ceremonious.

Apparently absorbed in solemn thought, he gives free rein to his steed: permitting the animal, at intervals, to snatch a mouthful of the herbage growing by the way. Nor does he, by voice or gesture, urge it impatiently onward, when the howl-bark of the prairie-wolf causes it to fling its head on high, and stand snorting in its tracks.

---

<sup>1</sup> **Texas** – a state in the South West of the USA (678,358 square kilometres); till 1836 Texas belonged to Mexico; after the independence from Mexico had been declared, the territory was included in the USA and became a state in 1845

<sup>2</sup> **savannah** – a plain with grass and no trees

<sup>3</sup> **prairie** – a level treeless land covered with grass

<sup>4</sup> **the Leona** – the river in Texas, USA

He appears to be under the influence of some all-absorbing emotion, from which no common incident can awake him. There is no speech – not a whisper – to betray its nature. The startled stag, his own horse, the wolf, and the midnight moon, are the sole witnesses of his silent abstraction.

His shoulders shrouded under a *serape*<sup>5</sup>, one edge of which, flirited up by the wind, displays a portion of his figure: his limbs encased in “water-guards” of jaguar-skin: thus sufficiently sheltered against the dews of the night, or the showers of a tropical sky, he rides on – silent as the stars shining above, unconcerned as the cicada<sup>6</sup> that chirrup in the grass beneath, or the prairie breeze playing with the drapery of his dress.

Something at length appears to rouse from his reverie, and stimulate him to greater speed – his steed, at the same time. The latter, tossing up its head, gives utterance to a joyous neigh; and, with outstretched neck, and spread nostrils, advances in a gait gradually increasing to a canter. The proximity of the river explains the altered pace.

The horse halts not again, till the crystal current is surging against his flanks, and the legs of his rider are submerged knee-deep under the surface.

The animal eagerly assuages its thirst; crosses to the opposite side; and, with vigorous stride, ascends the sloping bank.

Upon the crest occurs a pause: as if the rider tarried till his steed should shake the water from its flanks. There is a rattling of saddle-flaps, and stirrup-leathers, resembling thunder, amidst a cloud of vapour, white as the spray of a cataract.

Out of this self-constituted *nimbus*<sup>7</sup>, the Headless Horseman emerges; and moves onward, as before.

Apparently pricked by the spur, and guided by the rein, of his rider, the horse no longer strays from the track; but steps briskly forward, as if upon a path already trodden.

A treeless savannah stretches before – selvedged by the sky. Outlined against the azure<sup>8</sup> is seen the imperfect centaurean<sup>9</sup> shape gradually dissolving in the distance, till it becomes lost to view, under the mystic gloaming of the moonlight!

---

<sup>5</sup> **serape** – a bright, coloured Mexican shawl or plaid

<sup>6</sup> **cicada** – a flying insect which produces a shrill sound in hot, dry weather

<sup>7</sup> **nimbus** – a light or golden circle round the saint’s head; a rain cloud

<sup>8</sup> **azure** – (*poet.*) bright blue (usually about the sky)

<sup>9</sup> **centaurean** – from *centaur* – in Greek mythology, a strange creature, half man and half horse

## Chapter 1

### The Burnt Prairie

On the great plain of Texas, about a hundred miles southward from the old Spanish town of San Antonio de Bejar<sup>10</sup>, the noonday sun is shedding his beams from a sky of cerulean brightness. Under the golden light appears a group of objects, but little in unison with the landscape around them: since they betoken the presence of human beings, in a spot where there is no sign of human habitation.

The objects in question are easily identified – even at a great distance. They are waggons; each covered with its ribbed and rounded tilt of snow-white “Osnaburgh<sup>11</sup>.”

There are ten of them – scarce enough to constitute a “caravan” of traders, nor yet a “government train.” They are more likely the individual property of an emigrant; who has landed upon the coast, and is wending his way to one of the late-formed settlements on the Leona.

Slowly crawling across the savannah, it could scarce be told that they are in motion; but for their relative-position, in long serried line, indicating the order of march.

The dark bodies between each two declare that the teams are attached; and that they are making progress is proved, by the retreating antelope, scared from its noonday *siesta*, and the long-shanked curlew, rising with a screech from the sward – both bird and beast wondering at the string of strange *behemoths*, thus invading their wilderness domain.

Elsewhere upon the prairie, no movement may be detected – either of bird or quadruped. It is the time of day when all tropical life becomes torpid, or seeks repose in the shade; man alone, stimulated by the love of gain, or the promptings of ambition, disregarding the laws of nature, and defying the fervour of the sun.

So seems it with the owner of the tilted train; who, despite the relaxing influence of the fierce mid-day heat, keeps moving on.

That he is an emigrant – and not one of the ordinary class – is evidenced in a variety of ways. The ten large waggons of Pittsburgh<sup>12</sup> build, each hauled by eight able-bodied mules; their miscellaneous contents: plenteous provisions, articles of costly furniture, even of *luxe*, live stock in the shape of coloured women and children; the groups of black and yellow bondsmen, walking alongside, or straggling foot-sore in the rear; the light travelling carriage in the lead, drawn by a span of sleek-coated Kentucky<sup>13</sup> mules, and driven by a black Jehu<sup>14</sup>, sweltering in a suit of livery; all bespeak, not a poor Northern-States settler in search of a new home, but a rich Southerner who has already purchased one, and is on his way to take possession of it.

And this is the exact story of the train. It is the property of a planter who has landed at Indianola<sup>15</sup>, on the Gulf of Matagorda<sup>16</sup>; and is now travelling overland – *en route*<sup>17</sup> for his destination.

In the *cortège*<sup>18</sup> that accompanies it, riding habitually at its head, is the planter himself – Woodley Poindexter – a tall thin man of fifty, with a slightly sallowish complexion, and aspect

---

<sup>10</sup> **San Antonio de Bejar** – the city in south-central Texas; it was founded by the Spanish expedition from Mexico in 1718

<sup>11</sup> **Osnaburgh** – a linen cloth of a certain trademark

<sup>12</sup> **Pittsburgh** – the city in Pennsylvania on the Monongahela River; the first settlement was founded in 1758

<sup>13</sup> **Kentucky** – the state in the south of the United States (104,664 square kilometres); it was admitted as the 15<sup>th</sup> state in 1792

<sup>14</sup> **Jehu** – the King of Israel (842–815 BC) who was a great chariot driver

<sup>15</sup> **Indianola** – the city in central Iowa founded in 1849; there used to be a town of the same name in Texas

<sup>16</sup> **the Gulf of Matagorda** – the Bay of Matagorda, an inlet of the Gulf of Mexico in southern Texas

<sup>17</sup> **en route** – on the way to/from (*French*)

<sup>18</sup> **cortège** – a procession (*French*)

proudly severe. He is simply though not inexpensively clad: in a loosely fitting frock of alpaca cloth, a waistcoat of black satin, and trousers of nankin<sup>19</sup>. A shirt of finest linen shows its plaits through the opening of his vest – its collar embraced by a piece of black ribbon; while the shoe, resting in his stirrup, is of finest tanned leather. His features are shaded by a broad-brimmed Leghorn hat<sup>20</sup>.

Two horsemen are riding alongside – one on his right, the other on the left – a stripling scarce twenty, and a young man six or seven years older. The former is his son – a youth, whose open cheerful countenance contrasts, not only with the severe aspect of his father, but with the somewhat sinister features on the other side, and which belong to his cousin.

The youth is dressed in a French blouse of sky-coloured “cottonade,” with trousers of the same material; a most appropriate costume for a southern climate, and which, with the Panama hat<sup>21</sup> upon his head, is equally becoming.

The cousin, an ex-officer of volunteers, affects a military undress of dark blue cloth, with a forage cap to correspond.

There is another horseman riding near, who, only on account of having a white skin – not white for all that – is entitled to description. His coarser features, and cheaper habiliments; the keel-coloured “cowhide” clutched in his right hand, and flitted with such evident skill, proclaim him the overseer – and whipper up – of the swarthy pedestrians composing the *entourage*<sup>22</sup> of the train.

The travelling carriage, which is a “carriole<sup>23</sup>” – a sort of cross between a Jersey waggon<sup>24</sup> and a barouche<sup>25</sup> – has two occupants. One is a young lady of the whitest skin; the other a girl of the blackest. The former is the daughter of Woodley Poindexter – his only daughter. She of the sable complexion is the young lady’s handmaid.

The emigrating party is from the “coast” of the Mississippi<sup>26</sup> – from Louisiana<sup>27</sup>. The planter is not himself a native of this State – in other words a *Creole*<sup>28</sup>; but the type is exhibited in the countenance of his son – still more in that fair face, seen occasionally through the curtains of the carriole, and whose delicate features declare descent from one of those endorsed damsels – *filles à la casette* – who, more than a hundred years ago, came across the Atlantic provided with proofs of their virtue – in the *casket*!

A grand sugar planter of the South is Woodley Poindexter; one of the highest and haughtiest of his class; one of the most profuse in aristocratic hospitalities: hence the necessity of forsaking his Mississippian home, and transferring himself and his “penates<sup>29</sup>,” – with only a remnant of his “niggers,” – to the wilds of south-western Texas.

The sun is upon the meridian line, and almost in the zenith. The travellers tread upon their own shadows. Enervated by the excessive heat, the white horsemen sit silently in their saddles. Even the dusky pedestrians, less sensible to its influence, have ceased their garrulous “gumbo;” and, in straggling groups, shamble listlessly along in the rear of the waggons.

---

<sup>19</sup> **nankin** – a kind of rich cloth

<sup>20</sup> **A Leghorn hat** is a hat made of straw imported from Livorno, a town in Italy

<sup>21</sup> **A Panama hat** is a light hat made of plaited palm leaves; the name comes from *Panama*, a Spanish-speaking republic in Central America

<sup>22</sup> **entourage** – people accompanying a respected or high-ranking person

<sup>23</sup> **carriole** – a light, covered carriage drawn by one horse

<sup>24</sup> **a Jersey wagon** – a light two-wheeled carriage

<sup>25</sup> **a barouche** – a four-wheeled carriage for four passengers and the driver, with two seats facing each other

<sup>26</sup> **the Mississippi** – the largest river in North America; it flows south to the Gulf of Mexico. Together with its tributary, the Missouri River, the Mississippi is the longest river in the world

<sup>27</sup> **Louisiana** – the US state (123,366 square kilometres) admitted to the union in 1812 as the 18<sup>th</sup> member; it borders Arkansas, Mississippi and Texas

<sup>28</sup> **a Creole** – in the old French or Spanish states in the south of the USA, a person of pure European or mixed European origin; descendants of the French and Spanish settlers

<sup>29</sup> **penates** – home, household; in Roman mythology, Penates were household gods who protected the house



The silence – solemn as that of a funereal procession – is interrupted only at intervals by the pistol-like crack of a whip, or the loud “wo-ha,” delivered in deep baritone from the thick lips of some sable teamster.

Slowly the train moves on, as if groping its way. There is no regular road. The route is indicated by the wheel-marks of some vehicles that have passed before – barely conspicuous, by having crushed the culms of the shot grass.

Notwithstanding the slow progress, the teams are doing their best. The planter believes himself within less than twenty miles of the end of his journey. He hopes to reach it before night: hence the march continued through the mid-day heat.

Unexpectedly the drivers are directed to pull up, by a sign from the overseer; who has been riding a hundred yards in the advance, and who is seen to make a sudden stop – as if some obstruction had presented itself.

He comes trotting back towards the train. His gestures tell of something amiss. What is it?

There has been much talk about Indians – of a probability of their being encountered in this quarter.

Can it be the red-skinned marauders? Scarcely: the gestures of the overseer do not betray actual alarm.

“What is it, Mr Sansom?” asked the planter, as the man rode up.

“The grass air burnt. The prairie’s been afire.”

“*Been* on fire! Is it on fire *now*?” hurriedly inquired the owner of the waggon, with an apprehensive glance towards the travelling carriage. “Where? I see no smoke!”

“No, sir – no,” stammered the overseer, becoming conscious that he had caused unnecessary alarm; “I didn’t say it air afire now: only thet it hez been, an the hul ground air as black as the ten o’ spades.”

“Ta – tat! what of that? I suppose we can travel over a black prairie, as safely as a green one?”

“What nonsense of you, Josh Sansom, to raise such a row about nothing – frightening people out of their senses! Ho! there, you niggers! Lay the leather to your teams, and let the train proceed. Whip up! – whip up!”

“But, Captain Calhoun,” protested the overseer, in response to the gentleman who had reproached him in such chaste terms; “how air we to find the way?”

“Find the way! What are you raving about? We haven’t lost it – have we?”

“I’m afeerd we hev, though. The wheel-tracks ain’t no longer to be seen. They’re burnt out, along wi’ the grass.”

“What matters that? I reckon we can cross a piece of scorched prairie, without wheel-marks to guide us? We’ll find them again on the other side.”

“Ye-es,” naïvely responded the overseer, who, although a “down-easter,” had been far enough west to have learnt something of frontier life; “if theer air any other side. I kedn’t see it out o’ the seddle – ne’er a sign o’ it.”

“Whip up, niggers! whip up!” shouted Calhoun, without heeding the remark; and spurring onwards, as a sign that the order was to be obeyed.

The teams are again set in motion; and, after advancing to the edge of the burnt tract, without instructions from any one, are once more brought to a stand.

The white men on horseback draw together for a consultation. There is need: as all are satisfied by a single glance directed to the ground before them.

Far as the eye can reach the country is of one uniform colour – black as Erebus<sup>30</sup>. There is nothing green – not a blade of grass – not a reed nor weed!

---

<sup>30</sup> **Erebus** – in Greek mythology, Erebus (Darkness) is the offspring of Chaos (the Greek for *Abyss*)

It is after the summer solstice. The ripened culms of the *gramineae*<sup>31</sup>, and the stalks of the prairie flowers, have alike crumbled into dust under the devastating breath of fire.

In front – on the right and left – to the utmost verge of vision extends the scene of desolation. Over it the cerulean sky is changed to a darker blue; the sun, though clear of clouds, seems to scowl rather than shine – as if reciprocating the frown of the earth.

The overseer has made a correct report – there is no trail visible. The action of the fire, as it raged among the ripe grass, has eliminated the impression of the wheels hitherto indicating the route. “What are we to do?”

The planter himself put this inquiry, in a tone that told of a vacillating spirit.

“Do, uncle Woodley! What else but keep straight on? The river must be on the other side? If we don’t hit the crossing, to a half mile or so, we can go up, or down the bank – as the case may require.”

“But, Cassius: if we should lose our way?”

“We can’t. There’s but a patch of this, I suppose? If we do go a little astray, we must come out somewhere – on one side, or the other.”

“Well, nephew, you know best: I shall be guided by you.”

“No fear, uncle. I’ve made my way out of a worse fix than this. Drive on, niggers! Keep straight after *me*.”

The ex-officer of volunteers, casting a conceited glance towards the travelling carriage – through the curtains of which appears a fair face, slightly shadowed with anxiety – gives the spur to his horse; and with confident air trots onward.

A chorus of whipcracks is succeeded by the trampling of fourscore mules, mingled with the clanking of wheels against their hubs. The waggon-train is once more in motion.

The mules step out with greater rapidity. The sable surface, strange to their eyes, excites them to brisker action – causing them to raise the hoof, as soon as it touches the turf. The younger animals show fear – snorting, as they advance.

In time their apprehensions become allayed; and, taking the cue from their older associates, they move on steadily as before.

A mile or more is made, apparently in a direct line from the point of starting. Then there is a halt. The self-appointed guide has ordered it. He has reined up his horse; and is sitting in the saddle with less show of confidence. He appears to be puzzled about the direction.

The landscape – if such it may be called – has assumed a change; though not for the better. It is still sable as ever, to the verge of the horizon. But the surface is no longer a plain: it *rolls*. There are ridges – gentle undulations – with valleys between. They are not entirely treeless – though nothing that may be termed a tree is in sight. There have been such, before the fire – *algarobias*<sup>32</sup>, *mezquites*<sup>33</sup>, and others of the acacia family – standing solitary, or in copses. Their light pinnate foliage has disappeared like flax before the flame. Their existence is only evidenced by charred trunks, and blackened boughs.

“You’ve lost the way, nephew?” said the planter, riding rapidly up.

“No uncle – not yet. I’ve only stopped to have a look. It must lie in this direction – down that valley. Let them drive on. We’re going all right – I’ll answer for it.”

Once more in motion – adown the slope – then along the valley – then up the acclivity of another ridge – and then there is a second stoppage upon its crest.

“You’ve lost the way, Cash?” said the planter, coming up and repeating his former observation.

---

<sup>31</sup> **gramineae** – grass

<sup>32</sup> **algarobias** – a kind of wood species

<sup>33</sup> **mezquites** – a name of a bush with thorns

“Damned if I don’t believe I have, uncle!” responded the nephew, in a tone of not very respectful mistrust. “Anyhow; who the devil could find his way out of an ashpit like this? No, no!” he continued, reluctant to betray his embarrassment as the carriage came up. “I see now. We’re all right yet. The river must be in this direction. Come on!”

On goes the guide, evidently irresolute. On follow the sable teamsters, who, despite their stolidity, do not fail to note some signs of vacillation. They can tell that they are no longer advancing in a direct line; but circuitously among the copses, and across the glades that stretch between.

All are gratified by a shout from the conductor, announcing recovered confidence. In response there is a universal explosion of whipcord, with joyous exclamations.

Once more they are stretching their teams along a travelled road – where a half-score of wheeled vehicles must have passed before them. And not long before: the wheel-tracks are of recent impress – the hoof-prints of the animals fresh as if made within the hour. A train of waggons, not unlike their own, must have passed over the burnt prairie!

Like themselves, it could only be going towards the Leona: perhaps some government convoy on its way to Fort Inge<sup>34</sup>? In that case they have only to keep in the same track. The Fort is on the line of their march – but a short distance beyond the point where their journey is to terminate.

Nothing could be more opportune. The guide, hitherto perplexed – though without acknowledging it – is at once relieved of all anxiety; and with a fresh exhibition of conceit, orders the route to be resumed.

For a mile or more the waggon-tracks are followed – not in a direct line, but bending about among the skeleton copses. The countenance of Cassius Calhoun, for a while wearing a confident look, gradually becomes clouded. It assumes the profoundest expression of despondency, on discovering that the four-and-forty wheel-tracks he is following, have been made by ten Pittsburgh waggons, and a carriage – the same that are now following him, and in whose company he has been travelling *all the way from the Gulf of Matagorda*!

---

<sup>34</sup> **Fort Inge** – a settlement built in 1849 on the eastern bank of the Leona River, 135 kilometres south-west of San Antonio

## Chapter 2

### The Trail of the Lazo

35

Beyond doubt, the waggons of Woodley Poindexter were going over ground already traced by the tiring of their wheels.

“Our own tracks!” muttered Calhoun on making the discovery, adding a fierce oath as he reined up.

“Our own tracks! What mean you, Cassius? You don’t say we’ve been travelling – ”

“On our own tracks. I do, uncle; that very thing. We must have made a complete circumbendibus of it. See! here’s the hind hoof of my own horse, with half a shoe off; and there’s the foot of the niggers. Besides, I can tell the ground. That’s the very hill we went down as we left our last stopping place. Hang the crooked luck! We’ve made a couple of miles for nothing.”

Embarrassment is no longer the only expression upon the face of the speaker. It has deepened to chagrin, with an admixture of shame. It is through him that the train is without a regular guide. One, engaged at Indianola, had piloted them to their last camping place. There, in consequence of some dispute, due to the surly temper of the ex-captain of volunteers, the man had demanded his dismissal, and gone back.

For this – as also for an ill-timed display of confidence in his power to conduct the march – is the planter’s nephew now suffering under a sense of shame. He feels it keenly as the carriage comes up, and bright eyes become witnesses of his discomfiture.

Poindexter does not repeat his inquiry. That the road is lost is a fact evident to all. Even the barefooted or “broganned” pedestrians have recognised their long-heeled footprints, and become aware that they are for the second time treading upon the same ground.

There is a general halt, succeeded by an animated conversation among the white men. The situation is serious: the planter himself believes it to be so. He cannot that day reach the end of his journey – a thing upon which he had set his mind.

That is the very least misfortune that can befall them. There are others possible, and probable. There are perils upon the burnt plain. They may be compelled to spend the night upon it, with no water for their animals. Perhaps a second day and night – or longer – who can tell how long?

How are they to find their way? The sun is beginning to descend; though still too high in heaven to indicate his line of declination. By waiting a while they may discover the quarters of the compass.

But to what purpose? The knowledge of east, west, north, and south can avail nothing now: they have lost their *line of march*.

Calhoun has become cautious. He no longer volunteers to point out the path. He hesitates to repeat his pioneering experiments – after such manifest and shameful failure.

A ten minutes’ discussion terminates in nothing. No one can suggest a feasible plan of proceeding. No one knows how to escape from the embrace of that dark desert, which appears to cloud not only the sun and sky, but the countenances of all who enter within its limits.

A flock of black vultures is seen flying afar off. They come nearer, and nearer. Some alight upon the ground – others hover above the heads of the strayed travellers. Is there a boding in the behaviour of the birds?

---

<sup>35</sup> **lazo** – lasso – a long rope used for catching horses and cattle

Another ten minutes is spent in the midst of moral and physical gloom. Then, as if by a benignant mandate from heaven, does cheerfulness re-assume its sway. The cause? A horseman riding in the direction of the train!

An unexpected sight: who could have looked for human being in such a place? All eyes simultaneously sparkle with joy; as if, in the approach of the horseman, they beheld the advent of a saviour!

“He’s coming this way, is he not?” inquired the planter, scarce confident in his failing sight.

“Yes, father; straight as he can ride,” replied Henry, lifting the hat from his head, and waving it on high: the action accompanied by a shout intended to attract the horseman.

The signal was superfluous. The stranger had already sighted the halted waggons; and, riding towards them at a gallop, was soon within speaking distance.

He did not draw bridle, until he had passed the train; and arrived upon the spot occupied by the planter and his party.

“A Mexican!” whispered Henry, drawing his deduction from the habiliments of the horseman.

“So much the better,” replied Poindexter, in the same tone of voice; “he’ll be all the more likely to know the road.”

“Not a bit of Mexican about him,” muttered Calhoun, “excepting the rig. I’ll soon see. *Buenos días, caballero! Está V. Mexicano?*” (Good day, sir! are you a Mexican?)

“No, indeed,” replied the stranger, with a protesting smile. “Anything but that. I can speak to you in Spanish, if you prefer it; but I dare say you will understand me better in English: which, I presume, is your native tongue?”

Calhoun, suspecting that he had spoken indifferent Spanish, or indifferently pronounced it, refrains from making rejoinder.

“*American*, sir,” replied Poindexter, his national pride feeling slightly piqued. Then, as if fearing to offend the man from whom he intended asking a favour, he added: “Yes, sir; we are all Americans – from the *Southern States*.”

“That I can perceive by your following.” An expression of contempt – scarce perceptible – showed itself upon the countenance of the speaker, as his eye rested upon the groups of black bondsmen. “I can perceive, too,” he added, “that you are strangers to prairie travelling. You have lost your way?”

“We have, sir; and have very little prospect of recovering it, unless we may count upon your kindness to direct us.”

“Not much kindness in that. By the merest chance I came upon your trail, as I was crossing the prairie. I saw you were going astray; and have ridden this way to set you right.”

“It is very good of you. We shall be most thankful, sir. My name is Poindexter – Woodley Poindexter, of Louisiana. I have purchased a property on the Leona river, near Fort Inge. We were in hopes of reaching it before nightfall. Can we do so?”

“There is nothing to hinder you: if you follow the instructions I shall give.”

On saying this, the stranger rode a few paces apart; and appeared to scrutinise the country – as if to determine the direction which the travellers should take.

Poised conspicuously upon the crest of the ridge, horse and man presented a picture worthy of skilful delineation.

A steed, such as might have been ridden by an Arab sheik – blood-bay in colour – broad in counter – with limbs clean as culms of cane, and hips of elliptical outline, continued into a magnificent tail sweeping rearward like a rainbow: on his back a rider – a young man of not more than five-and-twenty – of noble form and features; habited in the picturesque costume of a Mexican

*ranchero*<sup>36</sup> – spencer jacket of velveteen – *calzoneros*<sup>37</sup> laced along the seams – *calzoncillos*<sup>38</sup> of snow-white lawn – *botas*<sup>39</sup> of buff leather, heavily spurred at the heels – around the waist a scarf of scarlet crape; and on his head a hat of black glaze, banded with gold bullion. Picture to yourself a horseman thus habited; seated in a deep tree-saddle, of Moorish<sup>40</sup> shape and Mexican manufacture, with housings of leather stamped in antique patterns, such as were worn by the caparisoned steeds of the Conquistadores<sup>41</sup>; picture to yourself such a *cavallero*<sup>42</sup>, and you will have before your mind's eye a counterpart of him, upon whom the planter and his people were gazing.

Through the curtains of the travelling carriage he was regarded with glances that spoke of a singular sentiment. For the first time in her life, Louise Poindexter looked upon that – hitherto known only to her imagination – a man of heroic mould. Proud might he have been, could he have guessed the interest which his presence was exciting in the breast of the young Creole.

He could not, and did not. He was not even aware of her existence. He had only glanced at the dust-bedaubed vehicle in passing – as one might look upon the rude incrustation of an oyster, without suspecting that a precious pearl may lie gleaming inside.

“By my faith!” he declared, facing round to the owner of the waggons, “I can discover no landmarks for you to steer by. For all that, I can find the way myself. You will have to cross the Leona five miles below the Fort; and, as I have to go by the crossing myself, *you* can follow the tracks of my horse. Good day, gentlemen!”

Thus abruptly bidding adieu, he pressed the spur against the side of his steed; and started off at a gallop.

An unexpected – almost uncourteous departure! So thought the planter and his people.

They had no time to make observations upon it, before the stranger was seen returning towards them!

In ten seconds he was again in their presence – all listening to learn what had brought him back.

“I fear the tracks of my horse may prove of little service to you. The *mustangs*<sup>43</sup> have been this way, since the fire. They have made hoof-marks by the thousand. Mine are shod; but, as you are not accustomed to trailing, you may not be able to distinguish them – the more so, that in these dry ashes all horse-tracks are so nearly alike.”

“What are we to do?” despairingly asked the planter.

“I am sorry, Mr Poindexter, I cannot stay to conduct you, I am riding express, with a despatch for the Fort. If you *should* lose my trail, keep the sun on your right shoulders: so that your shadows may fall to the left, at an angle of about fifteen degrees to your line of march. Go straight forward for about five miles. You will then come in sight of the top of a tall tree – a *cypress*. You will know it by its leaves being *in the red*. Head direct for this tree. It stands on the bank of the river; and close by is the crossing.”

The young horseman, once more drawing up his reins, was about to ride off; when something caused him to linger. It was a pair of dark lustrous eyes – observed by him for the first time – glancing through the curtains of the travelling carriage.

---

<sup>36</sup> **ranchero** – rancher (*Spanish*)

<sup>37</sup> **calzoneros** – trousers (*Spanish*)

<sup>38</sup> **calzoncillos** – men's underwear (*Spanish*)

<sup>39</sup> **botas** – boots (*Spanish*)

<sup>40</sup> **Moorish** – related to the Moors, a population of medieval Spain and Portugal of Moroccan, Algerian or Berber origin; the Moorish style is typical for architecture and decorative art of medieval Spain

<sup>41</sup> **the Conquistadores** – participants of the Spanish conquest of America in the 16<sup>th</sup> century

<sup>42</sup> **cavallero** – a nobleman; originally: a cavalry man, a military man on horseback

<sup>43</sup> **mustangs** – North American wild horses; they descended from Spanish horses brought to America in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Tamed mustangs are known for their speed and strength

Their owner was in shadow; but there was light enough to show that they were set in a countenance of surpassing loveliness. He perceived, moreover, that they were turned upon himself – fixed, as he fancied, in an expression that betokened interest – almost tenderness!

He returned it with an involuntary glance of admiration, which he made but an awkward attempt to conceal. Lest it might be mistaken for rudeness, he suddenly faced round; and once more addressed himself to the planter – who had just finished thanking him for his civility.

“I am but ill deserving thanks,” was his rejoinder, “thus to leave you with a chance of losing your way. But, as I’ve told you, my time is measured.”

The despatch-bearer consulted his watch – as though not a little reluctant to travel alone.

“You are very kind, sir,” said Poindexter; “but with the directions you have given us, I think we shall be able to manage. The sun will surely show us – ”

“No: now I look at the sky, it will not. There are clouds looming up on the north. In an hour, the sun may be obscured – at all events, before you can get within sight of the cypress. It will not do. Stay!” he continued, after a reflective pause, “I have a better plan still: *follow the trail of my lazo!*”

While speaking, he had lifted the coiled rope from his saddlebow, and flung the loose end to the earth – the other being secured to a ring in the pommel. Then raising his hat in graceful salutation – more than half directed towards the travelling carriage – he gave the spur to his steed; and once more bounded off over the prairie.

The lazo, lengthening out, tightened over the hips of his horse; and, dragging a dozen yards behind, left a line upon the cinereous surface – as if some slender serpent had been making its passage across the plain.

“An exceedingly curious fellow!” remarked the planter, as they stood gazing after the horseman, fast becoming hidden behind a cloud of sable dust. “I ought to have asked him his name?”

“An exceedingly conceited fellow, I should say,” muttered Calhoun; who had not failed to notice the glance sent by the stranger in the direction of the carriage, nor that which had challenged it. “As to his name, I don’t think it matters much. It mightn’t be his own he would give you. Texas is full of such swells, who take new names when they get here – by way of improvement, if for no better reason.”

“Come, cousin Cash,” protested young Poindexter; “you are unjust to the stranger. He appears to be educated – in fact, a gentleman – worthy of bearing the best of names, I should say.”

“A gentleman! Deuced unlikely: rigged out in that fanfaron fashion. I never saw a man yet, that took to a Mexican dress, who wasn’t a *Jack*<sup>44</sup>. He’s one, I’ll be bound.”

During this brief conversation, the fair occupant of the carriage was seen to bend forward; and direct a look of evident interest, after the form of the horseman fast receding from her view.

To this, perhaps, might have been traced the acrimony observable in the speech of Calhoun.

“What is it, Loo?” he inquired, riding close up to the carriage, and speaking in a voice not loud enough to be heard by the others. “You appear impatient to go forward? Perhaps you’d like to ride off along with that swaggering fellow? It isn’t too late: I’ll lend you my horse.”

The young girl threw herself back upon the seat – evidently displeased, both by the speech and the tone in which it was delivered. But her displeasure, instead of expressing itself in a frown, or in the shape of an indignant rejoinder, was concealed under a guise far more galling to him who had caused it. A clear ringing laugh was the only reply vouchsafed to him.

“So, so! I thought there must be something – by the way you behaved yourself in his presence. You looked as if you would have relished a *tête-à-tête*<sup>45</sup> with this showy despatch-bearer. Taken

---

<sup>44</sup> a **Jack** – a common man, a plebeian

<sup>45</sup> a **tête-à-tête** – a private meeting of two persons

with his stylish dress, I suppose? Fine feathers make fine birds. His are borrowed. I may strip them off some day, along with a little of the skin that's under them."

"For shame, Cassius! your words are a scandal!"

"'Tis you should think of scandal, Loo! To let your thoughts turn on a common scamp – a masquerading fellow like that! No doubt the letter carrier, employed by the officers at the Fort!"

"A letter carrier, you think? Oh, how I should like to get love letters by such a postman!"

"You had better hasten on, and tell him so. My horse is at your service."

"Ha! ha! ha! What a simpleton you show yourself! Suppose, for jesting's sake, I *did* have a fancy to overtake this prairie postman! It couldn't be done upon that dull steed of yours: not a bit of it! At the rate he is going, he and his blood-bay will be out of sight before you could change saddles for me. Oh, no! he's not to be overtaken by me, however much I might like it; and perhaps I *might like it!*"

"Don't let your father hear you talk in that way."

"Don't let him hear *you* talk in that way," retorted the young lady, for the first time speaking in a serious strain. "Though you *are* my cousin, and papa may think you the pink of perfection, I don't – not I! I never told you I did – did I?" A frown, evidently called forth by some unsatisfactory reflection, was the only reply to this tantalising interrogative.

"You *are* my cousin," she continued, in a tone that contrasted strangely with the levity she had already exhibited, "but you are nothing more – nothing more – Captain Cassius Calhoun! You have no claim to be my counsellor. There is but one from whom I am in duty bound to take advice, or bear reproach. I therefore beg of you, Master Cash, that you will not again presume to repeat such sentiments – as those you have just favoured me with. I shall remain mistress of my own thoughts – and actions, too – till I have found a master who can control them. It is not you!"

Having delivered this speech, with eyes flashing – half angrily, half contemptuously – upon her cousin, the young Creole once more threw herself back upon the cushions of the carriage.

The closing curtains admonished the ex-officer, that further conversation was not desired.

Quailing under the lash of indignant innocence, he was only too happy to hear the loud "gee-on" of the teamsters, as the waggons commenced moving over the sombre surface – not more sombre than his own thoughts.



## Chapter 3

### The Prairie Finger-Post

The travellers felt no further uneasiness about the route. The snake-like trail was continuous; and so plain that a child might have followed it.

It did not run in a right line, but meandering among the thickets; at times turning out of the way, in places where the ground was clear of timber. This had evidently been done with an intent to avoid obstruction to the waggons: since at each of these windings the travellers could perceive that there were breaks, or other inequalities, in the surface.

“How very thoughtful of the young fellow!” remarked Poindexter. “I really feel regret at not having asked for his name. If he belong to the Fort, we shall see him again.”

“No doubt of it,” assented his son. “I hope we shall.”

His daughter, reclining in shadow, overheard the conjectural speech, as well as the rejoinder. She said nothing; but her glance towards Henry seemed to declare that her heart fondly echoed the hope.

Cheered by the prospect of soon terminating a toilsome journey – as also by the pleasant anticipation of beholding, before sunset, his new purchase – the planter was in one of his happiest moods. His aristocratic bosom was moved by an unusual amount of condescension, to all around him. He chatted familiarly with his overseer; stopped to crack a joke with “Uncle” Scipio, hobbling along on blistered heels; and encouraged “Aunt” Chloe in the transport of her piccaninny<sup>46</sup>.

“Marvellous!” might the observer exclaim – misled by such exceptional interludes, so pathetically described by the scribblers in Lucifer<sup>47</sup>’s pay – “what a fine patriarchal institution is slavery, after all! After all we have said and done to abolish it! A waste of sympathy – sheer philanthropic folly to attempt the destruction of this ancient edifice – worthy corner-stone to a ‘chivalric’ nation! Oh, ye abolition fanatics! why do ye clamour against it? Know ye not that some must suffer – must work and starve – that others may enjoy the luxury of idleness? That some must be slaves, that others may be free?”

Such arguments – at which a world might weep – have been of late but too often urged. Woe to the man who speaks, and the nation that gives ear to them!

The planter’s high spirits were shared by his party, Calhoun alone excepted. They were reflected in the faces of his black bondsmen, who regarded him as the source, and dispenser, of their happiness, or misery – omnipotent – next to God. They loved him less than God, and feared him more; though he was by no means a bad master – that is, *by comparison*. He did not absolutely take delight in torturing them. He liked to see them well fed and clad – their epidermis shining with the exudation of its own oil. These signs bespoke the importance of their proprietor – himself. He was satisfied to let them off with an occasional “cow-hiding” – salutary, he would assure you; and in all his “stock” there was not one black skin marked with the mutilations of vengeance – a proud boast for a Mississippian slave-owner, and more than most could truthfully lay claim to.

In the presence of such an exemplary owner, no wonder that the cheerfulness was universal – or that the slaves should partake of their master’s joy, and give way to their garrulity.

It was not destined that this joyfulness should continue to the end of their journey. It was after a time interrupted – not suddenly, nor by any fault on the part of those indulging in it, but by causes and circumstances over which they had not the slightest control.

As the stranger had predicted: the sun ceased to be visible, before the cypress came in sight.

---

<sup>46</sup> **piccaninny** – (US) a small child; an African baby

<sup>47</sup> **Lucifer** – in Greek and Roman mythology, the Lightbearer – the morning star, symbol of dawn; in Christianity, the name of Satan before his fall

There was nothing in this to cause apprehension. The line of the lazo was conspicuous as ever; and they needed no guidance from the sun: only that his cloud-eclipse produced a corresponding effect upon their spirits.

“One might suppose it close upon nightfall,” observed the planter, drawing out his gold repeater, and glancing at its dial; “and yet it’s only three o’clock! Lucky the young fellow has left us such a sure guide. But for him, we might have floundered among these ashes till sundown; perhaps have been compelled to sleep upon them.”

“A black bed it would be,” jokingly rejoined Henry, with the design of rendering the conversation more cheerful. “Ugh! I should have such ugly dreams, were I to sleep upon it.”

“And I, too,” added his sister, protruding her pretty face through the curtains, and taking a survey of the surrounding scene: “I’m sure I should dream of Tartarus<sup>48</sup>, and Pluto<sup>49</sup>, and Proserpine<sup>50</sup>, and – ”

“Hya! hya! hya!” grinned the black Jehu, on the box – enrolled in the plantation books as *Pluto Poindexter* – “De young missa dream ’bout *me* in de mids’ ob dis brack praira! Golly! dat am a good joke – berry! Hya! hya! hya!”

“Don’t be too sure, all of ye,” said the surly nephew, at this moment coming up, and taking part in the conversation – “don’t be too sure that you won’t have to make your beds upon it yet. I hope it may be no worse.”

“What mean you, Cash?” inquired the uncle.

“I mean, uncle, that that fellow’s been misleading us. I won’t say it for certain; but it looks ugly. We’ve come more than five miles – six, I should say – and where’s the tree? I’ve examined the horizon, with a pair of as good eyes as most have got, I reckon; and there isn’t such a thing in sight.”

“But why should the stranger have deceived us?”

“Ah – why? That’s just it. There may be more reasons than one.”

“Give us one, then!” challenged a silvery voice from the carriage. “We’re all ears to hear it!”

“You’re all ears to take in everything that’s told you by a stranger,” sneeringly replied Calhoun. “I suppose if I gave my reason, you’d be so charitable as to call it a false alarm!”

“That depends on its character, Master Cassius. I think you might venture to try us. We scarcely expect a false alarm from a soldier, as well as traveller, of your experience.”

Calhoun felt the taunt; and would probably have withheld the communication he had intended to make, but for Poindexter himself.

“Come, Cassius, explain yourself!” demanded the planter, in a tone of respectful authority. “You have said enough to excite something more than curiosity. For what reason should the young fellow be leading us astray?”

“Well, uncle,” answered the ex-officer, retreating a little from his original accusation, “I haven’t said for certain that he *is*; only that it looks like it.”

“In what way?”

“Well, one don’t know what may happen. Travelling parties as strong, and stronger than we, have been attacked on these plains, and plundered of every thing – murdered.”

“Mercy!” exclaimed Louise, in a tone of terror, more affected than real.

“By Indians,” replied Poindexter.

“Ah – Indians, indeed! Sometimes it may be; and sometimes, too, they may be whites who play at that game – not all Mexican whites, neither. It only needs a bit of brown paint; a horsehair

---

<sup>48</sup> **Tartarus** – in Greek mythology, the deepest part of the underworld

<sup>49</sup> **Pluto** – in Greek mythology and religion, the son of Cronus, and brother of Zeus; he ruled the underworld, the dark land of the dead

<sup>50</sup> **Proserpine** or Persephone – in Greek mythology and religion, the wife of Pluto, king of the underworld

wig, with half a dozen feathers stuck into it; that, and plenty of hullabalooing<sup>51</sup>. If we were to be robbed by a party of *white* Indians, it wouldn't be the first time the thing's been done. We as good as half deserve it – for our greenness, in trusting too much to a stranger.”

“Good heavens, nephew! this is a serious accusation. Do you mean to say that the despatch-rider – if he be one – is leading us into – into an ambuscade<sup>52</sup>?”

“No, uncle; I don't say that. I only say that such things have been done; and it's possible he *may*.”

“But not *probable*,” emphatically interposed the voice from the carriage, in a tone tauntingly quizzical.

“No!” exclaimed the stripling Henry, who, although riding a few paces ahead, had overheard the conversation. “Your suspicions are unjust, cousin Cassius. I pronounce them a calumny. What's more, I can prove them so. Look there!”

The youth had reined up his horse, and was pointing to an object placed conspicuously by the side of the path; which, before speaking, he had closely scrutinised. It was a tall plant of the *columnar cactus*, whose green succulent stem had escaped scathing by the fire.

It was not to the plant itself that Henry Poindexter directed the attention of his companions; but to a small white disc, of the form of a parallelogram, impaled upon one of its spines. No one accustomed to the usages of civilised life could mistake the “card.” It was one.

“Hear what's written upon it!” continued the young man, riding nearer, and reading aloud the directions pencilled upon the bit of pasteboard.

“The cypress in sight!”

“Where?” inquired Poindexter.

“There's a hand,” rejoined Henry, “with a finger pointing – no doubt in the direction of the tree.”

All eyes were instantly turned towards the quarter of the compass, indicated by the cipher on the card.

Had the sun been shining, the cypress might have been seen at the first glance. As it was, the sky – late of cerulean hue – was now of a leaden grey; and no straining of the eyes could detect anything along the horizon resembling the top of a tree.

“There's nothing of the kind,” asserted Calhoun, with restored confidence, at the same time returning to his unworthy accusation. “It's only a dodge – another link in the chain of tricks the scamp is playing us.”

“You mistake, cousin Cassius,” replied that same voice that had so often contradicted him. “Look through this lorgnette<sup>53</sup>! If you haven't lost the sight of those superior eyes of yours, you'll see something *very like a tree* – a tall tree – and a cypress, too, if ever there was one in the swamps of Louisiana.”

Calhoun disdained to take the opera glass from the hands of his cousin. He knew it would convict him: for he could not suppose she was telling an untruth.

Poindexter availed himself of its aid; and, adjusting the focus to his failing sight, was enabled to distinguish the red-leaved cypress, topping up over the edge of the prairie.

“It's true,” he said: “the tree is there. The young fellow is honest: you've been wronging him, Cash. I didn't think it likely he should have taken such a queer plan to make fools of us. He there! Mr Sansom! Direct your teamsters to drive on!”

Calhoun, not caring to continue the conversation, nor yet remain longer in company, spitefully spurred his horse, and trotted off over the prairie.

---

<sup>51</sup> **hullabalooing** – making a lot of noise about smth; expressing excitement

<sup>52</sup> **ambuscade** = ambush – an unexpected attack from a hidden place

<sup>53</sup> **lorgnette** = binoculars, field-glasses (*French*)

“Let me look at that card, Henry?” said Louise, speaking to her brother in a restrained voice. “I’m curious to see the cipher that has been of such service to us. Bring it away, brother: it can be of no further use where it is – now that we have sighted the tree.”

Henry, without the slightest suspicion of his sister’s motive for making the request, yielded obedience to it.

Releasing the piece of pasteboard from its impalement, he “chucked” it into her lap.

“*Maurice Gerald!*” muttered the young Creole, after deciphering the name upon the card. “Maurice Gerald!” she repeated, in apostrophic thought, as she deposited the piece of pasteboard in her bosom. “Whoever you are – whence you have come – whither you are going – what you may be – *Henceforth there is a fate between us!* I feel it – I know it – sure as there’s a sky above! Oh! how that sky lowers! Am I to take it as a type of this still untraced destiny?”

## Chapter 4

### The Black Norther

For some seconds, after surrendering herself to the Sybilline thoughts thus expressed, the young lady sate in silence – her white hands clasped across her temples, as if her whole soul was absorbed in an attempt, either to explain the past, or penetrate the future.

Her reverie – whatever might be its cause – was not of long duration. She was awakened from it, on hearing exclamations without – mingled with words that declared some object of apprehension.

She recognised her brother's voice, speaking in tones that betokened alarm.

"Look, father! don't you see them?"

"Where, Henry – where?"

"Yonder – behind the waggons. You see them now?"

"I do – though I can't say what they are. They look like – like – " Poindexter was puzzled for a simile – "I really don't know what."

"Waterspouts?" suggested the ex-captain, who, at sight of the strange objects, had condescended to rejoin the party around the carriage. "Surely it can't be that? It's too far from the sea. I never heard of their occurring on the prairies."

"They are in motion, whatever they be," said Henry. "See! they keep closing, and then going apart. But for that, one might mistake them for huge obelisks of black marble!"

"Giants, or ghouls<sup>54</sup>!" jokingly suggested Calhoun; "ogres<sup>55</sup> from some other world, who've taken a fancy to have a promenade on this abominable prairie!"

The ex-officer was only humorous with an effort. As well as the others, he was under the influence of an uneasy feeling.

And no wonder. Against the northern horizon had suddenly become upreared a number of ink-coloured columns – half a score of them – unlike anything ever seen before. They were not of regular columnar form, nor fixed in any way; but constantly changing size, shape, and place – now steadfast for a time – now gliding over the charred surface like giants upon skates – anon, bending and balancing towards one another in the most fantastic figurings!

It required no great effort of imagination, to fancy the Titans<sup>56</sup> of old, resuscitated on the prairies of Texas, leading a measure after some wild carousal in the company of Bacchus<sup>57</sup>!

In the proximity of phenomena never observed before – unearthly in their aspect – unknown to every individual of the party – it was but natural these should be inspired with alarm.

And such was the fact. A sense of danger pervaded every bosom. All were impressed with a belief: that they were in the presence of some *peril of the prairies*.

A general halt had been made on first observing the strange objects: the negroes on foot, as well as the teamsters, giving utterance to shouts of terror. The animals – mules as well as horses, had come instinctively to a stand – the latter neighing and trembling – the former filling the air with their shrill screams.

---

<sup>54</sup> **ghouls** – in Arabic folklore, demonic spirits who inhabit cemeteries and deserted places

<sup>55</sup> **ogres** – in fairy-tales, giants eating human beings

<sup>56</sup> **Titans** – in Greek mythology, the children of Uranus (Heaven) and Gaea (Earth)

<sup>57</sup> **Bacchus** – in Greek mythology and religion, the god of vegetation, better known as the god of wine and ecstasy; in Roman mythology this god is known as Dionysus

These were not the only sounds. From the sable towers could be heard a hoarse swishing noise, that resembled the sough of a waterfall – at intervals breaking into reverberations like the roll of musketry<sup>58</sup>, or the detonations of distant thunder!

These noises were gradually growing louder and more distinct. The danger, whatever it might be, was drawing nearer!

Consternation became depicted on the countenances of the travellers, Calhoun's forming no exception. The ex-officer no longer pretended levity. The eyes of all were turned towards the lowering sky, and the band of black columns that appeared coming on to crush them!

At this crisis a shout, reaching their ears from the opposite side, was a source of relief – despite the unmistakable accent of alarm in which it was uttered.

Turning, they beheld a horseman in full gallop – riding direct towards them.

The horse was black as coal: the rider of like hue, even to the skin of his face. For all that he was recognised: as the stranger, upon the trail of whose lazo they had been travelling.

The perceptions of woman are quicker than those of man: the young lady within the carriage was the first to identify him. "Onward!" he cried, as soon as within speaking distance. "On – on! as fast as you can drive!"

"What is it?" demanded the planter, in bewildered alarm. "Is there a danger?"

"There is. I did not anticipate it, as I passed you. It was only after reaching the river, I saw the sure signs of it."

"Of what, sir?"

"The *norther*."

"You mean the storm of that name?"

"I do."

"I never heard of its being dangerous," interposed Calhoun, "except to vessels at sea. It's precious cold, I know; but –"

"You'll find it worse than cold, sir," interrupted the young horseman, "if you're not quick in getting out of its way. Mr Poindexter," he continued, turning to the planter, and speaking with impatient emphasis, "I tell you, that you and your party are in peril. A norther is not always to be dreaded; but this one – look yonder! You see those black pillars?"

"We've been wondering – didn't know what to make of them."

"They're nothing – only the precursors of the storm. Look beyond! Don't you see a coal-black cloud spreading over the sky? That's what you have to dread. I don't wish to cause you unnecessary alarm: but I tell you, there's death in yonder shadow! It's in motion, and coming this way. You have no chance to escape it, except by speed. If you do not make haste, it will be too late. In ten minutes' time you may be enveloped, and then – quick, sir, I entreat you! Order your drivers to hurry forward as fast as they can! The sky – heaven itself – commands you!"

The planter did not think of refusing compliance, with an appeal urged in such energetic terms. The order was given for the teams to be set in motion, and driven at top speed.

Terror, that inspired the animals equally with their drivers, rendered superfluous the use of the whip.

The travelling carriage, with the mounted men, moved in front, as before. The stranger alone threw himself in the rear – as if to act as a guard against the threatening danger.

At intervals he was observed to rein up his horse, and look back: each time by his glances betraying increased apprehension.

Perceiving it, the planter approached, and accosted him with the inquiry:

"Is there still a danger?"

---

<sup>58</sup> **musketry** – from *musket* – a firearm of the 16<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> centuries; in the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was replaced by a rifle

“I am sorry to answer you in the affirmative,” said he: “I had hopes that the wind might be the other way.”

“Wind, sir? There is none – that I can perceive.”

“Not here. Yonder it is blowing a hurricane, and this way too – direct. By heavens! it is nearing us rapidly! I doubt if we shall be able to clear the burnt track.”

“What is to be done?” exclaimed the planter, terrified by the announcement.

“Are your mules doing their best?”

“They are: they could not be driven faster.”

“I fear we shall *be too late, then!*”

As the speaker gave utterance to this gloomy conjecture, he reined round once more; and sate regarding the cloud columns – as if calculating the rate at which they were advancing.

The lines, contracting around his lips, told of something more than dissatisfaction.

“Yes: too late!” he exclaimed, suddenly terminating his scrutiny. “They are moving faster than we – far faster. There is no hope of our escaping them!”

“Good God, sir! is the danger so great? Can we do nothing to avoid it?”

The stranger did not make immediate reply. For some seconds he remained silent, as if reflecting – his glance no longer turned towards the sky, but wandering among the waggons.

“Is there no chance of escape?” urged the planter, with the impatience of a man in presence of a great peril.

“There is!” joyfully responded the horseman, as if some hopeful thought had at length suggested itself. “There *is a chance*. I did not think of it before. We cannot shun the storm – the danger we may. Quick, Mr Poindexter! Order your men to muffle the mules – the horses too – otherwise the animals will be blinded, and go mad. Blankets – cloaks – anything will do. When that’s done, let all seek shelter within the waggons. Let the tilts be closed at the ends. I shall myself look to the travelling carriage.”

Having delivered this chapter of instructions – which Poindexter, assisted by the overseer, hastened to direct the execution of – the young horseman galloped towards the front.

“Madame!” said he, reining up alongside the carriage, and speaking with as much suavity as the circumstances would admit of, “you must close the curtains all round. Your coachman will have to get inside; and you, gentlemen!” he continued, addressing himself to Henry and Calhoun – “and you, sir;” to Poindexter, who had just come up. “There will be room for all. Inside, I beseech you! Lose no time. In a few seconds the storm will be upon us!”

“And you, sir?” inquired the planter, with a show of interest in the man who was making such exertions to secure them against some yet unascertained danger. “What of yourself?”

“Don’t waste a moment upon me. I know what’s coming. It isn’t the first time I have encountered it. In – in, I entreat you! You haven’t a second to spare. Listen to that shriek! Quick, or the dust-cloud will be around us!”

The planter and his son sprang together to the ground; and retreated into the travelling carriage.

Calhoun, refusing to dismount, remained stiffly seated in his saddle. Why should *he* skulk from a visionary danger, that did not deter a man in Mexican garb?

The latter turned away; as he did so, directing the overseer to get inside the nearest waggon – a direction which was obeyed with alacrity – and, for the first time, the stranger was left free to take care of himself.

Quickly unfolding his *serape* – hitherto strapped across the cantle of his saddle – he flung it over the head of his horse. Then, drawing the edges back, he fastened it, bag-fashion, around the animal’s neck. With equal alertness he undid his scarf of China crape<sup>59</sup>; and stretched it around his

---

<sup>59</sup> **crape** – black silk or cotton material

sombrero<sup>60</sup> – fixing it in such a way, that one edge was held under the bullion band, while the other dropped down over the brim – thus forming a silken visor for his face.

Before finally closing it, he turned once more towards the carriage; and, to his surprise, saw Calhoun still in the saddle. Humanity triumphed over a feeling of incipient aversion.

“Once again, sir, I adjure you to get inside! If you do not you’ll have cause to repent it. Within ten minutes’ time, you may be a dead man!”

The positive emphasis with which the caution was delivered produced its effect. In the presence of mortal foeman, Cassius Calhoun was no coward. But there was an enemy approaching that was not mortal – not in any way understood. It was already making itself manifest, in tones that resembled thunder – in shadows that mocked the darkness of midnight. Who would not have felt fear at the approach of a destroyer so declaring itself?

The ex-officer was unable to resist the united warnings of earth and heaven; and, slipping out of his saddle with a show of reluctance – intended to save appearances – he clambered into the carriage, and ensconced himself behind the closely-drawn curtains.

To describe what followed is beyond the power of the pen. No eye beheld the spectacle: for none dared look upon it. Even had this been possible, nothing could have been seen. In five minutes after the muffling of the mules, the train was enveloped in worse than Cimmerian<sup>61</sup> darkness.

The opening scene can alone be depicted: for that only was observed by the travellers. One of the sable columns, moving in the advance, broke as it came in collision with the waggon-tilts. Down came a shower of black dust, as if the sky had commenced raining gunpowder! It was a foretaste of what was to follow.

There was a short interval of open atmosphere – hot as the inside of an oven. Then succeeded puffs, and whirling gusts, of wind – cold as if projected from caves of ice, and accompanied by a noise as though all the trumpets of Aeolus<sup>62</sup> were announcing the advent of the Storm-King!

In another instant the *norther* was around them; and the waggon train, halted on a subtropical plain, was enveloped in an atmosphere, akin to that which congeals the icebergs of the Arctic Ocean!

Nothing more was seen – nothing heard, save the whistling of the wind, or its hoarse roaring, as it thundered against the tilts of the waggons. The mules having instinctively turned stern towards it, stood silent in their traces; and the voices of the travellers, in solemn converse inside, could not be distinguished amid the howling of the hurricane.

Every aperture had been closed: for it was soon discovered, that to show a face from under the sheltering canvas was to court suffocation. The air was surcharged with ashes, lifted aloft from the burnt plain, and reduced, by the whirling of the wind, to an impalpable but poisonous powder.

For over an hour did the atmosphere carry this cinereous cloud; during which period lasted the imprisonment of the travellers.

At length a voice, speaking close by the curtains of the carriage, announced their release.

“You can come forth!” said the stranger, the crape scarf thrown back above the brim of his hat. “You will still have the storm to contend against. It will last to the end of your journey; and, perhaps, for three days longer. But you have nothing further to fear. The ashes are all swept off. They’ve gone before you; and you’re not likely to overtake them this side the Rio Grande<sup>63</sup>.”

“Sir!” said the planter, hastily descending the steps of the carriage, “we have to thank you for – for – ”

---

<sup>60</sup> **sombrero** – a broad-brimmed Spanish or Mexican hat made of straw or felt

<sup>61</sup> **Cimmerian** – related to the *Cimmerians*, the ancient people of unknown origin who lived north of the Caucasus till the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC; later they were driven by the Scythians to Anatolia

<sup>62</sup> **Aeolus** – in Greek mythology, the god of wind

<sup>63</sup> **the Rio Grande** – the river in North America; it forms the border between Texas and Mexico. The river starts in the Rocky Mountains and flows to the Gulf of Mexico



“Our lives, father!” cried Henry, supplying the proper words. “I hope, sir, you will favour us with your name?”

“*Maurice Gerald!*” returned the stranger; “though, at the Fort, you will find me better known as *Maurice the mustanger*<sup>64</sup>.”

“A mustanger!” scornfully muttered Calhoun, but only loud enough to be heard by Louise.

“Only a mustanger!” reflected the aristocratic Poindexter, the fervour of his gratitude becoming sensibly chilled.

“For guide, you will no longer need either myself, or my lazo,” said the hunter of wild horses. “The cypress is in sight: keep straight towards it. After crossing, you will see the flag over the Fort. You may yet reach your journey’s end before night. I have no time to tarry; and must say adieu.”

Satan<sup>65</sup> himself, astride a Tartarean steed, could not have looked more like the devil than did Maurice the Mustanger, as he separated for the second time from the planter and his party. But neither his ashy envelope, nor the announcement of his humble calling, did aught to damage him in the estimation of one, whose thoughts were already predisposed in his favour – Louise Poindexter.

On hearing him declare his name – by presumption already known to her – she but more tenderly cherished the bit of cardboard, chafing against her snow-white bosom; at the same time muttering in soft pensive soliloquy, heard only by herself: —

“Maurice the mustanger! despite your sooty covering – despite your modest pretence – you have touched the heart of a Creole maiden. *Mon Dieu*<sup>66</sup> – *mon Dieu!* He is too like Lucifer for me to despise him!”

---

<sup>64</sup> **mustanger** – a man who catches, tames and sells mustangs

<sup>65</sup> **Satan** – the prince of evil forces, the enemy of God; he is also identified with the devil

<sup>66</sup> **Mon Dieu!** = My God! (*French*)

## Chapter 5

### The Home of the Horse-Hunter

Where the *Rio de Nueces*<sup>67</sup> (River of Nuts) collects its waters from a hundred tributary streams – lining the map like the limbs of a grand genealogical tree – you may look upon a land of surpassing fairness. Its surface is “rolling prairie,” interspersed with clumps of post-oak and pecân, here and there along the banks of the watercourses uniting into continuous groves.

In some places these timbered tracts assume the aspect of the true *chapparal* – a thicket, rather than a forest – its principal growth being various kinds of acacia, associated with copaiva and creosote trees, with wild aloes, with eccentric shapes of cereus, cactus, and arborescent yucca.

These spinous forms of vegetation, though repulsive to the eye of the agriculturist – as proving the utter sterility of the soil – present an attractive aspect to the botanist, or the lover of Nature; especially when the cereus unfolds its huge wax-like blossoms, or the *Fouquiera splendens*<sup>68</sup> overtops the surrounding shrubbery with its spike of resplendent flowers, like a red flag hanging unfolded along its staff.

The whole region, however, is not of this character. There are stretches of greater fertility; where a black calcareous earth gives nourishment to trees of taller growth, and more luxuriant foliage. The “wild China” – a true *sapindal* – the pecan, the elm, the hackberry, and the oak of several species – with here and there a cypress or Cottonwood – form the components of many a sylvan scene, which, from the blending of their leaves of various shades of green, and the ever changing contour of their clumps, deserves to be denominated fair.

The streams of this region are of crystal purity – their waters tinted only by the reflection of sapphire skies. Its sun, moon, and stars are scarcely ever concealed behind a cloud. The demon of disease has not found his way into this salubrious spot: no epidemic can dwell within its borders.

Despite these advantages, civilised man has not yet made it his home. Its paths are trodden only by the red-skinned rovers of the prairie – Lipano<sup>69</sup> or Comanche<sup>70</sup> – and these only when mounted, and upon the *maraud* towards the settlements of the Lower Nueces, or Leona.

It may be on this account – though it would almost seem as if they were actuated by a love of the beautiful and picturesque – that the true children of Nature, the wild animals, have selected this spot as their favourite habitat and home. In no part of Texas does the stag bound up so often before you; and nowhere is the timid antelope so frequently seen. The rabbit, and his gigantic cousin, the mule-rabbit, are scarcely ever out of sight; while the polecat, the opossum, and the curious peccary, are encountered at frequent intervals.

Birds, too, of beautiful forms and colours, enliven the landscape. The quail whirrs up from the path; the king vulture wheels in the ambient air; the wild turkey, of gigantic stature, suns his resplendent gorget by the side of the pecân copse, and the singular tailor-bird – known among the rude Rangers<sup>71</sup> as the “bird of paradise” – flouts his long scissors-like tail among the feathery fronds of the acacia.

Beautiful butterflies spread their wide wings in flapping flight; or, perched upon some gay corolla, look as if they formed part of the flower. Huge bees (*Meliponae*), clad in velvet liveries,

---

<sup>67</sup> **the Rio de Nueces** – the Nueces River in Texas and Mexico

<sup>68</sup> **Fouquiera splendens** – ocotillo, or wine cactus, a flowering shrub which grows in Texas, California and Mexico

<sup>69</sup> **Lipano** – the Lipan people – the Indian nomad tribe of western Texas

<sup>70</sup> **Comanche** – North American Indian tribe of the Great Plains; they were skilled horsemen and led a nomadic life

<sup>71</sup> **Rangers** – in the USA, soldiers, trained to make rapid attacks on the enemy territory; in Texas, Rangers were formed into regiments and used in federal service as law-enforcement forces

buzz amid the blossoming bushes, disputing possession with hawkmoths and humming-birds not much larger than themselves.

They are not all innocent, the denizens of this lovely land. Here the rattlesnake attains to larger dimensions than in any other part of North America, and shares the covert with the more dangerous *moccasin*<sup>72</sup>. Here, too, the tarantula<sup>73</sup> inflicts its venomous sting; the scorpion poisons with its bite; and the centipede<sup>74</sup>, by simply crawling over the skin, causes a fever that may prove fatal!

Along the wooded banks of the streams may be encountered the spotted ocelot, the puma, and their more powerful congener, the jaguar; the last of these *felidae* being here upon the northern limit of its geographical range.

Along the edges of the chapparal skulks the gaunt Texan wolf – solitarily and in silence; while a kindred and more cowardly species, the *coyoté*, may be observed, far out upon the open plain, hunting in packs.

Sharing the same range with these, the most truculent of quadrupeds, may be seen the noblest and most beautiful of animals – perhaps nobler and more beautiful than man – certainly the most distinguished of man's companions – the horse!

Here – independent of man's caprice, his jaw unchecked by bit or curb, his back unscathed by pack or saddle – he roams unrestrained; giving way to all the wildness of his nature.

But even in this, his favourite haunt, he is not always left alone. Man presumes to be his pursuer and tamer: for here was he sought, captured, and conquered, by *Maurice the Mustanger*.

On the banks of the *Alamo*<sup>75</sup> – one of the most sparkling streamlets that pay tribute to the Nueces – stood a dwelling, unpretentious as any to be found within the limits of Texas, and certainly as picturesque.

Its walls were composed of split trunk of the arborescent yucca, set stockade-fashion in the ground; while its roof was a thatch furnished by the long bayonet-shaped loaves of the same gigantic lily.

The interstices between the uprights, instead of being “chinked” with clay – as is common in the cabins of Western Texas – were covered by a sheeting of horse-skins; attached, not by iron tacks, but with the sharp spines that terminate the leaves of the *pita* plant.

On the bluffs, that on both sides overlooked the rivulet – and which were but the termination of the escarpment of the higher plain – grew in abundance the material out of which the hut had been constructed: tree yuccas and *maguays*, amidst other rugged types of sterile vegetation; whereas the fertile valley below was covered with a growth of heavy timber – consisting chiefly of red-mulberry, post-oak, and pecân, that formed a forest of several leagues in length. The timbered tract was, in fact, conterminous with the bottom lands; the tops of the trees scarce rising to a level with the escarpment of the cliff.

It was not continuous. Along the edge of the streamlet were breaks – forming little meads, or savannahs, covered with that most nutritious of grasses, known among Mexicans as *grama*.

In the concavity of one of these, of semicircular shape – which served as a natural lawn – stood the primitive dwelling above described; the streamlet representing the chord; while the curve was traced by the trunks of the trees, that resembled a series of columns supporting the roof of some sylvan coliseum.

The structure was in shadow, a little retired among the trees; as if the site had been chosen with a view to concealment. It could have been seen but by one passing along the bank of the

---

<sup>72</sup> **moccasin** – a shoe of soft leather worn by North American Indians, hunters and traders; also a common name of *Agkistrodon* vipers

<sup>73</sup> **tarantula** – a poisonous spider

<sup>74</sup> **centipede** – a long, many-segmented insect; each segment has one pair of legs

<sup>75</sup> **the Alamo** – one of the tributaries of the Nueces River; also the old chapel of the Franciscan mission, founded in 1716–1718, the place of the historic resistance of fighters for the independence of Texas from Mexico

stream; and then only with the observer directly in front of it. Its rude style of architecture, and russet hue, contributed still further to its *inconspicuousness*.

The house was a mere cabin – not larger than a marquee tent – with only a single aperture, the door – if we except the flue of a slender clay chimney, erected at one end against the upright posts. The doorway had a door, a light framework of wood, with a horse-skin stretched over it, and hung upon hinges cut from the same hide.

In the rear was an open shed, thatched with yucca leaves, and supported by half a dozen posts. Around this was a small enclosure, obtained by tying cross poles to the trunks of the adjacent trees.

A still more extensive enclosure, containing within its circumference more than an acre of the timbered tract, and fenced in a similar manner, extended rearward from the cabin, terminating against the bluff. Its turf tracked and torn by numerous hoof-prints – in some places trampled into a hard surface – told of its use: a “corral” for wild horses – *mustangs*.

This was made still more manifest by the presence of a dozen or more of these animals within the enclosure; whose glaring eyeballs, and excited actions, gave evidence of their recent capture, and how ill they brooked the imprisonment of that shadowy paddock.

The interior of the hut was not without some show of neatness and comfort. The sheeting of mustang-skins that covered the walls, with the hairy side turned inward, presented no mean appearance. The smooth shining coats of all colours – black, bay, snow-white, sorrel, and skewbald – offered to the eye a surface pleasantly variegated; and there had evidently been some taste displayed in their arrangement.

The furniture was of the scantiest kind. It consisted of a counterfeit camp bedstead, formed by stretching a horse-hide over a framework of trestles; a couple of stools – diminutive specimens on the same model; and a rude table, shaped out of hewn slabs of the yucca-tree. Something like a second sleeping place appeared in a remote corner – a “shakedown,” or “spread,” of the universal mustang-skin.

What was least to be expected in such a place, was a shelf containing about a score of books, with pens, ink, and *papeterie*<sup>76</sup>; also a newspaper lying upon the slab table.

Further proofs of civilisation, if not refinement, presented themselves in the shape of a large leathern portmanteau<sup>77</sup>, a double-barrelled gun, with “Westley Richards” upon the breech; a drinking cup of chased silver, a huntsman’s horn, and a dog-call.

Upon the floor were a few culinary utensils, mostly of tin; while in one corner stood a demijohn<sup>78</sup>, covered with wicker, and evidently containing something stronger than the water of the Alamo.

Other “chattels” in the cabin were perhaps more in keeping with the place. There was a high-peaked Mexican saddle; a bridle, with headstall of plaited horsehair, and reins to correspond; two or three spare *serapes*, and some odds and ends of raw-hide rope.

Such was the structure of the mustanger’s dwelling – such its surroundings – such its interior and contents, with the exception of its living occupants – two in number.

On one of the stools standing in the centre of the floor was seated a man, who could not be the mustanger himself. In no way did he present the semblance of a proprietor. On the contrary, the air of the servitor – the mien of habitual obedience – was impressed upon him beyond the chance of misconstruction.

Rude as was the cabin that sheltered him, no one entering under its roof would have mistaken him for its master.

---

<sup>76</sup> *papeterie* – a set of writing materials (*French*)

<sup>77</sup> *portmanteau* – a suitcase consisting of two parts that fold together

<sup>78</sup> *demijohn* – a large glass wine bottle

Not that he appeared ill clad or fed, or in any way stinted in his requirements. He was a round plump specimen, with a shock of carrot-coloured hair and a bright ruddy skin, habited in a suit of stout stuff – half corduroy<sup>79</sup>, half cotton-velvet. The corduroy was in the shape of a pair of knee-breeches, with gaiters to correspond; the velveteen, once bottle green, now faded to a brownish hue, exhibited itself in a sort of shooting coat, with ample pockets in the breast and skirts.

A “wide-awake” hat, cocked over a pair of eyes equally deserving the appellation, completed the costume of the individual in question – if we except a shirt of coarse calico<sup>80</sup>, a red cotton kerchief loosely knotted around his neck, and a pair of Irish *brogues*<sup>81</sup> upon his feet.

It needed neither the brogues, nor the corduroy breeches, to proclaim his nationality. His lips, nose, eyes, air, and attitude, were all unmistakably Milesian<sup>82</sup>.

Had there been any ambiguity about this, it would have been dispelled as he opened his mouth for the emission of speech; and this he at intervals did, in an accent that could only have been acquired in the shire of Galway<sup>83</sup>. As he was the sole human occupant of the cabin, it might be supposed that he spoke only in soliloquy. Not so, however. Couched upon a piece of horse-skin, in front of the fire, with snout half buried among the ashes, was a canine companion, whose appearance bespoke a countryman – a huge Irish staghound, that looked as if he too understood the speech of Connemara<sup>84</sup>.

Whether he did so or not, it was addressed to him, as if he was expected to comprehend every word.

“Och, Tara, me jewel!” exclaimed he in the corduroys, fraternally interrogating the hound; “hadn’t yez weesh now to be back in Ballyballagh? Wadn’t yez loike to be wance more in the coortyard av the owld castle, friskin’ over the clane stones, an bein’ tripe-fed till there wasn’t a rib to be seen in your sides – so different from what they are now – when I kyan count ivery wan av them? Sowl! it’s meself that ud loike to be there, anyhow! But there’s no knowin’ when the young masther ’ll go back, an take us along wid him. Niver mind, Tara! He’s goin’ to the Sittlements soon, ye owld dog; an he’s promised to take us thare; that’s some consolashun. Be japers! it’s over three months since I’ve been to the Fort, meself. Maybe I’ll find some owld acquaintance among them Irish sodgers that’s come lately; an be me sowl, av I do, won’t there be a dhrap betwane us – won’t there, Tara?”

The staghound, raising his head at hearing the mention of his name, gave a slight sniff, as if saying “Yes” in answer to the droll interrogatory.

“I’d like a dhrap now,” continued the speaker, casting a covetous glance towards the wickered jar; “mightily I wud that same; but the dimmyjan is too near bein’ empty, an the young masther might miss it. Besides, it wudn’t be raal honest av me to take it widout lave – wud it, Tara?”

The dog again raised his head above the ashes, and sneezed as before.

“Why, that was *yis*, the last time ye spoke! Div yez mane is for the same now? Till me, Tara!”

Once more the hound gave utterance to the sound – that appeared to be caused either by a slight touch of influenza, or the ashes having entered his nostrils.

“Yis’ again? In trath that’s just fwhat the dumb crayther manes! Don’t timpt me, ye owld thief! No – no; I won’t touch the whisky. I’ll only draw the cork out av the dimmyjan, an take a smell at it. Shure the masther won’t know anything about that; an if he did, he wudn’t mind it! Smellin’ kyant do the pothyteen any harm.”

---

<sup>79</sup> **corduroy** – a durable fabric, used for breeches, coats, jackets and trousers

<sup>80</sup> **calico** – a cotton fabric with simple designs; it first appeared in the 11<sup>th</sup> century in Calicut, India

<sup>81</sup> **brogues** – strong leather shoes with stitches

<sup>82</sup> **Milesian** – related to *Milesians*, the ancestors of the Celtic population of Ireland

<sup>83</sup> **Galway** – a county in western Ireland, the largest Gaelic-speaking region of the country; a seaport and the county town of County Galway

<sup>84</sup> **Connemara** – a region in County Galway, a lowland with bogs, lakes and uplands

During the concluding portion of this utterance, the speaker had forsaken his seat, and approached the corner where stood the jar.

Notwithstanding the professed innocence of his intent, there was a stealthiness about his movements, that seemed to argue either a want of confidence in his own integrity, or in his power to resist temptation.

He stood for a short while listening – his eyes turned towards the open doorway; and then, taking up the demijohn, he drew out the stopper, and held the neck to his nose.

For some seconds he remained in this attitude: giving out no other sign than an occasional “sniff,” similar to that uttered by the hound, and which he had been fain to interpret as an affirmative answer to his interrogatory. It expressed the enjoyment he was deriving from the *bouquet* of the potent spirit.

But this only satisfied him for a very short time; and gradually the bottom of the jar was seen going upwards, while the reverse end descended in like ratio in the direction of his protruding lips.

“Be japers!” he exclaimed, once more glancing stealthily towards the door, “flesh and blood cudn’t stand the smell av that bewtiful whisky, widout tastin’ it. Trath! I’ll chance it – jist the smallest thrifle to wet the tap av my tongue. Maybe it’ll burn the skin av it; but no matther – here goes!”

Without further ado the neck of the demijohn was brought in contact with his lips; but instead of the “smallest thrifle” to wet the top of his tongue, the “gluck – gluck” of the escaping fluid told that he was administering a copious saturation to the whole lining of his larynx, and something more.

After half a dozen “smacks” of the mouth, with other exclamations denoting supreme satisfaction, he hastily restored the stopper; returned the demijohn to its place; and glided back to his seat upon the stool.

“Tara, ye owld thief!” said he, addressing himself once more to his canine companion, “it was you that timplted me! No matther, man: the masther ’ll niver miss it; besides, he’s goin’ soon to the Fort, an can lay in a fresh supply.”

For a time the pilferer remained silent; either reflecting on the act he had committed, or enjoying the effects which the “potheen” had produced upon his spirits.

His silence was of short duration; and was terminated by a soliloquy.

“I wondher,” muttered he, “fwhat makes Masther Maurice so anxious to get back to the Sittlements. He says he’ll go whenever he catches that spotty mustang he has seen lately. Sow! isn’t he bad afther that baste! I suppose it must be somethin’ beyant the common – the more be token, as he has chased the crayther three times widout bein’ able to throw his rope over it – an mounted on the blood-bay, too. He sez he won’t give it up, till he gets howlt of it. Trath! I hope it’ll be gruppued soon, or wez may stay here till the marnin’ av doomsday. Hush! fwhat’s that?”

Tara springing up from his couch of skin, and rushing out with a low growl, had caused the exclamation.

“Phelim!” hailed a voice from the outside. “Phelim!”

“It’s the masther,” muttered Phelim, as he jumped from his stool, and followed the dog through the doorway.

## Chapter 6

### The Spotted Mustang

Phelim was not mistaken as to the voice that had hailed him. It was that of his master, Maurice Gerald.

On getting outside, he saw the mustanger at a short distance from the door, and advancing towards it.

As the servant should have expected, his master was mounted upon his horse – no longer of a reddish colour, but appearing almost black. The animal's coat was darkened with sweat; its counter and flanks speckled with foam.

The blood-bay was not alone. At the end of the lazo – drawn taut from the saddle tree – was a companion, or, to speak more accurately, a captive. With a leathern thong looped around its under jaw, and firmly embracing the bars of its mouth, kept in place by another passing over its neck immediately behind the ears, was the captive secured.

It was a mustang of peculiar appearance, as regarded its markings; which were of a kind rarely seen – even among the largest “gangs” that roam over the prairie pastures, where colours of the most eccentric patterns are not uncommon.

That of the animal in question was a ground of dark chocolate in places approaching to black – with white spots distributed over it, as regularly as the contrary colours upon the skin of the jaguar.

As if to give effect to this pleasing arrangement of hues, the creature was of perfect shape – broad chested, full in the flank, and clean limbed – with a hoof showing half a score of concentric rings, and a head that might have been taken as a type of equine beauty. It was of large size for a mustang, though much smaller than the ordinary English horse; even smaller than the blood-bay – himself a mustang – that had assisted in its capture.

The beautiful captive was a mare – one of a *manada*<sup>85</sup> that frequented the plains near the source of the Alamo; and where, for the third time, the mustanger had unsuccessfully chased it.

In his case the proverb had proved untrue. In the third time he had not found the “charm”; though it favoured him in the fourth. By the fascination of a long rope, with a running noose at its end, he had secured the creature that, for some reason known only to himself, he so ardently wished to possess.

Phelim had never seen his master return from a horse-hunting excursion in such a state of excitement; even when coming back – as he often did – with half a dozen mustangs led loosely at the end of his lazo.

But never before at the end of that implement had Phelim beheld such a beauty as the spotted mare. She was a thing to excite the admiration of one less a connoisseur in horse-flesh than the *ci-devant*<sup>86</sup> stable-boy of Castle Ballagh.

“Hooch – hoop – hoora!” cried he, as he set eyes upon the captive, at the same time tossing his hat high into the air. “Thanks to the Howly Vargin<sup>87</sup>, an Saint Pathrick<sup>88</sup> to boot, Masther Maurice, yez have cotched the spotty at last! It's a mare, be japers! Och! the purthy crayther! I don't wondher yez hiv been so bad about gettin' howlt av her. Sow! if yez had her in Ballinasloe Fair, yez might ask your own price, and get it too, widout givin' sixpence av luckpenny. Oh! the purty crayther! Where will yez hiv her phut, masther? Into the corral, wid the others?”

---

<sup>85</sup> **manada** – herd of horses (*Spanish*)

<sup>86</sup> **ci-devant** – 1. former; 2. before (*French*)

<sup>87</sup> **Howly Vargin** – Holy Virgin, Mother of Jesus

<sup>88</sup> **Saint Patrick** – bishop and patron saint of Ireland, national apostle who brought Christianity to the country in the 5<sup>th</sup> century

“No, she might get kicked among them. We shall tie her in the shed. Castro must pass his night outside among the trees. If he’s got any gallantry in him he won’t mind that. Did you ever see anything so beautiful as she is, Phelim – I mean in the way of horseflesh?”

“Niver, Masther Maurice; niver, in all me life! An’ I’ve seen some nice bits av blood about Ballyballagh. Oh, the purty crayther! she looks as if a body cud ate her; and yit, in trath, she looks like she wud ate you. Yez haven’t given her the schoolin’ lesson, have yez?”

“No, Phelim: I don’t want to break her just yet – not till I have time, and can do it properly. It would never do to spoil such perfection as that. I shall tame her, after we’ve taken her to the Settlements.”

“Yez be goin’ there, masther Maurice? When?”

“To-morrow. We shall start by daybreak, so as to make only one day between here and the Fort.”

“Sowl! I’m glad to hear it. Not on me own account, but yours, Masther Maurice. Maybe yez don’t know that the whisky’s on the idge of bein’ out? From the rattle av the jar, I don’t think there’s more than three naggins left. Them sutlers at the Fort aren’t honest. They chate ye in the mizyure; besides watherin’ the whisky, so that it won’t bear a dhrap more out av the strame hare. Trath! a gallon av Innishowen wud last ayqual to three av this Amerikin *rotgut*, as the Yankees<sup>89</sup> themselves christen it.”

“Never mind about the whisky, Phelim – I suppose there’s enough to last us for this night, and fill our flasks for the journey of to-morrow. Look alive, old Ballyballagh! Let us stable the spotted mare; and then I shall have time to talk about a fresh supply of ‘potheen,’ which I know you like better than anything else – except yourself!”

“And you, Masther Maurice!” retorted the Galwegian<sup>90</sup>, with a comical twinkle of the eye, that caused his master to leap laughingly out of the saddle.

The spotted mare was soon stabled in the shed, Castro being temporarily attached to a tree; where Phelim proceeded to groom him after the most approved prairie fashion.

The mustanger threw himself on his horse-skin couch, wearied with the work of the day. The capture of the “yegua pinta” had cost him a long and arduous chase – such as he had never ridden before in pursuit of a mustang.

There was a motive that had urged him on, unknown to Phelim – unknown to Castro who carried him – unknown to living creature, save himself.

Notwithstanding that he had spent several days in the saddle – the last three in constant pursuit of the spotted mare – despite the weariness thus occasioned, he was unable to obtain repose. At intervals he rose to his feet, and paced the floor of his hut, as if stirred by some exciting emotion.

For several nights he had slept uneasily – at intervals tossing upon his *catré* – till not only his henchman Phelim, but his hound Tara, wondered what could be the meaning of his *unrest*.

The former might have attributed it to his desire to possess the spotted mare; had he not known that his master’s feverish feeling antedated his knowledge of the existence of this peculiar quadruped.

It was several days after his last return from the Fort that the “yegua pinta” had first presented herself to the eye of the mustanger. That therefore could not be the cause of his altered demeanour.

His success in having secured the animal, instead of tranquillising his spirit, seemed to have produced the contrary effect. At least, so thought Phelim: who – with the freedom of that relationship known as “foster-brother” – had at length determined on questioning his master as to

---

<sup>89</sup> **Yankees** – citizens of the USA, or more precisely of the six New England states; the origin of the word is unknown; it came into use during the Civil War in 1861–1865

<sup>90</sup> **Galwegian** – inhabitant of Galway



the cause of his inquietude. As the latter lay shifting from side to side, he was saluted with the interrogatory —

“Masther Maurice, fwhat, in the name of the Howly Vargin, is the matther wid ye?”

“Nothing, Phelim – nothing, *mabohil!* What makes you think there is?”

“*Alannah!* How kyan I help thinkin’ it! Yez kyant get a wink av sleep; niver since ye returned the last time from the Sittlement. Och! yez hiv seen somethin’ there that kapes ye awake? Shure now, it isn’t wan av them Mixikin girls – *mowchachas*, as they call them? No, I won’t believe it. You wudn’t be wan av the owld Geraldts to care for such trash as them.”

“Nonsense, my good fellow! There’s nothing the matter with me. It’s all your own imagination.”

“Trath, masther, yez arr mistaken. If there’s anything asthray wid me imaginashun, fhwat is it that’s gone wrong wid your own? That is, whin yez arr aslape – which aren’t often av late.”

“When I’m asleep! What do you mean, Phelim?”

“What div I mane? Fwhy, that whenever yez close your eyes an think yez are sleepin’, ye begin palaverin’, as if a preast was confessin’ ye!”

“Ah! Is that so? What have you heard me say?”

“Not much, masther, that I cud make sinse out av. Yez be always tryin’ to pronounce a big name that appares to have no indin’, though it begins wid a *point!*”

“A name! What name?”

“Sowl! I kyan’t till ye exakly. It’s too long for me to remimber, seein’ that my edicashun was intirely neglected. But there’s another name that yez phut before it; an that I kyan tell ye. It’s a wuman’s name, though it’s not common in the owld counthry. It’s Looaze that ye say, Masther Maurice; an then comes *the point.*”

“Ah!” interrupted the young Irishman, evidently not caring to converse longer on the subject. “Some name I may have heard – somewhere, accidentally. One does have such strange ideas in dreams!”

“Trath! yez spake the truth there; for in your drames, masther, ye talk about a purty girl lookin’ out av a carriage wid curtains to it, an tellin’ her to close them agaynst some danger that yez are going to save her from.”

“I wonder what puts such nonsense into my head?”

“I wondher meself,” rejoined Phelim, fixing his eyes upon his young master with a stealthy but scrutinising look. “Shure,” he continued, “if I may make bowld to axe the quistyun – shure, Masther Maurice, yez haven’t been makin’ a Judy Fitzsummon’s mother av yerself, an fallin’ in love wid wan of these Yankee weemen out hare? Och an-an-ee! that wud be a misforthune; an thwat wud she say – the purty colleen wid the goodlen hair an blue eyes, that lives not twinty miles from Ballyballagh?”

“Poh, poh! Phelim! you’re taking leave of your senses, I fear.”

“Trath, masther, I aren’t; but I know somethin’ I wud like to take lave av.”

“What is that? Not me, I hope?”

“You, *alannah?* Niver! It’s Tixas I mane. I’d like to take lave of that; an you goin’ along wid me back to the owld sad. Arrah, now, fhwat’s the use av yer stayin’ here, wastin’ the best part av yer days in doin’ nothin’? Shure yez don’t make more than a bare livin’ by the horse-catchin’; an if yez did, what mathers it? Yer owld aunt at Castle Ballagh can’t howld out much longer; an when she’s did, the bewtiful demane ’ll be yours, spite av the dhirty way she’s thratin’ ye. Shure the property’s got a tail to it; an not a mother’s son av them can kape ye out av it!”

“Ha! ha! ha!” laughed the young Irishman: “you’re quite a lawyer, Phelim. What a first-rate attorney you’d have made! But come! You forget that I haven’t tasted food since morning. What have you got in the larder?”

“Trath! there’s no great stock, masther. Yez haven’t laid in anythin’ for the three days yez hiv been afther spotty. There’s only the cowl’d venison an the corn-bread. If yez like I’ll phut the venison in the pat, an make a hash av it.”

“Yes, do so. I can wait.”

“Won’t yez wait bettther afther tastin’ a dhrap av the crayther?”

“True – let me have it.”

“Will yez take it nate, or with a little wather? Trath! it won’t carry much av that same.”

“A glass of grog<sup>91</sup> – draw the water fresh from the stream.”

Phelim took hold of the silver drinking-cup, and was about stepping outside, when a growl from Tara, accompanied by a start, and followed by a rush across the floor, caused the servitor to approach the door with a certain degree of caution.

The barking of the dog soon subsided into a series of joyful whimperings, which told that he had been gratified by the sight of some old acquaintance.

“It’s owld Zeb Stump,” said Phelim, first peeping out, and then stepping boldly forth – with the double design of greeting the new-comer, and executing the order he had received from his master.

The individual, who had thus freely presented himself in front of the mustanger’s cabin, was as unlike either of its occupants, as one from the other.

He stood full six feet high, in a pair of tall boots, fabricated out of tanned alligator skin; into the ample tops of which were thrust the bottoms of his pantaloons – the latter being of woollen homespun, that had been dyed with “dog-wood ooze,” but was now of a simple dirt colour. A deerskin under shirt, without any other, covered his breast and shoulders; over which was a “blanket coat,” that had once been green, long since gone to a greenish yellow, with most of the wool worn off.

There was no other garment to be seen: a slouch felt hat, of greyish colour, badly battered, completing the simple, and somewhat scant, collection of his wardrobe.

He was equipped in the style of a backwoods hunter, of the true Daniel Boone breed: bullet-pouch, and large crescent-shaped powder-horn, both suspended by shoulder-straps, hanging under the right arm; a waist-belt of thick leather keeping his coat closed and sustaining a skin sheath, from which protruded the rough stag-horn handle of a long-bladed knife.

He did not affect either mocassins, leggings, nor the caped and fringed tunic shirt of dressed deerskin worn by most Texan hunters. There was no embroidery upon his coarse clothing, no carving upon his accoutrements or weapons, nothing in his *tout ensemble*<sup>92</sup> intended as ornamental. Everything was plain almost to rudeness: as if dictated by a spirit that despised “fanfaron.”

Even the rifle, his reliable weapon – the chief tool of his trade – looked like a rounded bar of iron, with a piece of brown unpolished wood at the end, forming its stock; stock and barrel, when the butt rested on the ground, reaching up to the level of his shoulder.

The individual thus clothed and equipped was apparently about fifty years of age, with a complexion inclining to dark, and features that, at first sight, exhibited a grave aspect.

On close scrutiny, however, could be detected an underlying stratum of quiet humour; and in the twinkle of a small greyish eye there was evidence that its owner could keenly relish a joke, or, at times, perpetrate one.

The Irishman had pronounced his name: it was Zebulon Stump, or “Old Zeb Stump,” as he was better known to the very limited circle of his acquaintances.

“Kaintuck, by birth an raisin’,” – as he would have described himself, if asked the country of his nativity – he had passed the early part of his life among the primeval forests of the Lower

---

<sup>91</sup> **grog** – an alcoholic drink mixed with water

<sup>92</sup> **Nothing in his tout ensemble** means *nothing in his cloths*

Mississippi – his sole calling that of a hunter; and now, at a later period, he was performing the same *métier*<sup>93</sup> in the wilds of south-western Texas.

The behaviour of the staghound, as it bounded before him, exhibiting a series of canine welcomes, told of a friendly acquaintance between Zeb Stump and Maurice the mustanger.

“Evenin’!” laconically saluted Zeb, as his tail figure shadowed the cabin door.

“Good evening’, Mr Stump!” rejoined the owner of the hut, rising to receive him. “Step inside, and take a seat!”

The hunter accepted the invitation; and, making a single stride across the floor, after some awkward manoeuvring, succeeded in planting himself on the stool lately occupied by Phelim. The lowness of the seat brought his knees upon a level with his chin, the tall rifle rising like a pikestaff several feet above his head.

“Durn stools, anyhow!” muttered he, evidently dissatisfied with the posture; “an’ churs, too, for thet matter. I likes to plant my starn upon a log: thur ye’ve got somethin’ under ye as ain’t like to guv way.”

“Try that,” said his host, pointing to the leathern portmanteau in the corner: “you’ll find it a firmer seat.”

Old Zeb, adopting the suggestion, unfolded the zigzag of his colossal carcase, and transferred it to the trunk.

“On foot, Mr Stump, as usual?”

“No: I got my old critter out thur, tied to a saplin’. I wa’n’t a huntin’.”

“You never hunt on horseback, I believe?”

“I shed be a greenhorn if I dud. Anybody as goes huntin’ a hossback must be a durnation fool!”

“But it’s the universal fashion in Texas!”

“Univarsal or no, it air a fool’s fashion – a durned lazy fool’s fashion! I kill more meat in one day afut, then I ked in a hul week wi’ a hoss atween my legs. I don’t misdoubt that a hoss air the best thing for you – bein’ as yur game’s entire different. But when ye go arter baar, or deer, or turkey eyther, ye won’t see much o’ them, trampin’ about through the timmer a hossback, an scarrin’ everythin’ es hes got ears ’ithin the circuit o’ a mile. As for hosses, I shodn’t be bothered wi’ ne’er a one no how, ef twa’n’t for packin’ the meat: thet’s why I keep my ole maar.”

“She’s outside, you say? Let Phelim take her round to the shed. You’ll stay all night?”

“I kim for that purpiss. But ye needn’t trouble about the maar: she air hitched safe enuf. I’ll let her out on the laryitt, afore I take to grass.”

“You’ll have something to eat? Phelim was just getting supper ready. I’m sorry I can’t offer you anything very dainty – some hash of venison.”

“Nothin’ better ’n good deermeat, ’ceptin it be baar; but I like both done over the coals. Maybe I can help ye to some’at thet’ll make a roast. Mister Pheelum, ef ye don’t mind steppin’ to whar my critter air hitched, ye’ll find a gobbler hangin’ over the horn o’ the saddle. I shot the bird as I war comin’ up the crik.”

“Oh, that is rare good fortune! Our larder has got very low – quite out, in truth. I’ve been so occupied, for the last three days, in chasing a very curious mustang, that I never thought of taking my gun with me. Phelim and I, and Tara, too, had got to the edge of starvation.”

“Whet sort o’ a mustang?” inquired the hunter, in a tone that betrayed interest, and without appearing to notice the final remark.

“A mare; with white spots on a dark chocolate ground – a splendid creature!”

“Durn it, young fellur! thet air’s the very bizness thet’s brung me over to ye.”

“Indeed!”

---

<sup>93</sup> *métier* – profession, occupation, business (*French*)

“I’ve seed that mustang – maar, ye say it air, though I kedn’t tell, as she’d niver let me ’ithin hef a mile o’ her. I’ve seed her several times out on the purayra, an I jest wanted ye to go arter her. I’ll tell ye why. I’ve been to the Leeona settlements since I seed you last, and since I seed her too. Wal, theer hev kum thur a man as I knowed on the Mississippi. He air a rich planter, as used to keep up the tallest kind o’ doin’s, ’specially in the feestin’ way. Many’s the jeint o’ deermeat, and many’s the turkey-gobbler this hyur coon hes surplied for his table. His name air Peintdexter.”

“Poindexter?”

“Thet air the name – one o’ the best known on the Mississippi from Orleens<sup>94</sup> to Saint Looey<sup>95</sup>. He war rich then; an, I reck’n, ain’t poor now – seein’ as he’s brought about a hunderd niggers along wi’ him. Beside, thur’s a nephew o’ hisn, by name Calhoun. He’s got the dollars, an nothin’ to do wi’ ’em but lend ’em to his uncle – the which, for a sartin reezun, I think he *will*. Now, young fellur, I’ll tell ye why I wanted to see *you*. Thet ’ere planter hev got a darter, as air dead bent upon hossflesh. She used to ride the skittishest kind o’ cattle in Loozeyanner<sup>96</sup>, whar they lived. She heern me tellin’ the old ’un ’bout the spotted mustang; and nothin’ would content her thur and then, till he promised he’d offer a big price for catchin’ the critter. He sayed he’d give a kupple o’ hunderd dollars for the anymal, ef ’twur anythin like what I sayed it wur. In coorse, I knowed thet ’ud send all the mustangers in the settlement straight custrut arter it; so, sayin’ nuthin’ to nobody, I kim over hyur, fast as my ole maar ’ud fetch me. You grup thet ’ere spotty, an Zeb Stump ’ll go yur bail ye’ll grab them two hunderd dollars.”

“Will you step this way, Mr Stump?” said the young Irishman, rising from his stool, and proceeding in the direction of the door.

The hunter followed, not without showing some surprise at the abrupt invitation.

Maurice conducted his visitor round to the rear of the cabin; and, pointing into the shed, inquired —

“Does that look anything like the mustang you’ve been speaking of?”

“Dog-gone my cats, ef ’taint the eyedenticul same! Grupped already! Two hunderd dollars, easy as slidin’ down a barked saplin’! Young fellur, yur in luck: two hunderd, slick sure! – and durn me, ef the anymal ain’t worth every cent o’ the money! Geehosofat! what a putty beest it air! Won’t Miss Peintdexter be pleezed! It’ll turn that young critter ’most crazy!”

---

<sup>94</sup> **Orleens – New Orleans** – the largest city and port on the Mississippi River, founded in 1718 by the French settlers; in 1763 New Orleans was given to the Spanish government, but in 1803 it was returned to France. In the same year Napoleon sold it to the United States

<sup>95</sup> **Saint Looey – St. Louis** – the largest city in Missouri, located on the bank of the Mississippi River; it used to be the Gateway of the West at the time of the first settlers. The Missouri River joins the Mississippi to the north of St. Louis

<sup>96</sup> **Loozeyanner** – Louisiana

## Chapter 7

### Nocturnal Annoyances

The unexpected discovery, that his purpose had been already anticipated by the capture of the spotted mustang, raised the spirits of the old hunter to a high pitch of excitement.

They were further elevated by a portion of the contents of the demijohn, which held out beyond Phelim's expectations: giving all hands an appetising "nip" before attacking the roast turkey, with another go each to wash it down, and several more to accompany the post-cenal pipe.

While this was being indulged in, a conversation was carried on; the themes being those that all prairie men delight to talk about: Indian and hunter lore.

As Zeb Stump was a sort of living encyclopaedia of the latter, he was allowed to do most of the talking; and he did it in such a fashion as to draw many a wondering ejaculation, from the tongue of the astonished Galwegian.

Long before midnight, however, the conversation was brought to a close. Perhaps the empty demijohn was, as much as anything else, the monitor that urged their retiring to rest; though there was another and more creditable reason. On the morrow, the mustanger intended to start for the Settlements; and it was necessary that all should be astir at an early hour, to make preparation for the journey. The wild horses, as yet but slightly tamed, had to be strung together, to secure against their escaping by the way; and many other matters required attending to previous to departure.

The hunter had already tethered out his "ole maar" – as he designated the sorry specimen of horseflesh he was occasionally accustomed to bestride – and had brought back with him an old yellowish blanket, which was all he ever used for a bed.

"You may take my bedstead," said his courteous host; "I can lay myself on a skin along the floor."

"No," responded the guest; "none o' yer shelves for Zeb Stump to sleep on. I prefer the solid groun'. I kin sleep sounder on it; an bus-sides, thur's no fear o' fallin' over."

"If you prefer it, then, take the floor. Here's the best place. I'll spread a hide for you."

"Young fellur, don't you do anythin' o' the sort; ye'll only be wastin' yur time. This child don't sleep on no floors. His bed air the green grass o' the purayra."

"What! you're not going to sleep outside?" inquired the mustanger in some surprise – seeing that his guest, with the old blanket over his arm, was making for the door.

"I ain't agoin' to do anythin' else."

"Why, the night is freezing cold – almost as chilly as a norther!"

"Durn that! It air better to stan' a leetle chillishness, than a feelin' o' suffercation – which last I wud sartintly hev to go through ef I slep inside o' a house."

"Surely you are jesting, Mr Stump?"

"Young fellur!" emphatically rejoined the hunter, without making direct reply to the question. "It air now nigh all o' six yeer since Zeb Stump hev stretched his ole karkiss under a roof. I oncest used to hev a sort o' a house in the hollow o' a sycamore-tree. That wur on the Massissippi, when my ole ooman wur alive, an I kep up the 'stablishment to 'commerdate her. Arter she went under, I moved into Loozeyanny; an then arterward kim out hyur. Since then the blue sky o' Texas hev been my only kiver, eyther wakin' or sleepin'."

"If you prefer to lie outside –"

"I prefar it," laconically rejoined the hunter, at the same time stalking over the threshold, and gliding out upon the little lawn that lay between the cabin and the creek.

His old blanket was not the only thing he carried along with him. Beside it, hanging over his arm, could be seen some six or seven yards of a horsehair rope. It was a piece of a *cabriesto*<sup>97</sup> – usually employed for tethering horses – though it was not for this purpose it was now to be used.

Having carefully scrutinised the grass within a circumference of several feet in diameter – which a shining moon enabled him to do – he laid the rope with like care around the spot examined, shaping it into a sort of irregular ellipse.

Stepping inside this, and wrapping the old blanket around him, he quietly let himself down into a recumbent position. In an instant after he appeared to be asleep.

And he was asleep, as his strong breathing testified: for Zeb Stump, with a hale constitution and a quiet conscience, had only to summon sleep, and it came.

He was not permitted long to indulge his repose without interruption. A pair of wondering eyes had watched his every movement – the eyes of Phelim O’Neal.

“Mother av Mozis!” muttered the Galwegian; “fwhat can be the manin’ av the owld chap’s surroundin’ himself wid the rope?”

The Irishman’s curiosity for a while struggled with his courtesy, but at length overcame it; and just as the slumberer delivered his third snore, he stole towards him, shook him out of his sleep, and propounded a question based upon the one he had already put to himself.

“Durn ye for a Irish donkey!” exclaimed Stump, in evident displeasure at being disturbed; “ye made me think it war mornin’! What do I put the rope roun’ me for? What else wud it be for, but to keep off the varmints!”

“What varmints, Misther Stump? Snakes, div yez mane?”

“Snakes in coorse. Durn ye, go to your bed!”

Notwithstanding the sharp rebuke, Phelim returned to the cabin apparently in high glee. If there was anything in Texas, “barrin’ an above the Indyins themselves,” as he used to say, “that kept him from slapin’, it was them vinamous sarpints. He hadn’t had a good night’s rest, iver since he’d been in the counthry for thinkin’ av the ugly vipers, or dhramin’ about thim. What a pity Saint Pathrick hadn’t paid Tixas a visit before goin’ to grace!”

Phelim in his remote residence, isolated as he had been from all intercourse, had never before witnessed the trick of the *cabriesto*.

He was not slow to avail himself of the knowledge thus acquired. Returning to the cabin, and creeping stealthily inside – as if not wishing to wake his master, already asleep – he was seen to take a *cabriesto* from its peg; and then going forth again, he carried the long rope around the stockade walls – paying it out as he proceeded.

Having completed the circumvallation, he re-entered the hut; as he stepped over the threshold, muttering to himself —

“Sowl! Phalim O’Nale, you’ll slape sound for this night, spite ov all the snakes in Tixas!”

For some minutes after Phelim’s soliloquy, a profound stillness reigned around the hut of the mustanger. There was like silence inside; for the countryman of Saint Patrick, no longer apprehensive on the score of reptile intruders, had fallen asleep, almost on the moment of his sinking down upon his spread horse-skin.

For a while it seemed as if everybody was in the enjoyment of perfect repose, Tara and the captive steeds included. The only sound heard was that made by Zeb Stump’s “maar,” close by cropping the sweet *grama* grass.

Presently, however, it might have been perceived that the old hunter was himself stirring. Instead of lying still in the recumbent attitude to which he had consigned himself, he could be seen shifting from side to side, as if some feverish thought was keeping him awake.

---

<sup>97</sup> *cabriesto* – a kind of rope

After repeating this movement some half-score of times, he at length raised himself into a sitting posture, and looked discontentedly around.

“Dod-rot his ignorance and imperence – the Irish cuss!” were the words that came hissing through his teeth. “He’s spoilt my night’s rest, durn him! ’Twould sarve him ’bout right to drag him out, an giv him a duckin’ in the crik. Dog-goned ef I don’t feel ’clined torst doin’ it; only I don’t like to displeeze the other Irish, who air a somebody. Possible I don’t git a wink o’ sleep till mornin’.”

Having delivered himself of this peevish soliloquy, the hunter once more drew the blanket around his body, and returned to the horizontal position.

Not to sleep, however; as was testified by the tossing and fidgeting that followed – terminated by his again raising himself into a sitting posture.

A soliloquy, very similar to his former one, once more proceeded from his lips; this time the threat of ducking Phelim in the creek being expressed with a more emphatic accent of determination.

He appeared to be wavering, as to whether he should carry the design into execution, when an object coming under his eye gave a new turn to his thoughts.

On the ground, not twenty feet from where he sate, a long thin body was seen gliding over the grass. Its serpent shape, and smooth lubricated skin – reflecting the silvery light of the moon – rendered the reptile easy of identification.

“Snake!” mutteringly exclaimed he, as his eye rested upon the reptilian form. “Wonder what sort it air, slickerin’ aboout hyur at this time o’ the night? It air too large for a *rattle*; though thur air some in these parts most as big as it. But it air too clur i’ the colour, an thin about the belly, for ole rattle-tail! No; ’tain’t one o’ them. Hah – now I ree-cog-nise the varmint! It air a *chicken*, out on the sarch arter eggs, I reck’n! Durn the thing! it air comin’ torst me, straight as it kin crawl!”

The tone in which the speaker delivered himself told that he was in no fear of the reptile – even after discovering that it was making approach. He knew that the snake would not cross the *cabriesto*; but on touching it would turn away: as if the horsehair rope was a line of living fire. Secure within his magic circle, he could have looked tranquilly at the intruder, though it had been the most poisonous of prairie serpents.

But it was not. On the contrary, it was one of the most innocuous – harmless as the “chicken,” from which the species takes its trivial title – at the same time that it is one of the largest in the list of North-American *reptilia*.

The expression on Zeb’s face, as he sat regarding it, was simply one of curiosity, and not very keen. To a hunter in the constant habit of couching himself upon the grass, there was nothing in the sight either strange or terrifying; not even when the creature came close up to the *cabriesto*, and, with head slightly elevated, rubbed its snout against the rope!

After that there was less reason to be afraid; for the snake, on doing so, instantly turned round and commenced retreating over the sward.

For a second or two the hunter watched it moving away, without making any movement himself. He seemed undecided as to whether he should follow and destroy it, or leave it to go as it had come – unscathed. Had it been a rattlesnake, “copperhead,” or “mocassin,” he would have acted up to the curse delivered in the garden of Eden<sup>98</sup>, and planted the heel of his heavy alligator-skin boot upon its head. But a harmless chicken-snake did not come within the limits of Zeb Stump’s antipathy: as was evidenced by some words muttered by him as it slowly receded from the spot.

“Poor crawlin’ critter; let it go! It ain’t no enemy o’ mine; though it do suck a turkey’s egg now an then, an in coorse scarcities the breed o’ the birds. Thet air only its nater, an no reezun why I shed be angry wi’ it. But thur’s a durned good reezun why I shed be wi’ thet Irish – the dog-goned, stinkin’ fool, to ha’ woke me es he dud! I feel dod-rotted like sarvin’ him out, ef I ked only

---

<sup>98</sup> the garden of Eden – in the Bible, an earthly paradise where the first people, Adam and Eve, lived

think o' some way as wudn't diskermode the young fellur. Stay! By Geehosofat, I've got the idee – the very thing – sure es my name air Zeb Stump!”

On giving utterance to the last words, the hunter – whose countenance had suddenly assumed an expression of quizzical cheerfulness – sprang to his feet; and, with bent body, hastened in pursuit of the retreating reptile.

A few strides brought him alongside of it; when he pounced upon it with all his ten digits extended.

In another moment its long glittering body was uplifted from the ground, and writhing in his grasp.

“Now, Mister Pheelum,” exclaimed he, as if apostrophising the serpent, “ef I don't gi'e yur Irish soul a scare thet 'll keep ye awake till mornin', I don't know buzzart from turkey. Hyur goes to purvide ye wi' a bedfellur!”

On saying this, he advanced towards the hut; and, silently skulking under its shadow, released the serpent from his gripe – letting it fall within the circle of the *cabriesto*, with which Phelim had so craftily surrounded his sleeping-place.

Then returning to his grassy couch, and once more pulling the old blanket over his shoulders, he muttered —

“The varmint won't come out acrost the rope – thet air sartin; an it ain't agoin' to leave a yurd o' the groun' 'ithout explorin' for a place to git clur – thet's eequally sartin. Ef it don't crawl over thet Irish greenhorn 'ithin the hef o' an hour, then ole Zeb Stump air a greenhorn hissself. Hi! what's thet? Dog-goned of 'taint on him arready!”

If the hunter had any further reflections to give tongue to, they could not have been heard: for at that moment there arose a confusion of noises that must have startled every living creature on the Alamo, and for miles up and down the stream.

It was a human voice that had given the cue – or rather, a human howl, such as could proceed only from the throat of a Galwegian. Phelim O'Neal was the originator of the infernal *fracas*<sup>99</sup>.

His voice, however, was soon drowned by a chorus of barkings, snortings, and neighings, that continued without interruption for a period of several minutes.

“What is it?” demanded his master, as he leaped from the *catré*, and groped his way towards his terrified servitor. “What the devil has got into you, Phelim? Have you seen a ghost?”

“Oh, masther! – by Jaysus! worse than that: I've been murdered by a snake. It's bit me all over the body. Blessed Saint Pathrick! I'm a poor lost sinner! I'll be shure to die!”

“Bitten you, you say – where?” asked Maurice, hastily striking a light, and proceeding to examine the skin of his henchman, assisted by the old hunter – who had by this time arrived within the cabin.

“I see no sign of bite,” continued the mustanger, after having turned Phelim round and round, and closely scrutinised his epidermis.

“Ne'er a scratch,” laconically interpolated Stump.

“Sowl! then, if I'm not bit, so much the better; but it crawled all over me. I can feel it now, as cowl'd as charity, on me skin.”

“Was there a snake at all?” demanded Maurice, inclined to doubt the statement of his follower. “You've been dreaming of one, Phelim – nothing more.”

“Not a bit of a dhrame, masther: it was a raal sarpint. Be me sowl, I'm shure of it!”

“I reck'n thur's been snake,” drily remarked the hunter. “Let's see if we kin track it up. Kewrious it air, too. Thur's a hair rope all roun' the house. Wonder how the varmint could ha' crossed thet? Thur – thur it is!”

---

<sup>99</sup> **fracas** – noise; noisy quarrel



The hunter, as he spoke, pointed to a corner of the cabin, where the serpent was seen spirally coiled.

“Only a chicken!” he continued: “no more harm in it than in a suckin’ dove. It kedn’t ha’ bit ye, Mister Pheelum; but we’ll put it past bitin’, anyhow.”

Saying this, the hunter seized the snake in his hands; and, raising it aloft, brought it down upon the floor of the cabin with a “thwank” that almost deprived it of the power of motion.

“Thru now, Mister Pheelum!” he exclaimed, giving it the finishing touch with the heel of his heavy boot, “ye may go back to yur bed agin, an sleep ’ithout fear o’ bein’ disturbed till the mornin’ – leastwise, by snakes.”

Kicking the defunct reptile before him, Zeb Stump strode out of the hut, gleefully chuckling to himself, as, for the third time, he extended his colossal carcass along the sward.

## Chapter 8

### The Crawl of the Alacran

100

The killing of the snake appeared to be the cue for a general return to quiescence. The howlings of the hound ceased with those of the henchman. The mustangs once more stood silent under the shadowy trees.

Inside the cabin the only noise heard was an occasional shuffling, when Phelim, no longer feeling confidence in the protection of his *cabriesto*, turned restlessly on his horseskin.

Outside also there was but one sound, to disturb the stillness though its intonation was in striking contrast with that heard within. It might have been likened to a cross between the grunt of an alligator and the croaking of a bull-frog; but proceeding, as it did, from the nostrils of Zeb Stump, it could only be the snore of the slumbering hunter. Its sonorous fulness proved him to be soundly asleep.

He was – had been, almost from the moment of re-establishing himself within the circle of his *cabriesto*. The *revanche*<sup>101</sup> obtained over his late disturber had acted as a settler to his nerves; and once more was he enjoying the relaxation of perfect repose.

For nearly an hour did this contrasting duet continue, varied only by an occasional *recitative* in the hoot of the great horned owl, or a *cantata penserosa*<sup>102</sup> in the lugubrious wail of the prairie wolf.

At the end of this interval, however, the chorus recommenced, breaking out abruptly as before, and as before led by the vociferous voice of the Connemara man.

“Meliah murdher!” cried he, his first exclamation not only startling the host of the hut, but the guest so soundly sleeping outside. “Howly Mother! Vargin av unpurticted innocence! Save me – save me!”

“Save you from what?” demanded his master, once more springing from his couch and hastening to strike a light. “What is it, you confounded fellow?”

“Another snake, yer hanner! Och! be me sowl! a far wickedder sarpent than the wan Misther Stump killed. It’s bit me all over the breast. I feel the place burnin’ where it crawled across me, just as if the horse-shoer at Ballyballagh had scorched me wid a rid-hot iron!”

“Durn ye for a stinkin’ skunk!” shouted Zeb Stump, with his blanket about his shoulder, quite filling the doorway. “Ye’ve twicest spiled my night’s sleep, ye Irish fool! ’Scuse me, Mister Gerald! Thur air fools in all countries, I reck’n, ’Merican as well as Irish – but this hyur follerer o’ yourn air the durndest o’ the kind iver I kim acrost. Dog-goned if I see how we air to get any sleep the night, ’less we drownd *him* in the crik fust!”

“Och! Misther Stump dear, don’t talk that way. I sware to yez both there’s another snake. I’m shure it’s in the kyabin yit. It’s only a minute since I feeled it creepin’ over me.”

“You must ha’ been dreemin’?” rejoined the hunter, in a more complacent tone, and speaking half interrogatively. “I tell ye no snake in Texas will cross a hosshair rope. The tother ’un must ha’ been inside the house afore ye laid the laryitt roun’ it. ’Taint likely there keel ha’ been two on ’em. We kin soon settle that by sarchin’.”

“Oh, murdher! Luk hare!” cried the Galwegian, pulling off his shirt and laying bare his breast. “Thare’s the riptoile’s track, right acrass over me ribs! Didn’t I tell yez there was another snake? O blissed Mother, what will become av me? It feels like a strake av fire!”

---

<sup>100</sup> **Alacran** – Alacran tartarus, a kind of poisonous insects

<sup>101</sup> **revanche** – compensation, satisfaction (*French*)

<sup>102</sup> **cantata penserosa** – a short musical work for a choir and a soloist

“Snake!” exclaimed Stump, stepping up to the affrighted Irishman, and holding the candle close to his skin. “Snake i’ deed! By the ’tarnal airthquake, it air no snake! It air wuss than that!”

“Worse than a snake?” shouted Phelim in dismay. “Worse, yez say, Misther Stump? Div yez mane that it’s dangerous?”

“Wal, it mout be, an it moutn’t. Thet ere ’ll depend on whether I kin find somethin’ ’bout hyur, an find it soon. Ef I don’t, then, Mister Pheelum, I won’t answer – ”

“Oh, Misther Stump, don’t say thare’s danger!”

“What is it?” demanded Maurice, as his eyes rested upon a reddish line running diagonally across the breast of his follower, and which looked as if traced by the point of a hot spindle. “What is it, anyhow?” he repeated with increasing anxiety, as he observed the serious look with which the hunter regarded the strange marking. “I never saw the like before. Is it something to be alarmed about?”

“All o’ thet, Mister Gerald,” replied Stump, motioning Maurice outside the hut, and speaking to him in a whisper, so as not to be overheard by Phelim.

“But what is it?” eagerly asked the mustanger. “*It air the crawl o’ the pisen centipede.*”

“The poison centipede! Has it bitten him?”

“No, I hardly think it hez. But it don’t need thet. The *crawl* o’ itself air enuf to kill him!”

“Merciful Heaven! you don’t mean that?”

“I do, Mister Gerald. I’ve seed more ’an one good fellur go under wi’ that same sort o’ a stripe acrost his skin. If thur ain’t somethin’ done, an thet soon, he’ll fust get into a ragin’ fever, an then he’ll go out o’ his senses, jest as if the bite o’ a mad dog had gin him the hydrophoby<sup>103</sup>. It air no use frightenin’ him howsomdever, till I sees what I kin do. Thur’s a yarb, or rayther it air a plant, as grows in these parts. Ef I kin find it handy, there’ll be no defeequilty in curin’ o’ him. But as the cussed lack wud hev it, the moon hez sneaked out o’ sight; an I kin only get the yarb by gropin’. I know there air plenty o’ it up on the bluff; an ef you’ll go back inside, an keep the fellur quiet, I’ll see what kin be done. I won’t be gone but a minute.”

The whispered colloquy, and the fact of the speakers having gone outside to carry it on, instead of tranquillising the fears of Phelim, had by this time augmented them to an extreme degree: and just as the old hunter, bent upon his herborising errand, disappeared in the darkness, he came rushing forth from the hut, howling more piteously than ever.

It was some time before his master could get him tranquillised, and then only by assuring him – on a faith not very firm – that there was not the slightest danger.

A few seconds after this had been accomplished, Zeb Stump reappeared in the doorway, with a countenance that produced a pleasant change in the feelings of those inside. His confident air and attitude proclaimed, as plainly as words could have done, that he had discovered that of which he had gone in search – the “yarb.” In his right hand he held a number of oval shaped objects of dark green colour – all of them bristling with sharp spines, set over the surface in equidistant clusters. Maurice recognised the leaves of a plant well known to him – the *oregano* cactus.

“Don’t be skeart, Mister Pheelum!” said the old hunter, in a consolatory tone, as he stepped across the threshold. “Thur’s nothin’ to fear now. I hev got the bolsum as ’ll draw the burnin’ out o’ yur blood, quicker ’an flame ud scorch a feather. Stop yur yellin’, man! Ye’ve roused every bird an beast, an creepin’ thing too, I reckon, out o’ thar slumbers, for more an twenty mile up an down the crik. Ef you go on at that grist much longer, ye’ll bring the Kumanchees out o’ thur mountains, an that ’ud be wuss mayhap than the crawl o’ this hunderd-legged critter. Mister Gerald, you git riddy a bandige, whiles I purpares the powltiss.”

Drawing his knife from its sheath, the hunter first lopped off the spines; and then, removing the outside skin, he split the thick succulent leaves of the cactus into slices of about an eighth of an

---

<sup>103</sup> **hydrophoby** – fear of water

inch in thickness. These he spread contiguously upon a strip of clean cotton stuff already prepared by the mustanger; and then, with the ability of a hunter, laid the “powltiss,” as he termed it, along the inflamed line, which he declared to have been made by the claws of the centipede, but which in reality was caused by the injection of venom from its poison-charged mandibles, a thousand times inserted into the flesh of the sleeper!

The application of the *oregano* was almost instantaneous in its effect. The acrid juice of the plant, producing a counter poison, killed that which had been secreted by the animal; and the patient, relieved from further apprehension, and soothed by the sweet confidence of security – stronger from reaction – soon fell off into a profound and restorative slumber.

After searching for the centipede and failing to find it – for this hideous reptile, known in Mexico as the *alacran*, unlike the rattlesnake, has no fear of crossing a *cabriesto* – the improvised physician strode silently out of the cabin; and, once more committing himself to his grassy couch, slept undisturbed till the morning.

At the earliest hour of daybreak all three were astir – Phelim having recovered both from his fright and his fever. Having made their matutinal meal upon the *débris* of the roast turkey, they hastened to take their departure from the hut. The quondam stable-boy of Ballyballagh, assisted by the Texan hunter, prepared the wild steeds for transport across the plains – by stringing them securely together – while Maurice looked after his own horse and the spotted mare. More especially did he expend his time upon the beautiful captive – carefully combing out her mane and tail, and removing from her glossy coat the stains that told of the severe chase she had cost him before her proud neck yielded to the constraint of his lazo.

“Durn it, man!” exclaimed Zeb, as, with some surprise, he stood watching the movements of the mustanger, “ye needn’t ha’ been hef so purtickler! Wudley Pointdexter ain’t the man as ’ll go back from a barg’in. Ye’ll git the two hunderd dollars, sure as my name air Zeblun Stump; an dog-gone my cats, ef the maar ain’t worth every red cent o’ the money!”

Maurice heard the remarks without making reply; but the half suppressed smile playing around his lips told that the Kentuckian had altogether misconstrued the motive for his assiduous grooming.

In less than an hour after, the mustanger was on the march, mounted on his blood-bay, and leading the spotted mare at the end of his lazo; while the captive *cavallada*<sup>104</sup>, under the guidance of the Galwegian groom, went trooping at a brisk pace over the plain.

Zeb Stump, astride his “ole maar,” could only keep up by a constant hammering with his heels; and Tara, picking his steps through the spinous *mezquite* grass, trotted listlessly in the rear.

The hut, with its skin-door closed against animal intruders, was left to take care of itself; its silent solitude, for a time, to be disturbed only by the hooting of the horned owl, the scream of the cougar, or the howl-bark of the hungering coyoté.

---

<sup>104</sup> *cavallada* – a mare (female horse) (*Spanish*)

## Chapter 9

### The Frontier Fort

The “star-spangled banner” suspended above Fort Inge, as it flouts forth from its tall staff, flings its fitful shadow over a scene of strange and original interest.

It is a picture of pure frontier life – which perhaps only the pencil of the younger Vernet could truthfully portray – half military, half civilian – half savage, half civilised – mottled with figures of men whose complexions, costumes, and callings, proclaim them appertaining to the extremes of both, and every possible gradation between.

Even the *mise-en-scène*<sup>105</sup> – the Fort itself – is of this *miscegenous* character. That star-spangled banner waves not over bastions and battlements; it flings no shadow over casemate or covered way, fosse, scarpment, or glacis – scarce anything that appertains to a fortress. A rude stockade, constructed out of trunks of *algarobia*, enclosing shed-stabling for two hundred horses; outside this a half-score of buildings of the plainest architectural style – some of them mere huts of “wattle and daub” – *jacalés*<sup>106</sup> – the biggest a barrack; behind it the hospital, the stores of the commissary, and quartermaster; on one side the guardhouse; and on the other, more pretentiously placed, the messroom and officers’ quarters; all plain in their appearance – plastered and whitewashed with the lime plentifully found on the Leona – all neat and clean, as becomes a cantonment of troops wearing the uniform of a great civilised nation. Such is Fort Inge.

At a short distance off another group of houses meets the eye – nearly, if not quite, as imposing as the cluster above described bearing the name of “The Fort.” They are just outside the shadow of the flag, though under its protection – for to it are they indebted for their origin and existence. They are the germ of the village that universally springs up in the proximity of an American military post – in all probability, and at no very remote period, to become a town – perhaps a great city.

At present their occupants are a sutler, whose store contains “knick-knacks” not classed among commissariat rations; an hotel-keeper whose bar-room, with white sanded floor and shelves sparkling with prismatic glass, tempts the idler to step in; a brace of gamblers whose rival tables of *faro* and *monté*<sup>107</sup> extract from the pockets of the soldiers most part of their pay; a score of dark-eyed señoritas of questionable reputation; a like number of hunters, teamsters, *mustangers*, and nondescripts – such as constitute in all countries the hangers-on of a military cantonment, or the followers of a camp.

The houses in the occupancy of this motley corporation have been “sited” with some design. Perhaps they are the property of a single speculator. They stand around a “square,” where, instead of lamp-posts or statues, may be seen the decaying trunk of a cypress, or the bushy form of a hackberry rising out of a *tapis* of trodden grass.

The Leona – at this point a mere rivulet – glides past in the rear both of fort and village. To the front extends a level plain, green as verdure can make it – in the distance darkened by a bordering of woods, in which post-oaks and pecans, live oaks and elms, struggle for existence with spinous plants of cactus and anona; with scores of creepers, climbers, and parasites almost unknown to the botanist. To the south and east along the banks of the stream, you see scattered houses: the homesteads of plantations; some of them rude and of recent construction, with a few of more pretentious style, and evidently of older origin. One of these last particularly attracts the attention: a structure of superior size – with flat roof, surmounted by a crenelled parapet – whose white walls

---

<sup>105</sup> *mise-en-scène* – a scene; view (*French*)

<sup>106</sup> *jacalés* – a hut with walls covered with clay

<sup>107</sup> *faro, monté* – the names of card games

show conspicuously against the green background of forest with which it is half encircled. It is the hacienda<sup>108</sup> of *Casa del Corvo*.

Turning your eye northward, you behold a curious isolated eminence – a gigantic cone of rocks – rising several hundred feet above the level of the plain; and beyond, in dim distance, a waving horizontal line indicating the outlines of the Guadalupe mountains<sup>109</sup> – the outstanding spurs of that elevated and almost untrodden plateau, the *Llano Estacado*<sup>110</sup>.

Look aloft! You behold a sky, half sapphire, half turquoise; by day, showing no other spot than the orb of its golden god; by night, studded with stars that appear clipped from clear steel, and a moon whose well-defined disc outshines the effulgence of silver.

Look below – at that hour when moon and stars have disappeared, and the land-wind arrives from Matagorda Bay, laden with the fragrance of flowers; when it strikes the starry flag, unfolding it to the eye of the morn – then look below, and behold the picture that should have been painted by the pencil of Vernet – too varied and vivid, too plentiful in shapes, costumes, and colouring, to be sketched by the pen.

In the tableau you distinguish soldiers in uniform – the light blue of the United States infantry, the darker cloth of the dragoons, and the almost invisible green of the mounted riflemen.

You will see but few in full uniform – only the officer of the day, the captain of the guard, and the guard itself.

Their comrades off duty lounge about the barracks, or within the stockade enclosure, in red flannel shirts, slouch hats, and boots innocent of blacking.

They mingle with men whose costumes make no pretence to a military character: tall hunters in tunics of dressed deerskin, with leggings to correspond – herdsmen and mustangers, habited *à la Mexicaine* – Mexicans themselves, in wide *calzoneros*, *serapes* on their shoulders, *botas* on their legs, huge spurs upon their heels, and glazed *sombreros* set jauntily on their crowns. They palaver with Indians on a friendly visit to the Fort, for trade or treaty; whose tents stand at some distance, and from whose shoulders hang blankets of red, and green, and blue – giving them a picturesque, even classical, appearance, in spite of the hideous paint with which they have bedaubed their skins, and the dirt that renders sticky their long black hair, lengthened by tresses taken from the tails of their horses.

Picture to the eye of your imagination this jumble of mixed nationalities – in their varied costumes of race, condition, and calling; jot in here and there a black-skinned scion of Ethiopia<sup>111</sup>, the body servant of some officer, or the emissary of a planter from the adjacent settlements; imagine them standing in gossiping groups, or stalking over the level plain, amidst some half-dozen halted waggons; a couple of six-pounders upon their carriages, with caissons close by; a square tent or two, with its surmounting fly – occupied by some eccentric officer who prefers sleeping under canvas; a stack of bayoneted rifles belonging to the soldiers on guard, – imagine all these component parts, and you will have before your mind's eye a truthful picture of a military fort upon the frontier of Texas, and the extreme selvedge of civilisation.

About a week after the arrival of the Louisiana planter at his new home, three officers were seen standing upon the parade ground in front of Fort Inge, with their eyes turned towards the hacienda of Casa del Corvo.

They were all young men: the oldest not over thirty years of age. His shoulder-straps with the double bar proclaimed him a captain; the second, with a single cross bar, was a first lieutenant; while the youngest of the two, with an empty chevron, was either a second lieutenant or “brevet.”

---

<sup>108</sup> **hacienda** – an estate and an estate house in Texas, Mexico and South America (*Spanish*)

<sup>109</sup> **the Guadalupe mountains** – the mountains in western Texas and New Mexico

<sup>110</sup> **the Llano Estacado** – a region in the USA on the border of Texas and New Mexico

<sup>111</sup> **Ethiopia** – the country in eastern Africa (1,063,652 square km)

They were off duty; engaged in conversation – their theme, the “new people” in Casa del Corvo – by which was meant the Louisiana planter and his family.

“A sort of housewarming it’s to be,” said the infantry captain, alluding to an invitation that had reached the Fort, extending to all the commissioned officers of the garrison. “Dinner first, and dancing afterwards – a regular field day, where I suppose we shall see paraded the aristocracy and beauty of the settlement.”

“Aristocracy?” laughingly rejoined the lieutenant of dragoons. “Not much of that here, I fancy; and of beauty still less.”

“You mistake, Hancock. There are both upon the banks of the Leona. Some good States families have strayed out this way. We’ll meet them at Poindexter’s party, no doubt. On the question of aristocracy, the host himself, if you’ll pardon a poor joke, is himself a host. He has enough of it to inoculate all the company that may be present; and as for beauty, I’ll back his daughter against anything this side the Sabine. The commissary’s niece will be no longer belle about here.”

“Oh, indeed!” drawled the lieutenant of rifles, in a tone that told of his being chafed by this representation. “Miss Poindexter must be deuced good-looking, then.”

“She’s all that, I tell you, if she be anything like what she was when I last saw her, which was at a Bayou Lafourche ball. There were half a dozen young Creoles there, who came nigh crossing swords about her.”

“A coquette, I suppose?” insinuated the rifleman.

“Nothing of the kind, Crossman. Quite the contrary, I assure you. She’s a girl of spirit, though – likely enough to snub any fellow who might try to be too familiar. She’s not without some of the father’s pride. It’s a family trait of the Poindexters.”

“Just the girl I should cotton to,” jocosely remarked the young dragoon. “And if she’s as good-looking as you say, Captain Sloman, I shall certainly go in for her. Unlike Crossman here, I’m clear of all entanglements of the heart. Thank the Lord for it!”

“Well, Mr Hancock,” rejoined the infantry officer, a gentleman of sober inclinations, “I’m not given to betting; but I’d lay a big wager you won’t say that, after you have seen Louise Poindexter – that is, if you speak your mind.”

“Pshaw, Sloman! don’t you be alarmed about me. I’ve been too often under the fire of bright eyes to have any fear of them.”

“None so bright as hers.”

“Deuce take it! you make a fellow fall in love with this lady without having set eyes upon her. She must be something extraordinary – incomparable.”

“She was both, when I last saw her.”

“How long ago was that?”

“The Lafourche ball? Let me see – about eighteen months. Just after we got back from Mexico. She was then ‘coming out’ as society styles it: —

“A new star in the firmament, to light and glory born!”

“Eighteen months is a long time,” sagely remarked Crossman – “a long time for an unmarried maiden – especially among Creoles, where they often get spliced at twelve, instead of ‘sweet sixteen.’ Her beauty may have lost some of its bloom?”

“I believe not a bit. I should have called to see; only I knew they were in the middle of their ‘plenishing,’ and mightn’t desire to be visited. But the major has been to Casa del Corvo, and brought back such a report about Miss Poindexter’s beauty as almost got him into a scrape with the lady commanding the post.”

“Upon my soul, Captain Sloman!” asseverated the lieutenant of dragoons, “you’ve excited my curiosity to such a degree, I feel already half in love with Louise Poindexter!”

“Before you get altogether into it,” rejoined the officer of infantry, in a serious tone, “let me recommend a little caution. There’s a *ibête nor* in the background.”

“A brother, I suppose? That is the individual usually so regarded.”

“There is a brother, but it’s not he. A free noble young fellow he is – the only Poindexter I ever knew not eaten up with pride, he’s quite the reverse.”

“The aristocratic father, then? Surely he wouldn’t object to a quartering with the Hancocks?”

“I’m not so sure of that; seeing that the Hancocks are Yankees, and he’s a *chivalric Southerner*! But it’s not old Poindexter I mean.”

“Who, then, is the black beast, or what is it – if not a human?”

“It is human, after a fashion. A male cousin – a queer card he is – by name Cassius Calhoun.”

“I think I’ve heard the name.”

“So have I,” said the lieutenant of rifles.

“So has almost everybody who had anything to do with the Mexican war<sup>112</sup> – that is, who took part in Scott’s campaign<sup>113</sup>. He figured there extensively, and not very creditably either. He was captain in a volunteer regiment of Mississippians – for he hails from that State; but he was oftener met with at the *monté-table*<sup>114</sup> than in the quarters of his regiment. He had one or two affairs, that gave him the reputation of a bully. But that notoriety was not of Mexican-war origin. He had earned it before going there; and was well known among the desperadoes of New Orleans as a *dangerous man*.”

“What of all that?” asked the young dragoon, in a tone slightly savouring of defiance. “Who cares whether Mr Cassius Calhoun be a dangerous man, or a harmless one? Not I. He’s only the girl’s cousin, you say?”

“Something more, perhaps. I have reason to think he’s her lover.”

“Accepted, do you suppose?”

“That I can’t tell. I only know, or suspect, that he’s the favourite of the father. I have heard reasons why; given only in whispers, it is true, but too probable to be scouted. The old story – influence springing from mortgage money. Poindexter’s not so rich as he has been – else we’d never have seen him out here.”

“If the lady be as attractive as you say, I suppose we’ll have Captain Cassius out here also, before long?”

“Before long! Is that all you know about it? He *is* here; came along with the family, and is now residing with them. Some say he’s a partner in the planting speculation. I saw him this very morning – down in the hotel bar-room – ‘liquoring up,’ and swaggering in his old way.”

“A swarthy-complexioned man, of about thirty, with dark hair and moustaches; wearing a blue cloth frock, half military cut, and a Colt<sup>115</sup>’s revolver strapped over his thigh?”

“Ay, and a bowie knife, if you had looked for it, under the breast of his coat. That’s the man.”

“He’s rather a formidable-looking fellow,” remarked the young rifleman. “If a bully, his looks don’t belie him.”

“Damn his looks!” half angrily exclaimed the dragoon. “We don’t hold commissions in Uncle Sam’s army to be scared by looks, nor bullies either. If he comes any of his bullying over me, he’ll find I’m as quick with a trigger as he.”

At that moment the bugle brayed out the call for morning parade – a ceremony observed at the little frontier fort as regularly as if a whole *corps-d’armée*<sup>116</sup> had been present – and the three

---

<sup>112</sup> **the Mexican war** – the war between Mexico and the United States in 1846–1848; after the victory, the USA acquired over 1,300,000 square km of Mexican territory

<sup>113</sup> **Scott’s campaign** – a military campaign in the course of Mexican war

<sup>114</sup> **monté-table** – here: a table used for gambling (*French*)

<sup>115</sup> **Colt** – Samuel Colt (1814–1868), American firearms manufacturer who perfected and patented a revolver

<sup>116</sup> **corps-d’armée** – army corps (*French*)



officers separating, betook themselves to their quarters to prepare their several companies for the inspection of the major in command of the cantonment.

## Chapter 10

### Casa Del Corvo

The estate, or “*hacienda*,” known as Casa del Corvo, extended along the wooded bottom of the Leona River for more than a league, and twice that distance southwards across the contiguous prairie.

The house itself – usually, though not correctly, styled the *hacienda* – stood within long cannon range of Fort Inge; from which its white walls were partially visible; the remaining portion being shadowed by tall forest trees that skirted the banks of the stream.

Its site was peculiar, and no doubt chosen with a view to defence: for its foundations had been laid at a time when Indian assailants might be expected; as indeed they might be, and often are, at the present hour.

There was a curve of the river closing upon itself, like the shoe of a racehorse, or the arc of a circle, three parts complete; the chord of which, or a parallelogram traced upon it, might be taken as the ground-plan of the dwelling. Hence the name – Casa del Corvo – “the House of the Curve” (curved river).

The façade, or entrance side, fronted towards the prairie – the latter forming a noble lawn that extended to the edge of the horizon – in comparison with which an imperial park would have shrunk into the dimensions of a paddock.

The architecture of Casa del Corvo, like that of other large country mansions in Mexico, was of a style that might be termed Morisco<sup>117</sup>-Mexican: being a single story in height, with a flat roof – *azotea* – spouted and parapeted all round; having a courtyard inside the walls, termed *patio*, open to the sky, with a flagged floor, a fountain, and a stone stairway leading up to the roof; a grand entrance gateway – the *saguan* – with a massive wooden door, thickly studded with bolt-heads; and two or three windows on each side, defended by a *grille* of strong iron bars, called *reja*. These are the chief characteristics of a Mexican *hacienda*; and Casa del Corvo differed but little from the type almost universal throughout the vast territories of Spanish America.

Such was the homestead that adorned the newly acquired estate of the Louisiana planter – that had become his property by purchase.

As yet no change had taken place in the exterior of the dwelling; nor much in its interior, if we except the *personnel* of its occupants. A physiognomy, half Anglo-Saxon, half Franco-American, presented itself in courtyard and corridor, where formerly were seen only faces of pure Spanish type; and instead of the rich sonorous language of Andalusia<sup>118</sup>, was now heard the harsher guttural of a semi-Teutonic tongue<sup>119</sup> – occasionally diversified by the sweeter accentuation of Creolian French.

Outside the walls of the mansion – in the village-like cluster of yucca-thatched huts which formerly gave housing to the *peons*<sup>120</sup> and other dependants of the *hacienda* – the transformation was more striking. Where the tall thin *vaquero*<sup>121</sup>, in broad-brimmed hat of black glaze, and chequered *serape*, strode proudly over the sward – his spurs tinkling at every step – was now met the authoritative “overseer,” in blue jersey, or blanket coat – his whip cracking at every corner; where

---

<sup>117</sup> **Morisco** – Moorish (*Spanish*)

<sup>118</sup> **Andalusia** – a historic region in the south of Spain (87,590 square km); the capital is Seville; Andalusian culture was greatly influenced by many centuries of Moorish rule

<sup>119</sup> **Teutonic tongue** – a Germanic language; Germanic languages belong to the Indo-European family

<sup>120</sup> **peons** – workmen hired by the day, who worked in the fields

<sup>121</sup> **vaquero** – a shepherd (*Spanish*)

the red children of Azteca<sup>122</sup> and Anahuac<sup>123</sup>, scantily clad in tanned sheepskin, could be seen, with sad solemn aspect, lounging listlessly by their *jacalés*, or trotting silently along, were now heard the black sons and daughters of Ethiopia, from morn till night chattering their gay “gumbo,” or with song and dance seemingly contradicting the idea: that slavery is a heritage of unhappiness!

Was it a change for the better upon the estate of Casa del Corvo?

There was a time when the people of England would have answered – no; with a unanimity and emphasis calculated to drown all disbelief in their sincerity.

Alas, for human weakness and hypocrisy! Our long cherished sympathy with the slave proves to have been only a tissue of sheer dissembling. Led by an oligarchy – not the true aristocracy of our country: for these are too noble to have yielded to such, deep designings – but an oligarchy composed of conspiring plebs, who have smuggled themselves into the first places of power in all the four estates – guided by these prurient conspirators against the people’s rights – England has proved untrue to her creed so loudly proclaimed – truculent to the trust reposed in her by the universal acclaim, of the nations.

On a theme altogether different dwelt the thoughts of Louise Poindexter, as she flung herself into a chair in front of her dressing-glass, and directed her maid Florinda to prepare her for the reception of guests – expected soon to arrive at the hacienda.

It was the day fixed for the “house-warming,” and about an hour before the time appointed for dinner to be on the table. This might have explained a certain restlessness observable in the air of the young Creole – especially observed by Florinda; but it did not. The maid had her own thoughts about the cause of her mistress’s disquietude – as was proved by the conversation that ensued between them.

Scarce could it be called a conversation. It was more as if the young lady were thinking aloud, with her attendant acting as an echo. During all her life, the Creole had been accustomed to look upon her sable handmaid as a thing from whom it was not worth while concealing her thoughts, any more than she would from the chairs, the table, the sofa, or any other article of furniture in the apartment. There was but the difference of Florinda being a little more animated and companionable, and the advantage of her being able to give a vocal response to the observations addressed to her.

For the first ten minutes after entering the chamber, Florinda had sustained the brunt of the dialogue on indifferent topics – her mistress only interfering with an occasional ejaculation.

“Oh, Miss Looey!” pursued the negress, as her fingers fondly played among the lustrous tresses of her young mistress’s hair, “how bewful you hair am! Like de long ’Panish moss dat hang from de cyprus-tree; only dat it am ob a diff’rent colour, an shine like the sugar-house ’lasses.”

As already stated, Louise Poindexter was a Creole. After that, it is scarce necessary to say that her hair was of a dark colour; and – as the sable maid in rude speech had expressed it – luxuriant as Spanish moss. It was not black; but of a rich glowing brown – such as may be observed in the tinting of a tortoise-shell, or the coat of a winter-trapped sable.

“Ah!” continued Florinda, spreading out an immense “hank” of the hair, that glistened like a chestnut against her dark palm, “if I had dat lubbly hair on ma head, in’tead ob dis cuss’d cully wool, I fotch em all to ma feet – ebbry one oh dem.”

“What do you mean, girl?” inquired the young lady, as if just aroused from some dreamy reverie. “What’s that you’ve been saying? Fetch them to your feet? Fetch whom?”

“Na, now; you know what dis chile mean?”

“Pon honour, I do not.”

---

<sup>122</sup> **Azteca** – the historical land of the Aztec in the northwest of Mexico; in the 15<sup>th</sup>–16<sup>th</sup> centuries the Aztec ruled a large empire; their origin is uncertain; after the Spanish conquest the Aztec empire came to an end

<sup>123</sup> **Anahuac** – the part of Aztec Mexico (4,000 square km) where Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital, was located

“Make em lub me. Dat’s what I should hab say.”

“But whom?”

“All de white gen’l’m. De young planter, de officer ob de Fort – all ob dem. Wif you hair, Miss Looey, I could dem all make conqess.”

“Ha – ha – ha!” laughed the young lady, amused at the idea of Florinda figuring under that magnificent chevelure. “You think, with my hair upon your head, you would be invincible among the men?”

“No, missa – not you hair alone – but wif you sweet face – you skin, white as de alumbaster – you tall figga – you grand look. Oh, Miss Looey, you am so ’plendidly bewful! I hear de white gen’l’m say so. I no need hear em say it. I see dat for masef.”

“You’re learning to flatter, Florinda.”

“No, ’deed, missa – ne’er a word ob flattery – ne’er a word, I swa it. By de ’postles, I swa it.”

To one who looked upon her mistress, the earnest asseveration of the maid was not necessary to prove the sincerity of her speech, however hyperbolical it might appear. To say that Louise Poindexter was beautiful, would only be to repeat the universal verdict of the society that surrounded her. A single glance was sufficient to satisfy any one upon this point – strangers as well as acquaintances. It was a kind of beauty that needed no *discovering* – and yet it is difficult to describe it. The pen cannot portray swell a face. Even the pencil could convey but a faint idea of it: for no painter, however skilled, could represent upon cold canvas the glowing ethereal light that emanated from her eyes, and appeared to radiate over her countenance. Her features were purely classic: resembling those types of female beauty chosen by Phidias<sup>124</sup> or Praxiteles<sup>125</sup>. And yet in all the Grecian Pantheon there is no face to which it could have been likened: for it was not the countenance of a goddess; but, something more attractive to the eye of man, the face of a woman.

A suspicion of sensuality, apparent in the voluptuous curving of the lower lip – still more pronounced in the prominent rounding beneath the cheeks – while depriving the countenance of its pure spiritualism, did not perhaps detract from its beauty. There are men, who, in this departure from the divine type, would have perceived a superior charm: since in Louise Poindexter they would have seen not a divinity to be worshipped, but a woman to be loved.

Her only reply vouchsafed to Florinda’s earnest asseveration was a laugh – careless, though not incredulous. The young Creole did not need to be reminded of her beauty. She was not unconscious of it: as could be told by her taking more than one long look into the mirror before which her toilet was being made. The flattery of the negress scarce called up an emotion; certainly not more than she might have felt at the fawning of a pet spaniel; and she soon after surrendered herself to the reverie from which the speech had aroused her.

Florinda was not silenced by observing her mistress’s air of abstraction. The girl had evidently something on her mind – some mystery, of which she desired the *éclaircissement*<sup>126</sup> – and was determined to have it.

“Ah!” she continued, as if talking to herself; “if Florinda had half de charm ob young missa, she for nobody care – she for nobody heave do deep sigh!”

“Sigh!” repeated her mistress, suddenly startled by the speech. “What do you mean by that?”

“Pa’ dieu, Miss Looey, Florinda no so blind you tink; nor so deaf neider. She you see long time sit in de same place; you nebber ’peak no word – you only heave de sigh – de long deep sigh. You nebba do dat in de ole plantashun in Loozyanny.”

---

<sup>124</sup> **Phidias** – the Greek sculptor of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC who created the impressive images of the Greek gods; he supervised the construction of Parthenon and initiated a building program in Athens

<sup>125</sup> **Praxiteles** – the greatest of the Greek sculptors of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC; gentle charm and grace of his works greatly influenced the development of Greek sculpture

<sup>126</sup> **éclaircissement** – explanation (*French*)

“Florinda! I fear you are taking leave of your senses, or have left them behind you in Louisiana? Perhaps there’s something in the climate here that affects you. Is that so, girl?”

“Pa’ dieu, Miss Looey, dat question ob youself ask. You no be angry case I ’peak so plain. Florinda you slave – she you lub like brack sisser. She no happy hear you sigh. Dat why she hab take de freedom. You no be angry wif me?”

“Certainly not. Why should I be angry with you, child? I’m not. I didn’t say I was; only you are quite mistaken in your ideas. What you’ve seen, or heard, could be only a fancy of your own. As for sighing, heigho! I have something else to think of just now. I have to entertain about a hundred guests – nearly all strangers, too; among them the young planters and officers whom you would entangle if you had my hair. Ha! ha! ha! I don’t desire to enmesh them – not one of them! So twist it up as you like – without the semblance of a snare in it.”

“Oh! Miss Looey, you so ’peak?” inquired the negress with an air of evident interest. “You say none ob dem gen’l’m you care for? Dere am two, tree, berry, berry, berry han’som’. One planter dar be, and two ob de officer – all young gen’l’m. You know de tree I mean. All ob dem hab been ’tentive to you. You sure, missa, tain’t one ob dem dat you make sigh?”

“Sigh again! Ha! ha! ha! But come, Florinda, we’re losing time. Recollect I’ve got to be in the drawing-room to receive a hundred guests. I must have at least half an hour to compose myself into an attitude befitting such an extensive reception.”

“No fear, Miss Looey – no fear. I you toilette make in time – plenty ob time. No much trouble you dress. Pa’ dieu, in any dress you look ’plendid. You be de belle if you dress like one ob de fiel’ hand ob de plantashun.”

“What a flatterer you are grown, Florinda! I shall begin to suspect that you are after some favour. Do you wish me to intercede, and make up your quarrel with Pluto?”

“No, missa. I be friend nebber more wid Pluto. He show hisseff such great coward when come dat storm on de brack prairie. Ah, Miss Looey! what we boaf do if dat young white gen’l’m on de red hoss no come ridin’ dat way?”

“If he had not, cher Florinde, it is highly probable neither of us should now have been here.”

“Oh, missa! wasn’t he real fancy man, dat ’ere? You see him bewful face. You see him thick hair, jess de colour ob you own – only curled leetle bit like mine. Talk ob de young planter, or dem officer at de Fort! De brack folk say he no good for nuffin, like dem – he only poor white trash. Who care fo’ dat? He am de sort ob man could dis chile make sigh. Ah! de berry, berry sort!”

Up to this point the young Creole had preserved a certain tranquillity of countenance. She tried to continue it; but the effort failed her. Whether by accident or design, Florinda had touched the most sensitive chord in the spirit of her mistress.

She would have been loth to confess it, even to her slave; and it was a relief to her, when loud voices heard in the courtyard gave a colourable excuse for terminating her toilette, along with the delicate dialogue upon which she might have been constrained to enter.

## Chapter 11

### An Unexpected Arrival

“Say, ye durnationed nigger! whar’s yur master?”

“Mass Poindex’er, sar? De ole massr, or de young ’un?”

“Young ’un be durned! I mean Mister Peintdexter. Who else shed I? Whar air he?”

“Ho – ho! sar! dey am boaf at home – dat is, dey am boaf away from de house – de ole massr an de young Massr Henry. Dey am down de ribber, wha de folk am makin’ de new fence. Ho! ho! you find ’em dar.”

“Down the river! How fur d’ye reck’n?”

“Ho! ho! sar. Dis nigga reck’n it be ’bout tree or four mile – dat at de berry leas’.”

“Three or four mile? Ye must be a durnationed fool, nigger. Mister Peintdexter’s plantation don’t go thet fur; an I reck’n he ain’t the man to be makin’ a fence on some’dy else’s clarin’. Lookee hyur! What time air he expected hum? Ye’ve got a straighter idee o’ thet, I hope?”

“Dey boaf ’pected home berry soon, de young massr and de ole massr, and Mass Ca’houn too. Ho! ho! dar’s agwine to be big dooin’s ’bout dis yar shanty – yer see dat fo’ yeseff by de smell ob de kitchen. Ho! ho! All sorts o’ gran’ feassin’ – do roas’ an de bile, an de barbecue; de pot-pies, an de chicken fixins. Ho! ho! ain’t thar agwine to go it hyar jess like de ole times on de coass ob de Massippy! Hooray fo’ ole Mass Poindex’er! He de right sort. Ho! ho! ’tranger! why you no holla too: you no friend ob de massr?”

“Durn you, nigger, don’t ye remember me? Now I look into yur ugly mug, I recollex you.”

“Gorramighty! ’tain’t Mass ’Tump – ’t use to fotch de ven’son an de turkey gobbla to de ole plantashun? By de jumbo, it am, tho’. Law, Mass ’Tump, dis nigga ’members you like it wa de day afore yesserday. Ise heern you called de odder day; but I war away from ’bout de place. I’m de coachman now – dribes de carriage dat carries de lady ob de ’tablishment – de bewful Missy Loo. Lor, massr, she berry fine gal. Dey do say she beat Florinday into fits. Nebba mind, Mass ’Tump, you better wait till ole massr come home. He am *a bound to be hya*, in de shortess poss’ble time.”

“Wal, if thet’s so, I’ll wait upon him,” rejoined the hunter, leisurely lifting his leg over the saddle – in which up to this time he had retained his seat. “Now, ole fellur,” he added, passing the bridle into the hands of the negro, “you gi’e the maar half a dozen yeers o’ corn out o’ the crib. I’ve rid the critter better ’n a score o’ miles like a streak o’ lightnin’ – all to do yur master a sarvice.”

“Oh, Mr Zebulon Stump, is it you?” exclaimed a silvery voice, followed by the appearance of Louise Poindexter upon the verandah.

“I thought it was,” continued the young lady, coming up to the railings, “though I didn’t expect to see you so soon. You said you were going upon a long journey. Well – I am pleased that you are here; and so will papa and Henry be. Pluto! go instantly to Chloe, the cook, and see what she can give you for Mr Stump’s dinner. You have not dined, I know. You are dusty – you’ve been travelling? Here, Morinda! Haste you to the sideboard, and pour out some drink. Mr Stump will be thirsty, I’m sure, this hot day. What would you prefer – port, sherry, claret? Ah, now, if I recollect, you used to be partial to Monongahela whisky. I think there is some. Morinda, see if there be! Step into the verandah, dear Mr Stump, and take a seat. You were inquiring for papa? I expect him home every minute. I shall try to entertain you till he come.”

Had the young lady paused sooner in her speech, she would not have received an immediate reply. Even as it was, some seconds elapsed before Zeb made rejoinder. He stood gazing upon her, as if struck speechless by the sheer intensity of his admiration.

“Lord o’ marcy, Miss Lewaze!” he at length gasped forth, “I thort when I used to see you on the Massissippi, ye war the puttiest critter on the airth; but now, I think ye the puttiest thing eyther on airth or in hewing. Geehosofat!”

The old hunter's praise was scarce exaggerated. Fresh from the toilette, the gloss of her luxuriant hair untarnished by the notion of the atmosphere; her cheeks glowing with a carmine tint, produced by the application of cold water; her fine figure, gracefully draped in a robe of India muslin<sup>127</sup> – white and semi-translucent – certainly did Louise Poindexter appear as pretty as anything upon earth – if not in heaven.

"Geehosofat!" again exclaimed the hunter, following up his complimentary speech, "I hev in my time seed what I thort war some putty critters o' the sheemale kind – my ole 'ooman herself warn't so bad-lookin' when I fast kim acrost her in Kaintuck – thet she warn't. But I will say this, Miss Lewaze: ef the puttiest bits o' all o' them war clipped out an then jeined thegither agin, they wudn't make up the thousanth part o' a angel sech as you."

"Oh – oh – oh! Mr Stump – Mr Stump! I'm astonished to hear *you* talk in this manner. Texas has quite turned you into a courtier. If you go on so, I fear you will lose your character for plain speaking! After that I am sure you will stand in need of a very big drink. Haste, Morinda! I think you said you would prefer whisky?"

"Ef I didn't say it, I thunk it; an that air about the same. Yur right, miss, I prefar the corn afore any o' them thur furrin lickers; an I sticks to it whuriver I kin git it. Texas hain't made no alterashun in me in the matter o' lickerin'."

"Mass 'Tump, you it hab mix wif water?" inquired Florinda, coming forward with a tumbler about one-half full of "Monongahela."

"No, gurl. Durn yur water! I hev hed enuf o' thet since I started this mornin'. I hain't hed a taste o' lick the hul day – ne'er as much as the smell o' it."

"Dear Mr Stump! surely you can't drink it that way? Why, it will burn your throat! Have a little sugar, or honey, along with it?"

"Speil it, miss. It air sweet enuf 'ithout that sort o' docterin'; 'specially arter you hev looked inter the glass. Yu'll see ef I can't drink it. Hyur goes to try!"

The old hunter raised the tumbler to his chin; and after giving three gulps, and the fraction of a fourth, returned it empty into the hands of Florinda. A loud smacking of the lips almost drowned the simultaneous exclamations of astonishment uttered by the young lady and her maid.

"Burn my throat, ye say? Ne'er a bit. It hez jest eiled thet ere jugewlar, an put it in order for a bit o' a palaver I wants to hev wi' yur father – 'bout thet ere spotty mow-stang."

"Oh, true! I had forgotten. No, I hadn't either; but I did not suppose you had time to have news of it. Have you heard anything of the pretty creature?"

"Putty critter ye may well pernounce it. It ur all o' thet. Besides, it ur a maar."

"A ma-a-r! What is that, Mr Stump? I don't understand."

"A maar I sayed. Shurly ye know what a maar is?"

"Ma-a-r – ma-a-r! Why, no, not exactly. Is it a Mexican word? *Mar* in Spanish signifies the sea."

"In coorse it air a Mexikin maar – all mowstangs air. They air all on 'em o' a breed as wur oncest brought over from some European country by the fust o' them as settled in these hyur parts – leeseewise I hev heern so."

"Still, Mr Stump, I do not comprehend you. What makes this mustang a ma-a-r?"

"What makes her a *maar*? 'Case she ain't a *hoss*; thet's what make it, Miss Peintdexter."

"Oh – now – I – I think I comprehend. But did you say you have heard of the animal – I mean since you left us?"

"Heern o' her, seed her, an feeled her."

"Indeed!"

"She air gruppued."

---

<sup>127</sup> **muslin** – a thin cotton fabric; it was first made in Mosul, Iraq

“Ah, caught! what capital news! I shall be so delighted to see the beautiful thing; and ride it too. I haven’t had a horse worth a piece of orange-peel since I’ve been in Texas. Papa has promised to purchase this one for me at any price. But who is the lucky individual who accomplished the capture?”

“Ye mean who grupp’d the maar?”

“Yes – yes – who?”

“Why, in coorse it wur a mowstanger.”

“A mustanger?”

“Ye-es – an such a one as thur ain’t another on all these purayras – eyther to ride a hoss, or throw a laryitt over one. Yo may talk about yur Mexikins! I never seed neery Mexikin ked manage hoss-doin’s like that young fellur; an thur ain’t a drop o’ thur pisen blood in his veins. He ur es white es I am myself.”

“His name?”

“Wal, es to the name o’ his family, that I niver heern. His Christyun name air Maurice. He’s knowed up thur ’bout the Fort as Maurice the mowstanger.”

The old hunter was not sufficiently observant to take note of the tone of eager interest in which the question had been asked, nor the sudden deepening of colour upon the cheeks of the questioner as she heard the answer.

Neither had escaped the observation of Florinda.

“La, Miss Looney!” exclaimed the latter, “shoo dat de name ob de brave young white gen’l’m – he dat us save from being smodered on de brack prairie?”

“Geehosofat<sup>128</sup>, yes!” resumed the hunter, relieving the young lady from the necessity of making reply. “Now I think o’t, he told me o’ thet suckumstance this very mornin’, afore we started. He air the same. Thet’s the very fellur es hev trapped spotty; an he air toatin’ the critter along at this eyedential minnit, in kump’ny wi’ about a dozen others o’ the same cavyurd. He oughter be hyur afore sundown. I pushed my ole maar ahead, so ’s to tell yur father the spotty war comin’, and let him git the fust chance o’ buyin’. I know’d as how thet ere bit o’ hosdoin’s don’t get druv fur into the Settlements efore someb’dy snaps her up. I thort o’ *you*, Miss Lewaze, and how ye tuk on so when I tolt ye ’bout the critter. Wal, make yur mind eezy; ye shell hev the fast chance. Ole Zeb Stump ’ll be yur bail for thet.”

“Oh, Mr Stump, it is so kind of you! I am very, very grateful. You will now excuse me for a moment. Father will soon be back. We have a dinner-party to-day; and I have to prepare for receiving a great many people. Florinda, see that Mr Stump’s luncheon is set out for him. Go, girl – go at once about it!”

“And, Mr Stump,” continued the young lady, drawing nearer to the hunter, and speaking in a more subdued tone of voice, “if the young – young gentleman should arrive while the other people are here – perhaps he don’t know them – will you see that he is not neglected? There is wine yonder, in the verandah, and other things. You know what I mean, dear Mr Stump?”

“Durned if I do, Miss Lewaze; that air, not adzackly. I kin unnerstan’ all thet ere ’bout the lickin’ an other fixins. But who air the young gen’leman yur speakin’ o’? Thet’s the thing as bamboozles me.”

“Surely you know who I mean! The young gentleman – the young man – who, you say, is bringing in the horses.”

“Oh! ah! Maurice the mowstanger! That’s it, is it? Wal, I reck’n yur not a hundred mile astray in calling *him* a gen’leman; tho’ it ain’t offen es a mowstanger gits thet entitlement, or deserves it

---

<sup>128</sup> **Geehosofat** – Jehoshaphat, king of Judah in the 9<sup>th</sup> century BC, who tried to centralize the country with the help of religious and legal reforms



eyther. *He air one*, every inch o' him – a gen'leman by barth, breed, an raisin' – tho' he air a hoss-hunter, an Irish at thet."

The eyes of Louise Poindexter sparkled with delight as she listened to opinions so perfectly in unison with her own.

"I must tell ye, howsomdiver," continued the hunter, as some doubt had come across his mind, "it won't do to show that 'ere young fellur any sort o' second-hand hospertality. As they used to say on the Massissippi, he air 'as proud as a Peintdexter.' Excuse me, Miss Lewaze, for lettin' the word slip. I did think o't thet I war talkin' to a Peintdexter – not the proudest, but the puttiest o' the name."

"Oh, Mr Stump! you can say what you please to me. You know that I could not be offended with you, you dear old giant!"

"He'd be meaner than a dwurf es ked eyther say or do anythin' to offend you, miss."

"Thanks! thanks! I know your honest heart – I know your devotion. Perhaps some time – some time, Mr Stump," – she spoke hesitatingly, but apparently without any definite meaning – "I might stand in need of your friendship."

"Ye won't need it long afore ye git it, then; thet ole Zeb Stump kin promise ye, Miss Peintdexter. He'd be stinkiner than a skunk, an a bigger coward than a coyoat, es wouldn't stan' by sech as you, while there wur a bottle-full o' breath left in the inside o' his body."

"A thousand thanks – again and again! But what were you going to say? You spoke of second-hand hospitality?"

"I dud."

"You meant – ?"

"I meant that it 'ud be no use o' my inviting Maurice the mowstanger eyther to eat or drink unner this hyur roof. Unless yur father do that, the young fellur 'll go 'ithout tastin'. You unnerstan, Miss Lewaze, he ain't one o' thet sort o' poor whites as kin be sent roun' to the kitchen."

The young Creole stood for a second or two, without making rejoinder. She appeared to be occupied with some abstruse calculation, that engrossed the whole of her thoughts.

"Never mind about it," she at length said, in a tone that told the calculation completed. "Never mind, Mr Stump. You need not invite him. Only let *me* know when he arrives – unless we be at dinner, and then, of course, he would not expect any one to appear. But if he *should* come at that time, *you* detain him – won't you?"

"Boun' to do it, ef you bid me."

"You will, then; and let me know he is here. *I* shall ask him to eat."

"Ef ye do, miss, I reck'n ye'll speil his appetite. The sight o' you, to say nothin' o' listenin' to your melodyus voice, ud cure a starvin' wolf o' bein' hungry. When I kim in hyur I war peckish enuf to swaller a raw buzzart. Neow I don't care a durn about eatin'. I ked go 'ithout chawin' meat for month."

As this exaggerated chapter of euphemism was responded to by a peal of clear ringing laughter, the young lady pointed to the other side of the patio; where her maid was seer emerging from the "cocina"<sup>129</sup>, carrying a light tray – followed by Pluto with one of broader dimensions, more heavily weighted.

"You great giant!" was the reply, given in a tone of sham reproach; "I won't believe you have lost your appetite, until you have eaten Jack. Yonder come Pluto and Morinda. They bring something that will prove more cheerful company than I; so I shall leave you to enjoy it. Good bye, Zeb – good bye, or, as the natives say here, *hasta luego!*"

---

<sup>129</sup> **cocina** – kitchen (*Spanish*)

Gaily were these words spoken – lightly did Louise Poindexter trip back across the covered corridor. Only after entering her chamber, and finding herself *chez soi-même*<sup>130</sup>, did she give way to a reflection of a more serious character, that found expression in words low murmured, but full of mystic meaning: —

“It is my destiny: I feel – I know that it is! I dare not meet, and yet I cannot shun it – I may not – I would not – I *will not!*”

---

<sup>130</sup> **chez soi-même** – here: alone in her room (*French*)

## Chapter 12

### Taming a Wild Mare

The pleasantest *apartment* in a Mexican house is that which has the roof for its floor, and the sky for its ceiling – the *azotea*. In fine weather – ever fine in that sunny clime – it is preferred to the drawing-room; especially after dinner, when the sun begins to cast rose-coloured rays upon the snow-clad summits of Orizava, Popocatepec, Toluca, and the “Twin Sister;” when the rich wines of Xeres<sup>131</sup> and Madeira<sup>132</sup> have warmed the imaginations of Andalusia’s sons and daughters – descendants of the Conquistadores – who mount up to their house-tops to look upon a land of world-wide renown, rendered famous by the heroic achievements of their ancestors.

Then does the Mexican “cavallero,” clad in embroidered habiliments, exhibit his splendid exterior to the eyes of some señorita – at the same time puffing the smoke of his paper cigarito against her cheeks. Then does the dark-eyed donçella favourably listen to soft whisperings; or perhaps only pretends to listen, while, with heart distraught, and eye wandering away, she sends stealthy glances over the plain towards some distant hacienda – the home of him she truly loves.

So enjoyable a fashion, as that of spending the twilight hours upon the housetop, could not fail to be followed by any one who chanced to be the occupant of a Mexican dwelling; and the family of the Louisiana planter had adopted it, as a matter of course.

On that same evening, after the dining-hall had been deserted, the roof, instead of the drawing-room, was chosen as the place of re-assemblage; and as the sun descended towards the horizon, his slanting rays fell upon a throng as gay, as cheerful, and perhaps as resplendent, as ever trod the *azotea* of Casa del Corvo. Moving about over its tessellated tiles, standing in scattered groups, or lined along the parapet with faces turned towards the plain, were women as fair and men as brave as had ever assembled on that same spot – even when its ancient owner used to distribute hospitality to the *hidalgos*<sup>133</sup> of the land – the *bluest* blood in Coahuila<sup>134</sup> and Texas.

The company now collected to welcome the advent of Woodley Poindexter on his Texan estate, could also boast of this last distinction. They were the *élite* of the Settlements – not only of the Leona, but of others more distant. There were guests from Gonzales, from Castroville, and even from San Antonio – old friends of the planter, who, like him, had sought a home in South-Western Texas, and who had ridden – some of them over a hundred miles – to be present at this, his first grand “reception.”

The planter had spared neither pains nor expense to give it *éclat*<sup>135</sup>. What with the sprinkling of uniforms and epaulettes, supplied by the Fort – what with the brass band borrowed from the same convenient repository – what with the choice wines found in the cellars of Casa del Corvo, and which had formed part of the purchase – there could be little lacking to make Poindexter’s party the most brilliant ever given upon the banks of the Leona.

And to insure this effect, his lovely daughter Louise, late belle<sup>136</sup> of Louisiana – the fame of whose beauty had been before her, even in Texas – acted as mistress of the ceremonies – moving about among the admiring guests with the smile of a queen, and the grace of a goddess.

On that occasion was she the cynosure of a hundred pairs of eyes, the happiness of a score of hearts, and perhaps the torture of as many more: for not all were blessed who beheld her beauty.

---

<sup>131</sup> **Xeres** – sherry, the wine of Spanish origin; the name comes from Jerez, the province in Andalusia

<sup>132</sup> **Madeira** – Portuguese fortified wine from the island of Madeira

<sup>133</sup> **hidalgo** – a hereditary member of the gentry in Spain (*Spanish*)

<sup>134</sup> **Coahuila** – a state in northern Mexico

<sup>135</sup> **éclat** – magnificence (*French*)

<sup>136</sup> **belle** – a beauty

Was she herself happy?

The interrogatory may appear singular – almost absurd. Surrounded by friends – admirers – one, at least, who adored her – a dozen whose incipient love could but end in adoration – young planters, lawyers, embryo statesmen, and some with reputation already achieved – sons of Mars in armour, or with armour late laid aside – how could she be otherwise than proudly, supremely happy?

A stranger might have asked the question; one superficially acquainted with Creole character – more especially the character of the lady in question.

But mingling in that splendid throng was a man who was no stranger to either; and who, perhaps, more than any one present, watched her every movement; and endeavoured more than any other to interpret its meaning. Cassius Calhoun was the individual thus occupied.

She went not hither, nor thither, without his following her – not close, like a shadow; but by stealth, flitting from place to place; upstairs, and downstairs; standing in corners, with an air of apparent abstraction; but all the while with eyes turned askant upon his cousin's face, like a plain-clothes policeman employed on detective duty.

Strangely enough he did not seem to pay much regard to her speeches, made in reply to the compliments showered upon her by several would-be winners of a smile – not even when these were conspicuous and respectable, as in the case of young Hancock of the dragoons. To all such he listened without visible emotion, as one listens to a conversation in no way affecting the affairs either of self or friends.

It was only after ascending to the azotea, on observing his cousin near the parapet, with her eye turned interrogatively towards the plain, that his detective zeal became conspicuous – so much so as to attract the notice of others. More than once was it noticed by those standing near: for more than once was repeated the act which gave cause to it.

At intervals, not very wide apart, the young mistress of Casa del Corvo might have been seen to approach the parapet, and look across the plain, with a glance that seemed to interrogate the horizon of the sky.

Why she did so no one could tell. No one presumed to conjecture, except Cassius Calhoun. He had thoughts upon the subject – thoughts that were torturing him.

When a group of moving forms appeared upon the prairie, emerging from the garish light of the setting sun – when the spectators upon the azotea pronounced it a drove of horses in charge of some mounted men – the ex-officer of volunteers had a suspicion as to who was conducting that *cavallada*.

Another appeared to feel an equal interest in its advent, though perhaps from a different motive. Long before the horse-drove had attracted the observation of Poindexter's guests, his daughter had noted its approach – from the time that a cloud of dust soared up against the horizon, so slight and filmy as to have escaped detection by any eye not bent expressly on discovering it.

From that moment the young Creole, under cover of a conversation carried on amid a circle of fair companions, had been slyly scanning the dust-cloud as it drew nearer; forming conjectures as to what was causing it, upon knowledge already, and as she supposed, exclusively her own.

“Wild horses!” announced the major commandant of Fort Inge, after a short inspection through his pocket telescope. “Some one bringing them in,” he added, a second time raising the glass to his eye. “Oh! I see now – it's Maurice the mustanger, who occasionally helps our men to a remount. He appears to be coming this way – direct to your place, Mr Poindexter.”

“If it be the young fellow you have named, that's not unlikely,” replied the owner of Casa del Corvo. “I bargained with him to catch me a score or two; and maybe this is the first instalment he's bringing me.”

“Yes, I think it is,” he added, after a look through the telescope.

“I am sure of it,” said the planter's son. “I can tell the horseman yonder to be Maurice Gerald.”

The planter's daughter could have done the same; though she made no display of her knowledge. She did not appear to be much interested in the matter – indeed, rather indifferent. She had become aware of being watched by that evil eye, constantly burning upon her.

The *cavallada* came up, Maurice sitting handsomely on his horse, with the spotted mare at the end of his lazo.

“What a beautiful creature!” exclaimed several voices, as the captured mustang was led up in front of the house, quivering with excitement at a scene so new to it.

“It's worth a journey to the ground to look at such an animal!” suggested the major's wife, a lady of enthusiastic inclinations. “I propose we all go down! What say you, Miss Poindexter?”

“Oh, certainly,” answered the mistress of the mansion, amidst a chorus of other voices crying out —

“Let us go down! Let us go down!”

Led by the *majoress*<sup>137</sup>, the ladies filed down the stone stairway – the gentlemen after; and in a score of seconds the horse-hunter, still seated in his saddle, became, with his captive, the centre of the distinguished circle.

Henry Poindexter had hurried down before the rest, and already, in the frankest manner, bidden the stranger welcome.

Between the latter and Louise only a slight salutation could be exchanged. Familiarity with a horse-dealer – even supposing him to have had the honour of an introduction – would scarce have been tolerated by the “society.”

Of the ladies, the major's wife alone addressed him in a familiar way; but that was in a tone that told of superior position, coupled with condescension. He was more gratified by a glance – quick and silent – when his eye changed intelligence with that of the young Creole.

Hers was not the only one that rested approvingly upon him. In truth, the mustanger looked splendid, despite his travel-stained habiliments. His journey of over twenty miles had done little to fatigue him. The prairie breeze had freshened the colour upon his cheeks; and his full round throat, naked to the breast-bone, and slightly bronzed with the sun, contributed to the manliness of his mien. Even the dust clinging to his curled hair could not altogether conceal its natural gloss, nor the luxuriance of its growth; while a figure tersely knit told of strength and endurance beyond the ordinary endowment of man. There were stolen glances, endeavouring to catch his, sent by more than one of the fair circle. The pretty niece of the commissary smiled admiringly upon him. Some said the commissary's wife; but this could be only a slander, to be traced, perhaps, to the doctor's better half – the Lady Teazle of the cantonment.

“Surely,” said Poindexter, after making an examination of the captured mustang, “this must be the animal of which old Zeb Stump has been telling me?”

“It ur thet eyedenticul same,” answered the individual so described, making his way towards Maurice with the design of assisting him. “Ye-es, Mister Peintdexter; the eyedenticul critter – a maar, es ye kin all see for yurselves – ”

“Yes, yes,” hurriedly interposed the planter, not desiring any further elucidation.

“The young fellur hed grupped her afore I got thur; so I wur jess in the nick o' time 'bout it. She mout a been tuck elswhar, an then Miss Lewaze thur mout a missed hevin' her.”

“It is true indeed, Mr Stump! It was very thoughtful of you. I know not how I shall ever be able to reciprocate your kindness?”

“Reciperkate! Wal, I spose thet air means to do suthin in return. Ye kin do thet, miss, 'ithout much difeequilty. I han't dud nothin' for you, ceptin' make a bit o' a journey acrost the purayra. To see yur bewtyful self mounted on thet maar, wi' yur ploomed het upon yur head, an yur long-tailed pettykote streakin' it ahint you, 'ud pay old Zeb Stump to go clur to the Rockies, and back agin.”

---

<sup>137</sup> **majoress** – wife of a major

“Oh, Mr Stump! you are an incorrigible flatterer! Look around you! you will see many here more deserving of your compliments than I.”

“Wal, wal!” rejoined Zeb, casting a look of careless scrutiny towards the ladies, “I ain’t a goin’ to deny thur air gobs o’ putty critters hyur – dog-goned putty critters; but es they used to say in ole Loozyanney, thur air but one Lewaze Peintdexter.”

A burst of laughter – in which only a few feminine voices bore part – was the reply to Zeb’s gallant speech.

“I shall owe you two hundred dollars for this,” said the planter, addressing himself to Maurice, and pointing to the spotted mare. “I think that was the sum stipulated for by Mr Stump.”

“I was not a party to the stipulation,” replied the mustanger, with a significant but well-intentioned smile. “I cannot take your money. *She* is not for sale.”

“Oh, indeed!” said the planter, drawing back with an air of proud disappointment; while his brother planters, as well as the officers of the Fort, looked astonished at the refusal of such a munificent price. Two hundred dollars for an untamed mustang, when the usual rate of price was from ten to twenty! The mustanger must be mad?

He gave them no time to descant upon his sanity.

“Mr Poindexter,” he continued, speaking in the same good-humoured strain, “you have given me such a generous price for my other captives – and before they were taken too – that I can afford to make a present – what we over in Ireland call a ‘luckpenny.’ It is our custom there also, when a horse-trade takes place at the house, to give the *douceur*<sup>138</sup>, not to the purchaser himself, but to one of the fair members of his family. May I have your permission to introduce this Hibernian<sup>139</sup> fashion into the settlements of Texas?”

“Certainly, by all means!” responded several voices, two or three of them unmistakably with an Irish accentuation.

“Oh, certainly, Mr Gerald!” replied the planter, his conservatism giving way to the popular will – “as you please about that.”

“Thanks, gentlemen – thanks!” said the mustanger, with a patronising look towards men who believed themselves to be his masters. “This mustang is my luckpenny; and if Miss Poindexter will condescend to accept of it, I shall feel more than repaid for the three days’ chase which the creature has cost me. Had she been the most cruel of coquettes, she could scarce have been more difficult to subdue.”

“I accept your gift, sir; and with gratitude,” responded the young Creole – for the first time prominently proclaiming herself, and stepping freely forth as she spoke. “But I have a fancy,” she continued, pointing to the mustang – at the same time that her eye rested inquiringly on the countenance of the mustanger – “a fancy that your captive is not yet *tamed*? She but trembles in fear of the unknown future. She may yet kick against the traces, if she find the harness not to her liking; and then what am I to do – poor I?”

“True, Maurice!” said the major, widely mistaken as to the meaning of the mysterious speech, and addressing the only man on the ground who could possibly have comprehended it; “Miss Poindexter speaks very sensibly. That mustang has not been tamed yet – any one may see it. Come, my good fellow! give her the lesson.”

“Ladies and gentlemen!” continued the major, turning towards the company, “this is something worth your seeing – those of you who have not witnessed the spectacle before. Come, Maurice; mount, and show us a specimen of prairie horsemanship. She looks as though she would put your skill to the test.”

---

<sup>138</sup> **douceur** – here: gift (*French*)

<sup>139</sup> **Hibernian** – Irish

“You are right, major: she does!” replied the mustanger, with a quick glance, directed not towards the captive quadruped, but to the young Creole; who, with all her assumed courage, retired tremblingly behind the circle of spectators.

“No matter, my man,” pursued the major, in a tone intended for encouragement. “In spite of that devil sparkling in her eye, I’ll lay ten to one you’ll take the conceit out of her. Try!”

Without losing credit, the mustanger could not have declined acceding to the major’s request. It was a challenge to skill – to equestrian prowess – a thing not lightly esteemed upon the prairies of Texas.

He proclaimed his acceptance of it by leaping lightly out of his saddle, resigning his own steed to Zeb Stump, and exclusively giving his attention to the captive.

The only preliminary called for was the clearing of the ground. This was effected in an instant – the greater part of the company – with all the ladies – returning to the azotea.

With only a piece of raw-hide rope looped around the under jaw, and carried headstall fashion behind the ears – with only one rein in hand – Maurice sprang to the back of the wild mare.

It was the first time she had ever been mounted by man – the first insult of the kind offered to her.

A shrill spiteful scream spoke plainly her appreciation of and determination to resent it. It proclaimed defiance of the attempt to degrade her to the condition of a slave!

With equine instinct, she reared upon her hind legs, for some seconds balancing her body in an erect position. Her rider, anticipating the trick, had thrown his arms around her neck; and, close clasping her throat, appeared part of herself. But for this she might have poised over upon her back, and crushed him beneath her.

The uprearing of the hind quarters was the next “trick” of the mustang – sure of being tried, and most difficult for the rider to meet without being thrown. From sheer conceit in his skill, he had declined saddle and stirrup, that would now have stood him in stead; but with these he could not have claimed accomplishment of the boasted feat of the prairies – *to tame the naked steed*.

He performed it without them. As the mare raised her hind quarters aloft, he turned quickly upon her back, threw his arms around the barrel of her body, and resting his toes upon the angular points of her fore shoulders, successfully resisted her efforts to unhorse him.

Twice or three times was the endeavour repeated by the mustang, and as often foiled by the skill of the mustanger; and then, as if conscious that such efforts were idle, the enraged animal plunged no longer; but, springing away from the spot, entered upon a gallop that appeared to have no goal this side the ending of the earth.

It must have come to an end somewhere; though not within sight of the spectators, who kept their places, waiting for the horse-tamer’s return.

Conjectures that he might be killed, or, at the least, badly “crippled,” were freely ventured during his absence; and there was one who wished it so. But there was also one upon whom such an event would have produced a painful impression – almost as painful as if her own life depended upon his safe return. Why Louise Poindexter, daughter of the proud Louisiana sugar-planter – a belle – a beauty of more than provincial repute – who could, by simply saying yes, have had for a husband the richest and noblest in the land – why she should have fixed her fancy, or even permitted her thoughts to stray, upon a poor horse-hunter of Texas, was a mystery that even her own intellect – by no means a weak one – was unable to fathom.

Perhaps she had not yet gone so far as to fix her fancy upon him. She did not think so herself. Had she thought so, and reflected upon it, perhaps she would have recoiled from the contemplation of certain consequences, that could not have failed to present themselves to her mind.

She was but conscious of having conceived some strange interest in a strange individual – one who had presented himself in a fashion that favoured fanciful reflections – one who differed essentially from the common-place types introduced to her in the world of social distinctions.

She was conscious, too, that this interest – originating in a word, a glance, a gesture – listened to, or observed, amid the ashes of a burnt prairie – instead of subsiding, had ever since been upon the increase!

It was not diminished when Maurice the mustanger came riding back across the plain, with the wild mare between his legs – no more wild – no longer desiring to destroy him – but with lowered crest and mien submissive, acknowledging to all the world that she had found her master!

Without acknowledging it to the world, or even to herself, the young Creole was inspired with a similar reflection.

“Miss Poindexter!” said the mustanger, gliding to the ground, and without making any acknowledgment to the plaudits that were showered upon him – “may I ask you to step up to her, throw this lazo over her neck, and lead her to the stable? By so doing, she will regard you as her tamer; and ever after submit to your will, if you but exhibit the sign that first deprived her of her liberty.”

A prude would have paltered with the proposal – a coquette would have declined it – a timid girl have shrunk back.

Not so Louise Poindexter – a descendant of one of the *filles-à-la-casette*. Without a moment’s hesitation – without the slightest show of prudery or fear – she stepped forth from the aristocratic circle; as instructed, took hold of the horsehair rope; whisked it across the neck of the tamed mustang; and led the captive off towards the *caballeriza*<sup>140</sup> of Casa del Corvo.

As she did so, the mustanger’s words were ringing in her ears, and echoing through her heart with a strange foreboding weird signification.

*“She will regard you as her tamer; and ever after submit to your will, if you but exhibit the sign that first deprived her of her liberty.”*

---

<sup>140</sup> **caballeriza** – stable (*Spanish*)



## Chapter 13

### A Prairie Pic-Nic

The first rays from a rosy aurora<sup>141</sup>, saluting the flag of Fort Inge, fell with a more subdued light upon an assemblage of objects occupying the parade-ground below – in front of the “officers’ quarters.”

A small sumpter-waggon stood in the centre of the group; having attached to it a double span of tight little Mexican mules, whose quick impatient “stomping,” tails spitefully whisked, and ears at intervals turning awry, told that they had been for some time in harness, and were impatient to move off – warning the bystanders, as well, against a too close approximation to their heels.

Literally speaking, there were no bystanders – if we except a man of colossal size, in blanket coat, and slouch felt hat; who, despite the obscure light straggling around his shoulders, could be identified as Zeb Stump, the hunter.

He was not standing either, but seated astride his “ole maar,” that showed less anxiety to be off than either the Mexican mules or her own master.

The other forms around the vehicle were all in motion – quick, hurried, occasionally confused – hither and thither, from the waggon to the door of the quarters, and back again from the house to the vehicle.

There were half a score of them, or thereabouts; varied in costume as in the colour of their skins. Most were soldiers, in fatigue dress, though of different arms of the service. Two would be taken to be mess-cooks; and two or three more, officers’ servants, who had been detailed from the ranks.

A more legitimate specimen of this profession appeared in the person of a well-dressed darkie, who moved about the ground in a very authoritative manner; deriving his importance, from his office of *valet de tout*<sup>142</sup> to the major in command of the cantonment. A sergeant, as shown by his three-barred chevron, was in charge of the mixed party, directing their movements; the object of which was to load the waggon with eatables and drinkables – in short, the paraphernalia<sup>143</sup> of a pic-nic.

That it was intended to be upon a grand scale, was testified by the amplitude and variety of the *impedimenta*<sup>144</sup>. There were hampers and baskets of all shapes and sizes, including the well known parallelopipedon, enclosing its twelve necks of shining silver-lead; while the tin canisters, painted Spanish brown, along with the universal sardine-case, proclaimed the presence of many luxuries not indigenous to Texas.

However delicate and extensive the stock of provisions, there was one in the party of purveyors who did not appear to think it complete. The dissatisfied Lucullus<sup>145</sup> was Zeb Stump.

“Lookee hyur, surgint,” said he, addressing himself confidentially to the individual in charge, “I hain’t seed neery smell o’ corn put inter the veehicle as yit; an’, I reck’n, thet out on the purayra, thur’ll be some folks ud prefer a leetle corn to any o’ thet theer furrin French stuff. Sham-pain, ye call it, I b’lieve.”

“Prefer corn to champagne! The horses you mean?”

“Hosses be durned. I ain’t talkin’ ’bout hoss corn. I mean M’nongaheela.”

---

<sup>141</sup> **aurora** – a morning star, the symbol of dawn; the Roman goddess of dawn

<sup>142</sup> **valet de tout** – a manservant who looks after his master’s clothes, weapon, etc.

<sup>143</sup> **paraphernalia** – numerous objects used for a certain activity or event

<sup>144</sup> **impedimenta** – provisions, stores

<sup>145</sup> **Lucullus** – Lucius Licinius Lucullus (117–56 BC), a Roman general; he is remembered for his extravagant and luxurious life and great feasts

“Oh – ah – I comprehend. You’re right about that, Mr Stump. The whisky mustn’t be forgotten, Pomp. I think I saw a jar inside, that’s intended to go?”

“Yaw – yaw, sagint,” responded the dark-skinned domestic; “dar am dat same wesicle. Hya it is!” he added, lugging a large jar into the light, and swinging it up into the waggon.

Old Zeb appearing to think the packing now complete, showed signs of impatience to be off.

“Ain’t ye riddy, surgint?” he inquired, shifting restlessly in his stirrups.

“Not quite, Mr Stump. The cook tells me the chickens want another turn upon the spit, before we can take ’em along.”

“Durn the chickens, an the cook too! What air any dung-hill fowl to compare wi’ a wild turkey o’ the purayra; an how am I to shoot one, arter the sun hev clomb ten mile up the sky? The major sayed I war to git him a gobbler, whatever shed happen. ’Tain’t so durnation eezy to kill turkey gobbler arter sun-up, wi’ a clamjamferry like this comin’ clost upon a fellur’s heels? Ye mustn’t surpose, surgint, that thet ere bird air as big a fool as the sodger o’ a fort. Of all the cunnin’ critters as ferquents these hyur purayras, a turkey air the cunninest; an to git helf way roun’ one o’ ’em, ye must be up along wi’ the sun; and preehap a leetle urlier.”

“True, Mr Stump. I know the major wants a wild turkey. He told me so; and expects you to procure one on the way.”

“No doubt he do; an preehap expex me likeways to purvid him wi’ a baffler’s tongue, an hump – seein’ as thur ain’t sech a anymal on the purayras o’ South Texas – nor hain’t a been for good twenty yurs past – noterthstandin’ what Eur-op-ean writers o’ books hev said to the contrary, an ’specially French ’uns, as I’ve heern. Thur ain’t no burner ’bout hyur. Thur’s baar, an deer, an goats, an plenty o’ gobblers; but to hev one o’ these critters for yur dinner, ye must git it urlly enuf for yur breakfast. Unless I hev my own time, I won’t promise to guide yur party, an git gobbler both. So, surgint, ef ye expex yur grand kumpny to chaw turkey-meat this day, ye’ll do well to be makin’ tracks for the purayra.”

Stirred by the hunter’s representation, the sergeant did all that was possible to hasten the departure of himself and his parti-coloured company; and, shortly after, the provision train, with Zeb Stump as its guide, was wending its way across the extensive plain that lies between the Leona and the “River of Nuts.”

The parade-ground had been cleared of the waggon and its escort scarce twenty minutes, when a party of somewhat different appearance commenced assembling upon the same spot.

There were ladies on horseback; attended, not by grooms, as at the “meet” in an English hunting-field, but by the gentlemen who were to accompany them – their friends and acquaintances – fathers, brothers, lovers, and husbands. Most, if not all, who had figured at Poindexter’s dinner party, were soon upon the ground.

The planter himself was present; as also his son Henry, his nephew Cassius Calhoun, and his daughter Louise – the young lady mounted upon the spotted mustang, that had figured so conspicuously on the occasion of the entertainment at Casa del Corvo.

The affair was a reciprocal treat – a simple return of hospitality; the major and his officers being the hosts, the planter and his friends the invited guests. The entertainment about to be provided, if less pretentious in luxurious appointments, was equally appropriate to the time and place. The guests of the cantonment were to be gratified by witnessing a spectacle – grand as rare – a chase of wild steeds!

The arena of the sport could only be upon the wild-horse prairies – some twenty miles to the southward of Fort Inge. Hence the necessity for an early start, and being preceded by a vehicle laden with an ample *commissariat*.

Just as the sunbeams began to dance upon the crystal waters of the Leona, the excursionists were ready to take their departure from the parade-ground – with an escort of two-score dragoons that had been ordered to ride in the rear. Like the party that preceded them, they too were provided

with a guide – not an old backwoodsman in battered felt hat, and faded blanket coat, astride a scraggy roadster; but a horseman completely costumed and equipped, mounted upon a splendid steed, in every way worthy to be the chaperone of such a distinguished expedition.

“Come, Maurice!” cried the major, on seeing that all had assembled, “we’re ready to be conducted to the game. Ladies and gentlemen! this young fellow is thoroughly acquainted with the haunts and habits of the wild horses. If there’s a man in Texas, who can show us how to hunt them, ’tis Maurice the mustanger.”

“Faith, you flatter me, major!” rejoined the young Irishman, turning with a courteous air towards the company; “I have not said so much as that. I can only promise to show you where you may *find* them.”

“Modest fellow!” soliloquised one, who trembled, as she gave thought to what she more than half suspected to be an untruth.

“Lead on, then!” commanded the major; and, at the word, the gay cavalcade, with the mustanger in the lead, commenced moving across the parade-ground – while the star-spangled banner, unfurled by the morning breeze, fluttered upon its staff as if waving them an elegant adieu!

A twenty-mile ride upon prairie turf is a mere bagatelle – before breakfast, an airing. In Texas it is so regarded by man, woman, and horse.

It was accomplished in less than three hours – without further inconvenience than that which arose from performing the last few miles of it with appetites uncomfortably keen.

Fortunately the provision waggon, passed upon the road, came close upon their heels; and, long before the sun had attained the meridian line, the excursionists were in full pic-nic under the shade of a gigantic pecân tree, that stood near the banks of the Nueces.

No incident had occurred on the way – worth recording. The mustanger, as guide, had ridden habitually in the advance; the company, with one or two exceptions, thinking of him only in his official capacity – unless when startled by some feat of horsemanship – such as leaping clear over a prairie stream, or dry arroyo, which others were fain to ford, or cross by the crooked path.

There may have been a suspicion of bravado in this behaviour – a desire to exhibit. Cassius Calhoun told the company there was. Perhaps the ex-captain spoke the truth – for once.

If so, there was also some excuse. Have you ever been in a hunting-field, at home, with riding habits trailing the sward, and plumed hats proudly nodding around you? You have: and then what? Be cautious how you condemn the Texan mustanger. Reflect, that he, too, was under the artillery of bright eyes – a score pair of them – some as bright as ever looked love out of a lady’s saddle. Think, that Louise Poindexter’s were among the number – think of that, and you will scarce feel surprised at the ambition to “shine.”

There were others equally demonstrative of personal accomplishments – of prowess that might prove manhood. The young dragoon, Hancock, frequently essayed to show that he was not new to the saddle; and the lieutenant of mounted rifles, at intervals, strayed from the side of the commissary’s niece for the performance of some equestrian feat, without looking exclusively to her, his reputed sweetheart, as he listened to the whisperings of applause.

Ah, daughter of Poindexter! Whether in the *salons* of civilised Louisiana, or the prairies of savage Texas, peace could not reign in thy presence! Go where thou wilt, romantic thoughts must spring up – wild passions be engendered around thee!

## Chapter 14

### The Manada

146

Had their guide held the prairies in complete control – its denizens subject to his secret will – responsible to time and place – he could not have conducted the excursionists to a spot more likely to furnish the sport that had summoned them forth.

Just as the sparkling Johannisberger – obtained from the German wine-stores of San Antonio – had imparted a brighter blue to the sky, and a more vivid green to the grass, the cry “*Musteños!*” was heard above the hum of conversation, interrupting the half-spoken sentiment, with the peal of merry laughter. It came from a Mexican *vaquero*, who had been stationed as a vidette<sup>147</sup> on an eminence near at hand.

Maurice – at the moment partaking of the hospitality of his employers, freely extended to him – suddenly quaffed off the cup; and springing to his saddle, cried out —

“*Cavallada?*”

“No,” answered the Mexican; “*manada.*”

“What do the fellows mean by their gibberish?” inquired Captain Calhoun.

“*Musteños* is only the Mexican for mustangs,” replied the major; “and by ‘*manada*’ he means they are wild mares – a drove of them. At this season they herd together, and keep apart from the horses; unless when —”

“When what?” impatiently asked the ex-officer of volunteers, interrupting the explanation.

“When they are attacked by asses,” innocently answered the major.

A general peal of laughter rendered doubtful the *naïveté* of the major’s response – imparting to it the suspicion of a personality not intended.

For a moment Calhoun writhed under the awkward misconception of the auditory; but only for a moment. He was not the man to succumb to an unlucky accident of speech. On the contrary, he perceived the chance of a triumphant reply; and took advantage of it.

“Indeed!” he drawled out, without appearing to address himself to any one in particular. “I was not aware that mustangs were so dangerous in these parts.”

As Calhoun said this, he was not looking at Louise Poindexter or he might have detected in her eye a glance to gratify him.

The young Creole, despite an apparent coolness towards him, could not withhold admiration at anything that showed cleverness. His case might not be so hopeless?

The young dragoon, Hancock, did not think it so; nor yet the lieutenant of rifles. Both observed the approving look, and both became imbued with the belief that Cassius Calhoun had – or might have – in his keeping, the happiness of his cousin.

The conjecture gave a secret chagrin to both, but especially to the dragoon.

There was but short time for him to reflect upon it; the *manada* was drawing near.

“To the saddle!” was the thought upon every mind, and the cry upon every tongue.

The bit was rudely inserted between teeth still industriously grinding the yellow corn; the bridle drawn over shoulders yet smoking after the quick skurry of twenty miles through the close atmosphere of a tropical morn; and, before a hundred could have been deliberately counted, every one, ladies and gentlemen alike, was in the stirrup, ready to ply whip and spur.

---

<sup>146</sup> **manada** – a herd (Spanish)

<sup>147</sup> **vidette** – an observer (Spanish)

By this time the wild mares appeared coming over the crest of the ridge upon which the vidette had been stationed. He, himself a horse-catcher by trade, was already mounted, and in their midst – endeavouring to fling his lazo over one of the herd. They were going at mad gallop, as if fleeing from a pursuer – some dreaded creature that was causing them to “whigher” and snort! With their eyes strained to the rear, they saw neither the sumpter waggon, nor the equestrians clustering around it, but were continuing onward to the spot; which chanced to lie directly in the line of their flight.

“They are chased!” remarked Maurice, observing the excited action of the animals.

“What is it, Crespino?” he cried out to the Mexican, who, from his position, must have seen any pursuer that might be after them.

There was a momentary pause, as the party awaited the response. In the crowd were countenances that betrayed uneasiness, some even alarm. It might be Indians who were in pursuit of the mustangs!

“*Un asino cimmaron!*” was the phrase that came from the mouth of the Mexican, though by no means terminating the suspense of the picknickers. “*Un macho!*” he added.

“Oh! That’s it! I thought it was!” muttered Maurice. “The rascal must be stopped, or he’ll spoil our sport. So long as he’s after them, they’ll not make halt this side the sky line. Is the macho coming on?”

“Close at hand, Don Mauricio. Making straight for myself.”

“Fling your rope over him, if you can. If not, cripple him with a shot – anything to put an end to his capers.”

The character of the pursuer was still a mystery to most, if not all, upon the ground: for only the mustanger knew the exact signification of the phrases – “*un asino cimmaron*,” “*un macho*.”

“Explain, Maurice!” commanded the major. “Look yonder!” replied the young Irishman, pointing to the top of the hill.

The two words were sufficient. All eyes became directed towards the crest of the ridge, where an animal, usually regarded as the type of slowness and stupidity, was seen advancing with the swiftness of a bird upon the wing.

But very different is the “*asino cimmaron*” from the ass of civilisation – the donkey be-cudgelled into stolidity.

The one now in sight was a male, almost as large as any of the mustangs it was chasing; and if not fleet as the fleetest, still able to keep up with them by the sheer pertinacity of its pursuit!

The tableau of nature, thus presented on the green surface of the prairie, was as promptly produced as it could have been upon the stage of a theatre, or the arena of a hippodrome.

Scarce a score of words had passed among the spectators, before the wild mares were close up to them; and then, as if for the first time, perceiving the mounted party, they seemed to forget their dreaded pursuer, and shied off in a slanting direction.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” shouted the guide to a score of people, endeavouring to restrain their steeds; “keep your places, if you can. I know where the herd has its haunt. They are heading towards it now; and we shall find them again, with a better chance of a chase. If you pursue them at this moment, they’ll scatter into yonder chapparal; and ten to one if we ever more get sight of them.

“*Hola*<sup>148</sup>, Señor Crespino! Send your bullet through that brute. He’s near enough for your *escopette*, is he not?”

The Mexican, detaching a short gun – “*escopeta*” – from his saddle-flap, and hastily bringing its butt to his shoulder, fired at the wild ass.

The animal brayed on hearing the report; but only as if in defiance. He was evidently untouched. Crespino’s bullet had not been truly aimed.

---

<sup>148</sup> **Hola!** – Hello! (*Spanish*)

“I must stop him!” exclaimed Maurice, “or the mares will run on till the end of daylight.”

As the mustanger spoke, he struck the spur sharply into the flanks of his horse. Like an arrow projected from its bow, Castro shot off in pursuit of the jackass, now galloping regardlessly past.

Half a dozen springs of the blood bay, guided in a diagonal direction, brought his rider within casting distance; and like a flash of lightning, the loop of the lazo was seen descending over the long ears.

On launching it, the mustanger halted, and made a half-wheel – the horse going round as upon a pivot; and with like mechanical obedience to the will of his rider, bracing himself for the expected pluck.

There was a short interval of intense expectation, as the wild ass, careering onward, took up the slack of the rope. Then the animal was seen to rise erect on its hind legs, and fall heavily backward upon the sward – where it lay motionless, and apparently as dead, as if shot through the heart!

It was only stunned, however, by the shock, and the quick tightening of the loop causing temporary strangulation; which the Mexican mustanger prolonged to eternity, by drawing his sharp-edged *machete*<sup>149</sup> across its throat.

The incident caused a postponement of the chase. All awaited the action of the guide; who, after “throwing” the macho, had dismounted to recover his lazo.

He had succeeded in releasing the rope from the neck of the prostrate animal, when he was seen to coil it up with a quickness that betokened some new cause of excitement – at the same time that he ran to regain his saddle.

Only a few of the others – most being fully occupied with their own excited steeds – observed this show of haste on the part of the mustanger. Those who did, saw it with surprise. He had counselled patience in the pursuit. They could perceive no cause for the eccentric change of tactics, unless it was that Louise Poindexter, mounted on the spotted mustang, had suddenly separated from the company, and was galloping off after the wild mares, as if resolved on being foremost of the field!

But the hunter of wild horses had not construed her conduct in this sense. That uncourteous start could scarce be an intention – except on the part of the spotted mustang? Maurice had recognised the manada, as the same from which he had himself captured it: and, no doubt, with the design of rejoining its old associates, it was running away with its rider!

So believed the guide; and the belief became instantly universal.

Stirred by gallantry, half the field spurred off in pursuit. Calhoun, Hancock, and Crossman leading, with half a score of young planters, lawyers, and legislators close following – each as he rode off reflecting to himself, what a bit of luck it would be to bring up the runaway.

But few, if any, of the gentlemen felt actual alarm. All knew that Louise Poindexter was a splendid equestrian; a spacious plain lay before her, smooth as a race-track; the mustang might gallop till it tired itself down; it could not throw her; there could be little chance of her receiving any serious injury?

There was one who did not entertain this confident view. It was he who had been the first to show anxiety – the mustanger himself.

He was the last to leave the ground. Delayed in the rearrangement of his lazo – a moment more in remounting – he was a hundred paces behind every competitor, as his horse sprang forward upon the pursuit.

Calhoun was a like distance in the lead, pressing on with all the desperate energy of his nature, and all the speed he could extract from the heels of his horse. The dragoon and rifleman were a little in his rear; and then came the “ruck.”

---

<sup>149</sup> **machete** – a large heavy knife used both as a tool and weapon (*Spanish*)

Maurice soon passed through the thick of the field, overlapped the leaders one by one; and forging still further ahead, showed Cassius Calhoun the heels of his horse.

A muttered curse was sent hissing through the teeth of the ex-officer of volunteers, as the blood bay, bounding past, concealed from his sight the receding form of the spotted mustang.

The sun, looking down from the zenith, gave light to a singular tableau. A herd of wild mares going at reckless speed across the prairie; one of their own kind, with a lady upon its back, following about four hundred yards behind; at a like distance after the lady, a steed of red bay colour, bestriden by a cavalier picturesquely attired, and apparently intent upon overtaking her; still further to the rear a string of mounted men – some in civil, some in military, garb; behind these a troop of dragoons going at full gallop, having just parted from a mixed group of ladies and gentlemen – also mounted, but motionless, on the plain, or only stirring around the same spot with excited gesticulations!

In twenty minutes the tableau was changed. The same personages were upon the stage – the grand *tapis vert*<sup>150</sup> of the prairie – but the grouping was different, or, at all events, the groups were more widely apart. The manada had gained distance upon the spotted mustang; the mustang upon the blood bay; and the blood bay – ah! his competitors were no longer in sight, or could only have been seen by the far-piercing eye of the *caracara*<sup>151</sup>, soaring high in the sapphire heavens.

The wild mares – the mustang and its rider – the red horse, and his – had the savanna to themselves!

---

<sup>150</sup> **tapis vert** – a green carpet (*French*)

<sup>151</sup> **caracara** – a large bird of a falcon group (*Spanish*)

## Chapter 15

### The Runaway Overtaken

For another mile the chase continued, without much change. The mares still swept on in full flight, though no longer screaming or in fear. The mustang still uttered an occasional neigh, which its old associates seemed not to notice; while its rider held her seat in the saddle unshaken, and without any apparent alarm.

The blood bay appeared more excited, though not so much as his master; who was beginning to show signs either of despondency or chagrin.

“Come, Castro!” he exclaimed, with a certain spitefulness of tone. “What the deuce is the matter with your heels – to-day of all others? Remember, you overtook her before – though not so easily, I admit. But now she’s weighted. Look yonder, you dull brute! Weighted with that which is worth more than gold – worth every drop of your blood, and mine too. The yegua pinta<sup>152</sup> seems to have improved her paces. Is it from training; or does a horse run faster when ridden?”

“What if I lose sight of her? In truth, it begins to look queer! It would be an awkward situation for the young lady. Worse than that – there’s danger in it – real danger. If I should lose sight of her, she’d be in trouble to a certainty!”

Thus muttering, Maurice rode on: his eyes now fixed upon the form still flitting away before him; at intervals interrogating, with uneasy glances, the space that separated him from it.

Up to this time he had not thought of hailing the rider of the runaway.

His shouts might have been heard; but no words of warning, or instruction. He had refrained: partly on this account; partly because he was in momentary expectation of overtaking her; and partly because he knew that acts, not words, were wanted to bring the mustang to a stand.

All along he had been flattering himself that he would soon be near enough to fling his lazo over the creature’s neck, and control it at discretion. He was gradually becoming relieved of this hallucination.

The chase now entered among copses that thickly studded the plain, fast closing into a continuous chapparal. This was a new source of uneasiness to the pursuer. The runaway might take to the thicket, or become lost to his view amid the windings of the wood.

The wild mares were already invisible – at intervals. They would soon be out of sight altogether. There seemed no chance of their old associate overtaking them.

“What mattered that? A lady lost on a prairie, or in a chapparal – alone, or in the midst of a manada – either contingency pointed to certain danger.”

A still more startling peril suggested itself to the mind of the mustanger – so startling as to find expression in excited speech.

“By heavens!” he ejaculated, his brow becoming more clouded than it had been from his first entering upon the chase. “*If the stallions should chance this way!* ’Tis their favourite stamping ground among these mottos. They were here but a week ago; and this – yes – ’tis the month of their madness!”

The spur of the mustanger again drew blood, till its rowels were red; and Castro, galloping at his utmost speed, glanced back upbraidingly over his shoulder.

At this crisis the manada disappeared from, the sight both of the blood-bay and his master; and most probably at the same time from that of the spotted mustang and its rider. There was nothing mysterious in it. The mares had entered between the closing of two copses, where the shrubbery hid them from view.

---

<sup>152</sup> *yegua pinta* – here: a spotted mare (*Spanish*)



The effect produced upon the runaway appeared to proceed from some magical influence. As if their disappearance was a signal for discontinuing the chase, it suddenly slackened pace; and the instant after came to a standstill!

Maurice, continuing his gallop, came up with it in the middle of a meadow-like glade – standing motionless as marble – its rider, reins in hand, sitting silent in the saddle, in an attitude of easy elegance, as if waiting for him to ride up!

“Miss Poindexter!” he gasped out, as he spurred his steed within speaking distance: “I am glad that you have recovered command of that wild creature. I was beginning to be alarmed about – ”

“About what, sir?” was the question that startled the mustanger.

“Your safety – of course,” he replied, somewhat stammeringly. “Oh, thank you, Mr Gerald; but I was not aware of having been in any danger. Was I really so?”

“Any danger!” echoed the Irishman, with increased astonishment. “On the back of a runaway mustang – in the middle of a pathless prairie!”

“And what of that? The thing couldn’t throw me. I’m too clever in the saddle, sir.”

“I know it, madame; but that accomplishment would have availed you very little had you lost yourself, a thing you were like enough to have done among these chapparal copses, where the oldest Texan can scarce find his way.”

“Oh – *lost myself*! That was the danger to be dreaded?”

“There are others, besides. Suppose you had fallen in with – ”

“Indians!” interrupted the lady, without waiting for the mustanger to finish his hypothetical speech. “And if I had, what would it have mattered? Are not the Comanches *en paz*<sup>153</sup> at present? Surely they wouldn’t have molested me, gallant fellows as they are? So the major told us, as we came along. ’Pon my word, sir, I should seek, rather than shun, such an encounter. I wish to see the noble savage on his native prairie, and on horseback; not, as I’ve hitherto beheld him, reeling around the settlements in a state of debasement from too freely partaking of our fire-water.”

“I admire your courage, miss; but if I had the honour of being one of your friends, I should take the liberty of counselling a little caution. The ‘noble savage’ you speak of, is not always sober upon the prairies; and perhaps not so very gallant as you’ve been led to believe. If you had met him – ”

“If I had met him, and he had attempted to misbehave himself, I would have given him the go-by, and ridden, straight back to my friends. On such a swift creature as this, he must have been well mounted to have overtaken me. You found some difficulty – did you not?”

The eyes of the young Irishman, already showing astonishment, became expanded to increased dimensions – surprise and incredulity being equally blended in their glance.

“But,” said he, after a speechless pause, “you don’t mean to say that you could have controlled – that the mustang was not running away with you? Am I to understand – ”

“No – no – no!” hastily rejoined the fair equestrian, showing some slight embarrassment. “The mare certainly made off with me – that is, at the first – but I – I found, that is – at the last – I found I could easily pull her up. In fact I did so: you saw it?”

“And could you have done it sooner?”

A strange thought had suggested the interrogatory; and with more than ordinary interest the questioner awaited the reply.

“Perhaps – perhaps – I might; no doubt, if I had dragged a little harder upon the rein. But you see, sir, I like a good gallop – especially upon a prairie, where there’s no fear of running over pigs, poultry, or people.”

---

<sup>153</sup> *en paz* – at peace (Spanish)

Maurice looked amaze. In all his experience – even in his own native land, famed for feminine *braverie*<sup>154</sup> – above all in the way of bold riding – he had met no match for the clever equestrian before him.

His astonishment, mixed with admiration, hindered him from making a ready rejoinder.

“To speak truth,” continued the young lady, with an air of charming simplicity, “I was not sorry at being run off with. One sometimes gets tired of too much talk – of the kind called complimentary. I wanted fresh air, and to be alone. So you *see*, Mr Gerald, it was rather a bit of good fortune: since it saved explanations and adieus.”

“You wanted to be alone?” responded the mustanger, with a disappointed look. “I am sorry I should have made the mistake to have intruded upon you. I assure you, Miss Poindexter, I followed, because I believed you to be in danger.”

“Most gallant of you, sir; and now that I know there *was* danger, I am truly grateful. I presume I have guessed aright: you meant the Indians?”

“No; not Indians exactly – at least, it was not of them I was thinking.”

“Some other danger? What is it, sir? You will tell me, so that I may be more cautious for the future?”

Maurice did not make immediate answer. A sound striking upon his ear had caused him to turn away – as if inattentive to the interrogatory.

The Creole, perceiving there was some cause for his abstraction, likewise assumed a listening attitude. She heard a shrill scream, succeeded by another and another, close followed by a loud hammering of hoofs – the conjunction of sounds causing the still atmosphere to vibrate around her.

It was no mystery to the hunter of horses. The words that came quick from his lips – though not designed – were a direct answer to the question she had put.

“*The wild stallions!*” he exclaimed, in a tone that betokened alarm. “I knew they must be among those mottes; and they are!”

“Is that the danger of which you have been speaking?”

“It is.”

“What fear of them? They are only mustangs!”

“True, and at other times there is no cause to fear them. But just now, at this season of the year, they become as savage as tigers, and equally as vindictive. Ah! the wild steed in his rage is an enemy more to be dreaded than wolf, panther, or bear.”

“What are we to do?” inquired the young lady, now, for the first time, giving proof that she felt fear – by riding close up to the man who had once before rescued her from a situation of peril, and gazing anxiously in his face, as she awaited the answer.

“If they should charge upon us,” answered Maurice, “there are but two ways of escape. One, by ascending a tree, and abandoning our horses to their fury.”

“The other?” asked the Creole, with a *sang froid*<sup>155</sup> that showed a presence of mind likely to stand the test of the most exciting crisis. “Anything but abandon our animals! ’Twould be but a shabby way of making our escape!”

“We shall not have an opportunity of trying it, I perceive it is impracticable. There’s not a tree within sight large enough to afford us security. If attacked, we have no alternative but to trust to the fleetness of our horses. Unfortunately,” continued he, with a glance of inspection towards the spotted mare, and then at his own horse, “they’ve had too much work this morning. Both are badly blown. That will be our greatest source of danger. The wild steeds are sure to be fresh.”

“Do you intend us to start now?”

---

<sup>154</sup> **braverie** – bravery (*French*)

<sup>155</sup> **sang froid** – composure, coolness (*French*)

“Not yet. The longer we can breathe our animals the better. The stallions may not come this way; or if so, may not molest us. It will depend on their mood at the moment. If battling among themselves, we may look out for their attack. Then they have lost their reason – if I may so speak – and will recklessly rush upon one of their own kind – even with a man upon his back. Ha! ’tis as I expected: they are in conflict. I can tell by their cries! And driving this way, too!”

“But, Mr Gerald; why should we not ride off at once, in the opposite direction?”

“’Twould be of no use. There’s no cover to conceal us, on that side – nothing but open plain. They’ll be out upon it before we could get a sufficient start, and would soon overtake us. The place we must make for – the only safe one I can think of – lies the other way. They are now upon the direct path to it, if I can judge by what I hear; and, if we start too soon, we may ride into their teeth. We must wait, and try to steal away behind them. If we succeed in getting past, and can keep our distance for a two-mile gallop, I know a spot, where we shall be as safe as if inside the corrals of Casa del Corvo. You are sure you can control the mustang?”

“Quite sure,” was the prompt reply: all idea of deception being abandoned in presence of the threatening peril.

## Chapter 16

### Chased by Wild Stallions

The two sat expectant in their saddles – she, apparently, with more confidence than he: for she confided in him. Still but imperfectly comprehending it, she knew there must be some great danger. When such a man showed sign of fear, it could not be otherwise. She had a secret happiness in thinking: that a portion of this fear was for her own safety.

“I think we may venture now;” said her companion, after a short period spent in listening; “they appear to have passed the opening by which we must make our retreat. Look well to your riding, I entreat you! Keep a firm seat in the saddle, and a sure hold of the rein. Gallop by my side, where the ground will admit of it; but in no case let more than the length of my horse’s tail be between us. I must perforce go ahead to guide the way. Ha! they are coming direct for the glade. They’re already close to its edge. Our time is up!”

The profound stillness that but a short while before pervaded the prairie, no longer reigned over it. In its stead had arisen a fracas that resembled the outpouring of some overcrowded asylum; for in the shrill neighing of the steeds might have been fancied the screams of maniacs – only ten times more vociferous. They were mingled with a thunder-like hammering of hoofs – a swishing and crashing of branches – savage snorts, accompanied by the sharp snapping of teeth – the dull “thud” of heels coming in contact with ribs and rounded hips – squealing that betokened spite or pain – all forming a combination of sounds that jarred harshly upon the ear, and caused the earth to quake, as if oscillating upon its orbit!

It told of a terrible conflict carried on by the wild stallions; who, still unseen, were fighting indiscriminately among themselves, as they held their way among the mottes.

Not much longer unseen. As Maurice gave the signal to start, the speckled crowd showed itself in an opening between two copses. In a moment more it filled the gangway-like gap, and commenced disgorging into the glade, with the impetus of an avalanche!

It was composed of living forms – the most beautiful known in nature: for in this man must give way to the horse. Not the unsexed horse of civilisation, with hunched shoulders, bandied limbs, and bowed frontlet – scarce one in a thousand of true equine shape – and this, still further, mutilated by the shears of the coper and gentleman jockey – but the wild steed of the savannas, foaled upon the green grass, his form left free to develop as the flowers that shed their fragrance around him.

Eye never beheld a more splendid sight than a *cavallada* of wild stallions, prancing upon a prairie; especially at that season when, stirred by strong passions, they seek to destroy one another. The spectacle is more than splendid – it is fearful – too fearful to be enjoyed by man, much less by timid woman. Still more when the spectator views it from an exposed position, liable to become the object of their attack.

In such situation were the riders of the blood bay and spotted mustang. The former knew it by past experience – the latter could not fail to perceive it by the evidence before her.

“This way!” cried Maurice, lancing his horse’s flanks with the spur, and bending so as to oblique to the rear of the *cavallada*.

“By heaven – they’ve discovered us! On – on! Miss Poindexter! Remember you are riding for your life!”

The stimulus of speech was not needed. The behaviour of the stallions was of itself sufficient to show, that speed alone could save the spotted mustang and its rider.

On coming out into the open ground, and getting sight of the ridden horses, they had suddenly desisted from their internecine strife; and, as if acting under the orders of some skilled leader, come to a halt. In line, too, like cavalry checked up in the middle of a charge!

For a time their mutual hostility seemed to be laid aside – as if they felt called upon to attack a common enemy, or resist some common danger!

The pause may have proceeded from surprise; but, whether or no, it was favourable to the fugitives. During the twenty seconds it continued, the latter had made good use of their time, and accomplished the circuit required to put them on the path of safety.

Only on the path, however. Their escape was still problematical: for the steeds, perceiving their intention, wheeled suddenly into the line of pursuit, and went galloping after, with snorts and screams that betrayed a spiteful determination to overtake them.

From that moment it became a straight unchanging chase across country – a trial of speed between the horses without riders, and the horses that were ridden.

At intervals did Maurice carry his chin to his shoulder; and though still preserving the distance gained at the start, his look was not the less one of apprehension.

Alone he would have laughed to scorn his pursuers. He knew that the blood-bay – himself a prairie steed – could surpass any competitor of his race. But the mare was delaying him. She was galloping slower than he had ever seen her – as if unwilling, or not coveting escape – like a horse with his head turned away from home!

“What can it mean?” muttered the mustanger, as he checked his pace, to accommodate it to that of his companion. “If there should be any baulk at the crossing, we’re lost! A score of seconds will make the difference.”

“We keep our distance, don’t we?” inquired his fellow-fugitive, noticing his troubled look.

“So far, yes. Unfortunately there’s an obstruction ahead. It remains to be seen how we shall get over it. I know you are a clever rider, and can take a long leap. But your mount? I’m not so sure of the mare. You know her better than I. Do you think she can carry you over – ”

“Over what, sir?”

“You’ll see in a second. We should be near the place now.”

The conversation thus carried on was between two individuals riding side by side, and going at a gallop of nearly a mile to the minute!

As the guide had predicted, they soon came within sight of the obstruction; which proved to be an arroyo – a yawning fissure in the plain full fifteen feet in width, as many in depth, and trending on each side to the verge of vision.

To turn aside, either to the right or left, would be to give the pursuers the advantage of the diagonal; which the fugitives could no longer afford.

The chasm must be crossed, or the stallions would overtake them.

It could only be crossed by a leap – fifteen feet at the least. Maurice knew that his own horse could go over it – he had done it before. But the mare?

“Do you think she can do it?” he eagerly asked, as, in slackened pace, they approached the edge of the barranca.

“I am sure she can,” was the confident reply.

“But are you sure you can sit her over it?”

“Ha! ha! ha!” scornfully laughed the Creole. “What a question for an Irishman to ask! I’m sure, sir, one of your own countrywomen would be offended at your speech. Even I, a native of swampy Louisiana, don’t regard it as at all gallant. Sit her over it! Sit her anywhere she can carry me.”

“But, Miss Poindexter,” stammered the guide, still doubting the powers of the spotted mustang, “suppose she cannot? If you have any doubts, had you not better abandon her? I know that my horse can bear us both to the other side, and with safety. If the mustang be left behind, in all likelihood we shall escape further pursuit. The wild steeds – ”

“Leave Luna behind! Leave her to be trampled to death, or torn to pieces – as you say she would! No – no, Mr Gerald. I prize the spotted mare too much for that. She goes with me: over the

chasm, if we can. If not, we both break our necks at the bottom. Come, my pretty pet! This is he who chased, captured, and conquered you. Show him you're not yet so *subdued*, but that you can escape, when close pressed, from the toils of either friend or enemy. Show him one of those leaps, of which you've done a dozen within the week. Now for a flight in the air!"

Without even waiting for the stimulus of example, the courageous Creole rode recklessly at the arroyo; and cleared it by one of those leaps of which she had "done a dozen within the week."

There were three thoughts in the mind of the mustanger – rather might they be called emotions – as he sat watching that leap. The first was simple astonishment; the second, intense admiration. The third was not so easily defined. It had its origin in the words – "*I prize the spotted mare too much for that.*"

"Why?" reflected he, as he drove his spur-rowels into the flanks of the blood bay; and the reflection lasted as long as Castro was suspended in mid-air over the yawning abyss.

Cleverly as the chasm was crossed, it did not ensure the safety of the fugitives. It would be no obstruction to the steeds. Maurice knew it, and looked back with undiminished apprehension.

Rather was it increased. The delay, short as it was, had given the pursuers an advantage. They were nearer than ever! They would not be likely to make a moment's pause, but clear the crevasse at a single bound of their sure-footed gallop.

And then – what then?

The mustanger put the question to himself. He grew paler, as the reply puzzled him.

On alighting from the leap, he had not paused for a second, but gone galloping on – as before, close followed by his fugitive companion. His pace, however, was less impetuous. He seemed to ride with irresolution, or as if some half-formed resolve was restraining him.

When about a score lengths from the edge of the arroyo, he reined up and wheeled round – as if he had suddenly formed the determination to ride back!

"Miss Poindexter!" he called out to the young lady, at that moment just up with him. "You must ride on alone."

"But why, sir?" asked she, as she jerked the muzzle of the mustang close up to its counter, bringing it almost instantaneously to a stand.

"If we keep together we shall be overtaken. I must do something to stay those savage brutes. Here there is a chance – nowhere else. For heaven's sake don't question me! Ten seconds of lost time, and 'twill be too late. Look ahead yonder. You perceive the sheen of water. 'Tis a prairie pond. Ride straight towards it. You will find yourself between two high fences. They come together at the pond. You'll see a gap, with bars. If I'm not up in time, gallop through, dismount, and put the bars up behind you."

"And you, sir? You are going to undergo some great danger?"

"Have no fear for me! Alone, I shall run but little risk. 'Tis the mustang. – For mercy's sake, gallop forward! Keep the water under your eyes. Let it guide you like a beacon fire. Remember to close the gap behind you. Away – away!"

For a second or two the young lady appeared irresolute – as if reluctant to part company with the man who was making such efforts to ensure her safety – perhaps at the peril of his own.

By good fortune she was not one of those timid maidens who turn frantic at a crisis, and drag to the bottom the swimmer who would save them. She had faith in the capability of her counsellor – believed that he knew what he was about – and, once more spurring the mare into a gallop, she rode off in a direct line for the prairie pond.

At the same instant, Maurice had given the rein to his horse, and was riding in the opposite direction – back to the place where they had leaped the arroyo!

On parting from his companion, he had drawn from his saddle holster the finest weapon ever wielded upon the prairies – either for attack or defence, against Indian, buffalo, or bear. It was the six-chambered revolver of Colonel Colt – not the spurious *improvement* of Deane, Adams, and

a host of retrograde imitators – but the genuine article from the “land of wooden nutmegs,” with the Hartford<sup>156</sup> brand upon its breech.

“They must get over the narrow place where we crossed,” muttered he, as he faced towards the stallions, still advancing on the other side of the arroyo.

“If I can but fling one of them in his tracks, it may hinder the others from attempting the leap; or delay them – long enough for the mustang to make its escape. The big sorrel is leading. He will make the spring first. The pistol’s good for a hundred paces. He’s within range now!”

Simultaneous with the last words came the crack of the six-shooter. The largest of the stallions – a sorrel in colour – rolled headlong upon the sward; his carcass falling transversely across the line that led to the leap.

Half-a-dozen others, close following, were instantly brought to a stand; and then the whole cavallada!

The mustanger stayed not to note their movements. Taking advantage of the confusion caused by the fall of their leader, he reserved the fire of the other five chambers; and, wheeling to the west, spurred on after the spotted mustang, now far on its way towards the glistening pond.

Whether dismayed by the fall of their chief – or whether it was that his dead body had hindered them from approaching the only place where the chasm could have been cleared at a leap – the stallions abandoned the pursuit; and Maurice had the prairie to himself as he swept on after his fellow fugitive.

He overtook her beyond the convergence of the fences on the shore of the pond. She had obeyed him in everything – except as to the closing of the gap. He found it open – the bars lying scattered over the ground. He found her still seated in the saddle, relieved from all apprehension for his safety, and only trembling with a gratitude that longed to find expression in speech.

The peril was passed.

---

<sup>156</sup> **Hartford** – the capital of Connecticut, located in the north-central part of the state, a major industrial and commercial centre, founded in 1635

## Chapter 17

### The Mustang Trap

No longer in dread of any danger, the young Creole looked interrogatively around her.

There was a small lake – in Texan phraseology a “pond” – with countless horse-tracks visible along its shores, proving that the place was frequented by wild horses – their excessive number showing it to be a favourite watering place. There was a high rail fence – constructed so as to enclose the pond, and a portion of the contiguous prairie, with two diverging wings, carried far across the plain, forming a funnel-shaped approach to a gap; which, when its bars were up, completed an enclosure that no horse could either enter or escape from.

“What is it for?” inquired the lady, indicating the construction of split rails.

“A mustang trap,” said Maurice.

“A mustang trap?”

“A contrivance for catching wild horses. They stray between the *wings*; which, as you perceive, are carried far out upon the plain. The water attracts them; or they are driven towards it by a band of mustangers who follow, and force them on through the gap. Once within the *corral*<sup>157</sup>, there is no trouble in taking them. They are then lazoed at leisure.”

“Poor things! Is it yours? You are a mustanger? You told us so?”

“I am; but I do not hunt the wild horse in this way. I prefer being alone, and rarely consort with men of my calling. Therefore I could not make use of this contrivance, which requires at least a score of drivers. My weapon, if I may dignify it by the name, is this – the lazo.”

“You use it with great skill? I’ve heard that you do; besides having myself witnessed the proof.”

“It is complimentary of you to say so. But you are mistaken. There are men on these prairies ‘to the manner born’ – Mexicans – who regard, what you are pleased to call skill, as sheer clumsiness.”

“Are you sure, Mr Gerald, that your modesty is not prompting *you* to overrate your rivals? I have been told the very opposite.”

“By whom?”

“Your friend, Mr Zebulon Stump.”

“Ha – ha! Old Zeb is but indifferent authority on the subject of the lazo.”

“I wish I could throw the lazo,” said the young Creole. “They tell me ’tis not a lady-like accomplishment. What matters – so long as it is innocent, and gives one a gratification?”

“Not lady-like! Surely ’tis as much so as archery, or skating? I know a lady who is very expert at it.”

“An American lady?”

“No; she’s Mexican, and lives on the Rio Grande; but sometimes comes across to the Leona – where she has relatives.”

“A young lady?”

“Yes. About your own age, I should think, Miss Poindexter.”

“Size?”

“Not so tall as you.”

“But much prettier, of course? The Mexican ladies, I’ve heard, in the matter of good looks, far surpass us plain *Americanos*.”

---

<sup>157</sup> **corral** – a trap for catching wild animals, or an enclosure for cattle and horses



“I think Creoles are not included in that category,” was the reply, worthy of one whose lips had been in contact with the famed boulder of Blarney.

“I wonder if I could ever learn to fling it?” pursued the young Creole, pretending not to have been affected by the complimentary remark. “Am I too old? I’ve been told that the Mexicans commence almost in childhood; that that is why they attain to such wonderful skill?”

“Not at all,” replied Maurice, encouragingly. “’Tis possible, with a year or two’s practice, to become a proficient lazoer. I, myself, have only been three years at; and – ”

He paused, perceiving he was about to commit himself to a little boasting.

“And you are now the most skilled in all Texas?” said his companion, supplying the presumed finale of his speech.

“No, no!” laughingly rejoined he. “That is but a mistaken belief on the part of Zeb Stump, who judges my skill by comparison, making use of his own as a standard.”

“Is it modesty?” reflected the Creole. “Or is this man mocking me? If I thought so, I should go mad!”

“Perhaps you are anxious to get back to your party?” said Maurice, observing her abstracted air. “Your father may be alarmed by your long absence? Your brother – your cousin – ”

“Ah, true!” she hurriedly rejoined, in a tone that betrayed either pique, or compunction. “I was not thinking of that. Thanks, sir, for reminding me of my duty. Let us go back!”

Again in the saddle, she gathered up her reins, and plied her tiny spur – both acts being performed with an air of languid reluctance, as if she would have preferred lingering a little longer in the “mustang trap.”

Once more upon the prairie, Maurice conducted his protégée by the most direct route towards the spot where they had parted from the picnic party.

Their backward way led them across a peculiar tract of country – what in Texas is called a “weed prairie,” an appellation bestowed by the early pioneers, who were not very choice in their titles.

The Louisianian saw around her a vast garden of gay flowers, laid out in one grand parterre, whose borders were the blue circle of the horizon – a garden designed, planted, nurtured, by the hand of Nature.

The most plebeian spirit cannot pass through such a scene without receiving an impression calculated to refine it. I’ve known the illiterate trapper – habitually blind to the beautiful – pause in the midst of his “weed prairie,” with the flowers rising breast high around him, gaze for a while upon their gaudy corollas waving beyond the verge of his vision; then continue his silent stride with a gentler feeling towards his fellow-man, and a firmer faith in the grandeur of his God.

“*Pardieu!* ’tis very beautiful!” exclaimed the enthusiastic Creole, reining up as if by an involuntary instinct.

“You admire these wild scenes, Miss Poindexter?”

“Admire them? Something more, sir! I see around me all that is bright and beautiful in nature: verdant turf, trees, flowers, all that we take such pains to plant or cultivate; and such, too, as we never succeed in equalling. There seems nothing wanting to make this picture complete – ’tis a park perfect in everything!”

“Except the mansion?”

“That would spoil it for me. Give me the landscape where there is not a house in sight – slate, chimney, or tile – to interfere with the outlines of the trees. Under their shadow could I live; under their shadow let me – ”

The word: “love” uppermost in her thoughts – was upon the tip of her tongue.

She dexterously restrained herself from pronouncing it – changing it to one of very different signification – “die.”

It was cruel of the young Irishman not to tell her that she was speaking his own sentiments – repeating them to the very echo. To this was the prairie indebted for his presence. But for a kindred inclination – amounting almost to a passion – he might never have been known as *Maurice the mustanger*.

The romantic sentiment is not satisfied with a “sham.” It will soon consume itself, unless supported by the consciousness of reality. The mustanger would have been humiliated by the thought, that he chased the wild horse as a mere pastime – a pretext to keep him upon the prairies. At first, he might have condescended to make such an acknowledgment – but he had of late become thoroughly imbued with the pride of the professional hunter.

His reply might have appeared chillingly prosaic.

“I fear, miss, you would soon tire of such a rude life – no roof to shelter you – no society – no – ”

“And you, sir; how is it *you* have not grown tired of it? If I have been correctly informed – your friend, Mr Stump, is my authority – you’ve been leading this life for several years. Is it so?”

“Quite true: I have no other calling.”

“Indeed! I wish I could say the same. I envy you your lot. I’m sure I could enjoy existence amid these beautiful scene for ever and ever!”

“Alone? Without companions? Without even a roof to shelter you?”

“I did not say that. But, you’ve not told me. How do you live? Have *you* a house?”

“It does not deserve such a high-sounding appellation,” laughingly replied the mustanger. “Shed would more correctly serve for the description of my *jacalé*, which may be classed among the lowliest in the land.”

“Where is it? Anywhere near where we’ve been to-day?”

“It is not very far from where we are now. A mile, perhaps. You see those tree-tops to the west? They shade my hovel from the sun, and shelter it from the storm.”

“Indeed! How I should like to have a look at it! A real rude hut, you say?”

“In that I have but spoken the truth.”

“Standing solitary?”

“I know of no other within ten miles of it.”

“Among trees, and picturesque?”

“That depends upon the eye that beholds it.”

“I should like to see it, and judge. Only a mile you say?”

“A mile there – the same to return – would be two.”

“That’s nothing. It would not take us a score of minutes.”

“Should we not be trespassing on the patience of your people?”

“On your hospitality, perhaps? Excuse me, Mr Gerald!” continued the young lady, a slight shadow suddenly overcasting her countenance. “I did not think of it! Perhaps you do not live *alone*? Some other shares your – *jacalé* – as you call it?”

“Oh, yes, I have a companion – one who has been with me ever since I – ”

The shadow became sensibly darker.

Before the mustanger could finish his speech, his listener had pictured to herself a certain image, that might answer to the description of his companion: a girl of her own age – perhaps more inclining to *embonpoint*<sup>158</sup> – with a skin of chestnut brown; eyes of almond shade, set piquantly oblique to the lines of the nose; teeth of more than pearly purity; a tinge of crimson upon the cheeks; hair like Castro’s tail; beads and bangles around neck, arms, and ankles; a short kirtle elaborately embroidered; mocassins covering small feet; and fringed leggings, laced upon limbs

---

<sup>158</sup> **embonpoint** – plumpness, stoutness (*French*)

of large development. Such were the style and equipments of the supposed companion, who had suddenly become outlined in the imagination of Louise Poindexter.

“Your fellow tenant of the jacalé might not like being intruded upon by visitors – more especially a stranger?”

“On the contrary, he’s but too glad to see visitors at any time – whether strangers or acquaintances. My foster-brother is the last man to shun society; of which, poor fellow! he sees precious little on the Alamo.”

“Your foster-brother?”

“Yes. Phelim O’Neal by name – like myself a native of the Emerald Isle<sup>159</sup>, and shire of Galway; only perhaps speaking a little better brogue than mine.”

“Oh! the Irish brogue. I should so like to hear it spoken by a native of Galway. I am told that theirs is the richest. Is it so, Mr Gerald?”

“Being a Galwegian myself, my judgment might not be reliable; but if you will condescend to accept Phelim’s hospitality for half-an-hour, he will, no doubt, give you an opportunity of judging for yourself.”

“I should be delighted. ’Tis something so new. Let papa and the rest of them wait. There are plenty of ladies without me; or the gentlemen may amuse themselves by tracing up our tracks. ’Twill be as good a horse hunt as they are likely to have. Now, sir, I’m ready to accept your hospitality.”

“There’s not much to offer you, I fear. Phelim has been several days by himself, and as he’s but an indifferent hunter, his larder is likely to be low. ’Tis fortunate you had finished luncheon before the *stampede*<sup>160</sup>.”

It was not Phelim’s larder that was leading Louise Poindexter out of her way, nor yet the desire to listen to his Connemara pronunciation. It was not curiosity to look at the jacalé of the mustanger; but a feeling of a far more irresistible kind, to which she was yielding, as if she believed it to be her fate!

She paid a visit to the lone hut, on the Alamo; she entered under its roof; she scanned with seeming interest its singular *penates*; and noted, with pleased surprise, the books, writing materials, and other chattels that betokened the refinement of its owner; she listened with apparent delight to the *palthogue*<sup>161</sup> of the Connemara man, who called her a “coleén bawn;” she partook of Phelim’s hospitality – condescendingly tasting of everything offered, except that which was most urgently pressed upon her, “a dhrap of the crayther, drawn fresh from the dimmyjan;” and finally made her departure from the spot, apparently in the highest spirits.

Alas! her delight was short-lived: lasting only so long as it was sustained by the excitement of the novel adventure. As she recrossed the flower prairie, she found time for making a variety of reflections; and there was one that chilled her to the very core of her heart.

Was it the thought that she had been acting wrongly in keeping her father, her brother, and friends in suspense about her safety? Or had she become conscious of playing a part open to the suspicion of being unfeminine?

Not either. The cloud that darkened her brow in the midst of that blossoming brightness, was caused by a different, and far more distressing, reflection. During all that day, in the journey from the fort, after overtaking her in the chase, in the pursuit while protecting her, lingering by her side on the shore of the lake, returning across the prairie, under his own humble roof – in short everywhere – her companion had only been polite – *had only behaved as a gentleman!*

---

<sup>159</sup> the Emerald Isle – Ireland (*poet.*)

<sup>160</sup> *stampede* – a sudden rash of frightened animals or people

<sup>161</sup> *palthogue* – here: an amusing speech

## Chapter 18

### Jealousy upon the Trail

Of the two-score rescuers, who had started in pursuit of the runaway, but few followed far. Having lost sight of the wild mares, the mustang, and the mustanger, they began to lose sight of one another; and before long became dispersed upon the prairie – going single, in couples, or in groups of three and four together. Most of them, unused to tracking up a trail, soon strayed from that taken by the manada; branching off upon others, made, perhaps, by the same drove upon some previous stampede.

The dragoon escort, in charge of a young officer – a fresh fledgling from West Point – ran astray upon one of these ramifications, carrying the hindmost of the field along with it.

It was a rolling prairie through which the pursuit was conducted, here and there intersected by straggling belts of brushwood. These, with the inequalities of the surface, soon hid the various pursuing parties from one another; and in twenty minutes after the start, a bird looking from the heavens above, might have beheld half a hundred horsemen, distributed into half a score of groups – apparently having started from a common centre – spurring at full speed towards every quarter of the compass!

But one was going in the right direction – a solitary individual, mounted upon a large strong-limbed chestnut horse; that, without any claim to elegance of shape, was proving the possession both of speed and bottom. The blue frock-coat of half military cut, and forage cap of corresponding colour, were distinctive articles of dress habitually worn by the ex-captain of volunteer cavalry – Cassius Calhoun. He it was who directed the chestnut on the true trail; while with whip and spur he was stimulating the animal to extraordinary efforts. He was himself stimulated by a thought – sharp as his own spurs – that caused him to concentrate all his energies upon the abject in hand.

Like a hungry hound he was laying his head along the trail, in hopes of an issue that might reward him for his exertions.

What that issue was he had but vaguely conceived; but on occasional glance towards his holsters – from which protruded the butts of a brace of pistols – told of some sinister design that was shaping itself in his soul.

But for a circumstance that assisted him, he might, like the others, have gone astray. He had the advantage of them, however, in being guided by two shoe-tracks he had seen before. One, the larger, he recollected with a painful distinctness. He had seen it stamped upon a charred surface, amid the ashes of a burnt prairie. Yielding to an undefined instinct, he had made a note of it in his memory, and now remembered it.

Thus directed, the *ci-devant* captain arrived among the copses, and rode into the glade where the spotted mustang had been pulled up in such a mysterious manner. Hitherto his analysis had been easy enough. At this point it became conjecture. Among the hoof-prints of the wild mares, the shoe-tracks were still seen, but no longer going at a gallop. The two animals thus distinguished must have been halted, and standing in juxtaposition.

Whither next? Along the trail of the manada, there was no imprint of iron; nor elsewhere! The surface on all sides was hard, and strewn with pebbles. A horse going in rude gallop, might have indented it; but not one passing over it at a tranquil pace.

And thus had the spotted mustang and blood bay parted from that spot. They had gone at a walk for some score yards, before starting on their final gallop towards the mustang trap.

The impatient pursuer was puzzled. He rode round and round, and along the trail of the wild mares, and back again, without discovering the direction that had been taken by either of the ridden horses.

He was beginning to feel something more than surprise, when the sight of a solitary horseman advancing along the trail interrupted his uncomfortable conjectures.

It was no stranger who was drawing near. The colossal figure, clad in coarse habiliments, bearded to the buttons of his blanket coat, and bestriding the most contemptible looking steed that could have been found within a hundred miles of the spot, was an old acquaintance. Cassius Calhoun knew Zebulon Stump, and Zeb Stump knew Cash Calhoun, long before either had set foot upon the prairies of Texas.

"You hain't seed nuthin' o' the young lady, hev ye, Mister Calhoun?" inquired the hunter, as he rode up, with an unusual impressiveness of manner. "No, ye hain't," he continued, as if deducing his inference from the blank looks of the other. "Dog-gone my cats! I wonder what the hell hev becomed o' her! Kewrious, too; sech a rider as she air, ter let the durned goat o' a thing run away wi' her. Wal! thur's not much danger to be reeprehended. The mowstanger air putty sartin to throw his rope aroun' the critter, an that 'll put an eend to its capers. Why hev ye stopped hyur?"

"I'm puzzled about the direction they've taken. Their tracks show they've been halted here; but I can see the shod hoofs no farther."

"Whoo! whoo! yur right, Mister Cashus! They hev been halted hyur; an been clost thegither too. They hain't gone no further on the trail o' the wild maars. Sartin they hain't. What then?"

The speaker scanned the surface of the plain with an interrogative glance; as if there, and not from Cassius Calhoun, expecting an answer to his question.

"I cannot see their tracks anywhere," replied the ex-captain.

"No, kan't ye? I kin though. Lookkee hyur! Don't ye see them thur bruises on the grass?"

"No."

"Durn it! thur plain es the nose on a Jew's face. Thur's a big shoe, an a little un clost aside o' it. Thet's the way they've rud off, which show that they hain't follered the wild maars no further than hyur. We'd better keep on arter them?"

"By all means!"

Without further parley, Zeb started along the new trail; which, though still undiscernible to the eye of the other, was to him as conspicuous as he had figuratively declared it.

In a little while it became visible to his companion – on their arrival at the place where the fugitives had once more urged their horses into a gallop to escape from the cavallada, and where the shod tracks deeply indented the turf.

Shortly after their trail was again lost – or would have been to a scrutiny less keen than that of Zeb Stump – among the hundreds of other hoof-marks seen now upon the sward.

"Hilloo!" exclaimed the old hunter, in some surprise at the new sign. "What's been a doin' hyur? This air some 'at kewrious."

"Only the tracks of the wild mares!" suggested Calhoun. "They appear to have made a circuit, and come round again?"

"If they hev it's been arter the others rud past them. The chase must a changed sides, I reck'n."

"What do you mean, Mr Stump?"

"That i'stead o' them gallupin' arter the maars, the maars hev been gallupin' arter them."

"How can you tell that?"

"Don't ye see that the shod tracks air kivered by them o' the maars? Maars – no! By the 'turnal airthquake! – them's not maar-tracks. They air a inch bigger. Thur's been *studs* this way – a hul cavayurd o' them. Geehosofat! I hope they hain't –"

"Haven't what?"

"Gone arter Spotty. If they hev, then thur will be danger to Miss Peintdexter. Come on!"

Without waiting for a rejoinder, the hunter started off at a shambling trot, followed by Calhoun, who kept calling to him for an explanation of his ambiguous words.

Zeb did not deign to offer any – excusing himself by a backward sweep of the hand, which seemed to say, “Do not bother me now: I am busy.”

For a time he appeared absorbed in taking up the trail of the shod horses – not so easily done, as it was in places entirely obliterated by the thick trampling of the stallions. He succeeded in making it out by piecemeal – still going on at a trot.

It was not till he had arrived within a hundred yards of the arroyo that the serious shadow disappeared from his face; and, checking the pace of his mare, he vouchsafed the explanation once more demanded from him.

“Oh! that was the danger,” said Calhoun, on hearing the explanation. “How do you know they have escaped it?”

“Look thur!”

“A dead horse! Freshly killed, he appears? What does that prove?”

“That the mowstanger hes killed him.”

“It frightened the others off, you think, and they followed no further?”

“They follered no further; but it wa’n’t adzackly thet as scared ’em off. Thur’s the thing as kep them from follerin’. Ole Hickory, what a jump!”

The speaker pointed to the arroyo, on the edge of which both riders had now arrived.

“You don’t suppose they leaped it?” said Calhoun. “Impossible.”

“Leaped it clur as the crack o’ a rifle. Don’t ye see thur toe-marks, both on this side an the t’other? An’ Miss Peintdexter fust, too! By the jumpin’ Geehosofat, what a gurl she air sure enuf! They must both a jumped afore the stellyun war shot; else they kedn’t a got at it. Thur’s no other place whar a hoss ked go over. Geeroozalem! wa’n’t it cunnin’ o’ the mowstanger to throw the stud in his tracks, jest in the very gap?”

“You think that he and my cousin crossed here together?”

“Not adzackly thegither,” explained Zeb, without suspecting the motive of the interrogatory. “As I’ve sayed, Spotty went fust. You see the critter’s tracks yonner on t’other side?”

“I do.”

“Wal – don’t ye see they air kivered wi’ them o’ the mowstanger’s hoss?”

“True – true.”

“As for the stellyuns, they hain’t got over – ne’er a one o’ the hul cavayurd. I kin see how it hez been. The young fellur pulled up on t’other side, an sent a bullet back inter this brute’s karkidge. ’Twar jest like closin’ the gap ahint him; an the pursooers, seein’ it shet, guv up the chase, an scampered off in a different direckshun. Thur’s the way they hev gone – up the side o’ the gully!”

“They may have crossed at some other place, and continued the pursuit?”

“If they dud, they’d hev ten mile to go, afore they ked git back hyur – five up, an five back agin. Not a bit o’ that, Mister Calhoun. To needn’t be uneezy ’bout Miss Lewaze bein’ pursooed by *them* any further. Arter the jump, she’s rud off along wi’ the mowstanger – both on ’em as quiet as a kupple o’ lambs. Thur wa’n’t no danger then; an by this time, they oughter be dog-goned well on torst rejoinin’ the people as stayed by the purvision waggon.”

“Come on!” cried Calhoun, exhibiting as much impatience as when he believed his cousin to be in serious peril. “Come on, Mr Stump! Let us get back as speedily as possible!”

“Not so fast, if you pleeze,” rejoined Zeb, permitting himself to slide leisurely out of his saddle, and then drawing his knife from his sheath. “I’ll only want ye to wait for a matter o’ ten minutes, or thereabout.”

“Wait! For what?” peevishly inquired Calhoun.

“Till I kin strip the hide off o’ this hyur sorrel. It appear to be a skin o’ the fust qualerty; an oughter fetch a five-dollar bill in the settlements. Five-dollar bills ain’t picked up every day on these hyur purayras.”

“Damn the skin!” angrily ejaculated the impatient Southerner. “Come on, an leave it!”

“Ain’t a goin’ to do anythin’ o’ the sort,” coolly responded the hunter, as he drew the sharp edge of his blade along the belly of the prostrate steed. “You kin go on if ye like, Mister Calhoun; but Zeb Stump don’t start till he packs the hide of this hyur stellyun on the krupper o’ his old maar. Thet he don’t.”

“Come, Zeb; what’s the use of talking about my going back by myself? You know I can’t find my way?”

“That air like enough. I didn’t say ye ked.”

“Look here, you obstinate old case! Time’s precious to me just at this minute. It ’ll take you a full half-hour to skin the horse.”

“Not twenty minutes.”

“Well, say twenty minutes. Now, twenty minutes are of more importance to me than a five-dollar bill. You say that’s the value of the skin? Leave it behind; and I agree to make good the amount.”

“Wal – that air durned gin’rous, I admit – dog-goned gin’rous. But I mussent except yur offer. It ’ud be a mean trick o’ me – mean enuf for a yellor-bellied Mexikin – to take yur money for sech a sarvice as thet: the more so es I ain’t no stranger to ye, an myself a goin’ the same road. On the t’other hand, I kan’t afford to lose the five dollars’ worth o’ hoss-hide which ud be rotten as punk – to say nuthin’ o’ it’s bein’ tore into skreeds by the buzzarts and coyoats – afore I mout find a chance to kum this way agin.”

“Tis very provoking! What am I to do?”

“You *air* in a hurry? Wal – I’m sorry to discommerdate ye. But – stay! Thur’s no reezun for yur waitin’ on me. Thur’s nuthin’ to hinder ye from findin’ yur way to the waggon. Ye see that tree stannin’ up agin the sky-line – the tall poplar yonner?”

“I do.”

“Wal; do you remember ever to hev seed it afore? It air a queery lookin’ plant, appearin’ more like a church steeple than a tree.”

“Yes – yes!” said Calhoun. “Now you’ve pointed it out, I do remember it. We rode close past it while in pursuit of the wild mares?”

“You dud that very thing. An’ now, as ye know it, what air to hinder you from ridin’ past it agin; and follering the trail o’ the maars back’ard? That ud bring ye to yur startin’-peint; where, ef I ain’t out o’ my reck’nin’, ye’ll find yur cousin, Miss Peintdexter, an the hul o’ yur party enjoying themselves wi’ that ’ere French stuff, they call shampain. I hope they’ll stick to it, and spare the Monongaheela – of which licker I shed like to hev a triflin’ suck arter I git back myself.”

Calhoun had not waited for the wind-up of this characteristic speech. On the instant after recognising the tree, he had struck the spurs into the sides of his chestnut, and gone off at a gallop, leaving old Zeb at liberty to secure the coveted skin.

“Geeroozalem!” ejaculated the hunter, glancing up, and noticing the quick unceremonious departure. “It don’t take much o’ a head-piece to tell why he air in sech a durned hurry. I ain’t myself much guv torst guessin’; but if I ain’t doggonedly mistaken it air a clur case o’ jellacy on the trail!”

Zeb Stump was not astray in his conjecture. It *was* jealousy that urged Cassius Calhoun to take that hasty departure – black jealousy, that had first assumed shape in a kindred spot – in the midst of a charred prairie; that had been every day growing stronger from circumstances observed, and others imagined; that was now intensified so as to have become his prevailing passion.

The presentation and taming of the spotted mustang; the acceptance of that gift, characteristic of the giver, and gratifying to the receiver, who had made no effort to conceal her gratification; these, and other circumstances, acting upon the already excited fancy of Cassius Calhoun, had conducted him to the belief: that in Maurice the mustanger he would find his most powerful rival.

The inferior social position of the horse-hunter should have hindered him from having such belief, or even a suspicion.

Perhaps it might have done so, had he been less intimately acquainted with the character of Louise Poindexter. But, knowing her as he did – associating with her from the hour of childhood – thoroughly understanding her independence of spirit – the *braverie* of her disposition, bordering upon very recklessness – he could place no reliance on the mere idea of gentility. With most women this may be depended upon as a barrier, if not to *mésalliance*<sup>162</sup>, at least to absolute imprudence; but in the impure mind of Cassius Calhoun, while contemplating the probable conduct of his cousin, there was not even this feeble support to lean upon!

Chafing at the occurrences of the day – to him crookedly inauspicious – he hurried back towards the spot where the pic-nic had been held. The steeple-like tree guided him back to the trail of the manada; and beyond that there was no danger of straying. He had only to return along the path already trodden by him.

He rode at a rapid pace – faster than was relished by his now tired steed – stimulated by bitter thoughts, which for more than an hour were his sole companions – their bitterness more keenly felt in the tranquil solitude that surrounded him.

He was but little consoled by a sight that promised other companionship: that of two persons on horseback, riding in advance, and going in the same direction as himself, upon the same path. Though he saw but their backs – and at a long distance ahead – there was no mistaking the identity of either. They were the two individuals that had brought that bitterness upon his spirit.

Like himself they were returning upon the trail of the wild mares; which, when first seen, they had just struck, arriving upon it from a lateral path. Side by side – their saddles almost chafing against each other – to all appearance absorbed in a conversation of intense interest to both, they saw not the solitary horseman approaching them in a diagonal direction.

Apparently less anxious than he to rejoin the party of picknickers, they were advancing at a slow pace – the lady a little inclining to the rear.

Their proximity to one another – their attitudes in the saddle – their obvious inattention to outward objects – the snail-like pace at which they were proceeding – these, along with one or two other slighter circumstances observed by Calhoun, combined to make an impression on his mind – or rather to strengthen one already made – that almost drove him mad.

To gallop rapidly up, and rudely terminate the *tête-à-tête*, was but the natural instinct of the *chivalric* Southerner. In obedience to it he spitefully plied the spur; and once more forced his jaded chestnut into an unwilling canter.

In a few seconds, however, he slackened pace – as if changing his determination. The sound of his horse's hoofs had not yet warned the others of his proximity – though he was now less than two hundred yards behind them! He could hear the silvery tones of his cousin's voice bearing the better part of the conversation. How interesting it must be to both to have hindered them from perceiving his approach!

If he could but overhear what they were saying?

It seemed a most unpropitious place for playing eavesdropper; and yet there might be a chance?

The seeming interest of the dialogue to the individuals engaged in it gave promise of such opportunity. The turf of the savannah was soft as velvet. The hoof gliding slowly over it gave forth not the slightest sound.

Calhoun was still too impatient to confine himself to a walk; but his chestnut was accustomed to that gait, peculiar to the horse of the South-Western States – the “pace”; and into this was he pressed.

---

<sup>162</sup> *mésalliance* – unequal marriage



With hoofs horizontally striking the sward – elevated scarce an inch above the ground – he advanced swiftly and noiselessly; so quick withal, that in a few seconds he was close upon the heels of the spotted mustang, and the red steed of the mustanger!

He was then checked to a pace corresponding to theirs; while his rider, leaning forward, listened with an eagerness that evinced some terrible determination. His attitude proclaimed him in the vein for vituperation of the rudest kind – ready with ribald tongue; or, if need be, with knife and pistol!

His behaviour depended on a contingency – on what might be overheard.

As chance, or fate, willed it, there was nothing. If the *two* equestrians were insensible to external sounds, their steeds were not so absorbed. In a walk the chestnut stepped heavily – the more so from being fatigued. His footfall proclaimed his proximity to the sharp ears, both of the blood-bay and spotted mustang; that simultaneously flung up their heads, neighing as they did so.

Calhoun was discovered.

“Ha! cousin Cash!” cried the lady, betraying more of pique than surprise; “you there? Where’s father, and Harry, and the rest of the people?”

“Why do you ask that, Loo? I reckon you know as well as I.”

“What! haven’t you come out to meet us? And they too – ah! your chestnut is all in a sweat! He looks as if you had been riding a long race – like ourselves?”

“Of course he has. I followed you from the first – in hopes of being of some service to you.”

“Indeed! I did not know that you were after us. Thank you, cousin! I’ve just been saying thanks to this gallant gentleman, who also came after, and has been good enough to rescue both Luna and myself from a very unpleasant dilemma – a dreadful danger I should rather call it. Do you know that we’ve been chased by a drove of wild steeds, and had actually to ride for our lives?”

“I am aware of it.”

“You saw the chase then?”

“No. I only knew it by the tracks.”

“The tracks! And were you able to tell by that?”

“Yes – thanks to the interpretation of Zeb Stump.”

“Oh! he was with you? But did you follow them to – to – how far did you follow them?”

“To a crevasse in the prairie. You leaped over it, Zeb said. Did you?”

“Luna did.”

“With you on her back?”

“I *wasn’t anywhere else!* What a question, cousin Cash! Where would you expect me to have been? Clinging to her tail? Ha! ha! ha!”

“Did *you* leap it?” inquired the laughter, suddenly changing tone. “Did you follow us any farther?”

“No, Loo. From the crevasse I came direct here, thinking you had got back before me. That’s how I’ve chanced to come up with you.”

The answer appeared to give satisfaction.

“Ah! I’m glad you’ve overtaken us. We’ve been riding slowly. Luna is so tired. Poor thing! I don’t know how I shall ever get her back to the Leona.”

Since the moment of being joined by Calhoun, the mustanger had not spoken a word. However pleasant may have been his previous intercourse with the young Creole, he had relinquished it, without any apparent reluctance; and was now riding silently in the advance, as if by tacit understanding he had returned to the performance of the part for which he had been originally engaged.

For all that, the eye of the ex-captain was bent blightingly upon him – at times in a demoniac glare – when he saw – or fancied – that another eye was turned admiringly in the same direction.

A long journey performed by that trio of travellers might have led to a tragical termination. Such finale was prevented by the appearance of the picknickers; who soon after surrounding the returned runaway, put to flight every other thought by the chorus of their congratulations.

## Chapter 19

### Whisky and Water

In the embryo city springing up under the protection of Fort Inge, the “hotel” was the most conspicuous building. This is but the normal condition of every Texan town – whether new or founded forty years ago; and none are older, except the sparse cities of Hispano-Mexican origin – where the *presidio*<sup>163</sup> and convent took precedence, now surpassed by, and in some instances transformed into, the “tavern.”

The Fort Inge establishment, though the largest building in the place, was, nevertheless, neither very grand nor imposing. Its exterior had but little pretence to architectural style. It was a structure of hewn logs, having for ground-plan the letter T according to the grotesque alphabet – the shank being used for eating and sleeping rooms, while the head was a single apartment entirely devoted to drinking – smoking and *expectorating* included. This last was the bar-room, or “saloon.”

The sign outside, swinging from the trunk of a post-oak, that had been *pollarded* some ten feet above the ground, exhibited on both sides the likeness of a well known military celebrity – the hero of that quarter of the globe – General Zachariah Taylor<sup>164</sup>. It did not need looking at the lettering beneath to ascertain the name of the hotel. Under the patronage of such a portrait it could only be called “Rough and Ready.”

There was a touch of the apropos about this designation. Outside things appeared rough enough; while inside, especially if you entered by the “saloon,” there was a readiness to meet you half way, with a mint julep, a sherry cobbler, a gin sling, or any other *mixed* drink known to trans-Mississippian tipplers – provided always that you were ready with the *picayunes* to pay for them.

The saloon in question would not call for description, had you ever travelled in the Southern, or South-Western, States of America. If so, no Lethean<sup>165</sup> draught could ever efface from your memory the “bar-room” of the hotel or *tavern* in which you have had the unhappiness to sojourn. The counter extending longitudinally by the side; the shelved wall behind, with its rows of decanters and bottles, containing liquors, of not only all the colours of the prism, but every possible combination of them; the elegant young fellow, standing or sidling between counter and shelves, ycleped “clerk” – don’t call him a “barkeeper,” or you may get a decanter in your teeth – this elegant young gentleman, in blouse of blue *cottonade*, or white linen coat, or maybe in his shirt sleeves – the latter of finest linen and lace – ruffled, in the year of our Lord eighteen hundred and fifty – this elegant young gentleman, who, in mixing you a sherry cobbler, can look you straight in the face, talk to you the politics of the day, while the ice, and the wine, and the water, are passing from glass to glass, like an iris sparkling behind his shoulders, or an aureole surrounding his perfumed head! Traveller through the Southern States of America you; cannot fail to remember him?

If so, my words will recall him, along with his surroundings – the saloon in which he is the presiding administrator, with its shelves and coloured decanters; its counter; its floor sprinkled with white sand, at times littered with cigar stumps, and the brown asterisks<sup>166</sup> produced by *expectoration* – its odour of mint, absinthe, and lemon-peel, in which luxuriate the common black fly, the blue-bottle, and the sharp-tongued mosquito. All these must be sharply outlined on the retina of your memory.

---

<sup>163</sup> **presidio** – a fortress (*Spanish*)

<sup>164</sup> **General Zachariah Taylor** (1786–1850) – the American general who took part in the Mexican War of 1846–1848; later he became the US president

<sup>165</sup> **Lethean** – related to *Lethe* – in Greek mythology, the river in Hades that gives forgetfulness of the past

<sup>166</sup> **asterisks** – marks used to call attention

The hotel, or tavern, “Rough and Ready,” though differing but little from other Texan houses of entertainment, had some points in particular. Its proprietor, instead of being a speculative Yankee, was a German – in this part of the world, as elsewhere, found to be the best purveyors of food. He kept his own bar; so that on entering the saloon, instead of the elegant young gentleman with ruffled shirt and odorous chevelure, your “liquor” was mixed for you by a staid Teuton, who looked as sober as if he never tasted – notwithstanding the temptation of wholesale price – the delicious drinks served out to his customers. Oberdoffer was the name he had imported with him from his fatherland; transformed by his Texan customers into “Old Duffer.”

There was one other peculiarity about the bar-room of the “Rough and Ready,” though it scarce deserved to be so designated; since it was not uncommon elsewhere. As already stated, the building was shaped like a capital T; the saloon representing the head of the letter. The counter extended along one side, that contiguous to the shank; while at each end was a door that opened outward into the public square of the incipient city.

This arrangement had been designed to promote the circulation of the air – a matter of primary importance in an atmosphere where the thermometer for half the year stands at 90 degrees in the shade.

The hotels of Texas or the South-Western States – I may say every part of the American Union – serve the double purpose of exchange and club-house. Indeed, it is owing to the cheap accommodation thus afforded – often of the most convenient kind – that the latter can scarce be said to exist.

Even in the larger cities of the Atlantic states the “club” is by no means a necessity. The moderate charges of the hotels, along with their excellent *cuisine* and elegant accommodations, circumscribe the prosperity of this institution; which in America is, and ever must be, an unhealthy exotic.

The remark is still more true of the Southern and South-western cities; where the “saloon” and “bar-room” are the chief places of resort and rendezvous.

The company, too, is there of a more miscellaneous character. The proud planter does not disdain – for he does not dare – to drink in the same room with the “poor white trash;” often as proud as himself.

There is no *peasant* in that part of the world – least of all in the state called Texas; and in the saloon of “Rough and Ready” might often be seen assembled representatives of every class and calling to be met with among the settlements.

Perhaps not upon any occasion since “Old Duffer” had hung out the sign of his tavern, was he favoured with a larger company, or served more customers across his counter, than upon that night, after the return of the horse-hunting party to Fort Inge.

With the exception of the ladies, almost every one who had taken part in the expedition seemed to think that a half-hour spent at the “Rough and Ready” was necessary as a “nightcap” before retiring to rest; and as the Dutch clock, quaintly ticking among the coloured decanters, indicated the hour of eleven, one after another – officers of the Fort – planters living near along the river – Sutlers – commissariat contractors – “sportsmen” – and others who might be called nondescripts – came dropping in; each as he entered marching straight up to the counter, calling for his favourite drink, and then falling back to converse with some group already occupying the floor.

One of these groups was conspicuous. It consisted of some eight or ten individuals, half of them in uniform. Among the latter were the three officers already introduced; the captain of infantry, and the two lieutenants – Hancock of the dragoons, and Crossman of the mounted rifles.

Along with these was an officer older than any of them, also higher in authority, as could be told by the embroidery on his shoulder-strap, that proclaimed him of the rank of major. As he was the only “field officer” at Fort Inge, it is unnecessary to say he was the commandant of the cantonment.

These gentlemen were conversing as freely as if all were subalterns of equal rank – the subject of the discourse being the incidents of the day.

“Now tell us, major!” said Hancock: “you must know. Where did the girl gallop to?”

“How should I know?” answered the officer appealed to. “Ask her cousin, Mr Cassius Calhoun.”

“We have asked him, but without getting any satisfaction. It’s clear he knows no more than we. He only met them on the return – and not very far from the place where we had our bivouac<sup>167</sup>. They were gone a precious long time; and judging by the sweat of their horses they must have had a hard ride of it. They might have been to the Rio Grande, for that matter, and beyond it.”

“Did you notice Calhoun as he came back?” inquired the captain of infantry. “There was a scowl upon his face that betokened some very unpleasant emotion within his mind, I should say.”

“He did look rather unhappy,” replied the major; “but surely, Captain Sloman, you don’t attribute it to – ?”

“Jealousy. I do, and nothing else.”

“What! of Maurice the mustanger? Poh – poh! impossible – at least, very improbable.”

“And why, major?”

“My dear Sloman, Louise Poindexter is a lady, and Maurice Gerald – ”

“May be a gentleman for aught that is known to the contrary.”

“Pshaw!” scornfully exclaimed Crossman; “a trader in horses! The major is right – the thing’s improbable – impossible.”

“Ah, gentlemen!” pursued the officer of infantry, with a significant shake of the head. “You don’t know Miss Poindexter, so well as I. An eccentric young lady – to say the least of her. You may have already observed that for yourselves.”

“Come, come, Sloman!” said the major, in a bantering way; “you are inclined to be talking scandal, I fear. That would be a scandal. Perhaps you are yourself interested in Miss Poindexter, notwithstanding your pretensions to be considered a Joseph<sup>168</sup>? Now, I could understand your being jealous if it were handsome Hancock here, or Crossman – supposing him to be disengaged. But as for a common mustanger – poh – poh!”

“He’s an Irishman, major, this mustanger; and if he be what I have some reason to suspect – ”

“Whatever he be,” interrupted the major, casting a side glance towards the door, “he’s there to answer for himself; and as he’s a sufficiently plain-spoken fellow, you may learn from him all about the matter that seems to be of so much interest to you.”

“I don’t think you will,” muttered Sloman, as Hancock and two or three others turned towards the new-comer, with the design of carrying out the major’s suggestion.

Silently advancing across the sanded floor, the mustanger had taken his stand at an unoccupied space in front of the counter.

“A glass of whisky and water, if you please?” was the modest request with which he saluted the landlord.

“Visky und vachter!” echoed the latter, without any show of eagerness to wait upon his new guest. “Ya, woe, visky und vachter! It ish two picayunsh the glass.”

“I was not inquiring the price,” replied the mustanger, “I asked to be served with a glass of whisky and water. Have you got any?”

“Yesh – yesh,” responded the German, rendered obsequious by the sharp rejoinder. “Plenty – plenty of visky und vachter. Here it ish.”

---

<sup>167</sup> **bivouac** – a temporary camp, usually military

<sup>168</sup> **a Joseph** – a chaste man; from Joseph, a biblical figure of the Old Testament

While his simple potation was being served out to him, Maurice received nods of recognition from the officers, returning them with a free, but modest air. Most of them knew him personally, on account of his business relations with the Fort.

They were on the eve of interrogating him – as the major had suggested – when the entrance of still another individual caused them to suspend their design.

The new-comer was Cassius Calhoun. In his presence it would scarce have been delicacy to investigate the subject any further.

Advancing with his customary swagger towards the mixed group of military men and civilians, Calhoun saluted them as one who had spent the day in their company, and had been absent only for a short interval. If not absolutely intoxicated, it could be seen that the ex-officer of volunteers was under the influence of drink. The unsteady sparkle of his eyes, the unnatural pallor upon his forehead – still further clouded by two or three tossed tresses that fell over it – with the somewhat grotesque set of his forage cap – told that he had been taking one beyond the limits of wisdom.

“Come, gentlemen!” cried he, addressing himself to the major’s party, at the same time stepping up to the counter; “let’s hit the waggon a crack, or old Dunder-und-blitzen behind the bar will say we’re wasting his lights. Drinks all round. What say you?”

“Agreed – agreed!” replied several voices.

“You, major?”

“With pleasure, Captain Calhoun.”

According to universal custom, the intended imbibers fell into line along the counter, each calling out the name of the drink most to his liking at the moment.

Of these were ordered almost as many kinds as there were individuals in the party; Calhoun himself shouting out – “Brown sherry for me;” and immediately adding – “with a dash of bitters.”

“Prandy und pitters, you calls for, Mishter Calhoun?” said the landlord, as he leant obsequiously across the counter towards the reputed partner of an extensive estate.

“Certainly, you stupid Dutchman! I said brown sherry, didn’t I?”

“All rights, mein herr; all rights! Prandy und pitters – prandy und pitters,” repeated the German Boniface, as he hastened to place the decanter before his ill-mannered guest.

With the large accession of the major’s party, to several others already in the act of imbibing, the whole front of the long counter became occupied – with scarce an inch to spare.

Apparently by accident – though it may have been design on the part of Calhoun – he was the outermost man on the extreme right of those who had responded to his invitation.

This brought him in juxtaposition with Maurice Gerald, who alone – as regarded boon companionship – was quietly drinking his whisky and water, and smoking a cigar he had just lighted.

The two were back to back – neither having taken any notice of the other.

“A toast!” cried Calhoun, taking his glass from the counter.

“Let us have it!” responded several voices.

“America for the Americans, and confusion to all foreign interlopers – especially the damned Irish!”

On delivering the obnoxious sentiment, he staggered back a pace; which brought his body in contact with that of the mustanger – at the moment standing with the glass raised to his lips.

The collision caused the spilling of a portion of the whisky and water; which fell over the mustanger’s breast.

Was it an accident? No one believed it was – even for a moment. Accompanied by such a sentiment the act could only have been an affront intended and premeditated.

All present expected to see the insulted man spring instantly upon his insulter. They were disappointed, as well as surprised, at the manner in which the mustanger seemed to take it. There were some who even fancied he was about to submit to it.

“If he does,” whispered Hancock in Sloman’s ear, “he ought to be kicked out of the room.”

“Don’t you be alarmed about that,” responded the infantry officer, in the same *sotto voce*<sup>169</sup>. “You’ll find it different. I’m not given to betting, as you know; but I’d lay a month’s pay upon it the mustanger don’t back out; and another, that Mr Cassius Calhoun will find him an ugly customer to deal with, although just now he seems more concerned about his fine shirt, than the insult put upon him. Odd devil he is!”

While this whispering was being carried on, the man to whom it related was still standing by the bar – to use a hackneyed phrase, “the observed of all observers.”

Having deposited his glass upon the counter, he had drawn a silk handkerchief from his pocket, and was wiping from his embroidered shirt bosom the defilement of the spilt whisky.

There was an imperturbable coolness about the action, scarce compatible with the idea of cowardice; and those who had doubted him perceived that they had made a mistake, and that there was something to come. In silence they awaited the development.

They had not long to wait. The whole affair – speculations and whisperings included – did not occupy twenty seconds of time; and then did the action proceed, or the speech which was likely to usher it in.

“I am an Irishman,” said the mustanger, as he returned his handkerchief to the place from which he had taken it.

Simple as the rejoinder may have appeared, and long delayed as it had been, there was no one present who mistook its meaning. If the hunter of wild horses had tweaked the nose of Cassius Calhoun, it would not have added emphasis to that acceptance of his challenge. Its simplicity but proclaimed the serious determination of the acceptor.

“You?” scornfully retorted Calhoun, turning round, and standing with his arms *akimbo*<sup>170</sup>. “You?” he continued, with his eye measuring the mustanger from head to foot, “you an Irishman? Great God, sir, I should never have thought so! I should have taken you for a Mexican, judging by your rig, and the elaborate stitching of your shirt.”

“I can’t perceive how my rig should concern you, Mr Cassius Calhoun; and as you’ve done my shirt no service by spilling half my liquor upon it, I shall take the liberty of unstarching yours in a similar fashion.”

So saying, the mustanger took up his glass; and, before the ex-captain of volunteers could duck his head, or get out of the way, the remains of the mixed Monongahela were “swilled” into his face, sending him off into a fit of alternate sneezing and coughing that appeared to afford satisfaction to more than a majority of the bystanders.

The murmur of approbation was soon suppressed. The circumstances were not such as to call for speech; and the exclamations that accompanied the act were succeeded by a hush of silence. All saw that the quarrel could not be otherwise than a serious one. The affair must end in a fight. No power on earth could prevent it from coming to that conclusion.

---

<sup>169</sup> *sotto voce* – in a low voice (*Italian*)

<sup>170</sup> *with his arms akimbo* – with hands on the hips and elbows outwards

## Chapter 20

### An Unsafe Position

On receiving the alcoholic douche, Calhoun had clutched his six-shooter<sup>171</sup>, and drawn it from its holster. He only waited to get the whisky out of his eyes before advancing upon his adversary.

The mustanger, anticipating this action, had armed himself with a similar weapon, and stood ready to return the fire of his antagonist – shot for shot.

The more timid of the spectators had already commenced making their escape out of doors tumbling over one another, in their haste to get out of harm's way.

A few stayed in the saloon from sheer irresolution; a few others, of cooler courage, from choice; or, perhaps, actuated by a more astute instinct, which told them that in attempting to escape they might get a bullet in the back.

There was an interval – some six seconds – of silence, during which a pin might have been heard falling upon the floor. It was but the interlude that often occurs between resolution and action; when the mind has completed its task, and the body has yet to begin.

It might have been more brief with other actors on the scene. Two ordinary men would have blazed away at once, and without reflection. But the two now confronting each other were not of the common kind. Both had seen *street fighting* before – had taken part in it – and knew the disadvantage of an idle shot. Each was determined to take sure aim on the other. It was this that prolonged the interval of inaction.

To those outside, who dared not even look through the doors, the suspense was almost painful. The cracking of the pistols, which they expected every moment to hear, would have been a relief. It was almost a disappointment when, instead, they heard the voice of the major – who was among the few who had stayed inside – raised in a loud authoritative tone.

“Hold!” commanded he, in the accent of one accustomed to be obeyed, at the same time whisking his sabre out of its scabbard, and interposing its long blade between the disputants.

“Hold your fire – I command you both. Drop your muzzles; or by the Almighty I'll take the arm off the first of you that touches trigger! Hold, I say!”

“Why?” shouted Calhoun, purple with angry passion. “Why, Major Ringwood? After an insult like that, and from a low fellow –”

“You were the first to offer it, Captain Calhoun.”

“Damn me if I care! I shall be the last to let it pass unpunished. Stand out of the way, major. The quarrel is not yours – you have no right to interfere!”

“Indeed! Ha! ha! Sloman! Hancock! Crossman! hear that? I have no right to interfere! Hark ye, Mr Cassius Calhoun, ex-captain of volunteers! Know you where you are, sir? Don't fancy yourself in the state of Mississippi – among your slave-whipping chivalry. This, sir, is a military post – under military law – my humble self its present administrator. I therefore command you to return your six-shooter to the holster from which you have taken it. This instant too, or you shall go to the guard-house, like the humblest soldier in the cantonment!”

“Indeed!” sneeringly replied the Mississippian. “What a fine country you intend Texas to become! I suppose a man mustn't fight, however much aggrieved, without first obtaining a licence from Major Ringwood? Is that to be the law of the land?”

“Not a bit of it,” retorted the major. “I'm not the man – never was – to stand in the way of the honest adjustment of a quarrel. You shall be quite at liberty – you and your antagonist – to kill one another, if it so please you. But not just now. You must perceive, Mr Calhoun, that your sport

---

<sup>171</sup> **six-shooter** – a revolver with six bullets



endangers the lives of other people, who have not the slightest interest in it. I've no idea of being bored by a bullet not intended for me. Wait till the rest of us can withdraw to a safe distance; and you may crack away to your heart's content. Now, sir, will that be agreeable to you?"

Had the major been a man of ordinary character his commands might have been disregarded. But to his official weight, as chief officer of the post, was added a certain reverence due to seniority in age – along with respect for one who was himself known to wield a weapon with dangerous skill, and who allowed no trilling with his authority.

His sabre had not been unsheathed by way of empty gesticulation. The disputants knew it; and by simultaneous consent lowered the muzzles of their pistols – still holding them in hand.

Calhoun stood, with sullen brow, gritting his teeth, like a beast of prey momentarily withheld from making attack upon its victim; while the mustanger appeared to take things as coolly as if neither angry, nor an Irishman.

"I suppose you are determined upon fighting?" said the major, knowing that, there was not much chance of adjusting the quarrel.

"I have no particular wish for it," modestly responded Maurice. "If Mr Calhoun will apologise for what he has said, and also what he has done – "

"He ought to do it: he began the quarrel!" suggested several of the bystanders.

"Never!" scornfully responded the ex-captain. "Cash Calhoun ain't accustomed to that sort of thing. Apologise indeed! And to a masquerading monkey like that!"

"Enough!" cried the young Irishman, for the first time showing serious anger; "I gave him a chance for his life. He refuses to accept it: and now, by the Mother of God, we don't both leave this room alive! Major! I insist that you and your friends withdraw. I can stand his insolence no longer!"

"Ha – ha – ha!" responded the Southerner, with a yell of derisive laughter; "a chance for my life! Clear out, all of ye – clear out; and let me at him!"

"Stay!" cried the major, hesitating to turn his back upon the duellist. "It's not quite safe. You may fancy to begin your game of touch-trigger a second too soon. We must get out of doors before you do. Besides, gentlemen!" he continued, addressing himself to those around him, "there should be some system about this. If they are to fight, let it be fair for both sides. Let them be armed alike; and go at it on the square!"

"By all means!" chorused the half-score of spectators, turning their eyes towards the disputants, to see if they accepted the proposal.

"Neither of you can object?" continued the major, interrogatively.

"I sha'n't object to anything that's fair," assented the Irishman – "devil a bit!"

"I shall fight with the weapon I hold in my hand," doggedly declared Calhoun.

"Agreed! the very weapon for me!" was the rejoinder of his adversary.

"I see you both carry Colt's six-shooter Number 2," said the major, scanning the pistols held in hand. "So far all right! you're armed exactly alike."

"Have they any other weapons?" inquired young Hancock, suspecting that under the cover of his coat the ex-captain had a knife.

"I have none," answered the mustanger, with a frankness that left no doubt as to his speaking the truth.

All eyes were turned upon Calhoun, who appeared to hesitate about making a reply. He saw he must declare himself.

"Of course," he said, "I have my toothpick as well. You don't want me to give up that? A man ought to be allowed to use whatever weapon he has got."

"But, Captain Calhoun," pursued Hancock, "your adversary has no knife. If you are not afraid to meet him on equal terms you should surrender yours."

"Certainly he should!" cried several of the bystanders. "He must! he must!"

“Come, Mr Calhoun!” said the major, in a soothing tone. “Six shots ought to satisfy any reasonable man; without having recourse to the steel. Before you finish firing, one or the other of you – ”

“Damn the knife!” interrupted Calhoun, unbuttoning his coat. Then drawing forth the proscribed weapon, and flinging it to the farthest corner of the saloon, he added, in a tone of bravado, intended to encowardice his adversary. “I sha’n’t want it for such a spangled jay-bird as that. I’ll fetch him out of his boots at the first shot.”

“Time enough to talk when you’ve done something to justify it. Cry boo to a goose; but don’t fancy your big words are going to frighten me, Mr Calhoun! Quick, gentlemen! I’m impatient to put an end to his boasting and blasphemy!”

“Hound!” frantically hissed out the chivalric Southerner. “Low dog of an Irish dam! I’ll send you howling to your kennel! I’ll – ”

“Shame, Captain Calhoun!” interrupted the major, seconded by other voices. “This talk is idle, as it is unpolite in the presence of respectable company. Have patience a minute longer; and you may then say what you like. Now, gentlemen!” he continued, addressing himself to the surrounding, “there is only one more preliminary to be arranged. They must engage not to begin firing till we have got out of their way?”

A difficulty here presented itself. How was the engagement to be given? A simple promise would scarce be sufficient in a crisis like that? The combatants – one of them at least – would not be over scrupulous as to the time of pulling trigger.

“There must be a signal,” pursued the major. “Neither should fire till that be given. Can any one suggest what it is to be?”

“I think. I can,” said the quiet Captain Sloman, advancing as he spoke. “Let the gentlemen go outside, along with us. There is – as you perceive – a door at each end of the room. I see no difference between them. Let them enter again – one at each door, with the understanding that neither is to fire before setting foot across the threshold.”

“Capital! the very thing!” replied several voices. “And what for a signal?” demanded the major. “A shot?”

“No. Ring the tavern bell!”

“Nothing could be better – nothing fairer,” conclusively declared the major, making for one of the doors, that led outward into the square.

“Mein Gott, major!” screamed the German Boniface, rushing out from behind his bar; where, up to this time, he had been standing transfixed with fear. “Mein Gott – surely the shentlemens pe not going to shoot their pisthols inside the shaloon: Ach! they’ll preak all my pottles, and my shplendid looking-glashes, an my crystal clock, that hash cost me von – two hundred dollars. They’ll shpill my pesht liquors – ach! Major, it’ll ruin me – mein Gott – it will!”

“Never fear, Oberdoffer!” rejoined the major, pausing to reply. “No doubt you’ll be paid for the damage. At all events, you had better betake yourself to some place of safety. If you stay in your saloon you’ll stand a good chance of getting a bullet through your body, and that would be worse than the preaking of your pottles.”

Without further parley the major parted from the unfortunate landlord, and hurried across the threshold into the street, whither the combatants, who had gone out by separate doors, had already preceded him.

“Old Duffer,” left standing in the middle of his sanded floor, did not remain long in that perilous position. In six seconds after the major’s coat-tail had disappeared through the outer door, an inner one closed upon his own skirts; and the bar-room, with its camphine lamps, its sparkling decanters, and its costly mirrors, was left in untenanted silence – no other sound being heard save the ticking of its crystal clock.

## Chapter 21

### A Duel within Doors

Once outside, the major took no further part in the affair. As the commanding officer of the post, it would have been out of place for him to have given encouragement to a fight – even by his interfering to see that it should be a fair one. This, however, was attended to by the younger officers; who at once set about arranging the conditions of the duel.

There was not much time consumed. The terms had been expressed already; and it only remained to appoint some one of the party to superintend the ringing of the bell, which was to be the signal for the combat to commence.

This was an easy matter, since it made no difference who might be entrusted with the duty. A child might have sounded the summons for the terrible conflict that was to follow.

A stranger, chancing at that moment to ride into the rude square of which the hotel “Rough and Ready” formed nearly a side, would have been sorely puzzled to comprehend what was coming to pass. The night was rather dark, though there was still light enough to make known the presence of a conglomeration of human beings, assembled in the proximity of the hotel. Most were in military garb: since, in addition to the officers who had lately figured inside the saloon, others, along with such soldiers as were permitted to pass the sentries, had hastened down from the Fort on receiving intelligence that something unusual was going on within the “square.” Women, too, but scantily robed – soldiers’ wives, washerwomen, and “señoritas” of more questionable calling – had found their way into the street, and were endeavouring to extract from those who had forestalled them an explanation of the *fracas*.

The conversation was carried on in low tones. It was known that the commandant of the post was present, as well as others in authority; and this checked any propensity there might have been for noisy demonstration.

The crowd, thus promiscuously collected, was not in close proximity with the hotel; but standing well out in the open ground, about a dozen yards from the building. Towards it, however, the eyes of all were directed, with that steady stare which tells of the attention being fixed on some engrossing spectacle. They were watching the movements of two men, whose positions were apart – one at each end of the heavy blockhouse, known to be the bar-room of the hotel; and where, as already stated, there was a door.

Though separated by the interposition of two thick log walls, and mutually invisible, these men were manoeuvring as if actuated by a common impulse. They stood contiguous to the entrance doors, at opposite ends of the bar-room, through both of which glared the light of the camphine lamps – falling in broad divergent bands upon the rough gravel outside. Neither was in front of the contiguous entrance; but a little to one side, just clear of the light. Neither was in an upright attitude, but crouching – not as if from fear, but like a runner about to make a start, and straining upon the spring.

Both were looking inwards – into the saloon, where no sound could be heard save the ticking of a clock. Their attitudes told of their readiness to enter it, and that they were only restrained by waiting for some preconcerted signal.

That their purpose was a serious one could be deduced from several circumstances. Both were in their shirt sleeves, hatless, and stripped of every rag that might form an impediment to action; while on their faces was the stamp of stern determination – alike legible in the attitudes they had assumed.

But there was no fine reflection needed to discover their design. The stranger, chancing to come into the square, could have seen at a glance that it was deadly. The pistols in their hands, cocked and tightly clutched; the nervous energy of their attitudes; the silence of the crowd of

spectators; and the concentrated interest with which the two men were regarded, proclaimed more emphatically than words, that there was danger in what they were doing – in short, that they were engaged in some sort of a strife, with death for its probable consummation!

So it was at that moment when the crisis had come. The duellists stood, each with eye intent upon the door, by which he was to make entrance – perhaps into eternity! They only waited for a signal to cross the threshold; and engage in a combat that must terminate the existence of one or the other – perhaps both.

Were they listening for that fatal formulary: – One – two – fire?

No. Another signal had been agreed upon; and it was given.

A stentorian voice was heard calling out the simple monosyllable —

“Ring!”

Three or four dark figures could be seen standing by the shorn trunk on which swung the tavern bell. The command instantly set them in motion; and, along with the oscillation of their arms – dimly seen through the darkness – could be heard the sonorous tones of a bell. That bell, whose sounds had been hitherto heard only as symbols of joy – calling men together to partake of that which perpetuates life – was now listened to as a summons of death!

The “ringing in” was of short duration. The bell had made less than a score of vibrations, when the men engaged at the rope saw that their services were no longer required. The disappearance of the duellists, who had rushed inside the saloon, the quick, sharp cracking of pistols; the shivering of broken glass, admonished the ringers that theirs was but a superfluous noise; and, dropping the rope, they stood like the rest of the crowd, listening to the conflict inside.

No eyes – save those of the combatants themselves – were witnesses to that strange duel.

At the first dong of the bell both combatants had re-entered the room. Neither made an attempt to skulk outside. To have done so would have been a ruin to reputation. A hundred eyes were upon them; and the spectators understood the conditions of the duel – that neither was to fire before crossing the threshold.

Once inside, the conflict commenced, the first shots filling the room with smoke. Both kept their feet, though both were wounded – their blood spurting out over the sanded floor.

The second shots were also fired simultaneously, but at random, the smoke hindering the aim.

Then came a single shot, quickly followed by another, and succeeded by an interval of quiet.

Previous to this the combatants had been heard rushing about through the room. This noise was no longer being made.

Instead there was profound silence. Had they killed one another? Were both dead? No! Once more the double detonation announced that both still lived. The suspension had been caused as they stood peering through the smoke in the endeavour to distinguish one another. Neither spoke or stirred in fear of betraying his position.

Again there was a period of tranquillity similar to the former, but more prolonged.

It ended by another exchange of shots, almost instantly succeeded by the falling of two heavy bodies upon the floor.

There was the sound of sprawling – the overturning of chairs – then a single shot – the eleventh – and this was the last that was fired!

The spectators outside saw only a cloud of sulphurous smoke oozing out of both doors, and dimming the light of the camphine lamps. This, with an occasional flash of brighter effulgence, close followed by a crack, was all that occurred to give satisfaction to the eye.

But the ear – that was gratified by a greater variety. There were heard shots – after the bell had become silent, other sounds: the sharp shivering of broken glass, the duller crash of falling furniture, rudely overturned in earnest struggle – the trampling of feet upon the boarded floor – at intervals the clear ringing crack of the revolvers; but neither of the voices of the men whose insensate passions were the cause of all this commotion! The crowd in the street heard the confused

noises, and noted the intervals of silence, without being exactly able to interpret them. The reports of the pistols were all they had to proclaim the progress of the duel. Eleven had been counted; and in breathless silence they were listening for the twelfth.

Instead of a pistol report their ears were gratified by the sound of a voice, recognised as that of the mustanger.

“My pistol is at your head! I have one shot left – an apology, or you die!”

By this the crowd had become convinced that the fight was approaching its termination. Some of the more fearless, looking in, beheld a strange scene. They saw two men lying prostrate on the plank floor; both with bloodstained habiliments, both evidently disabled; the white sand around them reddened with their gore, tracked with tortuous trails, where they had crawled closer to get a last shot at each other – one of them, in scarlet scarf and slashed velvet trousers, slightly surmounting the other, and holding a pistol to his head that threatened to deprive him of life.

Such was the tableau that presented itself to the spectators, as the sulphurous smoke, drifted out by the current between the two doors, gave them a chance of distinguishing objects within the saloon.

At the same instant was heard a different voice from the one which had already spoken. It was Calhoun’s – no longer in roistering bravado, but in low whining accents, almost a whisper. “Enough, damn it! Drop your shooting-iron – I apologise.”

## Chapter 22

### An Unknown Donor

In Texas a duel is not even a nine days' wonder. It oftener ceases to be talked about by the end of the third day; and, at the expiration of a week, is no longer thought of, except by the principals themselves, or their immediate friends and relatives.

This is so, even when the parties are well known, and of respectable standing in society. When the duellists are of humble position – or, as is often the case, strangers in the place – a single day may suffice to doom their achievement to oblivion; to dwell only in the memory of the combatant who has survived it – oftener one than both – and perhaps some ill-starred spectator, who has been bored by a bullet, or received the slash of a knife, not designed for him.

More than once have I been witness to a “street fight” – improvised upon the pavement – where some innocuous citizen, sauntering carelessly along, has become the victim – even unto death – of this irregular method of seeking “satisfaction.”

I have never heard of any punishment awarded, or damages demanded, in such cases. They are regarded as belonging to the “chapter of accidents!”

Though Cassius Calhoun and Maurice Gerald were both comparatively strangers in the settlement – the latter being only seen on occasional visits to the Fort – the affair between them caused something more than the usual interest; and was talked about for the full period of the nine days, the character of the former as a noted bully, and that of the latter as a man of singular habitudes, gave to their duello a certain sort of distinction; and the merits and demerits of the two men were freely discussed for days after the affair had taken place nowhere with more earnestness than upon the spot where they had shed each other's blood – in the bar-room of the hotel.

The conqueror had gained credit and friends. There were few who favoured his adversary; and not a few who were gratified at the result for, short as had been the time since Calhoun's arrival, there was more than one saloon lounge who had felt the smart of his insolence. For this it was presumed the young Irishman had administered a cure; and there was almost universal satisfaction at the result.

How the ex-captain carried his discomfiture no one could tell. He was no longer to be seen swaggering in the saloon of the “Rough and Ready;” though the cause of his absence was well understood. It was not chagrin, but his couch; to which he was confined by wounds, that, if not skilfully treated, might consign him to his coffin.

Maurice was in like manner compelled to stay within doors. The injuries he had received, though not so severe as those of his antagonist, were nevertheless of such a character as to make it necessary for him to keep to his chamber – a small, and scantily furnished bedroom in “Old Duffer's” hotel; where, notwithstanding the *éclat* derived from his conquest, he was somewhat scurvily treated.

In the hour of his triumph, he had fainted from loss of blood. He could not be taken elsewhere; though, in the shabby apartment to which he had been consigned, he might have thought of the luxurious care that surrounded the couch of his wounded antagonist. Fortunately Phelim was by his side, or he might have been still worse attended to.

“Be Saint Pathrick! it's a shame,” half soliloquised this faithful follower. “A burnin' shame to squeeze a gentleman into a hole like this, not bigger than a pig-stoy! A gentleman like you, Masther Maurice. An' thin such aytn' and drinkin'. Och! a well fid Oirish pig wud turn up its nose at such traytment. An' fwhat div yez think I've heerd Owld Duffer talkin' about below?”

“I hav'n't the slightest idea, my dear Phelim; nor do I care straw to know what you've heard Mr Oberdoffer saying below; but if you don't want him to hear what you are saying above, you'll

moderate your voice a little. Remember, *ma bohil*<sup>172</sup>, that the partitions in this place are only lath and plaster.”

“Divil take the partitions; and divil burn them, av he loikes. Av yez don’t care fur fwhat’s sed, I don’t care far fwhat’s heeud – not the snappin’ av me fingers. The Dutchman can’t trate us any worse than he’s been doin’ already. For all that, Masther Maurice, I thought it bist to lit you know.”

“Let me know then. What is it he has been saying?”

“Will, thin; I heerd him tellin’ wan av his croneys that besoides the mate an the dhrink, an the washin’, an lodgin’, he intinded to make you pay for the bottles, and glasses, an other things, that was broke on the night av the shindy.”

“Me pay?”

“Yis, yerself, Masther Maurice; an not a pinny charged to the Yankee. Now I call that downright rascally mane; an nobody but a dhirty Dutchman wud iver hiv thought av it. Av there be anythin’ to pay, the man that’s bate should be made to showldor the damage, an that wasn’t a discindant av the owld Gerald’s av Ballyballagh. Hoo – hooch! wudn’t I loike to shake a shaylaylah about Duffer’s head for the matther of two minutes? Wudn’t I?”

“What reason did he give for saying that I should pay? Did you hear him state any?”

“I did, masther – the dhirtiest av all raisuns. He sid that you were the bird in the hand; an he wud kape ye till yez sittled the score.”

“He’ll find himself slightly mistaken about that; and would perhaps do better by presenting his bill to the bird in the bush. I shall be willing to pay for half the damage done; but no more. You may tell him so, if he speak to you about it. And, in troth, Phelim, I don’t know how I am to do even that. There must have been a good many breakages. I remember a great deal of jingling while we were at it. If I don’t mistake there was a smashed mirror, or clock dial, or something of the kind.”

“A big lookin’-glass, masther; an a crystal somethin’, that was set over the clock. They say two hunderd dollars. I don’t belave they were worth wan half av the money.”

“Even so, it is a serious matter to me – just at this crisis. I fear, Phelim, you will have to make a journey to the Alamo, and fetch away some of the household gods we have hidden there. To get clear of this scrape I shall have to sacrifice my spurs, my silver cup, and perhaps my gun!”

“Don’t say that, masther! How are we to live, if the gun goes?”

“As we best can, *ma bohil*. On horseflesh, I suppose: and the lazo will supply that.”

“Be Japers! it wudn’t be much worse than the mate Owld Duffer sits afore us. It gives me the bellyache ivery time I ate it.”

The conversation was here interrupted by the opening of the chamber door; which was done without knocking. A slatternly servant – whose sex it would have been difficult to determine from outward indices – appeared in the doorway, with a basket of palm sinnet held extended at the termination of a long sinewy arm.

“Fwhat is it, Gertrude?” asked Phelim, who, from some previous information, appeared to be acquainted with the feminine character of the intruder.

“A shentlemans prot this.”

“A gentleman! Who, Gertrude?”

“Not know, mein herr; he wash a stranger shentlemans.”

“Brought by a gentleman. Who can he be? See what it in, Phelim.”

Phelim undid the fastenings of the lid, and exposed the interior of the basket. It was one of considerable bulk: since inside were discovered several bottles, apparently containing wines and cordials, packed among a paraphernalia of sweetmeats, and other delicacies – both of the confectionery and the kitchen. There was no note accompanying the present – not even a direction –

---

<sup>172</sup> *ma bohil* – my friend (*Irish*)

but the trim and elegant style in which it was done up, proved that it had proceeded from the hands of a lady.

Maurice turned over the various articles, examining each, as Phelim supposed, to take note of its value. Little was he thinking of this, while searching for the “invoice.”

There proved to be none – not a scrap of paper – not so much as a *card*!

The generosity of the supply – well-timed as it was – bespoke the donor to be some person in affluent circumstances. Who could it be?

As Maurice reflected, a fair image came uppermost in his mind; which he could not help connecting with that of his unknown benefactor. Could it be Louise Poindexter?

In spite of certain improbabilities, he was fain to believe it might; and, so long as the belief lasted, his heart was quivering with a sweet beatitude.

As he continued to reflect, the improbabilities appeared too strong for this pleasant supposition; his faith became overturned; and there remained only a vague unsubstantial hope.

“A gentleman lift it,” spoke the Connemara man, in semi-soliloquy. “A gentleman, she sez; a kind gentleman, I say! Who div yez think he was, masther?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea; unless it may have been some of the officers of the Port; though I could hardly expect one of them to think of me in this fashion.”

“Nayther yez need. It wasn’t wan av them. No officer, or gentleman ayther, phut them things in the basket.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Pwhy div I think it! Och, masther! is it yerself to ask the quistyun? Isn’t there the smell av swate fingers about it? Jist look at the nate way them papers is tied up. That purty kreel was niver packed by the hand av a man. It was done by a wuman; and I’ll warrant a raal lady at that.”

“Nonsense, Phelim! I know no lady who should take so much interest in me.”

“Aw, murdher! What a thumpin’ big fib! I know won that shud. It wud be black ungratytude av she didn’t – afther what yez did for her. Didn’t yez save her life into the bargain?”

“Of whom are you speaking?”

“Now, don’t be desateful, masther. Yez know that I mane the purty crayther that come to the hut ridin’ Spotty that you presinted her, widout resavin’ a dollar for the mare. If it wasn’t her that sint ye this hamper, thin Phaylim Onale is the biggest numskull that was iver born about Ballyballagh. Be the Vargin, masther, speakin’ of the owld place phuts me in mind of its papple. Pwhat wud the blue-eyed colleen say, if she knew yez were in such danger heeur?”

“Danger! it’s all over. The doctor has said so; and that I may go out of doors in a week from this time. Don’t distress yourself about that.”

“Troth, masther, yez be only talkin’. That isn’t the danger I was drhamin’ av. Yez know will enough what I mane. Maybe yez have resaved a wound from bright eyes, worse than that from lid bullets. Or, maybe, somebody ilse has; an that’s why ye’ve had the things sint ye.”

“You’re all wrong, Phelim. The thing must have come from the Fort; but whether it did, or not, there’s no reason why we should stand upon ceremony with its contents. So, here goes to make trial of them!”

Notwithstanding the apparent relish with which the invalid partook of the products – both of collar and *cuisine* – while eating and drinking, his thoughts were occupied with a still more agreeable theme; with a string of dreamy conjectures, as to whom he was indebted for the princely present.

Could it be the young Creole – the cousin of his direst enemy as well as his reputed sweetheart?

The thing appeared improbable.

If not she, who else could it be?



The mustanger would have given a horse – a whole drove – to have been assured that Louise Poindexter was the provider of that luxurious refection.

Two days elapsed, and the donor still remained unknown.

Then the invalid was once more agreeably surprised, by a second present – very similar to the first – another basket, containing other bottles, and crammed with fresh “confections.”

The Bavarian wench was again questioned; but with no better result. A “shentlemans” had “prot” it – the same “stranger shentlemans” as before. She could only add that “the shentlemans” was very “*Schwartz*,” wore a glazed hat, and came to the tavern mounted upon a mule.

Maurice did not appear to be gratified with this description of the unknown donor; though no one – not even Phelim – was made the confidant of his thoughts.

In two days afterwards they were toned down to their former sobriety – on the receipt of a third basket, “prot by the Schwartz gentleman” in the glazed hat, who came mounted upon a mule.

The change could not be explained by the belongings in the basket – almost the counterpart of what had been sent before. It might be accounted for by the contents of a *billet doux*<sup>173</sup>, that accompanied the gift – attached by a ribbon to the wickerwork of palm-sinnet.

“’Tis only Isidora!” muttered the mustanger, as he glanced at the superscription upon the note.

Then opening it with an air of indifference, he read: —

+++“*Querido Señor!*

“*Soy quedando por una semana en la casa del tío Silvio. De questra desfortuna he oído – también que V. está mal ciudado en la fonda. He mandado algunas cositas. Sea graciosa usarlos, como una chiquitita memoria del servicio grande de que vuestra deudor estoy. En la silla soy escribando, con las espuelas preparadas sacar sangre de las ijadas del mio cavallo. En un momento más, partirá por el Río Grande.*

“*Bienhichor – de mi vida Salvador – y de que a una mujer esa mas querida, la honra – adiós – adiós!*

“Isidora Covarubio De Los Llanos.

“*Al Señor Don Mauricio Gerald.*”

Literally translated, and in the idiom of the Spanish language, the note ran thus: —

“Dear Sir, – I have been staying for a week at the house of Uncle Silvio. Of your mischance I have heard – also, that you are indifferently cared for at the hotel. I have sent you some little things. Be good enough to make use of them, as a slight souvenir of the great service for which I am your debtor. I write in the saddle, with my spurs ready to draw blood from the flanks of my horse. In another moment I am off for the Río Grande!

“Benefactor – preserver of my life – of what to a woman is dearer – my honour – adieu! adieu!

“Isidora Covarubio De Los Llanos.”

“Thanks – thanks, sweet Isidora!” muttered the mustanger, as he refolded the note, and threw it carelessly upon the coverlet of his couch. “Ever grateful – considerate – kind! But for Louise Poindexter, I might have loved you!”

---

<sup>173</sup> *billet doux* – a love letter (French)

## Chapter 23

### Vows of Vengeance

Calhoun, chafing in his chamber, was not the object of such assiduous solicitude. Notwithstanding the luxurious appointments that surrounded him, he could not comfort himself with the reflection: that he was cared for by living creature. Truly selfish in his own heart, he had no faith in friendships; and while confined to his couch – not without some fears that it might be his death-bed – he experienced the misery of a man believing that no human being cared a straw whether he should live or die.

Any sympathy shown to him, was upon the score of relationship. It could scarce have been otherwise. His conduct towards his cousins had not been such as to secure their esteem; while his uncle, the proud Woodley Poindexter, felt towards him something akin to aversion, mingled with a subdued fear.

It is true that this feeling was only of recent origin; and rose out of certain relations that existed between uncle and nephew. As already hinted, they stood to one another in the relationship of debtor and creditor – or mortgagor and mortgagee – the nephew being the latter. To such an extent had this indebtedness been carried, that Cassius Calhoun was in effect the real owner of Casa del Corvo; and could at any moment have proclaimed himself its master.

Conscious of his power, he had of late been using it to effect a particular purpose: that is, the securing for his wife, the woman he had long fiercely loved – his cousin Louise. He had come to know that he stood but little chance of obtaining her consent: for she had taken but slight pains to conceal her indifference to his suit. Trusting to the peculiar influence established over her father, he had determined on taking no slight denial.

These circumstances considered, it was not strange that the ex-officer of volunteers, when stretched upon a sick bed, received less sympathy from his relatives than might otherwise have been extended to him.

While dreading, death – which for a length of time he actually did – he had become a little more amiable to those around him. The agreeable mood, however, was of short continuance; and, once assured of recovery, all the natural savageness of his disposition was restored, along with the additional bitterness arising from his recent discomfiture.

It had been the pride of his life to exhibit himself as a successful bully – the master of every crowd that might gather around him. He could no longer claim this credit in Texas; and the thought harrowed his heart to its very core.

To figure as a defeated man before all the women of the settlement – above all in the eyes of her he adored, defeated by one whom he suspected of being his rival in her affections – a more nameless adventurer – was too much to be endured with equanimity. Even an ordinary man would have been pained by the infliction. Calhoun writhed under it.

He had no idea of enduring it, as an ordinary man would have done. If he could not escape from the disgrace, he was determined to revenge himself upon its author; and as soon as he had recovered from the apprehensions entertained about the safety of his life, he commenced reflecting upon this very subject.

Maurice, the mustanger, must die! If not by his (Calhoun's) own hand, then by the hand of another, if such an one was to be found in the settlement. There could not be much difficulty in procuring a confederate. There are *bravoes*<sup>174</sup> upon the broad prairies of Texas, as well as within

---

<sup>174</sup> **bravoes** – brave men (*Spanish*)

the walls of Italian cities. Alas! there is no spot upon earth where gold cannot command the steel of the assassin.

Calhoun possessed gold – more than sufficient for such a purpose; and to such purpose did he determine upon devoting at least a portion of it.

In the solitude of his sick chamber he set about maturing his plans; which comprehended the assassination of the mustanger. He did not purpose doing the deed himself. His late defeat had rendered him fearful of chancing a second encounter with the same adversary – even under the advantageous circumstances of a surprise. He had become too much encowarded to play the assassin. He wanted an accomplice – an arm to strike for him. Where was he to find it?

Unluckily he knew, or fancied he knew, the very man. There was a Mexican at the time making abode in the village – like Maurice himself – a mustanger; but one of those with whom the young Irishman had shown a disinclination to associate.

As a general rule, the men of this peculiar calling are amongst the greatest reprobates, who have their home in the land of the “Lone Star.” By birth and breed they are mostly Mexicans, or mongrel Indians; though, not unfrequently, a Frenchman, or American, finds it a congenial calling. They are usually the outcasts of civilised society – oftener its outlaws – who, in the excitement of the chase, and its concomitant dangers, find, perhaps, some sort of *salvo*<sup>175</sup> for a conscience that has been severely tried.

While dwelling within the settlements, these men are not unfrequently the pests of the society that surrounds them – ever engaged in broil and debauch; and when abroad in the exercise of their calling, they are not always to be encountered with safety. More than once is it recorded in the history of Texas how a company of mustangers has, for the nonce, converted itself into a band of *cuadrilla*<sup>176</sup> of *salteadores*<sup>177</sup>; or, disguised as Indians, levied black mail upon the train of the prairie traveller.

One of this kidney was the individual who had become recalled to the memory of Cassius Calhoun. The latter remembered having met the man in the bar-room of the hotel; upon several occasions, but more especially on the night of the duel. He remembered that he had been one of those who had carried him home on the stretcher; and from some extravagant expressions he had made use of, when speaking of his antagonist, Calhoun had drawn the deduction, that the Mexican was no friend to Maurice the mustanger.

Since then he had learnt that he was Maurice’s deadliest enemy – himself excepted.

With these data to proceed upon the ex-captain had called the Mexican to his counsels, and the two were often closeted together in the chamber of the invalid.

There was nothing in all this to excite suspicion – even had Calhoun cared for that. His visitor was a dealer in horses and horned cattle. Some transaction in horseflesh might be going on between them. So any one would have supposed. And so for a time thought the Mexican himself: for in their first interview, but little other business was transacted between them. The astute Mississippian knew better than to declare his ultimate designs to a stranger; who, after completing an advantageous horse-trade, was well supplied with whatever he chose to drink, and cunningly cross-questioned as to the relations in which he stood towards Maurice the mustanger.

In that first interview, the ex-officer volunteers learnt enough, to know that he might depend upon his man for any service he might require – even to the committal of murder.

The Mexican made no secret of his heartfelt hostility to the young mustanger. He did not declare the exact cause of it; but Calhoun could guess, by certain innuendos introduced during the

---

<sup>175</sup> *salvo* – salvation (*Spanish*)

<sup>176</sup> *cuadrilla* – a gang or band (*Spanish*)

<sup>177</sup> *salteadores* – robbers (*Spanish*)

conversation, that it was the same as that by which he was himself actuated – the same to which may be traced almost every quarrel that has occurred among men, from Troy to Texas – a woman!

The Helen<sup>178</sup> in this case appeared to be some dark-eyed *donçella* dwelling upon the Rio Grande, where Maurice had been in the habit of making an occasional visit, in whose eyes he had found favour, to the disadvantage of her own *compaisano*.

The Mexican did not give the name; and Calhoun, as he listened to his explanations, only hoped in his heart that the damsel who had slighted him might have won the heart of his rival.

During his days of convalescence, several interviews had taken place between the ex-captain and the intended accomplice in his purposes of vengeance – enough, one might suppose, to have rendered them complete.

Whether they were so, or not, and what the nature of their hellish designs, were things known only to the brace of kindred confederates. The outside world but knew that Captain Cassius Calhoun and Miguel Diaz – known by the nickname “El Coyote,” appeared to have taken a fancy for keeping each other’s company; while the more respectable portion of it wondered at such an ill-starred association.

---

<sup>178</sup> **Helen** – in Greek mythology, an extremely beautiful woman, the daughter of Zeus, and the cause of the Trojan War

## Chapter 24

### On the Azotea

There are no sluggards on a Texan plantation. The daybreak begins the day; and the bell, conch, or cow-horn, that summons the dark-skinned proletarians to their toil, is alike the signal for their master to forsake his more luxurious couch.

Such was the custom of Casa del Corvo under its original owners: and the fashion was followed by the family of the American planter – not from any idea of precedent, but simply in obedience to the suggestions of Nature. In a climate of almost perpetual spring, the sweet matutinal moments are not to be wasted in sleep. The *siesta*<sup>179</sup> belongs to the hours of noon; when all nature appears to shrink under the smiles of the solar luminary – as if surfeited with their superabundance.

On his reappearance at morn the sun is greeted with renewed joy. Then do the tropical birds spread their resplendent plumage – the flowers their dew-besprinkled petals – to receive his fervent kisses. All nature again seems glad, to acknowledge him as its god.

Resplendent as any bird that flutters among the foliage of south-western Texas – fair as any flower that blooms within it – gladdest was she who appeared upon the housetop of Casa del Corvo.

Aurora herself, rising from her roseate couch, looked not fresher than the young Creole, as she stood contemplating the curtains of that very couch, from which a Texan sun was slowly uplifting his globe of burning gold.

She was standing upon the edge of the azotea that fronted towards the east; her white hand resting upon the copestone of the parapet still wet with the dews of the night, under her eyes was the garden, enclosed within a curve of the river; beyond the bluff formed by the opposite bank; and further still, the wide-spreading plateau of the prairie.

Was she looking at a landscape, that could scarce fail to challenge admiration? No.

Equally was she unconscious of the ascending sun; though, like some fair pagan, did she appear to be in prayer at its apprising!

Listened she to the voices of the birds, from garden and grove swelling harmoniously around her?

On the contrary, her ear was not bent to catch any sound, nor her eye intent upon any object. Her glance was wandering, as if her thoughts went not with it, but were dwelling upon some theme, neither present nor near.

In contrast with the cheerful brightness of the sky, there was a shadow upon her brow; despite the joyous warbling of the birds, there was the sign of sadness on her cheek.

She was alone. There was no one to take note of this melancholy mood, nor inquire into its cause.

The cause was declared in a few low murmured words, that fell, as if involuntarily, from her lips.

“He may be dangerously wounded – perhaps even to death?”

Who was the object of this solicitude so hypothetically expressed?

The invalid that lay below, almost under her feet, in a chamber of the hacienda – her cousin Cassius Calhoun?

It could scarce be he. The doctor had the day before pronounced him out of danger, and on the way to quick recovery. Any one listening to her soliloquy – after a time continued in the same sad tone – would have been convinced it was not he.

---

<sup>179</sup> *siesta* – rest or sleep in the afternoon, when it is very hot outside

“I may not send to inquire. I dare not even ask after him. I fear to trust any of our people. He may be in some poor place – perhaps uncourteously treated – perhaps neglected? Would that I could convey to him a message – something more – without any one being the wiser! I wonder what has become of Zeb Stump?”

As if some instinct whispered her, that there was a possibility of Zeb making his appearance, she turned her eyes towards the plain on the opposite side of the river – where a road led up and down. It was the common highway between Fort Inge and the plantations on the lower Leona. It traversed the prairie at some distance from the river bank; approaching it only at one point, where the channel curved in to the base of the bluffs. A reach of the road, of half a mile in length, was visible in the direction of the Fort; as also a cross-path that led to a ford; thence running on to the hacienda. In the opposite direction – down the stream – the view was open for a like length, until the chaparral on both sides closing in, terminated the savanna.

The young lady scanned the road leading towards Fort Inge. Zeb Stump should come that way. He was not in sight; nor was any one else.

She could not feel disappointment. She had no reason to expect him. She had but raised her eyes in obedience to an instinct.

Something more than instinct caused her, after a time, to turn round, and scrutinise the plain in the opposite quarter.

If expecting some one to appear that way, she was not disappointed. A horse was just stepping out from among the trees, where the road debouched from the chaparral. He was ridden by one, who, at first sight, appeared to be a man, clad in a sort of Arab costume; but who, on closer scrutiny, and despite the style of equitation – *à la Duchesse de Berri* – was unquestionably of the other sex – a lady. There was not much of her face to be seen; but through the shadowy opening of the *rebozo* – rather carelessly *tapado*<sup>180</sup> – could be traced an oval facial outline, somewhat brownly “complexed,” But with a carmine tinting upon the cheeks, and above this a pair of eyes whose sparkle appeared to challenge comparison with the brightest object either on the earth, or in the sky.

Neither did the loosely falling folds of the lady’s scarf, nor her somewhat *outré*<sup>181</sup> attitude in the saddle, hinder the observer from coming to the conclusion, that her figure was quite as attractive as her face.

The man following upon the mule, six lengths of his animal in the rear, by his costume – as well as the respectful distance observed – was evidently only an attendant.

“Who can that woman be?” was the muttered interrogatory of Louise Poindexter, as with quick action she raised the lorgnette to her eyes, and directed it upon the oddly apparelled figure. “Who *can* she be?” was repeated in a tone of greater deliberation, as the glass came down, and the naked eye was entrusted to complete the scrutiny. “A Mexican, of course; the man on the mule her servant. Some grand señora, I suppose? I thought they had all gone to the other side of the Rio Grande. A basket carried by the attendant. I wonder what it contains; and what errand she can have to the Port – it may be the village. ’Tis the third time I’ve seen her passing within this week? She must be from some of the plantations below!”

What an outlandish style of riding! *Par Dieu!* I’m told it’s not uncommon among the daughters of Anahuac. What if I were to take to it myself? No doubt it’s much the easiest way; though if such a spectacle were seen in the States it would be styled unfeminine. How our Puritan mammas would scream out against it! I think I hear them. Ha, ha, ha!

The mirth thus begotten was but of momentary duration. There came a change over the countenance of the Creole, quick as a drifting cloud darkens the disc of the sun. It was not a return

---

<sup>180</sup> **rebozo, topado** – a cape or a scarf (*Spanish*)

<sup>181</sup> **outré** – exaggerated (*French*)

to that melancholy so late shadowing it; though something equally serious – as might be told by the sudden blanching of her cheeks.

The cause could only be looked for in the movements of the scarfed equestrian on the other side of the river. An antelope had sprung up, out of some low shrubbery growing by the roadside. The creature appeared to have made its first bound from under the counter of the horse – a splendid animal, that, in a moment after, was going at full gallop in pursuit of the affrighted “pronghorn;” while his rider, with her rebozo suddenly flung from her face, its fringed ends streaming behind her back, was seen describing, with her right arm, a series of circular sweeps in the air!

“What is the woman going to do?” was the muttered interrogatory of the spectator upon the house-top. “Ha! As I live, ’tis a lazo!”

The señora was not long in giving proof of skill in the use of the national implement: – by flinging its noose around the antelope’s neck, and throwing the creature in its tracks!

The attendant rode up to the place where it lay struggling; dismounted from his mule; and, stooping over the prostrate pronghorn, appeared to administer the *coup de grace*. Then, flinging the carcass over the croup of his saddle, he climbed back upon his mule, and spurred after his mistress – who had already recovered her lazo, readjusted her scarf, and was riding onward, as if nothing had occurred worth waiting for!

It was at that moment – when the noose was seen circling in the air – that the shadow had reappeared upon the countenance of the Creole. It was not surprise that caused it, but an emotion of a different character – a thought far more unpleasant.

Nor did it pass speedily away. It was still there – though a white hand holding the lorgnette to her eye might have hindered it from being seen – still there, as long as the mounted figures were visible upon the open road; and even after they had passed out of sight behind the screening of the acacias.

“I wonder – oh, I wonder if it be she! My own age, he said – not quite so tall. The description suits – so far as one may judge at this distance. Has her home on the Rio Grande. Comes occasionally to the Leona, to visit some relatives. Who are they? Why did I not ask him the name? *I wonder – oh, I wonder if it be she!*”

## Chapter 25

### A Gift Ungiven

For some minutes after the lady of the lazo and her attendant had passed out of sight, Louise Poindexter pursued the train of reflection – started by the somewhat singular episode of which she had been spectator. Her attitude, and air, of continued dejection told that her thoughts had not been directed into a more cheerful channel.

Rather the reverse. Once or twice before had her mind given way to imaginings, connected with that accomplished *equestrienne*<sup>182</sup>; and more than once had she speculated upon her purpose in riding up the road. The incident just witnessed had suddenly changed her conjectures into suspicions of an exceedingly unpleasant nature.

It was a relief to her, when a horseman appeared coming out of the chapparal, at the point where the others had ridden in; a still greater relief, when he was seen to swerve into the cross path that conducted to the hacienda, and was recognised, through the lorgnette, as Zeb Stump the hunter.

The face of the Creole became bright again – almost to gaiety. There was something ominous of good in the opportune appearance of the honest backwoodsman.

“The man I was wanting to see!” she exclaimed in joyous accents. “*He* can bear me a message; and perhaps tell who *she* is. He must have met her on the road. That will enable me to introduce the subject, without Zeb having any suspicion of my object. Even with him I must be circumspect – after what has happened. Ah, me! Not much should I care, if I were sure of *his* caring for me. How provoking his indifference! And to me – Louise Poindexter! *Par dieu!* Let it proceed much further, and I shall try to escape from the toils if – if – I should crush my poor heart in the attempt!”

It need scarce be said that the individual, whose esteem was so coveted, was not Zeb Stump.

Her next speech, however, was addressed to Zeb, as he reined up in front of the hacienda.

“Dear Mr Stump!” hailed a voice, to which the old hunter delighted to listen. “I’m so glad to see you. Dismount, and come up here! I know you’re a famous climber, and won’t mind a flight of stone stairs. There’s a view from this housetop that will reward you for your trouble.”

“Thur’s suthin’ on the house-top thear,” rejoined the hunter, “the view o’ which ’ud reward Zeb Stump for climbin’ to the top o’ a steamboat chimby; ’an thet’s yurself, Miss Lewaze. I’ll kum up, soon as I ha’ stabled the ole maar, which shall be dud in the shakin’ o’ a goat’s tail. Gee-up, ole gal!” he continued, addressing himself to the mare, after he had dismounted, “Hold up yur head, an may be Plute hyur ’ll gie ye a wheen o’ corn shucks for yur breakfast.”

“Ho – ho! Mass ’Tump,” interposed the sable coachman, making his appearance in the *patio*. “Dat same do dis nigga – gub um de shucks wi’ de yaller corn inside ob dem. Ho – ho! You gwup ’tairs to de young missa; an Plute he no ’gleck yar ole mar.”

“Yur a dod-rotted good sample o’ a nigger, Plute; an the nix occashun I shows about hyur, I’ll fetch you a ’possum – wi’ the meat on it as tender as a two-year old chicken. Thet’s what I’m boun’ ter do.”

After delivering himself of this promise, Zeb commenced ascending the stone stairway; not by single steps, but by two, and sometimes three, at a stride.

He was soon upon the housetop; where he was once more welcomed by the young mistress of the mansion.

Her excited manner, and the eagerness with which she conducted him to a remote part of the azotea, told the astute hunter, that he had been summoned thither for some other purpose than enjoying the prospect.

---

<sup>182</sup> *equestrienne* – a horse woman (*Spanish*)



“Tell me, Mr Stump!” said she, as she clutched the sleeve of the blanket coat in her delicate fingers, and looked inquiringly into Zeb’s grey eye – “You must know all. How is he? Are his wounds of a dangerous nature?”

“If you refer to Mister Cal-hoon – ”

“No – no – no. I know all about him. It’s not of Mr Calhoun I’m speaking.”

“Wall, Miss Lewasse; thur air only one other as I know of in these parts thet hev got wovnds; an thet air’s Maurice the mowstanger. Mout it be thet ere individooal yur inquirin’ about?”

“It is – it is! You know I cannot be indifferent to his welfare, notwithstanding the misfortune of his having quarrelled with my cousin. You are aware that he rescued me – twice I may say – from imminent peril. Tell me – is he in great danger?”

Such earnestness could no longer be trifled with. Zeb without further parley, made reply: —

“Ne’er a morsel o’ danger. Thur’s a bullet-hole jest above the ankle-jeint. It don’t signerfy more’n the scratch o’ a kitting. Thur’s another hev goed through the flesh o’ the young fellur’s left arm. It don’t signerfy neyther – only thet it drewed a good sup o’ the red out o’ him. Howsomdever, he’s all right now; an expecks to be out o’ doors in a kuppel o’ days, or tharabout. He sez that an hour in the seddle, an a skoot acrosst the purayra, ’ud do him more good than all the docters in Texas. I reckon it wud; but the docter – it’s the surgint o’ the Fort as attends on him – he won’t let him git to grass yit a bit.”

“Where is he?”

“He air stayin’ at the hotel – whar the skrimmage tuk place.”

“Perhaps he is not well waited upon? It’s a rough place, I’ve heard. He may not have any delicacies – such as an invalid stands in need of? Stay here, Mr Stump, till I come up to you again. I have something I wish to send to him. I know I can trust you to deliver it. Won’t you? I’m sure you will. I shall be with you in six seconds.”

Without waiting to note the effect of her speech, the young lady tripped lightly along the passage, and as lightly descended the stone stairway.

Presently she reappeared – bringing with her a good-sized hamper; which was evidently filled with eatables, with something to send them down.

“Now dear old Zeb, you will take this to Mr Gerald? It’s only some little things that Florinda has put up; some cordials and jellies and the like, such as sick people at times have a craving for. They are not likely to be kept in the hotel. Don’t tell *him* where they come from – *neither him, nor any one else*. You won’t? I know you won’t, you dear good giant.”

“He may depend on Zeb Stump for thet, Miss Lewaze. Nobody air a goin’ to be a bit the wiser about who sent these hyur delekissies; though, for the matter o’ cakes an kickshaws, an all that sort o’ thing, the mowstanger hain’t had much reezun to complain. He hev been serplied wi’ enuf o’ them to hev filled the bellies o’ a hul school o’ shugar-babbies.”

“Ha! Supplied already! By whom?”

“Wal, thet theer this chile can’t inform ye, Miss Lewaze; not be-knowin’ it hisself. I on’y hyurd they wur fetched to the tavern in baskets, by some sort o’ a sarving-man as air a Mexikin. I’ve seed the man myself. Fact, I’ve jest this minnit met him, ridin’ arter a wuman sot stridy legs in her seddle, as most o’ these Mexikin weemen ride. I reck’n he be her sarvingt, as he war keepin’ a good ways ahint, and toatin’ a basket jest like one o’ them Maurice hed got arready. Like enuf it air another lot o’ Rickshaws they wur takin’ to the tavern.”

There was no need to trouble Zeb Stump with further cross-questioning. A whole history was supplied by that single speech. The case was painfully clear. In the regard of Maurice Gerald, Louise Poindexter had a rival – perhaps something more. The lady of the lazo was either his *fiancée*, or his mistress!

It was not by accident – though to Zeb Stump it may have seemed so – that the hamper, steadied for a time, upon the coping of the balustrade, and still retained in the hand of the young

Creole, escaped from her clutch, and fell with a crash upon the stones below. The bottles were broken, and their contents spilled into the stream that surged along the basement of the wall.

The action of the arm that produced this effect, apparently springing from a spasmodic and involuntary effort, was nevertheless due to design; and Louise Poindexter, as she leant over the parapet, and contemplated the ruin she had caused, felt as if her heart was shattered like the glass that lay glistening below!

“How unfortunate!” said she, making a feint to conceal her chagrin. “The dainties are destroyed, I declare! What will Florinda say? After all, if Mr Gerald be so well attended to, as you say he is, he’ll not stand in need of them. I’m glad to hear he hasn’t been neglected – one who has done me a service. But, Mr Stump, you needn’t say anything of this, or that I inquired after him. You know his late antagonist is our near relative; and it might cause scandal in the settlement. Dear Zeb, you promise me?”

“Swa-ar it ef ye like. Neery word, Miss Lewaze, neery word; ye kin depend on ole Zeb.”

“I know it. Come! The sun is growing hot up here. Let as go down, and see whether we can find you such a thing as a glass of your favourite Monongahela. Come!”

With an assumed air of cheerfulness, the young Creole glided across the azotea; and, trilling the “New Orleans Waltz,” once more commenced descending the *escalera*<sup>183</sup>.

In eager acceptance of the invitation, the old hunter followed close upon her skirts; and although, by habit, stoically indifferent to feminine charms – and with his thoughts at that moment chiefly bent upon the promised Monongahela – he could not help admiring those ivory shoulders brought so conspicuously under his eyes.

But for a short while was he permitted to indulge in the luxurious spectacle. On reaching the bottom of the stair his fair hostess bade him a somewhat abrupt adieu. After the revelations he had so unwittingly made, his conversation seemed no longer agreeable; and she, late desirous of interrogating, was now contented to leave him alone with the Monongahela, as she hastened to hide her chagrin in the solitude of her chamber.

For the first time in her life Louise Poindexter felt the pangs of jealousy. It was her first real love: for she was in love with Maurice Gerald.

A solicitude like that shown for him by the Mexican señora, could scarce spring from simple friendship? Some closer tie must have been established between them? So ran the reflections of the now suffering Creole.

From what Maurice had said – from what she had herself seen – the lady of the lazo was just such a woman as should win the affections of such a man. Hers were accomplishments he might naturally be expected to admire.

Her figure had appeared perfect under the magnifying effect of the lens. The face had not been so fairly viewed, and was still undetermined. Was it in correspondence with the form? Was it such as to secure the love of a man so much master of his passions, as the mustanger appeared to be?

The mistress of Casa del Corvo could not rest, till she had satisfied herself on this score. As soon as Zeb Stump had taken his departure, she ordered the spotted mare to be saddled; and, riding out alone, she sought the crossing of the river; and thence proceeded to the highway on the opposite side.

Advancing in the direction of the Fort, as she expected, she soon encountered the Mexican señora on her return; no *señora* according to the exact signification of the term, but a *señorita* – a young lady, not older than herself.

At the place of their meeting, the road ran under the shadow of the trees. There was no sun to require the coifing of the rebozo upon the crown of the Mexican equestrian. The scarf had fallen upon her shoulders, laying bare a head of hair, in luxuriance rivalling the tail of a wild steed, in

---

<sup>183</sup> *escalera* – staircase (Spanish)

colour the plumage of a crow. It formed the framing of a face, that, despite a certain darkness of complexion, was charmingly attractive.

Good breeding permitted only a glance at it in passing; which was returned by a like courtesy on the part of the stranger. But as the two rode on, back to back, going in opposite directions, neither could restrain herself from turning round in the saddle, and snatching a second glance at the other.

Their reflections were not very dissimilar: if Louise Poindexter had already learnt something of the individual thus encountered, the latter was not altogether ignorant of *her* existence.

We shall not attempt to portray the thoughts of the señorita consequent on that encounter. Suffice it to say, that those of the Creole were even more sombre than when she sallied forth on that errand of inspection; and that the young mistress of Casa del Corvo rode back to the mansion, all the way seated in her saddle in an attitude that betokened the deepest dejection.

“Beautiful!” said she, after passing her supposed rival upon the road. “Yes; too beautiful to be his friend!”

Louise was speaking to her own conscience; or she might have been more chary of her praise.

“I cannot have any doubt,” continued she, “of the relationship that exists between them – He loves her! – he loves her! It accounts for his cold indifference to me? I’ve been mad to risk my heart’s happiness in such an ill-starred entanglement!

“And now to disentangle it! Now to banish him from my thoughts! Ah! ’tis easily said! Can I?”

“I shall see him no more. That, at least, is possible. After what has occurred, he will not come to our house. We can only meet by accident; and that accident I must be careful to avoid. Oh, Maurice Gerald! tamer of wild steeds! you have subdued a spirit that may suffer long – perhaps never recover from the lesson!”

## Chapter 26

### Still on the Azotea

To banish from the thoughts one who has been passionately loved is a simple impossibility. Time may do much to subdue the pain of an unreciprocated passion, and absence more. But neither time, nor absence, can hinder the continued recurrence of that longing for the lost loved one – or quiet the heart aching with that void that has never been satisfactorily filled.

Louise Poindexter had imbibed a passion that could not be easily stifled. Though of brief existence, it had been of rapid growth – vigorously overriding all obstacles to its indulgence. It was already strong enough to overcome such ordinary scruples as parental consent, or the inequality of rank; and, had it been reciprocated, neither would have stood in the way, so far as she herself was concerned. For the former, she was of age; and felt – as most of her countrywomen do – capable of taking care of herself. For the latter, who ever really loved that cared a straw<sup>184</sup> for class, or caste? Love has no such meanness in its composition. At all events, there was none such in the passion of Louise Poindexter.

It could scarce be called the first illusion of her life. It was, however, the first, where disappointment was likely to prove dangerous to the tranquillity of her spirit.

She was not unaware of this. She anticipated unhappiness for a while – hoping that time would enable her to subdue the expected pain.

At first, she fancied she would find a friend in her own strong will; and another in the natural buoyancy of her spirit. But as the days passed, she found reason to distrust both: for in spite of both, she could not erase from her thoughts the image of the man who had so completely captivated her imagination.

There were times when she hated him, or tried to do so – when she could have killed him, or seen him killed, without making an effort to save him! They were but moments; each succeeded by an interval of more righteous reflection, when she felt that the fault was hers alone, as hers only the misfortune.

No matter for this. It mattered not if he had been her enemy – the enemy of all mankind. If Lucifer himself – to whom in her wild fancy she had once likened him – she would have loved him all the same!

And it would have proved nothing abnormal in her disposition – nothing to separate her from the rest of womankind, all the world over. In the mind of man, or woman either, there is no connection between the *moral* and the *passional*. They are as different from each other as fire from water. They may chance to run in the same channel; but they may go diametrically opposite. In other words, we may love the very being we hate – ay, the one we despise!

Louise Poindexter could neither hate, nor despise, Maurice Gerald. She could only endeavour to feel indifference.

It was a vain effort, and ended in failure. She could not restrain herself from ascending to the azotea, and scrutinising the road where she had first beheld the cause of her jealousy. Each day, and almost every hour of the day, was the ascent repeated.

Still more. Notwithstanding her resolve, to avoid the accident of an encounter with the man who had made her miserable, she was oft in the saddle and abroad, scouring the country around – riding through the streets of the village – with no other object than to meet him.

During the three days that followed that unpleasant discovery, once again had she seen – from the housetop as before – the lady of the lazo *en route* up the road, as before accompanied by

---

<sup>184</sup> **cared a straw** – did not care at all (idiom)

her attendant with the pannier across his arm – that Pandora's box<sup>185</sup> that had bred such mischief in her mind – while she herself stood trembling with jealousy – envious of the other's errand.

She knew more now, though not much. Only had she learnt the name and social standing of her rival. The Doña Isidora Covarubio de los Llanos – daughter of a wealthy *haciendado*<sup>186</sup>, who lived upon the Rio Grande, and niece to another whose estate lay upon the Leona, a mile beyond the boundaries of her father's new purchase. An eccentric young lady, as some thought, who could throw a lazo, tame a wild steed, or anything else excepting her own caprices.

Such was the character of the Mexican señorita, as known to the American settlers on the Leona.

A knowledge of it did not remove the jealous suspicions of the Creole. On the contrary, it tended to confirm them. Such practices were her own predilections. She had been created with an instinct to admire them. She supposed that others must do the same. The young Irishman was not likely to be an exception.

There was an interval of several days – during which the lady of the lazo was not seen again.

“He has recovered from his wounds?” reflected the Creole. “He no longer needs such unremitting attention.”

She was upon the azotea at the moment of making this reflection – lorgnette in hand, as she had often been before.

It was in the morning, shortly after sunrise: the hour when the Mexican had been wont to make her appearance. Louise had been looking towards the quarter whence the señorita might have been expected to come.

On turning her eyes in the opposite direction, she beheld – that which caused her something more than surprise. She saw Maurice Gerald, mounted on horseback, and riding down the road!

Though seated somewhat stiffly in the saddle, and going at a slow pace, it was certainly he. The glass declared his identity; at the same time disclosing the fact, that his left arm was suspended in a sling.

On recognising him, she shrank behind the parapet – as she did so, giving utterance to a suppressed cry.

Why that anguished utterance? Was it the sight of the disabled arm, or the pallid face: for the glass had enabled her to distinguish both?

Neither one nor the other. Neither could be a cause of surprise. Besides, it was an exclamation far differently intoned to those of either pity or astonishment. It was an expression of sorrow, that had for its origin some heartfelt chagrin.

The invalid was convalescent. He no longer needed to be visited by his nurse. He was on the way to visit *her*!

Cowering behind the parapet – screened by the flower-spike of the *yucca* – Louise Poindexter watched the passing horseman. The lorgnette enabled her to note every movement made by him – almost to the play of his features.

She felt some slight gratification on observing that he turned his face at intervals and fixed his regard upon Casa del Corvo. It was increased, when on reaching a copse, that stood by the side of the road, and nearly opposite the house, he reined up behind the trees, and for a long time remained in the same spot, as if reconnoitring the mansion.

She almost conceived a hope, that he might be thinking of its mistress!

---

<sup>185</sup> **Pandora's box** – in Greek mythology, Pandora was the first woman made out of earth; she had a box with all kinds of evil and misery, and she opened it

<sup>186</sup> **haciendado** – owner of the estate or the land (*Spanish*)

It was but a gleam of joy, departing like the sunlight under the certain shadow of an eclipse. It was succeeded by a sadness that might be appropriately compared to such shadow: for to her the world at that moment seemed filled with gloom.

Maurice Gerald had ridden on. He had entered the chapparal; and become lost to view with the road upon which he was riding.

Whither was he bound? Whither, but to visit Doña Isidora Covarubio de los Llanos?

It mattered not that he returned within less than an hour. They might have met in the woods – within eyeshot of that jealous spectator – but for the screening of the trees. An hour was sufficient interview – for lovers, who could every day claim unrestricted indulgence.

It mattered not, that in passing upwards he again cast regards towards Casa del Corvo; again halted behind the copse, and passed some time in apparent scrutiny of the mansion.

It was but mockery – or exultation. He might well feel triumphant; but why should he be cruel, with kisses upon his lips – the kisses he had received from the Doña Isidora Covarubio de los Llanos?

## Chapter 27

### I Love You! – I Love You!

Louise Poindexter upon the azotea again – again to be subjected to a fresh chagrin! That broad stone stairway trending up to the housetop, seemed to lead only to spectacles that gave her pain. She had mentally vowed no more to ascend it – at least for a long time. Something stronger than her strong will combatted – and successfully – the keeping of that vow. It was broken ere the sun of another day had dried the dew from the grass of the prairie.

As on the day before, she stood by the parapet scanning the road on the opposite side of the river; as before, she saw the horseman with the slung arm ride past; as before, she crouched to screen herself from observation.

He was going downwards, as on the day preceding. In like manner did he cast long glances towards the hacienda, and made halt behind the clump of trees that grew opposite.

Her heart fluttered between hope and fear. There was an instant when she felt half inclined to show herself. Fear prevailed; and in the next instant he was gone.

Whither?

The self-asked interrogatory was but the same as of yesterday. It met with a similar response.

Whither, if not to meet Doña Isidora Covarubio de los Llanos?

Could there be a doubt of it?

If so, it was soon to be determined. In less than twenty minutes after, a parded steed was seen upon the same road – and in the same direction – with a lady upon its back.

The jealous heart of the Creole could hold out no longer. No truth could cause greater torture than she was already suffering through suspicion. She had resolved on assuring herself, though the knowledge should prove fatal to the last faint remnant of her hopes.

She entered the chapparal where the mustanger had ridden in scarce twenty minutes before. She rode on beneath the flitting shadows of the acacias. She rode in silence upon the soft turf – keeping close to the side of the path, so that the hoof might not strike against stones. The long pinnate fronds, drooping down to the level of her eyes, mingled with the plumes in her hat. She sate her saddle crouchingly, as if to avoid being observed – all the while with earnest glance scanning the open space before her.

She reached the crest of a hill which commanded a view beyond. There was a house in sight surrounded by tall trees. It might have been termed a mansion. It was the residence of Don Silvio Martinez, the uncle of Doña Isidora. So much had she learnt already.

There were other houses to be seen upon the plain below; but on this one, and the road leading to it, the eyes of the Creole became fixed in a glance of uneasy interrogation.

For a time she continued her scrutiny without satisfaction. No one appeared either at the house, or near it. The private road leading to the residence of the hacendado, and the public highway, were alike without living forms. Some horses were straying over the pastures; but not one with a rider upon his back.

Could the lady have ridden out to meet him, or Maurice gone in?

Were they at that moment in the woods, or within the walls of the house? If the former, was Don Silvio aware of it? If the latter, was he at home – an approving party to the assignation?

With such questions was the Creole afflicting herself, when the neigh of a horse broke abruptly on her ear, followed by the chinking of a shod hoof against the stones of the causeway. She looked below: for she had halted upon the crest, a steep acclivity. The mustanger was ascending it – riding directly towards her. She might have seen him sooner, had she not been occupied with the more distant view.

He was alone, as he had ridden past Casa del Corvo. There was nothing to show that he had recently been in company – much less in the company of an *inamorata*<sup>187</sup>.

It was too late for Louise to shun him. The spotted mustang had replied to the salutation of an old acquaintance. Its rider was constrained to keep her ground, till the mustanger came up.

“Good day, Miss Poindexter?” said he – for upon the prairies it is *not* etiquette for the lady to speak first. “Alone?”

“Alone, sir. And why not?”

“’Tis a solitary ride among the chapparals. But true: I think I’ve heard you say you prefer that sort of thing?”

“You appear to like it yourself, Mr Gerald. To you, however, it is not so solitary, I presume?”

“In faith I do like it; and just for that very reason. I have the misfortune to live at a tavern, or ‘hotel,’ as mine host is pleased to call it; and one gets so tired of the noises – especially an invalid, as I have the bad luck to be – that a ride along this quiet road is something akin to luxury. The cool shade of these acacias – which the Mexicans have vulgarised by the name of *mezquites* – with the breeze that keeps constantly circulating through their fan-like foliage, would invigorate the feeblest of frames. Don’t you think so, Miss Poindexter?”

“You should know best, sir,” was the reply vouchsafed, after some seconds of embarrassment. “You, who have so often tried it.”

“Often! I have been only twice down this road since I have been able to sit in my saddle. But, Miss Poindexter, may I ask how you knew that I have been this way at all?”

“Oh!” rejoined Louise, her colour going and coming as she spoke, “how could I help knowing it? I am in the habit of spending much time on the housetop. The view, the breeze, the music of the birds, ascending from the garden below, makes it a delightful spot – especially in the cool of the morning. Our roof commands a view of this road. Being up there, how could I avoid seeing you as you passed – that is, so long as you were not under *the shade of the acacias*?”

“You saw me, then?” said Maurice, with an embarrassed air, which was not caused by the innuendo conveyed in her last words – which he could not have comprehended – but by a remembrance of how he had himself behaved while riding along the reach of open road.

“How could I help it?” was the ready reply. “The distance is scarce six hundred yards. Even a lady, mounted upon a steed much smaller than yours, was sufficiently conspicuous to be identified. When I saw her display her wonderful skill, by strangling a poor little antelope with her lazo, I knew it could be no other than she whose accomplishments you were so good as to give me an account of.”

“Isidora?”

“Isidora!”

“Ah; true! She has been here for some time.”

“And has been very kind to Mr Maurice Gerald?”

“Indeed, it is true. She has been very kind; though I have had no chance of thanking her. With all her friendship for poor me, she is a great hater of us foreign invaders; and would not condescend to step over the threshold of Mr Oberdoffer’s hotel.”

“Indeed! I suppose she preferred meeting you under the *shade of the acacias*!”

“I have not met her at all; at least, not for many months; and may not for months to come – now that she has gone back to her home on the Rio Grande.”

“Are you speaking the truth, sir? You have not seen her since – she is gone away from the house of her uncle?”

“She has,” replied Maurice, exhibiting surprise. “Of course, I have not seen her. I only knew she was here by her sending me some delicacies while I was ill. In truth, I stood in need of them.”

---

<sup>187</sup> **inamorata** – a sweetheart, a beloved one (*Spanish*)



The hotel *cuisine* is none of the nicest; nor was I the most welcome of Mr Oberdoffer's guests. The Doña Isidora has been but too grateful for the slight service I once did her."

"A service! May I ask what it was, Mr Gerald?"

"Oh, certainly. It was merely a chance. I had the opportunity of being useful to the young lady, in once rescuing her from some rude Indians – Wild Oat and his Seminoles – into whose hands she had fallen, while making a journey from the Rio Grande to visit her uncle on the Leona – Don Silvio Martinez, whose house you can see from here. The brutes had got drunk; and were threatening – not exactly her life – though that was in some danger, but – well, the poor girl was in trouble with them, and might have had some difficulty in getting away, had I not chanced to ride up."

"A slight service, you call it? You are modest in your estimate, Mr Gerald. A man who should do that much for *me*!"

"What would you do for *him*?" asked the mustanger, placing a significant emphasis on the final word.

"I should *love* him," was the prompt reply.

"Then," said Maurice, spurring his horse close up to the side of the spotted mustang, and whispering into the ear of its rider, with an earnestness strangely contrasting to his late reticence, "I would give half my life to see you in the hands of Wild Cat and his drunken comrades – the other half to deliver you from the danger."

"Do you mean this, Maurice Gerald? Do not trifle with me: I am not a child. Speak the truth! Do you mean it?"

"I do! As heaven is above me, I do!"

The sweetest kiss I ever had in my life, was when a woman – a fair creature, in the hunting field – leant over in her saddle and kissed me as I sate in mine.

The fondest embrace ever received by Maurice Gerald, was that given by Louise Poindexter; when, standing up in her stirrup, and laying her hand upon his shoulder, she cried in an agony of earnest passion —

*"Do with me as thou wilt: I love you, I love you!"*

## Chapter 28

### A Pleasure Forbidden

Ever since Texas became the scene of an Anglo-Saxon immigration – I might go a century farther back and say, from the time of its colonisation by the descendants of the Conquistadores – the subject of primary importance has been the disposition of its aborigines.

Whether these, the lawful lords of the soil, chanced to be in a state of open war – or whether, by some treaty with the settlers they were consenting to a temporary peace – made but slight difference, so far as they were talked about. In either case they were a topic of daily discourse. In the former it related to the dangers to be hourly apprehended from them; in the latter, to the probable duration of such treaty as might for the moment be binding them to hold their tomahawks<sup>188</sup> entombed.

In Mexican times these questions formed the staple of conversation, at *desayuno*<sup>189</sup>, *almuerzo*<sup>190</sup>, *comida*<sup>191</sup>, *y cena*<sup>192</sup>; in American times, up to this present hour, they have been the themes of discussion at the breakfast, dinner, and supper tables. In the planter's piazza<sup>193</sup>, as in the hunter's camp, bear, deer, cougar, and peccary<sup>194</sup>, are not named with half the frequency, or half the fear-inspiring emphasis, allotted to the word "Indian." It is this that scares the Texan child instead of the stereotyped nursery ghost, keeping it awake upon its moss-stuffed mattress – disturbing almost as much the repose of its parent.

Despite the surrounding of strong walls – more resembling those of a fortress than a gentleman's dwelling – the inmates of Casa del Corvo were not excepted from this feeling of apprehension, universal along the frontier. As yet they knew little of the Indians, and that little only from report; but, day by day, they were becoming better acquainted with the character of this natural "terror" that interfered with the slumbers of their fellow settlers.

That it was no mere "bogie" they had begun to believe; but if any of them remained incredulous, a note received from the major commanding the Fort – about two weeks after the horse-hunting expedition – was calculated to cure them of their incredulity. It came in the early morning, carried by a mounted rifleman. It was put into the hands of the planter just as he was about sitting down to the breakfast-table, around which were assembled the three individuals who composed his household – his daughter Louise, his son Henry, and his nephew Cassius Calhoun.

"Startling news!" he exclaimed, after hastily reading, the note. "Not very pleasant if true; and I suppose there can be no doubt of that, since the major appears convinced."

"Unpleasant news, papa?" asked his daughter, a spot of red springing to her cheek as she put the question.

The spoken interrogatory was continued by others, not uttered aloud.

"What can the major have written to him? I met him yesterday while riding in the chapparal. He saw me in company with – Can it be that? *Mon Dieu!* if father should hear it –"

"The Comanches on the war trail' – so writes the major."

"Oh, that's all!" said Louise, involuntarily giving voice to the phrase, as if the news had nothing so very fearful in it. "You frightened us, sir. I thought it was something worse."

---

<sup>188</sup> **tomahawks** – Indian weapons, small battle axes; *to bury (entomb) a tomahawk* means *to achieve peace*

<sup>189</sup> **desayuno** – breakfast (*Spanish*)

<sup>190</sup> **almuerzo** – lunch (*Spanish*)

<sup>191</sup> **comida** – dinner (*Spanish*)

<sup>192</sup> **y cena** – and supper (*Spanish*)

<sup>193</sup> **piazza** – here: place, open place (*Italian*)

<sup>194</sup> **peccary** – a wild swine

“Worse! What trifling, child, to talk so! There is nothing worse, in Texas, than Comanches on the war trail – nothing half so dangerous.”

Louise might have thought there was – a danger at least as difficult to be avoided. Perhaps she was reflecting upon a pursuit of wild steeds – or thinking of the *trail of a lazo*.

She made no reply. Calhoun continued the conversation.

“Is the major sure of the Indians being up? What does he say, uncle?”

“That there have been rumours of it for some days past, though not reliable. Now it is certain. Last night Wild Cat, the Seminole<sup>195</sup> chief, came to the Fort with a party of his tribe; bringing the news that the painted pole has been erected in the camps of the Comanches all over Texas, and that the war dance has been going on for more than a month. That several parties are already out upon the maraud, and may be looked for among the settlements at any moment.”

“And Wild Cat himself – what of him?” asked Louise, an unpleasant reminiscence suggesting the inquiry. “Is that renegade Indian to be trusted, who appears to be as much an enemy to the whites as to the people of his own race?”

“Quite true, my daughter. You have described the chief of the Seminoles almost in the same terms as I find him spoken of, in a postscript to the major’s letter. He counsels us to beware of the two-faced old rascal, who will be sure to take sides with the Comanches, whenever it may suit his convenience to do so.”

“Well,” continued the planter, laying aside the note, and betaking himself to his coffee and waffles, “I trust we sha’n’t see any redskins here – either Seminoles or Comanches. In making their marauds, let us hope they will not like the look of the crenelled parapets of Casa del Corvo, but give the hacienda a wide berth.”

Before any one could respond, a sable face appearing at the door of the dining-room – which was the apartment in which breakfast was being eaten – caused a complete change in the character of the conversation.

The countenance belonged to Pluto, the coachman.

“What do you want, Pluto?” inquired his owner.

“Ho, ho! Massr Woodley, dis chile want nuffin ’t all. Only look in t’ tell Missa Looey dat soon’s she done eat her brekfass de spotty am unner de saddle, all ready for chuck de bit into him mouf. Ho! ho! dat critter do dance ’bout on de pave stone as ef it wa’ mad to ’treak it back to de smooove tuff ob de praira.”

“Going out for a ride, Louise?” asked the planter with a shadow upon his brow, which he made but little effort to conceal.

“Yes, papa; I was thinking of it.”

“You must not.”

“Indeed!”

“I mean, that you must not ride out *alone*. It is not proper.”

“Why do you think so, papa? I have often ridden out alone.”

“Yes; perhaps too often.”

This last remark brought the slightest tinge of colour to the cheeks of the young Creole; though she seemed uncertain what construction she was to put upon it.

Notwithstanding its ambiguity, she did not press for an explanation. On the contrary, she preferred shunning it; as was shown by her reply.

“If you think so, papa, I shall not go out again. Though to be cooped up here, in this dismal dwelling, while you gentlemen are all abroad upon business – is that the life you intend me to lead in Texas?”

---

<sup>195</sup> **Seminole** – North American Indian tribe, known under this name since 1775

“Nothing of the sort, my daughter. I have no objection to your riding out as much as you please; but Henry must be with you, or your cousin Cassius. I only lay an embargo on your going alone. I have my reasons.”

“Reasons! What are they?”

The question came involuntarily to her lips. It had scarce passed them, ere she regretted having asked it. By her uneasy air it was evident she had apprehensions as to the answer.

The reply appeared partially to relieve her.

“What other reasons do you want,” said the planter, evidently endeavouring to escape from the suspicion of duplicity by the statement of a convenient fact – “what better, than the contents of this letter from the major? Remember, my child, you are not in Louisiana, where a lady may travel anywhere without fear of either insult or outrage; but in Texas, where she may dread both – where even her life may be in danger. Here there are Indians.”

“My excursions don’t extend so far from the house, that I need have any fear of Indians. I never go more than five miles at the most.”

“Five miles!” exclaimed the ex-officer of volunteers, with a sardonic smile; “you would be as safe at fifty, cousin Loo. You are just as likely to encounter the redskins within a hundred yards of the door, as at the distance of a hundred miles. When they are on the war trail they may be looked for anywhere, and at any time. In my opinion, uncle Woodley is right; you are very foolish to ride out alone.”

“Oh! *you* say so?” sharply retorted the young Creole, turning disdainfully towards her cousin. “And pray, sir, may I ask of what service your company would be to me in the event of my encountering the Comanches, which I don’t believe there’s the slightest danger of my doing? A pretty figure we’d cut – the pair of us – in the midst of a war-party of painted savages! Ha! ha! The danger would be yours, not mine: since I should certainly ride away, and leave you to your own devices. Danger, indeed, within five miles of the house! If there’s a horseman in Texas – savages not excepted – who can catch up with my little Luna in a five mile stretch, he must ride a swift steed; which is more than you do, Mr Cash!”

“Silence, daughter!” commanded Poindexter. “Don’t let me hear you talk in that absurd strain. Take no notice of it, nephew. Even if there were no danger from Indians, there are other outlaws in these parts quite as much to be shunned as they. Enough that I forbid you to ride abroad, as you have of late been accustomed to do.”

“Be it as you will, papa,” rejoined Louise, rising from the breakfast-table, and with an air of resignation preparing to leave the room. “Of course I shall obey you – at the risk of losing my health for want of exercise. Go, Pluto!” she added, addressing herself to the darkey, who still stood grinning in the doorway, “turn Luna loose into the corral – the pastures – anywhere. Let her stray back to her native prairies, if the creature be so inclined; she’s no longer needed here.”

With this speech, the young lady swept out of the *sala*, leaving the three gentlemen, who still retained their seats by the table, to reflect upon the satire intended to be conveyed by her words.

They were not the last to which she gave utterance in that same series. As she glided along the corridor leading to her own chamber, others, low murmured, mechanically escaped from her lips. They were in the shape of interrogatories – a string of them self-asked, and only to be answered by conjecture.

“What can papa have heard? Is it but his suspicions? Can any one have told him? Does he know that we have met?”

## Chapter 29

### El Coyote at Home

Calhoun took his departure from the breakfast-table, almost as abruptly as his cousin; but, on leaving the *sala*<sup>196</sup> instead of returning to his own chamber, he sallied forth from the house.

Still suffering from wounds but half healed, he was nevertheless sufficiently convalescent to go abroad – into the garden, to the stables, the corrals – anywhere around the house.

On the present occasion, his excursion was intended to conduct him to a more distant point. As if under the stimulus of what had turned up in the conversation – or perhaps by the contents of the letter that had been read – his feebleness seemed for the time to have forsaken him; and, vigorously plying his crutch, he proceeded up the river in the direction of Fort Inge.

In a barren tract of land, that lay about half way between the hacienda and the Fort – and that did not appear to belong to any one – he arrived at the terminus of his limping expedition. There was a grove of *mezquit*, with, some larger trees shading it; and in the midst of this, a rude hovel of “wattle and dab,” known in South-Western Texas as a *jacalé*.

It was the domicile of Miguel Diaz, the Mexican mustanger – a lair appropriate to the semi-savage who had earned for himself the distinctive appellation of *El Coyote* (“Prairie Wolf.”)

It was not always that the wolf could be found in his den – for his *jacalé* deserved no better description. It was but his occasional sleeping-place; during those intervals of inactivity when, by the disposal of a drove of captured mustangs, he could afford to stay for a time within the limits of the settlement, indulging in such gross pleasures as its proximity afforded.

Calhoun was fortunate in finding him at home; though not quite so fortunate as to find him in a state of sobriety. He was not exactly intoxicated – having, after a prolonged spell of sleep, partially recovered from this, the habitual condition of his existence.

“*H’la ñor!*” he exclaimed in his provincial patois, slurring the salutation, as his visitor darkened the door of the *jacalé*. “*P’r Dios!* Who’d have expected to see you? *Siéntese*<sup>197</sup>! Be seated. Take a chair. There’s one. A chair! Ha! ha! ha!”

The laugh was called up at contemplation of that which he had facetiously termed a chair. It was the skull of a mustang, intended to serve as such; and which, with another similar piece, a rude table of cleft yucca-tree, and a couch of cane reeds, upon which the owner of the *jacalé* was reclining, constituted the sole furniture of Miguel Diaz’s dwelling.

Calhoun, fatigued with his halting promenade, accepted the invitation of his host, and sate down upon the horse-skull.

He did not permit much time to pass, before entering upon the object of his errand.

“Señor Diaz!” said he, “I have come for – ”

“Señor Americano!” exclaimed the half-drunken horse-hunter, cutting short the explanation, “why waste words upon that? *Carrambo!* I know well enough for what you’ve come. You want me to *wipe out* that devilish *Irlandes!*”

“Well!”

“Well; I promised you I would do it, for five hundred *pesos*<sup>198</sup> – at the proper time and opportunity. I will. Miguel Diaz never played false to his promise. But the time’s not come, *ñor capitan*; nor yet the opportunity, *Carajo!* To kill a man outright requires skill. It can’t be done – even on the prairies – without danger of detection; and if detected, ha! what chance for me? You forget, *ñor capitan*, that I’m a Mexican. If I were of your people, I might slay Don Mauricio; and

---

<sup>196</sup> *sala* – sitting-room (*Spanish*)

<sup>197</sup> *Siéntese!* – Sit down! (*Spanish*)

<sup>198</sup> *Pesos* in this very sentence mean *dollars*. *Peso* was a monetary unit in Mexico and many Spanish-speaking countries

get clear on the score of its being a quarrel. *Maldita*<sup>199</sup>! With us Mexicans it is different. If we stick our macheté into a man so as to let out his life's blood, it is called murder; and you Americanos, with your stupid juries of twelve *honest* men, would pronounce it so: ay, and hang a poor fellow for it. *Chingaro*! I can't risk that. I hate the Irlandes as much as you; but I'm not going to chop off my nose to spite my own face. I must wait for the time, and the chance – *carrai*<sup>200</sup>, the time and the chance."

"Both are come!" exclaimed the tempter, bending earnestly towards the bravo. "You said you could easily do it, if there was any Indian trouble going on?"

"Of course I said so. If there was that – "

"You have not heard the news, then?"

"What news?"

"That the Comanches are starting on the war trail."

"*Carajo*!" exclaimed El Coyote, springing up from his couch of reeds, and exhibiting all the activity of his namesake, when roused by the scent of prey. "*Santísima Virgen*<sup>201</sup>! Do you speak the truth, *ñor capitan*?"

"Neither more nor less. The news has just reached the Fort. I have it on the best authority – the officer in command."

"In that case," answered the Mexican reflecting! – "in that case, Don Mauricio may die. The Comanches can kill him. Ha! ha! ha!"

"You are sure of it?"

"I should be surer, if his scalp were worth a thousand dollars, instead of five hundred."

"It *is* worth that sum."

"What sum?"

"A thousand dollars."

"You promise it?"

"I do."

"Then the Comanches *shall* scalp him, *ñor capitan*. You may return to Casa del Corvo, and go to sleep with confidence that whenever the opportunity arrives, your enemy will lose his hair. You understand?"

"I do."

"Get ready your thousand *pesos*."

"They wait your acceptance."

"*Carajo*! I shall earn them in a trice. Adiós<sup>202</sup>! Adiós!"

"*Santísima Virgen*!" exclaimed the profane ruffian, as his visitor limped out of sight. "What a magnificent fluke of fortune! A perfect *chiripé*<sup>203</sup>. A thousand dollars for killing the man I intended to kill on my own account, without charging anybody a single *claco*<sup>204</sup> for the deed!"

"The Comanches upon the war trail! *Chingaro*! can it be true? If so, I must look up my old disguise – gone to neglect through these three long years of accursed peace. *Viva la guerra de los Indios*<sup>205</sup>! Success to the pantomime of the prairies!"

---

<sup>199</sup> **Maldita!** – Damn it! (*Spanish*)

<sup>200</sup> **Carrambo!, Carajo!, Carrai!** = Deuce take it! (*Spanish*)

<sup>201</sup> **Santísima Virgen!** – Holy Virgin! (*Spanish*)

<sup>202</sup> **Adiós!** – Goodbye! (*Spanish*)

<sup>203</sup> **chiripé** – good luck (*Spanish*)

<sup>204</sup> **claco** – a trifle (*Spanish*)

<sup>205</sup> **Viva la guerra de los Indios!** – Long live the Indian war! (*Spanish*)

## Chapter 30

### A Sagittary Correspondence

Louise Poindexter, passionately addicted to the sports termed “manly,” could scarce have overlooked archery.

She had not. The how, and its adjunct the arrow, were in her hands as toys which she could control to her will.

She had been instructed in their *manège* by the Houma<sup>206</sup> Indians; a remnant of whom – the last descendants of a once powerful tribe – may still be encountered upon the “coast” of the Mississippi, in the proximity of Point Coupé and the *bayou* Atchafalaya<sup>207</sup>.

For a long time her bow had lain unbent – unpacked, indeed, ever since it had formed part of the paraphernalia brought overland in the waggon train. Since her arrival at Casa del Corvo she had found no occasion to use the weapon of Diana; and her beautiful bow of Osage-orange wood, and quiver of plumed arrows, had lain neglected in the lumber-room.

There came a time when they were taken forth, and honoured with some attention. It was shortly after that scene at the breakfast table; when she had received the paternal command to discontinue her equestrian excursions.

To this she had yielded implicit obedience, even beyond what was intended: since not only had she given up riding out alone, but declined to do so in company.

The spotted mustang stood listless in its stall, or pranced frantically around the corral; wondering why its spine was no longer crossed, or its ribs compressed, by that strange caparison, that more than aught else reminded it of its captivity.

It was not neglected, however. Though no more mounted by its fair mistress, it was the object of her daily – almost hourly – solicitude. The best corn in the *granaderias* of Casa del Corvo was selected, the most nutritious grass that grows upon the savanna – the *gramma* – furnished for its manger; while for drink it had the cool crystal water from the current of the Leona.

Pluto took delight in grooming it; and, under his currycomb and brushes, its coat had attained a gloss which rivalled that upon Pluto’s own sable skin.

While not engaged attending upon her pet, Miss Poindexter divided the residue of her time between indoor duties and archery. The latter she appeared to have selected as the substitute for that pastime of which she was so passionately fond, and in which she was now denied indulgence.

The scene of her sagittary performances was the garden, with its adjacent shrubbery – an extensive enclosure, three sides of which were fenced in by the river itself, curving round it like the shoe of a racehorse, the fourth being a straight line traced by the rearward wall of the hacienda.

Within this circumference a garden, with ornamental grounds, had been laid out, in times long gone by – as might have been told by many ancient exotics seen standing over it. Even the statues spoke of a past age – not only in their decay, but in the personages they were intended to represent. Equally did they betray the chisel of the Spanish sculptor. Among them you might see commemorated the figure and features of the great Condé<sup>208</sup>; of the Campeador<sup>209</sup>; of Ferdinand<sup>210</sup> and his energetic queen; of the discoverer of the American world; of its two chief *conquistadores* –

---

<sup>206</sup> **Houma** – one of the North American Indian tribes

<sup>207</sup> **bayou Atchafalaya** – Atchafalaya Bay, a part of the Gulf of Mexico along the southern coast of Louisiana

<sup>208</sup> **Condé** – Louis II de Bourbon, Prince Condé (1621–1686), one of the greatest French generals of the times of King Louis XIV

<sup>209</sup> **the Campeador** (1043–1099) – also called the Sid, the byname of Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar, Castilian national hero and military leader

<sup>210</sup> **Ferdinand** – Ferdinand II, king of Aragon and Castile; he united different Spanish kingdoms into one nation and supported Columbus’ expeditions to America

Cortez<sup>211</sup> and Pizarro<sup>212</sup>; and of her, alike famous for her beauty and devotion, the Mexican Malinché<sup>213</sup>.

It was not amidst these sculptured stones that Louise Poindexter practised her feats of archery; though more than once might she have been seen standing before the statue of Malinché, and scanning the voluptuous outline of the Indian maiden's form; not with any severe thought of scorn, that this dark-skinned daughter of Eve<sup>214</sup> had succumbed to such a conqueror as Cortez.

The young creole felt, in her secret heart, that she had no right to throw a stone at that statue. To one less famed than Cortez – though in her estimation equally deserving of fame – she had surrendered what the great conquistador had won from Marina – her heart of hearts.

In her excursions with the bow, which were of diurnal occurrence, she strayed not among the statues. Her game was not there to be found; but under the shadow of tall trees that, keeping the curve of the river, formed a semicircular grove between it and the garden. Most of these trees were of indigenous growth – wild Chinas, mulberries, and pecans – that in the laying out of the grounds had been permitted to remain where Nature, perhaps some centuries ago, had scattered their seed.

It was under the leafy canopy of these fair forest trees the young Creole delighted to sit – or stray along the edge of the pellucid river, that rolled dreamily by.

Here she was free to be alone; which of late appeared to be her preference. Her father, in his sternest mood, could not have denied her so slight a privilege. If there was danger upon the outside prairie, there could be none within the garden – enclosed, as it was, by a river broad and deep, and a wall that could not have been scaled without the aid of a thirty-round ladder. So far from objecting to this solitary strolling, the planter appeared something more than satisfied that his daughter had taken to these tranquil habits; and the suspicions which he had conceived – not altogether without a cause – were becoming gradually dismissed from his mind.

After all he might have been misinformed? The tongue of scandal takes delight in torturing; and he may have been chosen as one of its victims? Or, perhaps, it was but a casual thing – the encounter of which he had been told, between his daughter and Maurice the mustanger? They may have met by accident in the chapparal? She could not well pass, without speaking to, the man who had twice rescued her from a dread danger. There might have been nothing in it, beyond the simple acknowledgment of her gratitude?

It looked well that she had, with such willingness, consented to relinquish her rides. It was but little in keeping with her usual custom, when crossed. Obedience to that particular command could not have been irksome; and argued innocence uncontaminated, virtue still intact.

So reasoned the fond father; who, beyond conjecture, was not permitted to scrutinise too closely the character of his child. In other lands, or in a different class of society, he might possibly have asked direct questions, and required direct answers to them. This is not the method upon the Mississippi; where a son of ten years old – a daughter of less than fifteen – would rebel against such scrutiny, and call it inquisition.

Still less might Woodley Poindexter strain the statutes of parental authority – the father of a Creole belle – for years used to that proud homage whose incense often stills, or altogether destroys, the simpler affections of the heart.

---

<sup>211</sup> **Cortez** – Hernán Cortés (1485–1547), Spanish conquistador who ruined the Aztec empire and expanded Spanish territories on the American continent

<sup>212</sup> **Pizarro** – Francisco Pizarro (1475–1541), Spanish traveller who led many successful expeditions in Central and South America, conquered the Inca empire and founded the city of Lima

<sup>213</sup> **Malinché** – also called Marina (1501–1550), an Indian princess; she was interpreter and mistress to Cortés during his conquest of Mexico

<sup>214</sup> **Eve** – in the Bible, the first woman on earth, created from Adam's rib by God; Adam and Eve lived happily in the Garden of Eden until Eve yielded to the temptation of the evil serpent



Though her father, and by law her controller, he knew to what a short length his power might extend, if exerted in opposition to her will. He was, therefore, satisfied with her late act of obedience – rejoiced to find that instead of continuing her reckless rides upon the prairie, she now contented herself within the range of the garden – with bow and arrow slaying the small birds that were so unlucky as to come under her aim.

Father of fifty years old, why reason in this foolish fashion? Have you forgotten your own youth – the thoughts that then inspired you – the deceits you practised under such inspiration – the counterfeits you assumed – the “stories” you told to cloak what, after all, may have been the noblest impulse of your nature?

The father of the fair Louise appeared to have become oblivious to recollections of this kind: for his early life was not without facts to have furnished them. They must have been forgotten, else he would have taken occasion to follow his daughter into the garden, and observe her – himself unobserved – while disporting herself in the shrubbery that bordered the river bank.

By doing so, he would have discovered that her disposition was not so cruel as may have been supposed. Instead of transfixing the innocent birds that fluttered in such foolish confidence around her, her greatest feat in archery appeared to be the impaling of a piece of paper upon the point of her arrow, and sending the shaft thus charged across the river, to fall harmlessly into a thicket on the opposite side.

He would have witnessed an exhibition still more singular. He would have seen the arrow thus spent – after a short interval, as if dissatisfied with the place into which it had been shot, and desirous of returning to the fair hand whence it had taken its departure – come back into the garden with the same, or a similar piece of paper, transfixed upon its shaft!

The thing might have appeared mysterious – even supernatural – to an observer unacquainted with the spirit and mechanism of that abnormal phenomenon. There was no observer of it save the two individuals who alternately bent the bow, shooting with a single arrow; and by them it was understood.

“Love laughs at locksmiths.” The old adage is scarce suited to Texas, where lock-making is an unknown trade.

“Where there’s a will, there’s a way,” expresses pretty much the same sentiment, appropriate to all time and every place. Never was it more correctly illustrated than in that exchange of bow-shots across the channel of the Leona.

Louise Poindexter had the will; Maurice Gerald had suggested the way.

## Chapter 31

### A Stream Cleverly Crossed

The sagittary correspondence could not last for long. They are but lukewarm lovers who can content themselves with a dialogue carried on at bowshot distance. Hearts brimful of passion must beat and burn together – in close proximity – each feeling the pulsation of the other. “If there be an Elysium<sup>215</sup> on earth, it is this!”

Maurice Gerald was not the man – nor Louise Poindexter the woman – to shun such a consummation.

It came to pass: not under the tell-tale light of the sun, but in the lone hour of midnight, when but the stars could have been witnesses of their social dereliction.

Twice had they stood together in that garden grove – twice had they exchanged love vows – under the steel-grey light of the stars; and a third interview had been arranged between them.

Little suspected the proud planter – perhaps prouder of his daughter than anything else he possessed – that she was daily engaged in an act of rebellion – the wildest against which parental authority may pronounce itself.

His own daughter – his only daughter – of the best blood of Southern aristocracy; beautiful, accomplished, everything to secure him a splendid alliance – holding nightly assignation with a horse-hunter!

Could he have but dreamt it when slumbering upon his soft couch, the dream would have startled him from his sleep like the call of the eternal trumpet!

He had no suspicion – not the slightest. The thing was too improbable – too monstrous, to have given cause for one. Its very monstrosity would have disarmed him, had the thought been suggested.

He had been pleased at his daughter’s compliance with his late injunctions; though he would have preferred her obeying them to the letter, and riding out in company with her brother or cousin – which she still declined to do. This, however, he did not insist upon. He could well concede so much to her caprice: since her staying at home could be no disadvantage to the cause that had prompted him to the stern counsel.

Her ready obedience had almost influenced him to regret the prohibition. Walking in confidence by day, and sleeping in security by night, he fancied, it might be recalled.

It was one of those nights known only to a southern sky, when the full round moon rolls clear across a canopy of sapphire; when the mountains have no mist, and look as though you could lay your hand upon them; when the wind is hushed, and the broad leaves of the tropical trees droop motionless from their boughs; themselves silent as if listening to the concert of singular sounds carried on in their midst, and in which mingle the voices of living creatures belonging to every department of animated nature – beast, bird, reptile, and insect.

Such a night was it, as you would select for a stroll in company with the being – the one and only being – who, by the mysterious dictation of Nature, has entwined herself around your heart – a night upon which you feel a wayward longing to have white arms entwined around your neck, and bright eyes before your face, with that voluptuous gleaming that can only be felt to perfection under the mystic light of the moon.

It was long after the infantry drum had beaten tattoo, and the cavalry bugle sounded the signal for the garrison of Fort Inge to go to bed – in fact it was much nearer the hour of midnight – when a horseman rode away from the door of Oberdoffer’s hotel; and, taking the down-river road, was

---

<sup>215</sup> **Elysium** – in Greek mythology, a land of perfect happiness, the paradise to which immortal heroes were sent after death

soon lost to the sight of the latest loiterer who might have been strolling through the streets of the village.

It is already known, that this road passed the hacienda of Casa del Corvo, at some distance from the house, and on the opposite side of the river. It is also known that at the same place it traversed a stretch of open prairie, with only a piece of copsewood midway between two extensive tracts of chapparal.

This clump of isolated timber, known in prairie parlance as a “motte” or “island” of timber, stood by the side of the road, along which the horseman had continued, after taking his departure from the village.

On reaching the copse he dismounted; led his horse in among the underwood; “hitched” him, by looping his bridle rein around the topmost twigs of an elastic bough; then detaching a long rope of twisted horsehair from the “horn” of his saddle, and inserting his arm into its coil, he glided out to the edge of the “island,” on that side that lay towards the hacienda.

Before forsaking the shadow of the copse, he cast a glance towards the sky, and at the moon sailing supremely over it. It was a glance of inquiry, ending in a look of chagrin, with some muttered phrases that rendered it more emphatic.

“No use waiting for that beauty to go to bed? She’s made up her mind, she won’t go home till morning – ha! ha!”

The droll conceit, which has so oft amused the nocturnal inebriate of great cities, appeared to produce a like affect upon the night patroller of the prairie; and for a moment the shadow, late darkening his brow, disappeared. It returned anon; as he stood gazing across the open space that separated him from the river bottom – beyond which lay the hacienda of Casa del Corvo, clearly outlined upon the opposite bluff, “If there *should* be any one stirring about the place? It’s not likely at this hour; unless it be the owner of a bad conscience who can’t sleep. Troth! there’s one such within those walls. If he be abroad there’s a good chance of his seeing me on the open ground; not that I should care a straw, if it were only myself to be compromised. By Saint Patrick, I see no alternative but risk it! It’s no use waiting upon the moon, deuce take her! She don’t go down for hours; and there’s not the sign of a cloud. It won’t do to keep *her* waiting. No; I must chance it in the clear light. Here goes?”

Saying this, with a swift but stealthy step, the dismounted horseman glided across the treeless tract, and soon readied the escarpment of the cliff, that formed the second height of land rising above the channel of the Leona.

He did not stay ten seconds in this conspicuous situation; but by a path that zigzagged down the bluff – and with which he appeared familiar – he descended to the river “bottom.”

In an instant after he stood upon the bank; at the convexity of the river’s bend, and directly opposite the spot where a skiff was moored, under the sombre shadow of a gigantic cotton-tree.

For a short while he stood gazing across the stream, with a glance that told of scrutiny. He was scanning the shrubbery on the other side; in the endeavour to make out, whether any one was concealed beneath its shadow.

Becoming satisfied that no one was there, he raised the loop-end of his lazo – for it was this he carried over his arm – and giving it half a dozen whirls in the air, cast it across the stream.

The noose settled over the cutwater of the skiff; and closing around the stem, enabled him to tow the tiny craft to the side on which he stood.

Stepping in, he took hold of a pair of oars that lay along the planking at the bottom; and, placing them between the thole-pins, pulled the boat back to its moorings.

Leaping out, he secured it as it had been before, against the drift of the current; and then, taking stand under the shadow of the cotton-tree, he appeared to await either a signal, or the appearance of some one, expected by appointment.

His manoeuvres up to this moment, had they been observed, might have rendered him amenable to the suspicion that he was a housebreaker, about to “crack the crib” of Casa del Corvo.

The phrases that fell from his lips, however, could they have been heard, would have absolved him of any such vile or vulgar intention. It is true he had designs upon the hacienda; but these did not contemplate either its cash, plate, or jewellery – if we except the most precious jewel it contained – the mistress of the mansion herself.

It is scarce necessary to say, that the man who had hidden his horse in the “motte,” and so cleverly effected the crossing of the stream, was Maurice the mustanger.

## Chapter 32

### Light and Shade

He had not long to chafe under the trysting-tree, if such it were. At the very moment when he was stepping into the skiff, a casement window that looked to the rear of the hacienda commenced turning upon its hinges, and was then for a time held slightly ajar; as if some one inside was intending to issue forth, and only hesitated in order to be assured that the “coast was clear.”

A small white hand – decorated with jewels that glistened under the light of the moon – grasping the sash told that the individual who had opened the window was of the gentler sex; the tapering fingers, with their costly garniture, proclaimed her a lady; while the majestic figure – soon after exhibited outside, on the top of the stairway that led down to the garden – could be no other than that of Louise Poindexter.

It was she.

For a second or two the lady stood listening. She heard, or fancied she heard, the dip of an oar. She might be mistaken; for the stridulation of the cicadas filled the atmosphere with confused sound. No matter. The hour of assignation had arrived; and she was not the one to stand upon punctilios as to time – especially after spending two hours of solitary expectation in her chamber, that had appeared like as many. With noiseless tread descending the stone stairway, she glided sylph<sup>216</sup>-like among the statues and shrubs; until, arriving under the shadow of the cotton-wood, she flung herself into arms eagerly outstretched to receive her.

Who can describe the sweetness of such embrace – strange to say, sweeter from being stolen? Who can paint the delicious emotions experienced at such a moment – too sacred to be touched by the pen?

It is only after long throes of pleasure had passed, and the lovers had begun to converse in the more sober language of life, that it becomes proper, or even possible to report them.

Thus did they speak to each other, the lady taking the initiative: —

“To-morrow night you will meet me again – to-morrow night, dearest Maurice?”

“To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow, – if I were free to say the word.”

“And why not? Why are you not free to say it?”

“To-morrow, by break of day, I am off for the Alamo.”

“Indeed! Is it imperative you should go?”

The interrogatory was put in a tone that betrayed displeasure. A vision of a sinister kind always came before the mind of Louise Poindexter at mention of the lone hut on the Alamo.

And why? It had afforded her hospitality. One would suppose that her visit to it could scarce fail to be one of the pleasantest recollections of her life. And yet it was not!

“I have excellent reasons for going,” was the reply she received.

“Excellent reasons! Do you expect to meet any one there?”

“My follower Phelim – no one else. I hope the poor fellow is still above the grass. I sent him out about ten days ago – before there was any tidings of these Indian troubles.”

“Only Phelim you expect to meet? Is it true, Gerald? Dearest! do not deceive me! Only him?”

“Why do you ask the question, Louise?”

“I cannot tell you why. I should die of shame to speak my secret thoughts.”

“Do not fear to speak them! I could keep no secret from you – in truth I could not. So tell me what it is, love!”

“Do you wish me, Maurice?”

---

<sup>216</sup> **sylph** – an imaginary soulless creature that lives in the air

"I do – of course I do. I feel sure that whatever it may be, I shall be able to explain it. I know that my relations with you are of a questionable character; or might be so deemed, if the world knew of them. It is for that very reason I am going back to the Alamo."

"And to stay there?"

"Only for a single day, or two at most. Only to gather up my household gods, and bid a last adieu to my prairie life."

"Indeed!"

"You appear surprised."

"No! only mystified. I cannot comprehend you. Perhaps I never shall!"

"'Tis very simple – the resolve I have taken. I know you will forgive me, when I make it known to you."

"Forgive you, Maurice! For what do you ask forgiveness?"

"For keeping it a secret from you, that – that I am not what I seem."

"God forbid you should be otherwise than what you seem to me – noble, grand, beautiful, rare among men! Oh, Maurice! you know not how I esteem – how I love you!"

"Not more than I esteem and love you. It is that very esteem that now counsels me to a separation."

"A separation?"

"Yes, love; but it is to be hoped only for a short time."

"How long?"

"While a steamer can cross the Atlantic, and return."

"An age! And why this?"

"I am called to my native country – Ireland, so much despised, as you already know. 'Tis only within the last twenty hours I received the summons. I obey it the more eagerly, that it tells me I shall be able soon to return, and prove to your proud father that the poor horse-hunter who won his daughter's heart – have I won it, Louise?"

"Idle questioner! Won it? You know you have more than won it – conquered it to a subjection from which it can never escape. Mock me not, Maurice, nor my stricken heart – henceforth, and for evermore, your slave!"

During the rapturous embrace that followed this passionate speech, by which a high-born and beautiful maiden confessed to have surrendered herself – heart, soul, and body – to the man who had made conquest of her affections, there was silence perfect and profound.

The grasshopper amid the green herbage, the cicada on the tree-leaf, the mock-bird on the top of the tall cotton-wood, and the nightjar soaring still higher in the moonlit air, apparently actuated by a simultaneous instinct, ceased to give utterance to their peculiar cries: as though one and all, by their silence, designed to do honour to the sacred ceremony transpiring in their presence!

But that temporary cessation of sounds was due to a different cause. A footstep grating upon the gravelled walk of the garden – and yet touching it so lightly, that only an acute ear could have perceived the contact – was the real cause why the nocturnal voices had suddenly become stilled.

The lovers, absorbed in the sweet interchange of a mutual affection, heard it not. They saw not that dark shadow, in the shape of man or devil, flitting among the flowers; now standing by a statue; now cowering under cover of the shrubbery, until at length it became stationary behind the trunk of a tree, scarce ten paces from the spot where they were kissing each other!

Little did they suspect, in that moment of celestial happiness when all nature was hushed around them, that the silence was exposing their passionate speeches, and the treacherous moon, at the same time, betraying their excited actions.

That shadowy listener, crouching guilty-like behind the tree, was a witness to both. Within easy earshot, he could hear every word – even the sighs and soft low murmurings of their love;

while under the silvery light of the moon, with scarce a sprig coming between, he could detect their slightest gestures.

It is scarce necessary to give the name of the dastardly eavesdropper. That of Cassius Calhoun will have suggested itself.

It was he.

## Chapter 33

### A Torturing Discovery

How came the cousin of Louise Poindexter to be astir at that late hour of the night, or, as it was now, the earliest of the morning? Had he been forewarned of this interview of the lovers; or was it merely some instinctive suspicion that had caused him to forsake his sleeping-chamber, and make a tour of inspection within the precincts of the garden?

In other words, was he an eavesdropper by accident, or a spy acting upon information previously communicated to him?

The former was the fact. Chance alone, or chance aided by a clear night, had given him the clue to a discovery that now filled his soul with the fires of hell.

Standing upon the housetop at the hour of midnight – what had taken him up there cannot be guessed – breathing vile tobacco-smoke into an atmosphere before perfumed with the scent of the night-blooming *cereus*; the ex-captain of cavalry did not appear distressed by any particular anxiety. He had recovered from the injuries received in his encounter with the mustanger; and although that bit of evil fortune did not fail to excite within him the blackest chagrin, whenever it came up before his mind, its bitterness had been, to some extent, counteracted by hopes of revenge – towards a plan for which he had already made some progress.

Equally with her father, he had been gratified that Louise was contented of late to stay within doors: for it was himself who had secretly suggested the prohibition to her going abroad. Equally had he remained ignorant as to the motive of that garden archery, and in a similar manner had misconceived it. In fact, he had begun to flatter himself, that, after all, her indifference to himself might be only a feint on the part of his cousin, or an illusion upon his. She had been less cynical for some days; and this had produced upon him the pleasant impression, that he might have been mistaken in his jealous fears.

He had as yet discovered no positive proof that she entertained a partiality for the young Irishman; and as the days passed without any renewed cause for disquiet, he began to believe that in reality there was none.

Under the soothing influence of this restored confidence, had he mounted up to the azotea; and, although it was the hour of midnight, the careless *insouciance* with which he applied the light to his cigar, and afterwards stood smoking it, showed that he could not have come there for any very important purpose. It may have been to exchange the sultry atmosphere of his sleeping-room for the fresher air outside; or he may have been tempted forth by the magnificent moon – though he was not much given to such romantic contemplation.

Whatever it was, he had lighted his cigar, and was apparently enjoying it, with his arms crossed upon the coping of the parapet, and his face turned towards the river.

It did not disturb his tranquillity to see a horseman ride out from the chapparal on the opposite side, and proceed onward across the open plain.

He knew of the road that was there. Some traveller, he supposed, who preferred taking advantage of the cool hours of the night – a night, too, that would have tempted the weariest wayfarer to continue his journey. It might be a planter who lived below, returning home from the village, after lounging an hour too long in the tavern saloon.

In daytime, the individual might have been identified; by the moonlight, it could only be made out that there was a man on horseback.

The eyes of the ex-officer accompanied him as he trotted along the road; but simply with mechanical movement, as one musingly contemplates some common waif drifting down the current of a river.



It was only after the horseman had arrived opposite the island of timber, and was seen to pull up, and then ride into it, that the spectator upon the housetop became stirred to take an interest in his movements.

“What the devil can that mean?” muttered Calhoun to himself, as he hastily plucked the cigar stump from between his teeth. “Damn the man, he’s dismounted!” continued he, as the stranger reappeared, on foot, by the inner edge of the copse.

“And coming this way – towards the bend of the river – straight as he can streak it!

“Down the bluff – into the bottom – and with a stride that shows him well acquainted with the way. Surely to God he don’t intend making his way across into the garden? He’d have to swim for that; and anything he could get there would scarce pay him for his pains. What the old Scratch<sup>217</sup> can be his intention? A thief?”

This was Calhoun’s first idea – rejected almost as soon as conceived. It is true that in Spanish-American countries even the beggar goes on horseback. Much more might the thief?

For all this, it was scarce probable, that a man would make a midnight expedition to steal fruit, or vegetables, in such cavalier style.

What else could he be after?

The odd manoeuvre of leaving his horse under cover of the copse, and coming forward on foot, and apparently with caution, as far as could be seen in the uncertain light, was of itself evidence that the man’s errand could scarce be honest and that he was approaching the premises of Casa del Corvo with some evil design.

What could it be?

Since leaving the upper plain he had been no longer visible to Calhoun upon the housetop. The underwood skirting the stream on the opposite side, and into which he had entered, was concealing him.

“What can the man be after?”

After putting this interrogatory to himself, and for about the tenth time – each with increasing emphasis – the composure of the ex-captain was still further disturbed by a sound that reached his ear, exceedingly like a plunge in the river. It was slight, but clearly the concussion of some hard substance brought in contact with water.

“The stroke of an oar,” muttered he, on hearing it. “Is, by the holy Jehovah<sup>218</sup>! He’s got hold of the skiff, and’s crossing over to the garden. What on earth can he be after?”

The questioner did not intend staying on the housetop to determine. His thought was to slip silently downstairs – rouse the male members of the family, along with some of the servants; and attempt to capture the intruder by a clever ambushade.

He had raised his arm from the copestone, and was in the act of stepping back from the parapet, when his ear was saluted by another sound, that caused him again to lean forward and look into the garden below.

This new noise bore no resemblance to the stroke of an oar; nor did it proceed from the direction of the river. It was the creaking of a door as it turned upon its hinge, or, what is much the same, a casement window; while it came from below – almost directly underneath the spot where the listener stood.

On craning over to ascertain the cause, he saw, what blanched his cheeks to the whiteness of the moonlight that shone upon them – what sent the blood curdling through every corner of his heart.

---

<sup>217</sup> **the old Scratch** – the devil

<sup>218</sup> **Jehovah** or Jahweh – in Judaism, the name of God; the name is thought too sacred to be said aloud

The casement that had been opened was that which belonged to the bed-chamber of his cousin Louise. He knew it. The lady herself was standing outside upon the steps that led to the level of the garden, her face turned downward, as if she was meditating a descent.

Loosely attired in white, as though in the negligé<sup>219</sup> of a *robe de chambre*<sup>220</sup>, with only a small kerchief coifed over her crown, she resembled some fair nymph of the night, some daughter of the moon, whom Luna delighted to surround with a silvery effulgence!

Calhoun reasoned rapidly. He could not do otherwise than connect her appearance outside the casement with the advent of the man who was making his way across the river.

And who could this man be? Who but Maurice the mustanger?

A clandestine meeting! And by appointment!

There could be no doubt of it; and if there had, it would have been dissolved, at seeing the white-robed figure glide noiselessly down the stone steps, and along the gravelled walks, till it at length disappeared among the trees that shadowed the mooring-place of the skiff.

Like one paralysed with a powerful stroke, the ex-captain continued for some time upon the azotea – speechless and without motion. It was only after the white drapery had disappeared, and he heard the low murmur of voices rising from among the trees, that he was stimulated to resolve upon some course of proceeding.

He thought no longer of awaking the inmates of the house – at least not then. Better first to be himself the sole witness of his cousin's disgrace; and then – and then —

In short, he was not in a state of mind to form any definite plan; and, acting solely under the blind stimulus of a fell instinct, he hurried down the *escalera*, and made his way through the house, and out into the garden.

He felt feeble as he pressed forward. His legs had tottered under him while descending the stone steps. They did the same as he glided along the gravelled walk. They continued to tremble as he crouched behind the tree trunk that hindered him from being seen – while playing spectator of a scene that afflicted him to the utmost depths of his soul.

He heard their vows; their mutual confessions of love; the determination of the mustanger to be gone by the break of the morrow's day; as also his promise to return, and the revelation to which that promise led.

With bitter chagrin, he heard how this determination was combated by Louise, and the reasons why she at length appeared to consent to it.

He was witness to that final and rapturous embrace, that caused him to strike his foot nervously against the pebbles, and make that noise that had scared the cicadas into silence.

Why at that moment did he not spring forward – put a termination to the intolerable *tête-à-tête* – and with a blow of his bowie-knife lay his rival low – at his own feet and that of his mistress? Why had he not done this at the beginning – for to him there needed no further evidence, than the interview itself, to prove that his cousin had been dishonoured?

There was a time when he would not have been so patient. What, then, was the *punctilio* that restrained him? Was it the presence of that piece of perfect mechanism, that, with a sheen of steel, glistened upon the person of his rival, and which under the bright moonbeams, could be distinguished as a “Colt's six-shooter?”

Perhaps it may have been. At all events, despite the terrible temptation to which his soul was submitted, something not only hindered him from taking an immediate vengeance, but in the mid-moments of that maddening spectacle – the final embrace – prompted him to turn away from the spot, and with an earnestness, even keener than he had yet exhibited, hurry back in the direction

---

<sup>219</sup> negligé – any kind of informal dress

<sup>220</sup> robe de chambre = dressing-gown (French)

of the house: leaving the lovers, still unconscious of having been observed, to bring their sweet interview to an ending – sure to be procrastinated.

## Chapter 34

### A Chivalrous Dictation

Where went Cassius Calhoun?

Certainly not to his own sleeping-room. There was no sleep for a spirit suffering like his.

He went not there; but to the chamber of his cousin. Not hers – now untenanted, with its couch unoccupied, its coverlet undisturbed – but to that of her brother, young Henry Poindexter.

He went direct as crooked corridors would permit him – in haste, without waiting to avail himself of the assistance of a candle.

It was not needed. The moonbeams penetrating through the open bars of the *reja*<sup>221</sup>, filled the chamber with light – sufficient for his purpose. They disclosed the outlines of the apartment, with its simple furniture – a washstand, a dressing-table, a couple of chairs, and a bed with “mosquito curtains.”

Under those last was the youth reclining; in that sweet silent slumber experienced only by the innocent. His finely formed head rested calmly upon the pillow, over which lay scattered a profusion of shining curls.

As Calhoun lifted the muslin “bar,” the moonbeams fell upon his face, displaying its outlines of the manliest aristocratic type.

What a contrast between those two sets of features, brought into such close proximity! Both physically handsome; but morally, as Hyperion<sup>222</sup> to the Satyr<sup>223</sup>.

“Awake, Harry! awake!” was the abrupt salutation extended to the sleeper, accompanied by a violent shaking of his shoulder.

“Oh! ah! you, cousin Cash? What is it? not the Indiana, I hope?”

“Worse than that – worse! worse! Quick! Rouse yourself, and see! Quick, or it will be too late! Quick, and be the witness of your own disgrace – the dishonour of your house. Quick, or the name of Poindexter will be the laughing-stock of Texas!”

After such summons there could be no inclination for sleep – at least on the part of a Poindexter; and at a single bound, the youngest representative of the family cleared the mosquito curtains, and stood upon his feet in the middle of the floor – in an attitude of speechless astonishment.

“Don’t wait to dress,” cried his excited counsellor, “stay, you may put on your pants. Damn the clothes! There’s no time for standing upon trifles. Quick! Quick!”

The simple costume the young planter was accustomed to wear, consisting of trousers and Creole blouse of Attakapas *cottonade*<sup>224</sup>, were adjusted to his person in less than twenty seconds of time; and in twenty more, obedient to the command of his cousin – without understanding why he had been so unceremoniously summoned forth – he was hurrying along the gravelled walks of the garden.

“What is it, Cash?” he inquired, as soon as the latter showed signs of coming to a stop. “What does it all mean?”

“See for yourself! Stand close to me! Look through yonder opening in the trees that leads down to the place where your skiff is kept. Do you see anything there?”

“Something white. It looks like a woman’s dress. It is that. It’s a woman!”

“It *is* a woman. Who do you suppose she is?”

---

<sup>221</sup> **reja** – an iron or wooden grate (*Spanish*)

<sup>222</sup> **Hyperion** – in Greek mythology, one of the Titans

<sup>223</sup> **Satyr** – in Greek mythology, half man, half goat; Satyrs were associated with the god Dionysus and his cult

<sup>224</sup> **cottonade** – cotton (*Spanish*)

“I can’t tell. Who do you say she is?”

“There’s another figure – a dark one – by her side.”

“It appears to be a man? It is a man!”

“And who do you suppose *he* is?”

“How should I know, cousin Cash? Do you?”

“I do. That man is Maurice the mustanger!”

“And the woman?”

“*Is Louise – your sister – in his arms!*”

As if a shot had struck him through the heart, the brother bounded upward, and then onward, along the path.

“Stay!” said Calhoun, catching hold of, and restraining him. “You forget that you are unarmed! The fellow, I know, has weapons upon him. Take this, and this,” continued he, passing his own knife and pistol into the hands of his cousin. “I should have used them myself, long ere this; but I thought it better that you – her brother – should be the avenger of your sister’s wrongs. On, my boy! See that you don’t hurt *her*; but take care not to lose the chance at him. Don’t give him a word of warning. As soon as they are separated, send a bullet into his belly; and if all six should fail, go at him with the knife. I’ll stay near, and take care of you, if you should get into danger. Now! Steal upon him, and give the scoundrel hell!”

It needed not this blasphemous injunction to inspire Henry Poindexter to hasty action. The brother of a sister – a beautiful sister – erring, undone!

In six seconds he was by her side, confronting her supposed seducer.

“Low villain!” he cried, “unclasp your loathsome arm from the waist of my sister. Louise! stand aside, and give me a chance of killing him! Aside, sister! Aside, I say!”

Had the command been obeyed, it is probable that Maurice Gerald would at that moment have ceased to exist – unless he had found heart to kill Henry Poindexter; which, experienced as he was in the use of his six-shooter, and prompt in its manipulation, he might have done.

Instead of drawing the pistol from its holster, or taking any steps for defence, he appeared only desirous of disengaging himself from the fair arms still clinging around him, and for whose owner he alone felt alarm.

For Henry to fire at the supposed betrayer, was to risk taking his sister’s life; and, restrained by the fear of this, he paused before pulling trigger.

That pause produced a crisis favourable to the safety of all three. The Creole girl, with a quick perception of the circumstances, suddenly released her lover from the protecting embrace; and, almost in the same instant, threw her arms around those of her brother. She knew there was nothing to be apprehended from the pistol of Maurice. Henry alone had to be held doing mischief.

“Go, go!” she shouted to the former, while struggling to restrain the infuriated youth. “My brother is deceived by appearances. Leave me to explain. Away, Maurice! away!”

“Henry Poindexter,” said the young Irishman, as he turned to obey the friendly command, “I am not the sort of villain you have been pleased to pronounce me. Give me but time, and I shall prove, that your sister has formed a truer estimate of my character than either her father, brother, or cousin. I claim but six months. If at the end of that time I do not show myself worthy of her confidence – her love – then shall I make you welcome to shoot me at sight, as you would the cowardly coyoté, that chanced to cross your track. Till then, I bid you adieu.”

Henry’s struggle to escape from his sister’s arms – perhaps stronger than his own – grew less energetic as he listened to these words. They became feebler and feebler – at length ceasing – when a plunge in the river announced that the midnight intruder into the enclosed grounds of Casa del Corvo was on his way back to the wild prairies he had chosen for his home.

It was the first time he had recrossed the river in that primitive fashion. On the two previous occasions he had passed over in the skiff, which had been drawn back to its moorings by a delicate

hand, the tow-rope consisting of that tiny lazo that had formed part of the caparison presented along with the spotted mustang.

“Brother! you are wronging him! indeed you are wronging him!” were the words of expostulation that followed close upon his departure. “Oh, Henry – dearest Hal, if you but knew how noble he is! So far from desiring to do me an injury, ’tis only this moment he has been disclosing a plan to – to – prevent – scandal – I mean to make me happy. Believe me, brother, he is a gentleman; and if he were not – if only the common man you take him for – I could not help what I have done – I could not, for *I love him!*”

“Louise! tell me the truth! Speak to me, not as to your brother, but as to your own self. From what I have this night seen, more than from your own words, I know that you love this man. Has he taken advantage of your – your – unfortunate passion?”

“No – no – no. As I live he has not. He is too noble for that – even had I – Henry! he is innocent! If there be cause for regret, I alone am to blame. Why – oh! brother! why did you insult him?”

“Have I done so?”

“You have, Henry – rudely, grossly.”

“I shall go after, and apologise. If you speak truly, sister, I owe him that much. I shall go this instant. I liked him from the first – you know I did? I could not believe him capable of a cowardly act. I can’t now. Sister! come back into the house with me. And now, dearest Loo! you had better go to bed. As for me, I shall be off *instantly* to the hotel, where I may still hope to overtake him. I cannot rest till I have made reparation for my rudeness.”

So spoke the forgiving brother; and gently leading his sister by the hand, with thoughts of compassion, but not the slightest trace of anger, he hastily returned to the hacienda – intending to go after the young Irishman, and apologise for the use of words that, under the circumstances, might have been deemed excusable.

As the two disappeared within the doorway, a third figure, hitherto crouching among the shrubbery, was seen to rise erect, and follow them up the stone steps. This last was their cousin, Cassius Calhoun.

He, too, had thoughts of *going after* the mustanger.

## Chapter 35

### An Uncourteous Host

“The chicken-hearted fool! Fool myself, to have trusted to such a hope! I might have known she’d cajole the young calf, and let the scoundrel escape. I could have shot him from behind the tree – dead as a drowned rat! And without risking anything – even disgrace! Not a particle of risk. Uncle Woodley would have thanked me – the whole settlement would have said I had done right. My cousin, a young lady, betrayed by a common scamp – a horse trader – who would have said a word against it? Such a chance! Why have I missed it? Death and the devil – it may not trump up again!”

Such were the reflections of the ex-captain of cavalry, while at some paces distance following his two cousins on their return to the hacienda.

“I wonder,” muttered he, on re-entering the *patio*<sup>225</sup>, “whether the blubbering baby be in earnest? Going after to apologise to the man who has made a fool of his sister! Ha – ha! It would be a good joke were it not too serious to be laughed at. He *is* in earnest, else why that row in the stable? ’Tis he bringing but his horse! It is, by the Almighty<sup>226</sup>!”

The door of the stable, as is customary in Mexican haciendas opened upon the paved *patio*.

It was standing ajar; but just as Calhoun turned his eye upon it, a man coming from the inside pushed it wide open; and then stepped over the threshold, with a saddled horse following close after him.

The man had a Panama hat upon his head, and a cloak thrown loosely around his shoulders. This did not hinder Calhoun from recognising his cousin Henry, as also the dark brown horse that belonged to him.

“Fool! So – you’ve let him off?” spitefully muttered the ex-captain, as the other came within whispering distance. “Give me back my bowie and pistol. They’re not toys suited to such delicate fingers as yours! Bah! Why did you not use them as I told you? You’ve made a mess of it!”

“I have,” tranquilly responded the young planter. “I know it. I’ve insulted – and grossly too – a noble fellow.”

“Insulted a noble fellow! Ha – ha – ha! You’re mad – by heavens, you’re mad!”

“I should have been had I followed your counsel, cousin Cash. Fortunately I did not go so far. I have done enough to deserve being called worse than fool; though perhaps, under the circumstances, I may obtain forgiveness for my fault. At all events, I intend to try for it, and without losing time.”

“Where are you going?”

“After Maurice the mustanger – to apologise to him for my misconduct.”

“Misconduct! Ha – ha – ha! Surely you are joking?”

“No. I’m in earnest. If you come along with me, you shall see!”

“Then I say again you are mad! Not only mad, but a damned natural-born idiot! you are, by Jesus Christ and General Jackson!”

“You’re not very polite, cousin Cash; though, after the language I’ve been lately using myself, I might excuse you. Perhaps you will, one day imitate me, and make amends for your rudeness.”

Without adding another word, the young gentleman – one of the somewhat rare types of Southern chivalry – sprang to his saddle; gave the word, to his horse; and rode hurriedly through the *saguan*<sup>227</sup>.

---

<sup>225</sup> **patio** – an inner courtyard in a Spanish American home

<sup>226</sup> **the Almighty** – God; the Almighty God

<sup>227</sup> **saguan** – here: gates (*Spanish*)

Calhoun stood upon the stones, till the footfall of the horse became but faintly distinguishable in the distance.

Then, as if acting under some sudden impulse, he hurried along the verandah to his own room; entered it; reappeared in a rough overcoat; crossed back to the stable; went in; came out again with his own horse saddled and bridled; led the animal along the pavement, as gently as if he was stealing him; and once outside upon the turf, sprang upon his back, and rode rapidly away.

For a mile or more he followed the same road, that had been taken by Henry Poindexter. It could not have been with any idea of overtaking the latter: since, long before, the hoofstrokes of Henry's horse had ceased to be heard; and proceeding at a slower pace, Calhoun did not ride as if he cared about catching up with his cousin.

He had taken the up-river road. When about midway between Casa del Corvo and the Fort, he reined up; and, after scrutinising the chapparal around him, struck off by a bridle-path leading back toward the bank of the river. As he turned into it he might have been heard muttering to himself —

“A chance still left; a good one, though not so cheap as the other. It will cost me a thousand dollars. What of that, so long as I get rid of this Irish curse, who has poisoned every hour of my existence! If true to his promise, he takes the route to his home by an early hour in the morning. What time, I wonder. These men of the prairies call it late rising, if they be abed till daybreak! Never mind. There's yet time for the Coyote to get before him on the road! I know that. It must be the same as we followed to the wild horse prairies. He spoke of his hut upon the Alamo. That's the name of the creek where we had our pic-nic. The hovel cannot be far from there! The Mexican must know the place, or the trail leading to it; which last will be sufficient for his purpose and mine. A fig for the shanty itself! The owner may never reach it. There may be Indians upon the road! There *must* be, before daybreak in the morning!”

As Calhoun concluded this string of strange reflections, he had arrived at the door of another “shanty” — that of the Mexican mustanger. The *jacalé* was the goal of his journey.

Having slipped out of his saddle, and knotted his bridle to a branch, he set foot upon the threshold.

The door was standing wide open. From the inside proceeded a sound, easily identified as the snore of a slumberer.

It was not as of one who sleeps either tranquilly, or continuously. At short intervals it was interrupted — now by silent pauses — anon by hog-like gruntings, interspersed with profane words, not perfectly pronounced, but slurred from a thick tongue, over which, but a short while before, must have passed a stupendous quantity of alcohol.

“*Carrambo! carrai! carajo — chingara! mil diablos!*” mingled with more — perhaps less — reverential exclamations of “*Sangre<sup>228</sup> de Cristo! Jesus! Santissima Virgen! Santa Maria! Dios! Madre de Dios!<sup>229</sup>*” and the like, were uttered inside the *jacalé*, as if the speaker was engaged in an apostrophic conversation with all the principal characters of the Popish<sup>230</sup> antheon.

Calhoun paused upon the threshold, and listened.

“*Mal — dit — dit — o!*” muttered the sleeper, concluding the exclamation with a hiccup. “*Buen — buenos nove-dad-es! Good news, por sangre Chrees — Chreest — o! Si S'ñor Merican — cano! Nove — dad — es s'perbos! Los Indynos Co — co — manchees on the war-trail — el rastro de guerra. God bless the Co — co — manchees!*”

“The brute's drunk!” said his visitor, mechanically speaking aloud.

“*H'la S'ñor!*” exclaimed the owner of the *jacalé*, aroused to a state of semi-consciousness by the sound of a human voice. “*Quien llama!* Who has the honour — that is, have I the happiness —

---

<sup>228</sup> **sangre** — blood (*Spanish*)

<sup>229</sup> **Madre de Dios** — the Holy Virgin, Mother of Jesus (*Spanish*)

<sup>230</sup> **Popish** — Catholic



I, Miguel Diaz – el Co – coyote, as the *leperos*<sup>231</sup> call me. Ha, ha! coyo – coyot. Bah! what's in a name? Yours, S'ñor? *Mil demonios!* who are you?"

Partially raising himself from his reed couch, the inebriate remained for a short time in a sitting attitude – glaring, half interrogatively, half unconsciously, at the individual whose voice had intruded itself into his drunken dreams.

The unsteady examination lasted only for a score of seconds. Then the owner of the *jacalé*, with an unintelligible speech, subsided into a recumbent position; when a savage grunt, succeeded by a prolonged snore, proved him to have become oblivious to the fact that his domicile contained a guest.

"Another chance lost!" said the latter, hissing the words through his teeth, as he turned disappointedly from the door.

"A sober fool and a drunken knave – two precious tools wherewith, to accomplish a purpose like mine! Curse the luck! All this night it's been against me! It maybe three long hours before this pig sleeps off the swill that has stupefied him. Three long hours, and then what would be the use of him? 'Twould be too late – too late!"

As he said this, he caught the rein of his bridle, and stood by the head of his horse, as if uncertain what course to pursue.

"No use my staying here! It might be daybreak before the damned liquor gets out of his skull. I may as well go back to the hacienda and wait there; or else – or else – "

The alternative, that at this crisis presented itself, was nor, spoken aloud. Whatever it may have been, it had the effect of terminating the hesitancy that living over him, and stirring him to immediate action.

Roughly tearing his rein from the branch, and passing it over his horse's head, he sprang into the saddle, and rode off from the *jacalé* in a direction the very opposite to that in which he had approached it.

---

<sup>231</sup> *leperos* – rascals (Spanish)

## Chapter 36

### Three Travellers on the same Track

No one can deny, that a ride upon a smooth-turfed prairie is one of the most positive pleasures of sublunary existence. No one *will* deny it, who has had the good fortune to experience the delightful sensation. With a spirited horse between your thighs, a well-stocked valise strapped to the cantle of your saddle, a flask of French brandy slung handy over the “horn,” and a plethoric cigar-case protruding from under the flap of your pistol holster, you may set forth upon a day’s journey, without much fear of feeling weary by the way.

A friend riding by your side – like yourself alive to the beauties of nature, and sensitive to its sublimities – will make the ride, though long, and otherwise arduous, a pleasure to be remembered for many, many years.

If that friend chance to be some fair creature, upon whom you have fixed your affections, then will you experience a delight to remain in your memory for ever.

Ah! if all prairie-travellers were to be favoured with such companionship, the wilderness of Western Texas would soon become crowded with tourists; the great plains would cease to be “pathless,” – the savannas would swarm with snobs.

It is better as it is. As it is, you may launch yourself upon the prairie: and once beyond the precincts of the settlement from which you have started – unless you keep to the customary “road,” indicated only by the hoof-prints of half a dozen horsemen who have preceded you – you may ride on for hours, days, weeks, months, perhaps a whole year, without encountering aught that bears the slightest resemblance to yourself, or the image in which you have been made.

Only those who have traversed the great plain of Texas can form a true estimate of its illimitable vastness; impressing the mind with sensations similar to those we feel in the contemplation of infinity.

In some sense may the mariner comprehend my meaning. Just as a ship may cross the Atlantic Ocean – and in tracks most frequented by sailing craft – without sighting a single sail, so upon the prairies of South-western Texas, the traveller may journey on for months, amid a solitude that seems eternal!

Even the ocean itself does not give such an impression of endless space. Moving in its midst you perceive no change – no sign to tell you you are progressing. The broad circular surface of azure blue, with the concave hemisphere of a tint but a few shades lighter, are always around and above you, seeming ever the same. You think they *are* so; and fancy yourself at rest in the centre of a sphere and a circle. You are thus to some extent hindered from having a clear conception of “magnificent distances.”

On the prairie it is different. The “landmarks” – there are such, in the shape of “mottes,” mounds, trees, ridges, and rocks – constantly changing before your view, admonish you that you are passing through space; and this very knowledge imbues you with the idea of vastness.

It is rare for the prairie traveller to contemplate such scenes alone – rarer still upon the plains of South-western Texas. In twos at least – but oftener in companies of ten or a score – go they, whose need it is to tempt the perils of that wilderness claimed by the Comanches as ancestral soil.

For all this, a solitary traveller may at times be encountered: for on the same night that witnessed the tender and stormy scenes in the garden of Casa del Corvo, no less than three such made the crossing of the plain that stretches south-westward from the banks of the Leona River.

Just at the time that Calhoun was making his discontented departure from the *jacalé* of the Mexican mustanger, the foremost of these nocturnal travellers was clearing the outskirts of the village – going in a direction which, if followed far enough, would conduct him to the Nueces River, or one of its tributary streams.

It is scarcely necessary to say, that he was on horseback. In Texas there are no pedestrians, beyond the precincts of the town or plantation.

The traveller in question bestrode a strong steed; whose tread, at once vigorous and elastic, proclaimed it capable of carrying its rider through a long journey, without danger of breaking down.

Whether such a journey was intended, could not have been told by the bearing of the traveller himself. He was equipped, as any Texan cavalier might have been, for a ten-mile ride – perhaps to his own house. The lateness of the hour forbade the supposition, that he could be going from it. The serape on his shoulders – somewhat carelessly hanging – might have been only put on to protect them against the dews of the night.

But as there was no dew on that particular night – nor any outlying settlement in the direction he was heading to – the horseman was more like to have been a real traveller – *en route* for some distant point upon the prairies.

For all this he did not appear to be in haste; or uneasy as to the hour at which he might reach his destination.

On the contrary, he seemed absorbed in some thought, that linked itself with the past; sufficiently engrossing to render him unobservant of outward objects, and negligent in the management of his horse.

The latter, with the rein lying loosely upon his neck, was left to take his own way; though instead of stopping, or straying, he kept steadily on, as if over ground oft trodden before.

Thus leaving the animal to its own guidance, and pressing it neither with whip nor spur, the traveller rode tranquilly over the prairie, till lost to view – not by the intervention of any object, but solely through the dimness of the light, where the moon became misty in the far distance.

Almost on the instant of his disappearance – and as if the latter had been taken for a cue – a second horseman spurred out from the suburbs of the village; and proceeded along the same path.

From the fact of his being habited in a fashion to defend him against the chill air of the night, he too might have been taken for a traveller.

A cloak clasped across his breast hung over his shoulders, its ample skirts draping backward to the hips of his horse.

Unlike the horseman who had preceded him, he showed signs of haste – plying both whip and spur as he pressed on.

He appeared intent on overtaking some one. It might be the individual whose form had just faded out of sight?

This was all the more probable from the style of his equitation – at short intervals bending forward in his saddle, and scanning the horizon before him, as if expecting to see some form outlined above the line of the sky.

Continuing to advance in this peculiar fashion, he also disappeared from view – exactly at the same point, where his precursor had ceased to be visible – to any one whose gaze might have been following him from the Fort or village.

An odd contingency – if such it were – that just at that very instant a third horseman rode forth from the outskirts of the little Texan town, and, like the other two, continued advancing in a direct line across the prairie.

He, also, was costumed as if for a journey. A “blanket-coat” of scarlet colour shrouded most of his person from sight – its ample skirts spread over his thighs, half concealing a short jäger rifle, strapped aslant along the flap of his saddle.

Like the foremost of the three, he exhibited no signs of a desire to move rapidly along the road. He was proceeding at a slow pace – even for a traveller. For all that, his manner betokened a state of mind far from tranquil; and in this respect he might be likened to the horseman who had more immediately preceded him.

But there was an essential difference between the actions of the two men. Whereas the cloaked cavalier appeared desirous of overtaking some one in advance, he in the red blanket coat seemed altogether to occupy himself in reconnoitring towards his rear.

At intervals he would slue himself round in the stirrups – sometimes half turn his horse – and scan the track over which he had passed; all the while listening, as though he expected to hear some one who should be coming after him.

Still keeping up this singular surveillance, he likewise in due time reached the point of disappearance, without having overtaken any one, or been himself overtaken.

Though at nearly equal distances apart while making the passage of the prairie, not one of the three horsemen was within sight of either of the others. The second, half-way between the other two, was beyond reach of the vision of either, as they were beyond his.

At the same glance no eye could have taken in all three, or any two of them; unless it had been that of the great Texan owl perched upon the summit of some high eminence, or the “whip-poor-will” soaring still higher in pursuit of the moon-loving moth.

An hour later, and at a point of the prairie ten miles farther from Fort Inge, the relative positions of the three travellers had undergone a considerable change.

The foremost was just entering into a sort of alley or gap in the chapparal forest; which here extended right and left across the plain, far as the eye could trace it. The alley might have been likened to a strait in the sea: its smooth turfed surface contrasting with the darker foliage of the bordering thickets; as water with dry land. It was illumined throughout a part of its length – a half mile or so – the moon showing at its opposite extremity. Beyond this the dark tree line closed it in, where it angled round into sombre shadow.

Before entering the alley the foremost of the trio of travellers, and for the first time, exhibited signs of hesitation. He reined up; and for a second or two sat in his saddle regarding the ground before him. His attention was altogether directed to the opening through the trees in his front. He made no attempt at reconnoitring his rear.

His scrutiny, from whatever cause, was of short continuance.

Seemingly satisfied, he muttered an injunction to his horse, and rode onward into the gap.

Though he saw not him, he was seen by the cavalier in the cloak, following upon the same track, and now scarce half a mile behind.

The latter, on beholding him, gave utterance to a slight exclamation.

It was joyful, nevertheless; as if he was gratified by the prospect of at length overtaking the individual whom he had been for ten miles so earnestly pursuing.

Spurring his horse to a still more rapid pace, he also entered the opening; but only in time to get a glimpse of the other, just passing under the shadow of the trees, at the point where the avenue angled.

Without hesitation, he rode after; soon disappearing at the same place, and in a similar manner.

It was a longer interval before the third and hindmost of the horsemen approached the pass that led through the chapparal.

He did approach it, however; but instead of riding into it, as the others had done, he turned off at an angle towards the edge of the timber; and, after leaving his horse among the trees, crossed a corner of the thicket, and came out into the opening on foot.

Keeping along it – to all appearance still more solicitous about something that might be in his rear than anything that was in front of him – he at length arrived at the shadowy turning; where, like the two others, he abruptly disappeared in the darkness.

An hour elapsed, during which the nocturnal voices of the chapparal – that had been twice temporarily silenced by the hoofstroke of a horse, and once by the footsteps of a man – had kept up their choral cries by a thousand stereotyped repetitions.

Then there came a further interruption; more abrupt in its commencement, and of longer continuance. It was caused by a sound, very different from that made by the passage of either horseman or pedestrian over the prairie turf.

It was the report of a gun, quick, sharp, and clear – the “spang” that denotes the discharge of a rifle.

As to the authoritative wave of the conductor’s baton the orchestra yields instant obedience, so did the prairie minstrels simultaneously take their cue from that abrupt detonation, that inspired one and all of them with a peculiar awe.

The tiger cat miaulling in the midst of the chapparal, the coyoté howling along its skirts; even the jaguar who need not fear any forest foe that might approach him, acknowledged his dread of that quick, sharp explosion – to him unexplainable – by instantly discontinuing his cries.

As no other sound succeeded the shot – neither the groan of a wounded man, nor the scream of a stricken animal – the jaguar soon recovered confidence, and once more essayed to frighten the denizens of the thicket with his hoarse growling.

Friends and enemies – birds, beasts, insects, and reptiles – disregarding his voice in the distance, reassumed the thread of their choral strain; until the chapparal was restored to its normal noisy condition, when two individuals standing close together, can only hold converse by speaking in the highest pitch of their voices!

## Chapter 37

### A Man Missing

The breakfast bell of Casa del Corvo had sounded its second and last summons – preceded by a still earlier signal from a horn, intended to call in the stragglers from remote parts of the plantation.

The “field hands” labouring near had collected around the “quarter;” and in groups, squatted upon the grass, or seated upon stray logs, were discussing their diet – by no means spare – of “hog and hominy” corn-bread and “corn-coffee,” with a jocosity that proclaimed a keen relish of these, their ordinary comestibles.

The planter’s family assembled in the *sala* were about to begin breakfast, when it was discovered that one of its members was missing.

Henry was the absent one.

At first there was but little notice taken of the circumstance. Only the conjecture: that he would shortly make his appearance.

As several minutes passed without his coming in, the planter quietly observed that it was rather strange of Henry to be behind time, and wonder where he could be.

The breakfast of the South-western American is usually a well appointed meal. It is eaten at a fixed hour, and *table-d’hôte*<sup>232</sup> fashion – all the members of the family meeting at the table.

This habit is exacted by a sort of necessity, arising out of the nature of some of the viands peculiar to the country; many of which, as “Virginia biscuit,” “buckwheat cakes,” and “waffles,” are only relished coming fresh from the fire: so that the hour when breakfast is being eaten in the dining-room, is that in which the cook is broiling her skin in the kitchen.

As the laggard, or late riser, may have to put up with cold biscuit, and no waffles or buckwheat cakes, there are few such on a Southern plantation.

Considering this custom, it *was* somewhat strange, that Henry Poindexter had not yet put in an appearance.

“Where can the boy be?” asked his father, for the fourth time, in that tone of mild conjecture that scarce calls for reply.

None was made by either of the other two guests at the table. Louise only gave expression to a similar conjecture. For all that, there was a strangeness in her glance – as in the tone of her voice – that might have been observed by one closely scrutinising her features.

It could scarce be caused by the absence of her brother from the breakfast-table? The circumstance was too trifling to call up an emotion; and clearly at that moment was she subject to one.

What was it? No one put the inquiry. Her father did not notice anything odd in her look. Much less Calhoun, who was himself markedly labouring to conceal some disagreeable thought under the guise of an assumed *naïveté*.

Ever since entering the room he had maintained a studied silence; keeping his eyes averted, instead of, according to his usual custom, constantly straying towards his cousin.

He sate nervously in his chair; and once or twice might have been seen to start, as a servant entered the room.

Beyond doubt he was under the influence of some extraordinary agitation.

“Very strange Henry not being here to his breakfast!” remarked the planter, for about the tenth time. “Surely he is not abed till this hour? No – no – he never lies so late. And yet if abroad,

---

<sup>232</sup> *table-d’hôte* – 1. a large dinner table for many people in hotels and restaurants; 2. a fixed menu at a fixed price

he couldn't be at such a distance as not to have heard the horn. He *may* be in his room? It is just possible. Pluto!"

"Ho – ho! d'ye call me, Mass' Woodley? I'se hya." The sable coachee, acting as table waiter, was in the *sala*, hovering around the chairs.

"Go to Henry's sleeping-room. If he's there, tell him we're at breakfast – half through with it."

"He no dar, Mass' Woodley."

"You have been to his room?"

"Ho – ho! Yas. Dat am I'se no been to de room itseff; but I'se been to de 'table, to look atter Massa Henry hoss; an gib um him fodder an corn. Ho – ho! Dat same ole hoss he ain't dar; nor han't a been all ob dis mornin'. I war up by de fuss skreek ob day. No hoss dar, no saddle, no bridle; and ob coass no Massa Henry. Ho – ho! He been an gone out 'fore anb'dy wor 'tirr'in' 'bout de place."

"Are you sure?" asked the planter, seriously stirred by the intelligence.

"Satin, shoo, Mass' Woodley. Dar's no hoss doins in dat ere 'table, ceppin de sorrel ob Massa Cahoon. Spotty am in de 'closure outside. Massa Henry hoss ain't nowha."

"It don't follow that Master Henry himself is not in his room. Go instantly, and see!"

"Ho – ho! I'se go on de instum, massr; but f'r all dat dis chile no speck find de young genl'um dar. Ho! ho! wha'ebber de ole hoss am, darr Massr Henry am too."

"There's something strange in all this," pursued the planter, as Pluto shuffled out of the *sala*. "Henry from home; and at night too. Where can he have gone? I can't think of any one he would be visiting at such unseasonable hours! He must have been out all night, or very early, according to the nigger's account! At the Port, I suppose, with those young fellows. Not at the tavern, I hope?"

"Oh, no! He wouldn't go there," interposed Calhoun, who appeared as much mystified by the absence of Henry as was Poindexter himself. He refrained, however, from suggesting any explanation, or saying aught of the scenes to which he had been witness on the preceding night.

"It is to be hoped *he* knows nothing of it," reflected the young Creole. "If not, it may still remain a secret between brother and myself. I think I can manage Henry. But why is he still absent? I've sate up all night waiting for him. He must have overtaken Maurice, and they have fraternised. I hope so; even though the tavern may have been the scene of their reconciliation. Henry is not much given to dissipation; but after such a burst of passion, followed by his sudden repentance, he may have strayed from his usual habits? Who could blame him if he has? There can be little harm in it: since he has gone astray in good company?"

How far the string of reflections might have extended it is not easy to say: since it did not reach its natural ending.

It was interrupted by the reappearance of Pluto; whose important air, as he re-entered the room, proclaimed him the bearer of eventful tidings.

"Well!" cried his master, without waiting for him to speak, "is he there?"

"No, Mass' Woodley," replied the black, in a voice that betrayed a large measure of emotion, "he are not dar – Massa Henry am not. But – but," he hesitatingly continued, "dis chile grieb to say dat – dat – *him hoss am dar*."

"His horse there! Not in his sleeping-room, I suppose?"

"No, massa; nor in de 'table neider; but out da, by de big gate."

"His horse at the gate? And why, pray, do you grieve about that?"

"'Ecause, Mass' Woodley, 'ecause de hoss – dat am Massa Henry hoss – 'ecause de anymal –

"Speak out, you stammering nigger! What because? I suppose the horse has his head upon him? Or is it his tail that is missing?"

"Ah, Mass' Woodley, dis nigga fear dat am missin' wuss dan eider him head or him tail. I'se feer'd dat de ole hoss hab loss him rider!"

“What! Henry thrown from his horse? Nonsense, Pluto! My son is too good a rider for that. Impossible that *he* should have been pitched out of the saddle – impossible!”

“Ho! ho! I doan say he war frown out ob de saddle. Gorramity! I fear de trouble wuss dan dat. O! dear ole Massa, I tell you no mo’. Come to de gate ob do hashashanty, and see fo youseff.”

By this time the impression conveyed by Pluto’s speech – much more by his manner – notwithstanding its ambiguity, had become sufficiently alarming; and not only the planter himself, but his daughter and nephew, hastily forsaking their seats, and preceded by the sable coachman, made their way to the outside gate of the hacienda.

A sight was there awaiting them, calculated to inspire all three with the most terrible apprehensions.

A negro man – one of the field slaves of the plantation – stood holding a horse, that was saddled and bridled. The animal wet with the dews of the night, and having been evidently uncared for in any stable, was snorting and stamping the ground, as if but lately escaped from some scene of excitement, in which he had been compelled to take part.

He was speckled with a colour darker than that of the dewdrops – darker than his own coat of bay-brown. The spots scattered over his shoulders – the streaks that ran parallel with the downward direction of his limbs, the blotches showing conspicuously on the saddle-flaps, were all of the colour of coagulated blood. Blood had caused them – spots, streaks, and blotches!

Whence came that horse?

From the prairies. The negro had caught him, on the outside plain, as, with the bridle trailing among his feet, he was instinctively straying towards the hacienda.

To whom did he belong?

The question was not asked. All present knew him to be the horse of Henry Poindexter.

Nor did any one ask whose blood bedaubed the saddle-flaps. The three individuals most interested could think only of that one, who stood to them in the triple relationship of son, brother, and cousin.

The dark red spots on which they were distractedly gazing had spurted from the veins of Henry Poindexter. They had no other thought.



## Chapter 38

### The Avengers

Hastily – perhaps too truly – construing the sinister evidence, the half-frantic father leaped into the bloody saddle, and galloped direct for the Fort.

Calhoun, upon his own horse, followed close after.

The hue and cry soon spread abroad. Rapid riders carried it up and down the river, to the remotest plantations of the settlement.

The Indians were out, and near at hand, reaping their harvest of scalps! That of young Poindexter was the firstfruits of their sanguinary gleanings!

Henry Poindexter – the noble generous youth who had not an enemy in all Texas! Who but Indians could have spilled such innocent blood? Only the Comanches could have been so cruel?

Among the horsemen, who came quickly together on the parade ground of Port Inge, no one doubted that the Comanches had done the deed. It was simply a question of how, when, and where.

The blood drops pretty clearly, proclaimed the first. He who had shed them must have been shot, or speared, while sitting in his saddle. They were mostly on the off side; where they presented an appearance, as if something had been slaked over them. This was seen both on the shoulders of the horse, and the flap of the saddle. Of course it was the body of the rider as it slipped lifeless to the earth.

There were some who spoke with equal certainty as to the time – old frontiersmen experienced in such matters.

According to them the blood was scarce “ten hours old.” in other words, must have been shed about ten hours before.

It was now noon. The murder must have been committed at *two* o’clock in the morning.

The third query was, perhaps, the most important – at least now that the deed was done.

*Where* had it been done? Where was the body to be found?

After that, where should the assassins be sought for?

These were the questions discussed by the mixed council of settlers and soldiers, hastily assembled at Port Inge, and presided over by the commandant of the Fort – the afflicted father standing speechless by his side.

The last was of special importance. There are thirty-two points in the compass of the prairies, as well as in that which guides the ocean wanderer; and, therefore, in any expedition going in search of a war-party of Comanches, there would be thirty-two chances to one against its taking the right track.

It mattered not that the home of these nomadic savages was in the west. That was a wide word; and signified anywhere within a semicircle of some hundreds of miles.

Besides, the Indians were now upon the *war-trail*; and, in an isolated settlement such as that of the Leona, as likely to make their appearance from the east. More likely, indeed, since such is a common strategic trick of these astute warriors.

To have ridden forth at random would have been sheer folly; with such odds against going the right way, as thirty-two to one.

A proposal to separate the command into several parties, and proceed in different directions, met with little favour from any one. It was directly negatived by the major himself.

The murderers might be a thousand, the avengers were but the tenth of that number: consisting of some fifty dragoons who chanced to be in garrison, with about as many mounted civilians. The party must be kept together, or run the risk of being attacked, and perhaps cut off, in detail!

The argument was deemed conclusive. Even, the bereaved father – and cousin, who appeared equally the victim of a voiceless grief – consented to shape their course according to the counsels of the more prudent majority, backed by the authority of the major himself.

It was decided that the searchers should proceed in a body.

In what direction? This still remained the subject of discussion.

The thoughtful captain of infantry now became a conspicuous figure, by suggesting that some inquiry should be made, as to what direction had been last taken by the man who was supposed to be murdered. Who last saw Henry Poindexter?

His father and cousin were first appealed to.

The former had last seen his son at the supper table; and supposed him to have gone thence to his bed.

The answer of Calhoun was less direct, and, perhaps, less satisfactory. He had conversed with his cousin at a later hour, and had bidden him good night, under the impression that he was retiring to his room.

Why was Calhoun concealing what had really occurred? Why did he refrain from giving a narration of that garden scene to which he had been witness?

Was it, that he feared humiliation by disclosing the part he had himself played?

Whatever was the reason, the truth was shunned; and an answer given, the sincerity of which was suspected by more than one who listened to it.

The evasiveness might have been more apparent, had there been any reason for suspicion, or had the bystanders been allowed longer time to reflect upon it.

While the inquiry was going on, light came in from a quartet hitherto unthought of. The landlord of the Rough and Ready, who had come uncalled to the council, after forcing his way through the crowd, proclaimed himself willing to communicate some facts worth their hearing – in short, the very facts they were endeavouring to find out: when Henry Poindexter had been last seen, and what the direction he had taken.

Oberdoffer's testimony, delivered in a semi-Teutonic tongue, was to the effect: that Maurice the mustanger – who had been staying at his hotel ever since his fight with Captain Calhoun – had that night ridden out at a late hour, as he had done for several nights before.

He had returned to the hotel at a still later hour; and finding it open – on account of a party of *bons vivants*<sup>233</sup> who had supped there – had done that which he had not done for a long time before – demanded his bill, and to Old Duffer's astonishment – as the latter naïvely confessed – settled every cent of it!

Where he had procured the money "Gott" only knew, or why he left the hotel in such a hurry. Oberdoffer himself only knew that he had left it, and taken all his 'trapsh' along with him – just as he was in the habit of doing, whenever he went off upon one of his horse-catching expeditions.

On one of these the village Boniface supposed him to have gone.

What had all this to do with the question before the council? Much indeed; though it did not appear till the last moment of his examination, when the witness revealed the more pertinent facts: – that about twenty minutes after the mustanger had taken his departure from the hotel, "Heinrich Poindexter" knocked at the door, and inquired after Mr Maurice Gerald; – that on being told the latter was gone, as also the time, and probable direction he had taken, the "young gentlemen" rode off at a quick pace, as if with the intention of overtaking him.

This was all Mr Oberdoffer knew of the matter; and all he could be expected to tell.

The intelligence, though containing several points but ill understood, was nevertheless a guide to the expeditionary party. It furnished a sort of clue to the direction they ought to take. If

---

<sup>233</sup> **bon vivant** – a person who enjoys life and lives to his/her own pleasure

the missing man had gone off with Maurice the mustanger, or after him, he should be looked for on the road the latter himself would be likely to have taken.

Did any one know where the horse-hunter had his home?

No one could state the exact locality; though there were several who believed it was somewhere among the head-waters of the Nueces, on a creek called the "Alamo."

To the Alamo, then, did they determine upon proceeding in quest of the missing man, or his dead body – perhaps, also, to find that of Maurice the mustanger; and, at the same time, avenge upon the savage assassins two murders instead of one.

## Chapter 39

### The Pool of Blood

Notwithstanding its number – larger than usual for a party of borderers merely in search of a strayed neighbour – the expedition pursued its way with, considerable caution.

There was reason. The Indians were upon the war-trail. Scouts<sup>234</sup> were sent out in advance; and professed “trackers” employed to pick up, and interpret the “sign.”

On the prairie, extending nearly ten miles to the westward of the Leona, no trail was discovered. The turf, hard and dry, only showed the tracks of a horse when going in a gallop. None such were seen along the route.

At ten miles’ distance from the Fort the plain is traversed by a tract of chaparral, running north-west and south-east. It is a true Texan jungle, laced by llianas, and almost impenetrable for man and horse.

Through this jungle, directly opposite the Fort, there is an opening, through which passes a path – the shortest that leads to the head waters of the Nueces. It is a sort of natural avenue among the trees that stand closely crowded on each side, but refrain from meeting. It may be artificial: some old “war-trail” of the Comanches, erst trodden by their expeditionary parties on the maraud to Tamaulipas, Coahuila, or New Leon.

The trackers knew that it conducted to the Alamo; and, therefore, guided the expedition into it.

Shortly after entering among the trees, one of the latter, who had gone afoot in the advance, was seen standing by the edge of the thicket, as if waiting to announce some recently discovered fact.

“What is it?” demanded the major, spurring ahead of the others, and riding up to the tracker. “Sign?”

“Ay, that there is, major; and plenty of it. Look there! In that bit of sottish ground you see – ”

“The tracks of a horse.”

“Of two horses, major,” said the man, correcting the officer with an air of deference.

“True. There are two.”

“Farther on they become four; though they’re all made by the same two horses. They have gone up this openin’ a bit, and come back again.”

“Well, Spangler, my good fellow; what do you make of it?”

“Not much,” replied Spangler, who was one of the paid scouts of the cantonment; “not much of *that*; I hav’n’t been far enough up the openin’ to make out what it means – only far enough to know that *a man has been murdered*.”

“What proof have you of what you say? Is there a dead body?”

“No. Not as much as the little finger; not even a hair of the head, so fur as I can see.”

“What then?”

“Blood, a regular pool of it – enough to have cleared out the carcass<sup>235</sup> of a hull buffalo. Come and see for yourself. But,” continued the scout in a muttered undertone, “if you wish me to follow up the sign as it ought to be done, you’ll order the others to stay back – ’specially them as are now nearest you.”

This observation appeared to be more particularly pointed at the planter and his nephew; as the tracker, on making it, glanced furtively towards both.

---

<sup>234</sup> **Scouts** – rangers, reconnoiterers

<sup>235</sup> **carcass** – a dead body of a human being or animal

“By all means,” replied the major. “Yes, Spangler, you shall have every facility for your work. Gentlemen! may I request you to remain where you are for a few minutes. My tracker, here, has to go through a performance that requires him to have the ground to himself. He can only take me along with him.”

Of course the major’s request was a command, courteously conveyed, to men who were not exactly his subordinates. It was obeyed, however, just as if they had been; and one and all kept their places, while the officer, following his scout, rode away from the ground.

About fifty yards further on, Spangler came to a stand.

“You see that, major?” said he, pointing to the ground.

“I should be blind if I didn’t,” replied the officer. “A pool of blood – as you say, big enough to have emptied the veins of a buffalo. If it has come from those of a man, I should say that whoever shed it is no longer in the land of the living.”

“Dead!” pronounced the tracker. “Dead before that blood had turned purple – as it is now.”

“Whose do you think it is, Spangler?”

“That of the man we’re in search of – the son of the old gentleman down there. That’s why I didn’t wish him to come forward.”

“He may as well know the worst. He must find it out in time.”

“True what you say, major; but we had better first find out how the young fellow has come to be thrown in his tracks. That’s what is puzzling me.”

“How! by the Indians, of course? The Comanches have done it?”

“Not a bit of it,” rejoined the scout, with an air of confidence.

“Hu! why do you say that, Spangler?”

“Because, you see, if the Indyins had a been here, there would be forty horse-tracks instead of four, and them made by only two horses.”

“There’s truth in that. It isn’t likely a single Comanch would have had the daring, even to assassinate – ”

“No Comanche, major, no Indyin of any kind committed this murder. There are two horse-tracks along the opening. As you see, both are shod; and they’re the same that have come back again. Comanches don’t ride shod horses, except when they’ve stolen them. Both these were ridden by white men. One set of the tracks has been made by a mustang, though it it was a big ’un. The other is the hoof of an American horse. Goin’ west the mustang was foremost; you can tell that by the overlap. Comin’ back the States horse was in the lead, the other followin’ him; though it’s hard to say how fur behind. I may be able to tell better, if we keep on to the place whar both must have turned back. It can’t be a great ways off.”

“Let us proceed thither, then,” said the major. “I shall command the people to stay where they are.”

Having issued the command, in a voice loud enough to be heard by his following, the major rode away from the bloodstained spot, preceded by the tracker.

For about four hundred yards further on, the two sets of tracks were traceable; but by the eye of the major, only where the turf was softer under the shadow of the trees. So far – the scout said the horses had passed and returned in the order already declared by him: – that is, the mustang in the lead while proceeding westward, and in the rear while going in the opposite direction.

At this point the trail ended – both horses, as was already known, having returned on their own tracks.

Before taking the back track, however, they had halted, and stayed some time in the same place – under the branches of a spreading cottonwood. The turf, much trampled around the trunk of the tree, was evidence of this.

The tracker got off his horse to examine it; and, stooping to the earth, carefully scrutinised the sign.

“They’ve been here thegither,” said he, after several minutes spent in his analysis, “and for some time; though neither’s been out of the saddle. They’ve been on friendly terms, too; which makes it all the more unexplainable. They must have quarrelled afterwards.”

“If you are speaking the truth, Spangler, you must be a witch. How on earth can you know all that?”

“By the sign, major; by the sign. It’s simple enough. I see the shoes of both horses lapping over each other a score of times; and in such a way that shows they must have been thegither – the animals, it might be, restless and movin’ about. As for the time, they’ve taken long enough to smoke a cigar apiece – close to the teeth too. Here are the stumps; not enough left to fill a fellow’s pipe.”

The tracker, stooping as he spoke, picked up a brace of cigar stumps, and handed them to the major.

“By the same token,” he continued, “I conclude that the two horsemen, whoever they were, while under this tree could not have had any very hostile feelins, the one to the tother. Men don’t smoke in company with the design of cutting each other’s throats, or blowing out one another’s brains, the instant afterwards. The trouble between them must have come on after the cigars were smoked out. That it did come there can be no doubt. As sure, major, as you’re sittin’ in your saddle, one of them has wiped out the other. I can only guess which has been wiped out, by the errand we’re on. Poor Mr Poindexter will niver more see his son alive.”

“’Tis very mysterious,” remarked the major.

“It is, by jingo!”

“And the body, too; where can *it* be?”

“That’s what purplexes me most of all. If ’t had been Indyins, I wouldn’t a thought much o’ its being missin’. They might a carried the man off wi them to make a target of him, if only wounded; and if dead, to eat him, maybe. But there’s been no Indyins here – not a redskin. Take my word for it, major, one o’ the two men who rid these horses has wiped out the other; and sartinly he *have* wiped him out in the litterlest sense o’ the word. What he’s done wi’ the body beats me; and perhaps only hisself can tell.”

“Most strange!” exclaimed the major, pronouncing the words with emphasis – “most mysterious!”

“It’s possible we may yet unravel some o’ the mystery,” pursued Spangler. “We must follow up the tracks of the horses, after they started from this – that is, from where the deed was done. We may make something out of that. There’s nothing more to be learnt here. We may as well go back, major. Am I to tell *him*?”

“Mr Poindexter, you mean?”

“Yes. You are convinced that his son is the man who has been murdered?”

“Oh, no; not so much as that comes to. Only convinced that the horse the old gentleman is now riding is one of the two that’s been over this ground last night – the States horse I feel sure. I have compared the tracks; and if young Poindexter was the man who was on *his back*, I fear there’s not much chance for the poor fellow. It looks ugly that the other *rid after* him.”

“Spangler! have you any suspicion as to who the other may be?”

“Not a spark, major. If’t hadn’t been for the tale of Old Duffer I’d never have thought of Maurice the mustanger. True, it’s the track o’ a shod mustang; but I don’t know it to be hisn. Surely it can’t be? The young Irishman aint the man to stand nonsense from nobody; but as little air he the one to do a deed like this – that is, if it’s been cold-blooded killin’.”

“I think as you about that.”

“And you may think so, major. If young Poindexter’s been killed, and by Maurice Gerald, there’s been a fair stand-up fight atween them, and the planter’s son has gone under. That’s how I shed reckon it up. As to the disappearance o’ the dead body – for them two quarts o’ blood could only have come out o’ a body that’s now dead – that *trees me*. We must follow the trail, howsoever;

and maybe it'll fetch us to some sensible conclloosion. Am I to tell the old gentleman what I think o't?"

"Perhaps better not. He knows enough already. It will at least fall lighter upon him if he find things out by piecemeal. Say nothing of what we've seen. If you can take up the trail of the two horses after going off from the place where the blood is, I shall manage to bring the command after you without any one suspecting what we've seen."

"All right, major," said the scout, "I think I can guess where the off trail goes. Give me ten minutes upon it, and then come on to my signal."

So saying the tracker rode back to the "place of blood;" and after what appeared a very cursory examination, turned off into a lateral opening in the chapparal.

Within the promised time his shrill whistle announced that he was nearly a mile distant, and in a direction altogether different from the spot that had been profaned by some sanguinary scene.

On hearing the signal, the commander of the expedition – who had in the meantime returned to his party – gave orders to advance; while he himself, with Poindexter and the other principal men, moved ahead, without his revealing to any one of his retinue the chapter of strange disclosures for which he was indebted to the "instincts" of his tracker.

## Chapter 40

### The Marked Bullet

Before coming up with the scout, an incident occurred to vary the monotony of the march. Instead of keeping along the avenue, the major had conducted his command in a diagonal direction through the chapparal. He had done this to avoid giving unnecessary pain to the afflicted father; who would otherwise have looked upon the life-blood of his son, or at least what the major believed to be so. The gory spot was shunned, and as the discovery was not yet known to any other save the major himself, and the tracker who had made it, the party moved on in ignorance of the existence of such a dread sign.

The path they were now pursuing was a mere cattle-track, scarce broad enough for two to ride abreast. Here and there were glades where it widened out for a few yards, again running into the thorny chapparal.

On entering one of these glades, an animal sprang out of the bushes, and bounded off over the sward. A beautiful creature it was, with its fulvous coat ocellated with rows of shining rosettes; its strong lithe limbs supporting a smooth cylindrical body, continued into a long tapering tail; the very type of agility; a creature rare even in these remote solitudes – the jaguar.

Its very rarity rendered it the more desirable as an object to test the skill of the marksman; and, notwithstanding the serious nature of the expedition, two of the party were tempted to discharge their rifles at the retreating animal.

They were Cassius Calhoun, and a young planter who was riding by his side.

The jaguar dropped dead in its tracks: a bullet having entered its body, and traversed the spine in a longitudinal direction.

Which of the two was entitled to the credit of the successful shot? Calhoun claimed it, and so did the young planter.

The shots had been fired simultaneously, and only one of them had hit.

“I shall show you,” confidently asserted the ex-officer, dismounting beside the dead jaguar, and unsheathing his knife. “You see, gentlemen, the ball is still in the animal’s body? If it’s mine, you’ll find my initials on it – C.C. – with a crescent. I mould my bullets so that I can always tell when I’ve killed my game.”

The swaggering air with which he held up the leaden missile after extracting it told that he had spoken the truth. A few of the more curious drew near and examined the bullet. Sure enough it was moulded as Calhoun had declared, and the dispute ended in the discomfiture of the young planter.

The party soon after came up with the tracker, waiting to conduct them along a fresh trail.

It was no longer a track made by two horses, with shod hooves. The turf showed only the hoof-marks of one; and so indistinctly, that at times they were undiscernible to all eyes save those of the tracker himself.

The trace carried them through the thicket, from glade to glade – after a circuitous march – bringing them back into the lane-like opening, at a point still further to the west.

Spangler – though far from being the most accomplished of his calling – took it; up as fast as the people could ride after him. In his own mind he had determined the character of the animal whose footmarks he was following. He knew it to be a mustang – the same that had stood under the cottonwood whilst its rider was smoking a cigar – the same whose hoof-mark he had seen deeply indented in a sod saturated with human blood.

The track of the States horse he had also followed for a short distance – in the interval, when he was left alone. He saw that it would conduct him back to the prairie through which they had passed; and thence, in all likelihood, to the settlements on the Leona.



He had forsaken it to trace the footsteps of the shod mustang; more likely to lead him to an explanation of that red mystery of murder – perhaps to the den of the assassin.

Hitherto perplexed by the hoof-prints of two horses alternately overlapping each other, he was not less puzzled now, while scrutinising the tracks of but one.

They went not direct, as those of an animal urged onwards upon a journey; but here and there zigzagging; occasionally turning upon themselves in short curves; then forward for a stretch; and then circling again, as if the mustang was either not mounted, or its rider was asleep in the saddle!

Could these be the hoof-prints of a horse with a man upon his back – an assassin skulking away from the scene of assassination, his conscience freshly excited by the crime?

Spangler did not think so. He knew not what to think. He was mystified more than ever. So confessed he to the major, when being questioned as to the character of the trail.

A spectacle that soon afterwards came under his eyes – simultaneously seen by every individual of the party – so far from solving the mystery, had the effect of rendering it yet more inexplicable.

More than this. What had hitherto been but an ambiguous affair – a subject for guess and speculation – was suddenly transformed into a horror; of that intense kind that can only spring from thoughts of the supernatural.

No one could say that this feeling of horror had arisen without reason.

When a man is seen mounted on a horse's back, seated firmly in the saddle, with limbs astride in the stirrups, body erect, and hand holding the rein – in short, everything in air and attitude required of a rider; when, on closer scrutiny, it is observed: that there is something wanting to complete the idea of a perfect equestrian; and, on still closer scrutiny, that this something is the *head*, it would be strange if the spectacle did not startle the beholder, terrifying him to the very core of his heart.

And this very sight came before their eyes; causing them simultaneously to rein up, and with as much suddenness, as if each had rashly ridden within less than his horse's length of the brink of an abyss!

The sun was low down, almost on a level with the sward. Facing westward, his disc was directly before them. His rays, glaring redly in their eyes, hindered them from having a very accurate view, towards the quarter of the west. Still could they see that strange shape above described – a horseman without a head!

Had only one of the party declared himself to have seen it, he would have been laughed at by his companions as a lunatic. Even two might have been stigmatised in a similar manner.

But what everybody saw at the same time, could not be questioned; and only he would have been thought crazed, who should have expressed incredulity about the presence of the abnormal phenomenon.

No one did. The eyes of all were turned in the same direction, their gaze intently fixed on what was either a horseman without the head, or the best counterfeit that could have been contrived.

Was it this? If not, what was it?

These interrogatories passed simultaneously through the minds of all. As no one could answer them, even to himself, no answer was vouchsafed. Soldiers and civilians sate silent in their saddles – each expecting an explanation, which the other was unable to supply.

There could be heard only mutterings, expressive of surprise and terror. No one even offered a conjecture.

The headless horseman, whether phantom or real, when first seen, was about entering the avenue – near the debouchure of which the searchers had arrived. Had he continued his course, he must have met them in the teeth – supposing their courage to have been equal to the encounter.

As it was, he had halted at the same instant as themselves; and stood regarding them with a mistrust that may have been mutual.

There was an interval of silence on both sides, during which a cigar stump might have been heard falling upon the sward. It was then the strange apparition was most closely scrutinised by those who had the courage: for the majority of the men sat shivering in their stirrups – through sheer terror, incapable even of thought!

The few who dared face the mystery, with any thought of accounting for it, were baffled in their investigation by the glare of the setting sun. They could only see that there was a horse of large size and noble shape, with a man upon his back. The figure of the man was less easily determined, on account of the limbs being inserted into overalls, while his shoulders were enveloped in an ample cloak-like covering.

What signified his shape, so long as it wanted that portion most essential to existence? A man without a head – on horseback, sitting erect in the saddle, in an attitude of ease and grace – with spurs sparkling upon his heels – the bridle-rein held in one hand – the other where it should be, resting lightly upon his thigh!

Great God! what could it mean?

Was it a phantom? Surely it could not be human?

They who viewed it were not the men to have faith either in phantoms, or phantasmagoria<sup>236</sup>. Many of them had met Nature in her remotest solitudes, and wrestled with her in her roughest moods. They were not given to a belief in ghosts.

But the confidence of the most incredulous was shaken by a sight so strange – so absolutely unnatural – and to such an extent, that the stoutest hearted of the party was forced mentally to repeat the words: —

*“Is it a phantom? Surely it cannot be human?”*

Its size favoured the idea of the supernatural. It appeared double that of an ordinary man upon an ordinary horse. It was more like a giant on a gigantic steed; though this might have been owing to the illusory light under which it was seen – the refraction of the sun’s rays passing horizontally through the tremulous atmosphere of the parched plain.

There was but little time to philosophise – not enough to complete a careful scrutiny of the unearthly apparition, which every one present, with hand spread over his eyes to shade them from the dazzling glare, was endeavouring to make.

Nothing of colour could be noted – neither the garments of the man, nor the hairy coat of the horse. Only the shape could be traced, outlined in sable silhouette against the golden background of the sky; and this in every change of attitude, whether fronting the spectators, or turned stern towards them, was still the same – still that inexplicable phenomenon: *a horseman without a head!*

Was it a phantom? Surely it could not be human?

“’Tis old Nick upon horseback!” cried a fearless frontiersman, who would scarce have quailed to encounter his Satanic majesty even in that guise. “By the ’tarnal Almighty, it’s the devil himself.”

The boisterous laugh which succeeded the profane utterance of the reckless speaker, while it only added to the awe of his less courageous comrades, appeared to produce an effect on the headless horseman. Wheeling suddenly round – his horse at the same time sending forth a scream that caused either the earth or the atmosphere to tremble – he commenced galloping away.

He went direct towards the sun; and continued this course, until only by his motion could he be distinguished from one of those spots that have puzzled the philosopher – at length altogether disappearing, as though he had ridden into the dazzling disc!

---

<sup>236</sup> **phantasmagoria** – fantastic, unreal pictures; ghostly images

## Chapter 41

### Cuatro Cavalleros

The party of searchers, under the command of the major, was not the only one that went forth from Fort Inge on that eventful morning.

Nor was it the earliest to take saddle. Long before – in fact close following the dawn of day – a much smaller party, consisting of only four horsemen, was seen setting out from the suburbs of the village, and heading their horses in the direction of the Nueces.

These could not be going in search of the dead body of Henry Poindexter. At that hour no one suspected that the young man was dead, or even that he was missing. The riderless horse had not yet come in to tell the tale of woe. The settlement was still slumbering, unconscious that innocent blood had been spilt.

Though setting out from nearly the same point, and proceeding in a like direction, there was not the slightest similarity between the two parties of mounted men. Those earliest a-start were all of pure Iberian<sup>237</sup> blood; or this commingled with Aztec<sup>238</sup>. In other words they were Mexicans.

It required neither skill nor close scrutiny to discover this. A glance at themselves and their horses, their style of equitation, the slight muscular development of their thighs and hips – more strikingly observable in their deep-tree saddles – the gaily coloured serapes shrouding their shoulders, the wide velveteen calzoneros on their legs, the big spurs on their boots, and broad-brimmed sombreros on their heads, declared them either Mexicans, or men who had adopted the Mexican costume.

That they were the former there was not a question. The sallow hue; the pointed Vandyke<sup>239</sup> beard, covering the chin, sparsely – though not from any thinning by the shears – the black, close-cropped *chevelure*; the regular facial outline, were all indisputable characteristics of the Hispano-Moro-Aztec race, who now occupy the ancient territory of the Moctezumas.

One of the four was a man of larger frame than any of his companions. He rode a better horse; was more richly apparelled; carried upon his person arms and equipments of a superior finish; and was otherwise distinguished, so as to leave no doubt about his being the leader of the *cuartilla*<sup>240</sup>.

He was a man of between thirty and forty years of age, nearer to the latter than the former; though a smooth, rounded cheek – furnished with a short and carefully trimmed whisker – gave him the appearance of being younger than he was.

But for a cold animal eye, and a heaviness of feature that betrayed a tendency to behave with brutality – if not with positive cruelty – the individual in question might have been described as handsome.

A well formed mouth, with twin rows of white teeth between the lips, even when these were exhibited in a smile, did not remove this unpleasant impression. It but reminded the beholder of the sardonic grin that may have been given by Satan, when, after the temptation had succeeded, he gazed contemptuously back upon the mother of mankind.

It was not his looks that had led to his having become known among his comrades by a peculiar nick-name; that of an animal well known upon the plains of Texas.

His deeds and disposition had earned for him the unenviable soubriquet “El Coyote.”

---

<sup>237</sup> **Iberian** – Iberian people used to live in the southeast of Spain; in the text, *Iberian* means *Spanish*

<sup>238</sup> **Aztec** – related to the Aztec people

<sup>239</sup> **Vandyke** – Anthony Van Dyck (1599–1641), the most famous Flemish painter; beards and collars in the portraits by Van Dyck came into fashion under his name: Vandyke beard, Vandyke collar

<sup>240</sup> **cuartilla** – the four of them (*Spanish*)

How came he to be crossing the prairie at this early hour of the morning – apparently sober, and acting as the leader of others – when on the same morning, but a few hours before, he was seen drunk in his jacalé – so drunk as to be unconscious of having a visitor, or, at all events, incapable of giving that visitor a civil reception?

The change of situation though sudden – and to some extent strange – is not so difficult of explanation. It will be understood after an account has been given of his movements, from the time of Calhoun's leaving him, till the moment of meeting him in the saddle, in company with his three *conpaisanos*<sup>241</sup>.

On riding away from his hut, Calhoun had left the door, as he had found it, ajar; and in this way did it remain until the morning – El Coyote all the time continuing his sonorous slumber.

At daybreak he was aroused by the raw air that came drifting over him in the shape of a chilly fog. This to some extent sobered him; and, springing up from his skin-covered truck, he commenced staggering over the floor – all the while uttering anathemas against the cold, and the door for letting it in.

It might be expected that he would have shut to the latter on the instant; but he did not. It was the only aperture, excepting some holes arising from dilapidation, by which light was admitted into the interior of the jacalé; and light he wanted, to enable him to carry out the design that had summoned him to his feet.

The grey dawn, just commencing to creep in through the open doorway, scarce sufficed for his purpose; and it was only after a good while spent in groping about, interspersed with a series of stumblings, and accompanied by a string of profane exclamations, that he succeeded in finding that he was searching for: a large two-headed gourd, with a strap around its middle, used as a canteen for carrying water, or more frequently *mezcal*<sup>242</sup>.

The odour escaping from its uncorked end told that it had recently contained this potent spirit; but that it was now empty, was announced by another profane ejaculation that came from the lips of its owner, as he made the discovery.

“*Sangre de Cristo!*” he cried, in an accent of angry disappointment, giving the gourd a shake to assure himself of its emptiness. “Not a drop – not enough to drown a chiga! And my tongue sticking to my teeth. My throat feels as if I had bolted a *brazero* of red-hot charcoal. Por Dios! I can't stand it. What's to be done? Daylight? It is. I must up to the *pueblita*<sup>243</sup>. It's possible that Señor Doffer may have his trap open by this time to catch the early birds. If so, he'll find a customer in the Coyote. Ha, ha, ha!”

Slinging the gourd strap around his neck, and thrusting his head through the slit of his serapé, he set forth for the village.

The tavern was but a few hundred yards from his hut, on the same side of the river, and approachable by a path, that he could have travelled with his eyes under “tapojos.” In twenty minutes after, he was staggering past the sign-post of the “Rough and Ready.”

He chanced to be in luck. Oberdoffer was in his bar-room, serving some early customers – a party of soldiers who had stolen out of quarters to swallow their morning dram.

“Mein Gott<sup>244</sup>, Mishter Dees!” said the landlord, saluting the newly arrived guest, and without ceremony forsaking six *credit* customers, for one that he knew to be *cash*. “Mein Gott! is it you I sees so early ashtir? I knowsh vat you vant. You vant your pig coord fill mit ze Mexican spirits – ag – ag – vat you call it?”

---

<sup>241</sup> **conpaisanos** – here: compatriots (*Spanish*)

<sup>242</sup> **mezcal** – a strong alcoholic drink (*Spanish*)

<sup>243</sup> **pueblita** – a small settlement (*Spanish*)

<sup>244</sup> **Mein Gott** – My God! (*German*)

“*Aguardiente*<sup>245</sup>! You’ve guessed it, cavallero. That’s just what I want.”

“A tollar – von tollar ish the price.”

“*Carrambo*! I’ve paid it often enough to know that. Here’s the coin, and there’s the canteen. Fill, and be quick about it!”

“Ha! you ish in a hurry, mein herr. Fel – I von’t keeps you waitin’; I suppose you ish off for the wild horsh prairish. If there’s anything goot among the droves, I’m afeart that the Irishmans will pick it up before you. He went off lasht night. He left my housh at a late hour – after midnight it wash – a very late hour, to go a shourney! But he’s a queer cushtomer is that mushtanger, Mister Maurish Sherralt. Nobody knows his ways. I shouldn’t say anythings againsht him. He hash been a goot cushtomer to me. He has paid his bill like a rich man, and he hash plenty peside. Mein Gott! his pockets wash cramm mit tollars!”

On hearing that the Irishman had gone off to the “horsh prairish,” as Oberdoffer termed them, the Mexican by his demeanour betrayed more than an ordinary interest in the announcement.

It was proclaimed, first by a slight start of surprise, and then by an impatience of manner that continued to mark his movements, while listening to the long rigmarole that followed.

It was clear that he did not desire anything of this to be observed. Instead of questioning his informant upon the subject thus started, or voluntarily displaying any interest in it, he rejoined in a careless drawl —

“It don’t concern me, cavallero. There are plenty of *musteños*<sup>246</sup> on the plains – enough to give employment to all the horse-catchers in Texas. Look alive, señor, and let’s have the *aguardiente*!”

A little chagrined at being thus rudely checked in his attempt at a gossip, the German Boniface hastily filled the gourd canteen; and, without essaying farther speech, handed it across the counter, took the dollar in exchange, chucked the coin into his till, and then moved back to his military customers, more amiable because drinking *upon the score*.

Diaz, notwithstanding the eagerness he had lately exhibited to obtain the liquor, walked out of the bar-room, and away from the hotel, without taking the stopper from his canteen, or even appearing to think of it!

His excited air was no longer that of a man merely longing for a glass of ardent spirits. There was something stronger stirring within, that for the time rendered him oblivious of the appetite.

Whatever it may have been it did not drive him direct to his home: for not until he had paid a visit to three other hovels somewhat similar to his own – all situated in the suburbs of the *pueblita*, and inhabited by men like himself – not till then, did he return to his jacalé.

It was on getting back, that he noticed for the first time the tracks of a shod horse; and saw where the animal had been tied to a tree that stood near the hut.

“*Carrambo*!” he exclaimed, on perceiving this sign, “*the Capitan Americano* has been here in the night. Por Dios! I remember something – I thought I had dreamt it. I can guess his errand. He has heard of Don Mauricio’s departure. Perhaps he’ll repeat his visit, when he thinks I’m in a proper state to receive him? Ha! ha! It don’t matter now. The thing’s all understood; and I sha’n’t need any further instructions from him, till I’ve earned his thousand dollars. *Mil pesos*! What a splendid fortune! Once gained, I shall go back to the Rio Grande, and see what can be done with Isidora.”

After delivering the above soliloquy, he remained at his hut only long enough to swallow a few mouthfuls of roasted *tasajo*<sup>247</sup>, washing them down with as many gulps of mezcal. Then having caught and caparisoned his horse, buckled on his huge heavy spurs, strapped his short carbine to the saddle, thrust a pair of pistols into their holsters, and belted the leathern sheathed macheté on his hip, he sprang into the stirrups, and rode rapidly away.

---

<sup>245</sup> *Aguardiente* – Mexican rum (*Spanish*)

<sup>246</sup> *musteños* – mustangs (*Spanish*)

<sup>247</sup> *tasajo* – here: meat

The short interval that elapsed, before making his appearance on the open plain, was spent in the suburbs of the village – waiting for the three horsemen who accompanied him, and who had been forewarned of their being wanted to act as his coadjutors, in some secret exploit that required their assistance.

Whatever it was, his trio of *confrères*<sup>248</sup> appeared to have been made acquainted with the scheme; or at all events that the scene of the exploit was to be on the Alamo. When a short distance out upon the plain, seeing Diaz strike off in a diagonal direction, they called out to warn him, that he was not going the right way.

“I know the Alamo well,” said one of them, himself a mustanger. “I’ve hunted horses there many a time. It’s southwest from here. The nearest way to it is through an opening in the chapparal you see out yonder. You are heading too much to the west, Don Miguel!”

“Indeed!” contemptuously retorted the leader of the *cuartilla*. “You’re a *gringo*<sup>249</sup>, Señor Vicente Barajo! You forget the errand we’re upon; and that we are riding shod horses? Indians don’t go out from Port Inge and then direct to the Alamo to do – no matter what. I suppose you understand me?”

“Oh true!” answered Señor Vicente Barajo, “I beg your pardon, Don Miguel. *Carrambo!* I did not think of that.”

And without further protest, the three coadjutors of El Coyote fell into his tracks, and followed him in silence – scarce another word passing between him and them, till they had struck the chapparal, at a point several miles above the opening of which Barajo had made mention.

Once under cover of the thicket, the four men dismounted; and, after tying their horses to the trees, commenced a performance that could only be compared to a scene in the gentlemen’s dressing-room of a suburban theatre, preliminary to the representation of some savage and sanguinary drama.

---

<sup>248</sup> **confrères** – comrades, friends (*French*)

<sup>249</sup> **gringo** – a contemptuous name for Americans in Latin American countries

## Chapter 42

### Vultures on the Wing

He who has travelled across the plains of Southern Texas cannot fail to have witnessed a spectacle of common occurrence – a flock of black vultures upon the wing.

An hundred or more in the flock, swooping in circles, or wide spiral gyrations – now descending almost to touch the prairie award, or the spray of the chapparal – anon soaring upward by a power in which the wing bears no part – their pointed pinions sharply cutting against the clear sky – they constitute a picture of rare interest, one truly characteristic of a tropical clime.

The traveller who sees it for the first time will not fail to rein up his horse, and sit in his saddle, viewing it with feelings of curious interest. Even he who is accustomed to the spectacle will not pass on without indulging in a certain train of thought which it is calculated to call forth.

There is a tale told by the assemblage of base birds. On the ground beneath them, whether seen by the traveller or not, is stretched some stricken creature – quadruped, or it may be *man* – dead, or it may be *dying*.

On the morning that succeeded that sombre night, when the three solitary horsemen made the crossing of the plain, a spectacle similar to that described might have been witnessed above the chapparal into which they had ridden. A flock of black vultures, of both species, was disporting above the tops of the trees, near the point where the avenue angled.

At daybreak not one could have been seen. In less than an hour after, hundreds were hovering above the spot, on widespread wings, their shadows sailing darkly over the green spray of the chapparal.

A Texan traveller entering the avenue, and observing the ominous assemblage, would at once have concluded, that there was death upon his track.

Going farther, he would have found confirmatory evidence, in a pool of blood trampled by the hooves of horses.

Not exactly over this were the vultures engaged in their aerial evolutions. The centre of their swoopings appeared to be a point some distance off among the trees; and there, no doubt, would be discovered the quarry that had called them together.

At that early hour there was no traveller – Texan, or stranger – to test the truth of the conjecture; but, for all that, it was true.

At a point in the chapparal, about a quarter of a mile from the blood-stained path, lay stretched upon the ground the object that was engaging the attention of the vultures.

It was not carrion, nor yet a quadruped; but a human being – a man!

A young man, too, of noble lineaments and graceful shape – so far as could be seen under the cloak that shrouded his recumbent form – with a face fair to look upon, even in death.

Was he dead?

At first sight any one would have said so, and the black birds believed it. His attitude and countenance seemed to proclaim it beyond question.

He was lying upon his back, with face upturned to the sky – no care being taken to shelter it from the sun. His limbs, too, were not in a natural posture; but extended stiffly along the stony surface, as if he had lost the power to control them.

A colossal tree was near, a live oak, but it did not shadow him. He was outside the canopy of its frondage; and the sun's beams, just beginning to penetrate the chapparal, were slanting down upon his pale face – paler by reflection from a white Panama hat that but partially shaded it.

His features did not seem set in death: and as little was it like sleep. It had more the look of death than sleep. The eyes were but half closed; and the pupils could be seen glancing through the lashes, glassy and dilated. Was the man dead?

Beyond doubt, the black birds believed that he was. But the black birds were judging only by appearances. Their wish was parent to the thought. They were mistaken.

Whether it was the glint of the sun striking into his half-screened orbs, or nature becoming restored after a period of repose, the eyes of the prostrate man were seen to open to their full extent, while a movement was perceptible throughout his whole frame.

Soon after he raised himself a little; and, resting upon his elbow, stared confusedly around him.

The vultures soared upward into the air, and for the time maintained a higher flight.

“Am I dead, or living?” muttered he to himself. “Dreaming, or awake? Which is it? Where am I?”

The sunlight was blinding him. He could see nothing, till he had shaded his eyes with his hand; then only indistinctly.

“Trees above – around me! Stones underneath! That I can tell by the aching of my bones. A chapparal forest! How came I into it?”

“Now I have it,” continued he, after a short spell of reflection. “My head was dashed against a tree. There it is – the very limb that lifted me out of the saddle. My left leg pains me. Ah! I remember; it came in contact with the trunk. By heavens, I believe it is broken!”

As he said this, he made an effort to raise himself into an erect attitude. It proved a failure. His sinister limb would lend him no assistance: it was swollen at the knee-joint – either shattered or dislocated.

“Where is the horse? Gone off, of course. By this time, in the stables of Casa del Corvo. I need not care now. I could not mount him, if he were standing by my side.

“The other?” he added, after a pause. “Good heavens! what a spectacle it was! No wonder it scared the one I was riding!”

“What am I to do? My leg may be broken. I can’t stir from this spot, without some one to help me. Ten chances to one – a hundred – a thousand – against any one coming this way; at least not till I’ve become food for those filthy birds. Ugh! the hideous brutes; they stretch out their beaks, as if already sure of making a meal upon me!”

“How long have I been lying here? The surf don’t seem very high. It was just daybreak, as I climbed into the saddle. I suppose I’ve been unconscious about an hour. By my faith, I’m in a serious scrape? In all likelihood a broken limb – it feels broken – with no surgeon to set it; a stony couch in the heart of a Texan chapparal – the thicket around me, perhaps for miles – no chance to escape from it of myself – no hope of human creature coming to help me – wolves on the earth, and vultures in the air! Great God! why did I mount, without making sure of the rein? I may have ridden my last ride!”

The countenance of the young man became clouded; and the cloud grew darker, and deeper, as he continued to reflect upon the perilous position in which a simple accident had placed him.

Once more he essayed to rise to his feet, and succeeded; only to find, that he had but one leg on which he could rely! It was no use, standing upon it; and he lay down again.

Two hours were passed without any change in his situation; during which he had caused the chapparal to ring with a loud hallooing. He only desisted from this, under the conviction: that there was no one at all likely to hear him.

The shouting caused thirst; or at all events hastened the advent of this appetite – surely coming on as the concomitant of the injuries he had received.

The sensation was soon experienced to such an extent that everything else – even the pain of his wounds – became of trifling consideration.

“It will kill me, if I stay here?” reflected the sufferer. “I must make an effort to reach water. If I remember aright there’s a stream somewhere in this chapparal, and not such a great way off. I must get to it, if I have to crawl upon my hands and knees. Knees! and only one in a condition to



support me! There's no help for it but try. The longer I stay here, the worse it will be. The sun grows hotter. It already burns into my brain. I may lose my senses, and then – the wolves – the vultures – ”

The horrid apprehension caused silence and shuddering. After a time he continued:

“If I but knew the right way to go. I remember the stream well enough. It runs towards the chalk prairie. It should be south-east, from here. I shall try that way. By good luck the sun guides me. If I find water all may yet be well. God give me strength to reach it!”

With this prayer upon his lips, he commenced making his way through the thicket – creeping over the stony ground, and dragging after him his disabled leg, like some huge Saurian<sup>250</sup> whose vertebrae have been disjoined by a blow!

Lizard-like, he continued his crawl.

The effort was painful in the extreme; but the apprehension from which he suffered was still more painful, and urged him to continue it.

He well knew there was a chance of his falling a victim to thirst – almost a certainty, if he did not succeed in finding water.

Stimulated by this knowledge he crept on.

At short intervals he was compelled to pause, and recruit his strength by a little rest. A man does not travel far, on his hands and knees, without feeling fatigued. Much more, when one of the four members cannot be employed in the effort.

His progress was slow and irksome. Besides, it was being made under the most discouraging circumstances. He might not be going in the right direction? Nothing but the dread of death could have induced him to keep on.

He had made about a quarter of a mile from the point of starting, when it occurred to him that a better plan of locomotion might be adopted – one that would, at all events, vary the monotony of his march.

“Perhaps,” said he, “I might manage to hobble a bit, if I only had a crutch? Ho! my knife is still here. Thank fortune for that! And there's a sapling of the right size – a bit of blackjack. It will do.”

Drawing the knife – a “bowie” – from his belt, he cut down the dwarf-oak; and soon reduced it to a rude kind of crutch; a fork in the tree serving for the head.

Then rising erect, and fitting the fork into his armpit, he proceeded with his exploration.

He knew the necessity of keeping to one course; and, as he had chosen the south-east, he continued in this direction.

It was not so easy. The sun was his only compass; but this had now reached the meridian, and, in the latitude of Southern Texas, at that season of the year, the midday sun is almost in the zenith. Moreover, he had the chapparal to contend with, requiring constant détours to take advantage of its openings. He had a sort of guide in the sloping of the ground: for he knew that downward he was more likely to find the stream.

After proceeding about a mile – not in one continued march, but by short stages, with intervals of rest between – he came upon a track made by the wild animals that frequent the chapparal. It was slight, but running in a direct line – a proof that it led to some point of peculiar consideration – in all likelihood a watering-place – stream, pond, or spring.

Any of these three would serve his purpose; and, without longer looking to the sun, or the slope of the ground, he advanced along the trail – now hobbling upon his crutch, and at times, when tired of this mode, dropping down upon his hands and crawling as before.

The cheerful anticipations he had indulged in, on discovering the trail, soon, came to a termination. It became *blind*. In other words it ran out – ending in a glade surrounded by

---

<sup>250</sup> **Saurian** – one of lizard species

impervious masses of underwood. He saw, to his dismay, that it led *from* the glade, instead of *towards* it. He had been following it the wrong way!

Unpleasant as was the alternative, there was no other than to return upon his track. To stay in the glade would have been to die there.

He retraced the trodden path – going on beyond the point where he had first struck it.

Nothing but the torture of thirst could have endowed him with strength or spirit to proceed. And this was every moment becoming more unendurable.

The trees through which he was making way were mostly acacias, interspersed with cactus and wild agave. They afforded scarce any shelter from the sun, that now in mid-heaven glared down through their gossamer foliage with the fervour of fire itself.

The perspiration, oozing through every pore of his skin, increased the tendency to thirst – until the appetite became an agony!

Within reach of his hand were the glutinous legumes of the *mezquites*, filled with mellifluous moisture. The agaves and cactus plants, if tapped, would have exuded an abundance of juice. The former was too sweet, the latter too acrid to tempt him.

He was acquainted with the character of both. He knew that, instead of allaying his thirst, they would only have added to its intensity.

He passed the depending pods, without plucking them. He passed the succulent stalks, without tapping thorn.

To augment his anguish, he now discovered that the wounded limb was, every moment, becoming more unmanageable. It had swollen to enormous dimensions. Every step caused him a spasm of pain. Even if going in the direction of the doubtful streamlet, he might never succeed in reaching it? If not, there was no hope for him. He could but lie down in the thicket, and die!

Death would not be immediate. Although suffering acute pain in his head, neither the shock it had received, nor the damage done to his knee, were like to prove speedily fatal. He might dread a more painful way of dying than from wounds. Thirst would be his destroyer – of all shapes of death perhaps the most agonising.

The thought stimulated him to renewed efforts; and despite the slow progress he was able to make – despite the pain experienced in making it – he toiled on.

The black birds hovering above, kept pace with his halting step and laborious crawl. Now more than a mile from the point of their first segregation, they were all of them still there – their numbers even augmented by fresh detachments that had become warned of the expected prey. Though aware that the quarry still lived and moved, they saw that it was stricken. Instinct – perhaps rather experience – told them it must soon succumb.

Their shadows crossed and recrossed the track upon which he advanced – filling him with ominous fears for the end.

There was no noise: for these birds are silent in their flight – even when excited by the prospect of a repast. The hot sun had stilled the voices of the crickets and tree-toads. Even the hideous “horned frog” reclined listless along the earth, sheltering its tuberculated body under the stones.

The only sounds to disturb the solitude of the chapparal were those made by the sufferer himself – the swishing of his garments, as they brushed against the hirsute plants that beset the path; and occasionally his cries, sent forth in the faint hope of their being heard.

By this time, blood was mingling with the sweat upon his skin. The spines of the cactus, and the clawlike thorns of the agave, had been doing their work; and scarce an inch of the epidermis upon his face, hands, and limbs, that was not rent with a laceration.

He was near to the point of despondence – in real truth, he had reached it: for after a spell of shouting he had flung himself prostrate along the earth, despairingly indifferent about proceeding farther.

In all likelihood it was the attitude that saved him. Lying with his ear close to the surface, he heard a sound – so slight, that it would not have been otherwise discernible.

Slight as it was, he could distinguish it, as the very sound for which his senses were sharpened. It was the murmur of moving water!

With an ejaculation of joy, he sprang to his feet, as if nothing were amiss; and made direct towards the point whence proceeded the sound.

He plied his improvised crutch with redoubled energy. Even the disabled leg appeared to sustain him. It was strength and the love of life, struggling against decrepitude and the fear of death.

The former proved victorious; and, in ten minutes after, he lay stretched along the sward, on the banks of a crystal streamlet – wondering why the want of water could have caused him such indescribable agony!

## Chapter 43

### The Cup and the Jar

Once more the mustanger's hut! Once more his henchman, astride of a stool in the middle of the floor! Once more his hound lying astretch upon the skin-covered hearth, with snout half buried in the cinders!

The relative positions of the man and the dog are essentially the same – as when seen on a former occasion – their attitudes almost identical. Otherwise there is a change in the picture since last painted – a transformation at once striking and significant.

The horse-hide door, standing ajar, still hangs upon its hinges; and the smooth coats of the wild steeds shine lustroously along the walls. The slab table, too, is there, the trestle bedstead, the two stools, and the “shake down” of the servitor.

But the other “chattels” wont to be displayed against the skin tapestry are either out of sight, or displaced. The double gun has been removed from its rack; the silver cup, hunting horn, and dog-call, are no longer suspended from their respective pegs; the saddle, bridles, ropes, and serapés are unslung; and the books, ink, pens, and *papeterie* have entirely disappeared.

At first sight it might be supposed that Indians have paid a visit to the jacalé, and pillaged it of its *penates*.

But no. Had this been the case, Phelim would not be sitting so unconcernedly on the stool, with his carroty scalp still upon his head.

Though the walls are stripped nothing has been carried away. The articles are still there, only with a change of place; and the presence of several corded packages, lying irregularly over the floor – among which is the leathern portmanteau – proclaims the purpose of the transposition.

Though a clearing out has not been made, it is evident that one is intended.

In the midst of the general displacement, one piece of plenishing was still seen in its accustomed corner – the demijohn. It was seen by Phelim, oftener than any other article in the room: for no matter in what direction he might turn his eyes, they were sure to come round again to that wicker-covered vessel that stood so temptingly in the angle.

“Ach! me jewel, it's there yez are!” said he, apostrophising the demijohn for about the twentieth time, “wid more than two quarts av the crayther inside yer bewtifull belly, and not doin' ye a bit av good, nayther. If the tinth part av it was inside av me, it wud be a moighty binnefit to me intistines. Trath wud it that same. Wudn't it, Tara?”

On hearing his name pronounced, the dog raised his head and looked inquiringly around, to see what was wanted of him.

Perceiving that his human companion was but talking to himself, he resumed his attitude of repose.

“Faix! I don't want any answer to that, owld boy. It's meself that knows it, widout tillin'. A hape av good a glass of that same potyeen would do me; and I dar'n't touch a dhrap, afther fwhat the masther sid to me about it. Afther all that packin', too, till me throat is stickin' to me tongue, as if I had been thryin' to swallow a pitch plaster. Sow! it's a shame av Masther Maurice to make me promise agaynst touchin' the dhrink – espacially when it's not goin' to be wanted. Didn't he say he wudn't stay more than wan night, whin he come back heeur; an shure he won't conshume two quarts in wan night – unless that owld sinner Stump comes along wid him. Bad luck to his greedy gut! he gets more av the Manongahayla than the masther himsilf.

“There's wan consolashun, an thank the Lord for it, we're goin' back to the owld *sad*, an the owld place at Ballyballagh. Won't I have a skinful when I get thare – av the raal stuff too, instid of this Amerikyan rotgut! Hooch – hoop – horoo! The thought av it's enough to sit a man mad wid deloight. Hooch – hoop – horoo!”

Tossing his wide-awake up among the rafters, and catching it as it came down again, the excited Galwegian several times repeated his ludicrous shibboleth. Then becoming tranquil he sate for awhile in silence – his thoughts dwelling with pleasant anticipation on the joys that awaited him at Ballyballagh.

They soon reverted to the objects around him – more especially to the demijohn in the corner. On this once more his eyes became fixed in a gaze, in which increasing covetousness was manifestly visible.

“Arrah, me jewel!” said he, again apostrophising the vessel, “ye’re extramely bewtifull to look at – that same ye arr. Shure now, yez wudn’t till upon me, if I gave yez a thrifle av a kiss? Ye wudn’t be the thraiter to bethray me? Wan smack only. Thare can be no harum in that. Trath, I don’t think the masther ’ud mind it – when he thinks av the throuble I’ve had wid this packin’, an the dhry dust gettin’ down me throat. Shure he didn’t mane me to kape that promise for this time – which differs intirely from all the rest, by rason av our goin’ away. A dhry flittin’, they say, makes a short sittin’. I’ll tell the masther that, whin he comes back; an shure it ’ll pacify him. Besoides, there’s another icxuse. He’s all av tin hours beyant his time; an I’ll say I took a thriflin’ dhrap to kape me from thinkin’ long for him. Shure he won’t say a word about it. Be Sant Pathrick! I’ll take a smell at the dimmyjan, an trust to good luck for the rist. Loy down, Tara, I’m not agoin’ out.”

The staghound had risen, seeing the speaker step towards the door.

But the dumb creature had misinterpreted the purpose – which was simply to take a survey of the path by which the jacalé was approached, and make sure, that, his master was not likely to interrupt him in his intended dealings with the demijohn.

Becoming satisfied that the coast was clear, he glided back across the floor; uncorked the jar; and, raising it to his lips, swallowed something more than a “thriflin’ dhrap av its contints.”

Then putting it back in its place, he returned to his seat on the stool.

After remaining quiescent for a considerable time, he once more proceeded to soliloquise – now and then changing his speech to the apostrophic form – Tara and the demijohn being the individuals honoured by his discourse.

“In the name av all the angels, an the divils to boot, I wondher what’s kapin’ the masther! He sid he wud be heeur by eight av the clock in the marnin’, and it’s now good six in the afternoon, if thare’s any truth in a Tixas sun. Shure thare’s somethin’ detainin’ him? Don’t yez think so, Tara?”

This time Tara did vouchsafe the affirmative “sniff” – having poked his nose too far into the ashes.

“Be the powers! then, I hope it’s no harum that’s befallen him! If there has, owld dog, fwhat ’ud become av you an me? Thare might be no Ballyballagh for miny a month to come; unliiss we cowl’d pay our passage wid these thraps av the masther’s. The drinkin’ cup – raal silver it is – wud cover the whole expinse av the voyage. Be japers! now that it stroikes me, I niver had a dhrink out av that purty little vessel. I’m shure the liquor must taste swater that way. Does it, I wondher – trath, now’s just the time to thry.”

Saying this, he took the cup out of the portmanteau, in which he had packed it; and, once more uncorking the demijohn, poured out a portion of its contents – of about the measure of a wineglassful.

Quaffing it off at a single gulp, he stood smacking his lips – as if to assure himself of the quality of the liquor.

“Sowl! I don’t know that it *does* taste betther,” said he, still holding the cup in one hand, and the jar in the other. “Afther all, I think, it’s swater out av the dimmyjan itself, that is, as far as I cyan remimber. But it isn’t givin’ the gawblet fair play. It’s so long since I had the jar to me mouth, that I a’most forget how it tasted that way. I cowl’d till betther if I thryed thim thegither. I’ll do that, before I decoide.”

The demijohn was now raised to his lips; and, after several “glucks” was again taken away.

Then succeeded a second series of smacking, in true connoisseur fashion, with the head held reflectingly steadfast.

“Trath! an I’m wrong agane!” said he, accompanying the remark with another doubtful shake of the head. “Althegither asthray. It’s swater from the silver. Or, is it only me imaginayshin that’s desavin’ me? It’s worth while to make shure, an I can only do that by tastin’ another thrifle out av the cup. That wud be givin’ fair play to both av the vessels; for I’ve dhrunk twice from the jar, an only wanst from the silver. Fair play’s a jewil all the world over; and thare’s no raison why this bewtiful little mug showldn’t be trated as dacently as that big basket av a jar. Be japers! but it shall tho’!”

The cup was again called into requisition; and once more a portion of the contents of the demijohn were transferred to it – to be poured immediately after down the insatiable throat of the unsatisfied connoisseur.

Whether he eventually decided in favour of the cup, or whether he retained his preference for the jar, is not known. After the fourth potation, which was also the final one, he appeared to think he had tasted sufficiently for the time, and laid both vessels aside.

Instead of returning to his stool, however, a new idea came across his mind; which was to go forth from the hut, and see whether there was any sign to indicate the advent of his master.

“Come, Tara!” cried he, striding towards the door. “Let us stip up to the bluff beyant, and take a look over the big plain. If masther’s comin’ at all, he shud be in sight by this. Come along, ye owld dog! Masther Maurice ’ll think all the betther av us, for bein’ a little unazy about his gettin’ back.”

Taking the path through the wooded bottom – with the staghound close at his heels – the Galwegian ascended the bluff, by one of its sloping ravines, and stood upon the edge of the upper plateau.

From this point he commanded a view of a somewhat sterile plain; that stretched away eastward, more than a mile, from the spot where he was standing.

The sun was on his back, low down on the horizon, but shining from a cloudless sky. There was nothing to interrupt his view. Here and there, a stray cactus plant, or a solitary stem of the arborescent yucca, raised its hirsute form above the level of the plain. Otherwise the surface was smooth; and a coyoté could not have crossed it without being seen.

Beyond, in the far distance, could be traced the darker outline of trees – where a tract of chapparral, or the wooded selvedge of a stream stretched transversely across the *llano*.

The Galwegian bent his gaze over the ground, in the direction in which he expected his master should appear; and stood silently watching for him.

Ere long his vigil was rewarded. A horseman was seen coming out from among the trees upon the other side, and heading towards the Alamo.

He was still more than a mile distant; but, even at that distance, the faithful servant could identify his master. The striped serapé of brilliant hues – a true Navajo blanket, which Maurice was accustomed to take with him when travelling – was not to be mistaken. It gleamed gaudily under the glare of the setting sun – its bands of red, white, and blue, contrasting with the sombre tints of the sterile plain.

Phelim only wondered, that his master should have it spread over his shoulders on such a sultry evening instead of folded up, and strapped to the cantle of his saddle!

“Trath, Tara! it looks quare, doesn’t it? It’s hot enough to roast a stake upon these stones; an yit the masther don’t seem to think so. I hope he hasn’t caught a cowl from stayin’ in that close crib at owld Duffer’s tavern. It wasn’t fit for a pig to dwell in. Our own shanty’s a splindid parlour to it.”

The speaker was for a time silent, watching the movements of the approaching horseman – by this time about half a mile distant, and still drawing nearer.

When his voice was put forth again it was in a tone altogether changed. It was still that of surprise, with an approach towards merriment. But it was mirth that doubted of the ludicrous; and seemed to struggle under restraint.

“Mother av Moses!” cried he. “What can the masther mane? Not contint with havin’ the blankyet upon his showldhers, be japers, he’s got it over his head!

“He’s playin’ us a thrick, Tara. He wants to give you an me a surprise. He wants to have a joke agaynst us!

“Sowl! but it’s quare anyhow. It looks as if he *had* no head. In faix does it! Ach! what cyan it mane? Be the Howly Virgin! it’s enough to frighten wan, av they didn’t know it was the masther!

“*Is* it the masther? Be the powers, it’s too short for him! The head? Saint Patrick presarve us, whare is it? It cyan’t be smothered up in the blankyet? Thare’s no shape thare! Be Jaysus, thare’s somethin’ wrong! What does it mane, Tara?”

The tone of the speaker had again undergone a change. It was now close bordering upon terror – as was also the expression of his countenance.

The look and attitude of the staghound were not very different. He stood a little in advance – half cowering, half inclined to spring forward – with eyes glaring wildly, while fixed upon the approaching horseman – now scarce two hundred yards from the spot!

As Phelim put the question that terminated his last soliloquy, the hound gave out a lugubrious howl, that seemed intended for an answer.

Then, as if urged by some canine instinct, he bounded off towards the strange object, which puzzled his human companion, and was equally puzzling him.

Rushing straight on, he gave utterance to a series of shrill yelps; far different from the soft sonorous baying, with which he was accustomed to welcome the coming home of the mustanger.

If Phelim was surprised at what he had already seen, he was still further astonished by what now appeared to him.

As the dog drew near, still yelping as he ran, the blood-bay – which the ex-groom had long before identified as his master’s horse – turned sharply round, and commenced galloping back across the plain!

While performing the wheel, Phelim saw – or fancied he saw – that, which not only astounded him, but caused the blood to run chill through his veins, and his frame to tremble to the very tips of his toes.

It was a head – that of the man on horseback; but, instead of being in its proper place, upon his shoulders, it was held in the rider’s hand, just behind the pommel of the saddle!

As the horse turned side towards him, Phelim saw, or fancied he saw, the face – ghastly and covered with gore – half hidden behind the shaggy hair of the holster!

He saw no more. In another instant his back was turned towards the plain; and, in another, he was rushing down the ravine, as fast as his enfeebled limbs would carry him!

## Chapter 44

### A Quartette of Comanches

With his flame-coloured curls bristling upward – almost raising the hat from his head – the Galwegian continued his retreat – pausing not – scarce looking back, till he had re-entered the jacalé, closed the skin door behind him, and barricaded it with several large packages that lay near.

Even then he did not feel secure. What protection could there be in a shut door, barred and bolted besides, against that which was not earthly?

And surely what he had seen was not of the earth – not of this world! Who on earth had ever witnessed such a spectacle – a man mounted upon horseback, and carrying his head in his hand? Who had ever heard of a phenomenon so unnatural? Certainly not “Phaylim Onale.”

His horror still continuing, he rushed to and fro across the floor of the hut; now dropping down upon the stool, anon rising up, and gliding to the door; but without daring either to open it, or look out through the chinks.

At intervals he tore the hair out of his head, striking his clenched hand against his temples, and roughly rubbing his eyes – as if to make sure that he was not asleep, but had really seen the shape that was horrifying him.

One thing alone gave him a moiety of comfort; though it was of the slightest. While retreating down the ravine, before his head had sunk below the level of the plain, he had given a glance backward. He had derived some gratification from that glance; as it showed the headless rider afar off on the prairie, and with back turned toward the Alamo, going on at a gallop.

But for the remembrance of this, the Galwegian might have been still more terrified – if that were possible – while striding back and forth upon the floor of the jacalé.

For a long time he was speechless – not knowing what to say – and only giving utterance to such exclamations as came mechanically to his lips.

As the time passed, and he began to feel, not so much a return of confidence, as of the power of ratiocination, his tongue became restored to him; and a continuous fire of questions and exclamations succeeded. They were all addressed to himself. Tara was no longer there, to take part in the conversation.

They were put, moreover, in a low whispered tone, as if in fear that his voice might be heard outside the jacalé.

“Ochone<sup>251</sup>! Ochone! it cyan’t av been him! Sant Pathrick protict me, but fwhat was it thin?

“Thare was iverything av his – the horse – the sthriped blankyet – them spotted wather guards upon his legs – an the head itself – all except the faytures. Thim I saw too, but wasn’t shure about eyedintifycashin; for who kud till a face all covered over wid rid blood?

“Ach! it cudn’t be Masther Maurice at all, at all!

“It’s all a dhrame. I must have been aslape, an dhramin? Or, was it the whisky that did it?

“Shure, I wasn’t dhrunk enough for that. Two goes out av the little cup, an two more from the dimmyjan – not over a kupple av naggins in all! That wudn’t make me dhrunk. I’ve taken twice that, widout as much as thrippin in my spache. Trath have I. Besoides, if I had been the worse for the liquor, why am I not so still?

“Thare’s not half an hour passed since I saw it; an I’m as sober as a judge upon the binch av magistrates.

“Sowl! a dhrap ’ud do me a power av good just now. If I don’t take wan, I’ll not get a wink av slape. I’ll be shure to kape awake all the night long thinkin’ about it. Ochone! ochone! what

---

<sup>251</sup> **Ochone!** – Oh, my God! (*Irish*)



cyan it be anyhow? An' where cyan the masther be, if it wasn't him? Howly Sant Pathrick! look down an watch over a miserable sinner, that's lift all alone be himself, wid nothin' but ghosts an goblins<sup>252</sup> around him!"

After this appeal to the Catholic saint, the Connemara man addressed himself with still more zealous devotion to the worship of a very different divinity, known among the ancients as Bacchus.

His suit in this quarter proved perfectly successful; for in less than an hour after he had entered upon his genuflexions at the shrine of the pagan god – represented by the demijohn of Monongahela whisky – he was shrived of all his sufferings – if not of his sins – and lay stretched along the floor of the jacalé, not only oblivious of the spectacle that had so late terrified him to the very centre of his soul, but utterly unconscious of his soul's existence.

There is no sound within the hut of Maurice the mustanger – not even a clock, to tell, by its continuous ticking, that the hours are passing into eternity, and that another midnight is mantling over the earth.

There are sounds outside; but only as usual. The rippling of the stream close by, the whispering of the leaves stirred by the night wind, the chirrup of cicadas, the occasional cry of some wild creature, are but the natural voices of the nocturnal forest.

Midnight has arrived, with a moon that assimilates it to morning. Her light illumines the earth; here and there penetrating through the shadowy trees, and flinging broad silvery lists between them.

Passing through these alternations of light and shadow – apparently avoiding the former, as much as possible – goes a group of mounted men.

Though few in number – as there are only four of them – they are formidable to look upon. The vermilion glaring redly over their naked skins, the striped and spotted tatooing upon their cheeks, the scarlet feathers standing stiffly upright above their heads, and the gleaming of weapons held in their hands, all bespeak strength of a savage and dangerous kind.

Whence come they?

They are in the war costume of the Comanche. Their paint proclaims it. There is the skin fillet around the temples, with the eagle plumes stuck behind it. The bare breasts and arms; the buckskin breech-clouts – everything in the shape of sign by which these Ishmaelites<sup>253</sup> of Texas may be recognised, when out upon the *maraud*.

They must be Comanches: and, therefore, have come from the west.

Whither go they?

This is a question more easily answered. They are closing in upon the hut, where lies the unconscious inebriate. The jacalé of Maurice Gerald is evidently the *butt*<sup>254</sup> of their expedition.

That their intentions are hostile, is to be inferred from the fact of their wearing the war costume. It is also apparent from their manner of making approach. Still further, by their dismounting at some distance from the hut, securing their horses in the underwood, and continuing their advance on foot.

Their stealthy tread – taking care to plant the foot lightly upon the fallen leaves – the precaution to keep inside the shadow – the frequent pauses, spent in looking ahead and listening – the silent gestures with which these movements are directed by him who appears to be the leader – all proclaim design, to reach the jacalé unperceived by whoever may chance to be inside it.

In this they are successful – so far as may be judged by appearances. They stand by the stockade walls, without any sign being given to show that they have been seen.

---

<sup>252</sup> **goblins** – in European folklore, goblin is a malicious spirite attached to a household, who makes noise, disturbs people, punishes disobedient children, etc.

<sup>253</sup> **Ishmaelites** – also called Medianites, in Old Testament, nomadic tribes living in the Arabic deserts and engaged in banditry

<sup>254</sup> **butt** – a target of or for smth

The silence inside is complete, as that they are themselves observing. There is nothing heard – not so much as the screech of a hearth-cricket.

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.