

Aimard Gustave

Stoneheart: A Romance



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CHAPTER I. SYMPATHY

Sympathy is a feeling admitting neither analyzation nor discussion. It masters us, whether we will or no. Persons we meet unconsciously attract or repel us at first sight. And why? It is a question impossible to answer, but the fact is indubitable. An irresistible magnetic influence draws us towards people whom, if we listened to the promptings of self-interest, we ought to shun; while, on the other hand, the same influence compels us to avoid others, in whom this very interest should induce us to confide.

And it is an extraordinary fact, well worthy of remark, that this intuition, acting in opposition to our reasoning powers, seldom if ever misleads us. Sooner or later we are forced to acknowledge as right what to the prejudiced eyes of the world appeared erroneous, and find that our sympathy, far from deceiving, has only led us to the truth.

The result of this sympathy and antipathy are so palpable, so many persons have experienced the effects of this mysterious influence, that it would be superfluous for us to linger longer over the topic.

Don Estevan and Stoneheart had become acquainted under circumstances which might have induced enmity between them, or, at all events, made them indifferent to each other: the reputation of the bee-hunter, and the singular life he led, were ample reasons why the young and straightforward *mayor domo* of Don Pedro de Luna should feel himself repelled by them; and yet a diametrically opposite effect was produced without the two young men knowing why, and they suddenly felt themselves friends, bound together, not by one of those vapid sentimentalities so common in civilised life in Europe, where the word "friend" means no more than a mere acquaintance, and is one of the titles most easily and constantly profaned, but by the strong, true feeling, admitting neither limit nor reasoning, which shoots up so strongly in a few hours that it engrosses an immense part of the existence of those of whom it has taken possession.

They had never seen each other before their casual encounter in the road to San Lucar, and yet they seemed to have known each other for ages, and now only to have met again after a long parting.

Singular to say, the same effect was produced on both at the same moment, without calculation or reservation.

What we have asserted is so true, that Don Estevan, notwithstanding the innate prudence of his character, had not hesitated to confide to Stoneheart, on the spur of the moment, the history of his master, or, to speak more correctly, his benefactor. He had recounted this history in all its details, without disguising anything, or omitting a title, induced to act as he did by the secret presentiment which apprised him that he had found a man worthy of sharing the burden of this important secret.

The course of this tale will furnish us with still stronger proofs of the singular confidence these two men had instantly felt for each other.

The sun was setting in a flood of purple and gold behind the snowy crests of the lofty and jagged mountains of the Sierra Madre, when Don Estevan ceased speaking.

The landscape assumed that garb of placid melancholy in which it clothes itself at the approach of eve; the birds came flying in countless flocks, to nestle, twittering, under the leafy boughs of the grand old trees. *Vaqueros* and *peones*, galloping in all directions, mustered the cattle,

and drove them towards the *hacienda*; and in the distance appeared a camp of *arrieros*, whose watch fires already began to tinge the rapidly darkening sky with a ruddy glow.

"And now," resumed Don Estevan, "having acquired as intimate a knowledge as my own of the secrets of the family with whom chance has brought you into contact, what do you intend to do?"

"First, and before all a single word," answered Stoneheart.

"Say on; you must indeed have many things to confide to me in your turn."

"Not so many as you think. You already know as much of my life as I do myself; that is to say, almost nothing. But that is not the question between us at present."

"What can it be, then?" said Don Estevan, unable to repress his curiosity.

"I am about to tell you. Surely you have not told me this long and interesting tale with the sole purpose of satisfying a curiosity I never exhibited; there must be some other motive in your thoughts, and I think I have guessed it. Don Estevan Diaz, two bold men, bound to each other as closely as the ivy and the oak, with thoughts running in the same channel, with but one will between them, – two such men are mighty; for the one forms the complement to the other, and what each alone would not dare to essay, the two will undertake without hesitation, and be almost certain to succeed, however hazardous and rash their projects may seem. Are you of the same way of thinking?"

"Most surely, Don Fernando; I am entirely of the same opinion."

A flash of joy illumined the face of the bee-hunter. "Good!" said he, stretching out his arm; "Here is my hand, Don Estevan; it belongs to a man who, with his hand, offers you a loyal and honest heart, whatever may be said to the contrary: will you accept them?"

"*¡Vive Dios!*" eagerly exclaimed the *mayor domo*, heartily pressing in his own the hand so frankly tendered; "I accept both one and the other. Thanks, brother! I was on the point of making the same offer to you; we are now one for life or death. I am yours, as the handle is to the blade."

"Ah!" said Don Fernando, with a sigh of pleasure, "At last I have a friend. I shall no longer wander through life alone: joy and sorrow, grief and happiness, – I shall have one to whom I can confide them all."

"You shall have more than one to sympathise with you, brother; you shall have a mother too. Mine shall be yours also. Come, let us mount; it grows late. We have still many things to talk of."

"Let us go," was all the hunter answered.

The horses had not strayed from the neighbourhood of the *rancho*, near which they found abundant pasturage: the men easily *lassoed* them, and five minutes later the friends rode side by side in the direction of Don Estevan's dwelling.

Ña Manuela was awaiting them at the entrance. She was smiling.

"Make haste!" she cried, as soon as she perceived them; "the *angelus* has rung an hour ago. It is supper time."

"Which means to say, mother, that we are dying with hunger," replied her son, dismounting; "so, if you have not prepared an ample meal, you run great risk of leaving our appetites unappeased."

"No fear of that, Estevan. I thought you would arrive in some such condition; so I took my precautions."

"Can you forgive me, madam," said the bee-hunter, "for making this fresh inroad on your hospitality?"

The mistress of the house smiled kindly.

"I am so ready to forgive you, señor," said she, "that, feeling convinced we should have you a long time with us, I have myself arranged your *cuarto* (quarters)."

Don Fernando did not reply at once: a lively blush overspread his features; he dismounted, and approaching the old lady:

"Señora," said he, much affected, "I know not how to thank you; you have guessed the dearest wish of my heart. Your son calls me brother: would you deign to permit me to call you mother? How happy it would make me!"

Ña Manuela fixed upon him a long and steadfast gaze: her face exhibited tokens of vivid emotion; two tears coursed slowly down her pallid cheeks. Then, stretching out her hand to the hunter, she said:

"Be it so! Instead of one, I have now two children. Come, my sons, supper is waiting."

"My name is Fernando, mother."

"I will not forget it," was her smiling answer. They entered the dwelling, while some *peones* led away the horses to the *corral*.

Don Fernando had not deceived his friend; he had in truth given him a mother.

The meal proceeded with the cheerfulness to be expected from three persons who, although strangers three days before, had suddenly understood and appreciated each other: that is to say, it was gay and cordial. No allusion was made to the impromptu band which had linked them together so intimately and unexpectedly.

As soon as the *peones* had retired, and their masters found themselves alone, they left the table, and betook themselves, as on the previous day, to an inner room, where, sheltered from prying eyes and ears, they ran no risk of having their conversation overheard, commented on, and perhaps reported.

"Shut the door," said Don Estevan to Don Fernando, who was the last to enter.

"Not so," replied the latter; "we will leave it open: by this means we shall both see and hear anyone who may come near us. Take this as a general rule: never close the door when you have secrets to tell."

Don Estevan drew forward some *butacas* (seats), sat down, lit his cigarette, and turning to the hunter, said:

"Now for our talk!"

There are certain situations in life where the most insignificant word becomes of the greatest importance. So, when Don Estevan said, "Now for our talk!" each of the three felt that the conversation to ensue would not be confined to the limits of pleasant chat, but would almost assume the proportions of a congress with closed doors, so extremely grave were the matters which would be propounded.

It was Don Fernando who first commenced the conversation in the decided and clear manner which was habitual to him.

"My friend, I have pondered deeply on what you told me today: you would never have intrusted such an important secret to me, if grave reasons had not induced you. I think I have divined your reasons; they are these: the tranquillity which Don Pedro has enjoyed since he lived here is menaced; you dread evil to Doña Hermosa. Are these your motives, or am I mistaken?"

"You are not. In fact, I have for some time past been oppressed by a vague fear, a secret apprehension, I cannot subdue; I feel, as it were, the approach of some misfortune, without knowing whence or how it will come. Doubtless you know better than I can tell you, that in all men's lives certain dark hours occur, in which the brave man trembles without apparent cause, like a child afraid of its own shadow. All things alarm, all things excite suspicion. Well, my friend, for the last two months I have lived these dark hours: an invincible sadness overpowers me. In a word, I am living in fear, without knowing why; for all around me takes its usual course: Don Pedro is as calm, Doña Hermosa as gay, as lively, and as free from care as ever; we live in this out-of-the-way corner of the world entirely ignorant of its doings; the rumours of society die without an echo on our threshold. What have we, then, to fear? Who is the enemy that lies in wait for us, and whose savage eye watches us night and day? I know not; but I repeat, I feel him; I see him, as it were, without being really able to discover him."

"You know your enemy now, as well as I do. It is the Tigercat. The conversation you overheard last night between him and myself must have enlightened you as to his intention, if not as to his plans."

"True; but, nevertheless, my mind refuses to admit that this man can really be our enemy. As there can be no effects without causes, so there can be no hate without a reason. Since Don Pedro's arrival in this country, he has never come in contact with this man at home or abroad, for good or for evil. Why, then, should he wish ill to my master?"

"Why! Why!" repeated the hunter, with feverish impatience. "Why does day follow night? Why are there good and bad men? Why rascals and honest people? The inquiry would lead you too far, my good friend. I know as well as you that none of you have ever come in contact with the Tigercat. It is impossible to doubt it; but what does that signify? This man is a gloomy miscreant, the greater portion of whose life is spent in doing evil for mere evil's sake. Don Pedro is loved and honoured by all who know him; Doña Hermosa is respected even by the Apaches, – the most ferocious redskins of the prairie; hence, most likely, the hatred he bears to the family of the *hacendero*. In such a man's eyes, no one has the right to be good and honest with impunity; it is an obvious necessity that all loyal hearts should be his natural enemies. A man, however low he may have fallen, can never forget his frightful downfall, or the position from which his crimes have hurled him; he cannot forgive the world his own abasement; but as he cannot avenge himself upon it in the mass, he wages war upon it in detail, attacking all those within his reach, and taking his revenge on them for fault she has himself committed. Here lies the sole cause of Tigercat's hatred of Don Pedro; seek no further reason; no other exists."

"Yes; you are right," answered Don Estevan uneasily; "it must be as you say."

"Of course it is! Trust in me, who have known the monster so long, as it is he who brought me up. But enough of this: what do you intend to do, now we have clearly ascertained our position?"

"I confess I find myself greatly embarrassed, and know not how to extricate myself from the dilemma – how to upset plans the aim of which is beyond my ken; how to thwart projects tending to an unknown end. There lies the difficulty for me."

"I think it would be by far the best course to leave the family in complete ignorance of our suspicions," said Ña Manuela.

"Say rather our conviction, señora," replied Don Fernando. "But in this matter I am quite of your opinion: it will be easy for us to guard Don Pedro and his daughter so secretly that they shall not dream of the danger which threatens them. Then, if the position grows too complicated, we shall not be in want of pretexts to oblige them to keep watch over their own safety."

"Oh, yes!" exclaimed Don Estevan excitedly;

"It is most important that they should entertain no suspicion, particularly Doña Hermosa, who is so sensitive. Poor child; if our fears prove true, she will learn to know misfortune too soon. Come, Fernando, counsel us; you are the only one who can aid us in this trying emergency."

"I will do all a man can do to save those you love."

"Thanks. But why not save those whom you love yourself? You have already rendered them an inestimable service."

"Alas, my friend!" said the hunter, with a sigh; "What am I, the miserable adventurer, that I should lift my thoughts so high? I am nothing more; and can only play the part of the honest watchdog, who saves his master and dies at his feet."

He spoke these words in accents of so much sadness and humility, that Don Estevan and his mother, moved to tears, with one accord seized his hands, and pressed them affectionately.

"Do not speak thus, brother," exclaimed the *mayor domo*; "you do not know Doña Hermosa as we do: a more upright heart, a purer or nobler soul, does not exist: she loves you."

"Ah," said Don Fernando with emotion, "do not utter the word. Doña Hermosa – love me – me! It is impossible."

"Doña Hermosa is a woman, my good friend; you saved her life. I do not positively know the nature of her sentiments towards you, – it is very likely they are inexplicable to herself, – but I am convinced of her gratitude to you; and in a young girl gratitude soon merges into love."

"Silence, Estevan!" cried the old lady, interrupting him; "Such words must not be used when speaking of your master's daughter."

"Very true, mother; forgive me; I was wrong. But had you heard Doña Hermosa speaking of our friend as I did, and exacting from me a promise to search for and bring him to her, —*vive Dios!* you would not know what to think."

"Perhaps so; but, at all events, I should not have poured oil upon the flame, and, for my own sake and that of my friend, should have prudently locked up my thoughts at the bottom of my heart."

"Do not think me so mad, señora," exclaimed Don Fernando, "as to attach more importance than they deserve to your son's words. I know too well what I am – I have too complete a conviction of my inferiority – to dare to raise my venturous eyes to her whom honour compels me to respect as one of the angels."

"Well said, Don Fernando, and spoken as a man should speak," broke in Ña Manuela; "but let us drop the subject, and occupy ourselves in finding the means of escape from the dilemma we are in."

"I think," replied the hunter, with some hesitation – "I think I can show you the means, if you cannot contrive something better."

Mother and son eagerly drew their *butacas* nearer to him, in order to listen more attentively.

"Speak, brother, speak," cried Don Estevan; "let us have no further delay. These means, what are they?"

"You must excuse me," resumed Don Fernando, "if the plan I am about to submit to you should not be exactly compatible with the strict laws of honour as they are understood in the civilised world; but I entreat you to recollect that I have been brought up as a redskin; that the man with whom we are about to enter into mortal strife is more than half an Indian; and the war he intends to wage with you will be an Apache war, full of treachery and ambushes; that, in order to meet him with advantage, we too, whatever repugnance we may feel, must employ the same measures, – must turn his own weapons against himself; must repel treachery by treachery, and knavery by knavery; for if, adhering to a false idea of honour, we persist in an open and honest warfare, we shall play the part of fools indeed, and he will outwit us."

"What you say, Fernando," replied the *mayor domo*, "is unfortunately but too true. The proverb is right, 'Cap a knave with a knave.' I perfectly understand the bearing and the justice of your reasoning, yet I confess that it is hard for an honest man, accustomed to look his enemies in the face, to be forced to wrap himself in a fox's hide, and condescend to stratagem when his heart leads him to attack openly."

"But what can we do? This is one of the sad necessities of our position. If we do not act in this wise, we may as well submit to our foe as attempt to thwart his measures; for we should fail."

"Let it be as you wish, since there is no other method; but now for your plan."

"It is this: notwithstanding the disagreement between myself and the Tigercat, he has allowed me to dive too deep into his confidence – too many of his secrets are known to me – for him to exhibit any rancour against me, whatever anger he may feel. Accustomed for a number of years to mould me to his will, and rule over me as he pleased, he thinks he knows my character thoroughly, and is persuaded that my dispute with him was only an outbreak of temper, and that nothing would please me more than to place myself once again under his guidance. Finally, like all men who have through long years cherished a chimera, the Tigercat – who, I am convinced, has only fostered me and suffered me in his presence for the sake of making me useful in one of his infernal plots – will allow himself, shrewd as he is, to be overreached by me, if I choose to take the trouble."

"All this sounds plausible enough," observed Don Estevan.

"I think it does. Well, then, listen to my proposal. At daybreak tomorrow you and I will leave for the *presidio*, where I will put you into communication with a certain rogue of my acquaintance, who is as much devoted to me as people of his sort can be. This *pícaro* will serve you as an agent: through him we shall learn all the Tigercat is doing at San Lucar with the *leperos* he is enrolling for some sinister purpose. We will then part: you to return quietly to this place; I to rejoin the Tigercat in the prairies. In this way, whatever happens will reach our ears. This is my project; what do you think of it?"

"It is capital, Fernando; you have thought of everything."

"But remember three things: first of all, whatever I may do or say, whatever measures you may see me try, do not take offence at them; leave me complete master of my actions, and never for a moment suspect that I intend to betray you."

"Have no uneasiness on that score; I will put no faith in the testimony of my eyes or ears: my confidence in you shall be unalterable. And now for your next remark."

"You will instantly comprehend its importance. As soon as we have left the *presidio*, we must be as strangers; we must know nothing of each other."

"It is indeed an important piece of advice, and I will take care to follow it; the consequences of a single mistake would be incalculably disastrous to us."

"Lastly, be ready to act at the first signal, be it by night or day. Never mind what you may be doing; leave everything instantly to assume the offensive the moment the signal is given."

"Good. After tomorrow, on the pretence of having certain urgent work to be carried out at the *hacienda*, I will quietly enlist a score of *leperos*, – hairbrained fellows, – who for gold will obey me blindly and recoil before no danger."

"The very thing! You can easily employ them here in doing nothing till the time comes for the use of knife and rifle."

"I will be answerable that no one shall make a single inquiry concerning them. But what sort of token will you send me, and through whom will you send it?"

"The token will be a white eagle's plume broken into three pieces, and with the quill painted red. He who brings the plume will only say the words, 'My two piastres.' You will give them to him without remark, and send him away again."

"But who is the man, Fernando?"

"He will be a stranger; most likely the first man I happen to meet. It is requisite that the messenger should not suspect the importance of the message he conveys, should he chance to fall into the enemy's hands."

"Well reasoned! Come, come, I think we shall get through this business successfully."

"As for me, I am sure of it," exclaimed Don Fernando, "if you will only follow my instructions to the letter."

"Do not be anxious on that score, brother; I will answer for my accuracy."

Everything having been thus arranged and decided on by our three personages, they separated and retired to rest, for it was already late, and the two men were to mount at daybreak to take the road to the *presidio* of San Lucar.

CHAPTER II. THE VIRGIN FOREST

Don Torribio Quiroga, with whom we have now to do, was a young man of twenty-eight, with a refined and intellectual countenance, an elegant figure, and possessing in the highest degree the manners of the best society.

He belonged to one of the richest and most considerable families in the province of Chihuahua: the death of his parents had put him in possession of an income of more than five hundred thousand piastres, or about ninety thousand pounds sterling; for money is plentiful in that country.

A man in this position, and gifted with all the mental and physical advantages enjoyed by Don Torribio, had a right to very high pretensions; for, a certain amount of fortune once reached, obstacles no longer exist, or, at least, are only an excitement instead of an impediment.

Don Torribio had succeeded in all his undertakings, with one exception: his struggle against Don Fernando, – a struggle in which the latter had always come off victorious.

Thus the hatred the rich *hacendero* felt for the bee-hunter, and which was originally based upon puerile motives, had insensibly increased with each successive mortification, and ended at last by assuming the alarming proportions of real Mexican hate, which only the death of its object can appease.

After the meeting with Don Fernando Carril, which resulted so unfavourably for him, Don Torribio Quiroga remained a prey to that cold and concentrated rage which slowly eats into the soul till it explodes with terrific violence.

As soon as he lost sight of his lucky adversary, he had started at full speed. His spurs mangled the flanks of his luckless horse, who snorted with pain, and redoubled his furious pace.

Now, where was Don Torribio going, with distorted features and hair streaming to the wind?

He did not know himself; moreover, he did not care.

He saw nothing, heard nothing. Revolving sinister projects in his brain, he crossed torrents and ravines without checking his horse's career.

Hatred was crying aloud in his heart; nothing cooled his burning forehead; his temples beat as if they would burst, and nervous agitation shook him in every limb.

This state of overexcitement lasted many hours. His steed still continued to fly. At last the noble animal, worn out with fatigue, suddenly stopped and dropped upon the sand.

Don Torribio rose, and looked around him with a bewildered air.

A shock like this rude fall was necessary to restore order to his ideas, and recall him to reality. Another hour of such continued anguish would have made him raving mad, or ended in sudden apoplexy.

It was night. Thick darkness covered the earth; a mournful silence reigned over the wilderness to which chance had brought him.

"Where am I?" he exclaimed, endeavouring to make out his position.

But the moon, hidden by clouds, gave forth no ray; the wind began to roar like thunder; the branches of the trees crashed against each other, and, from the depths of the wilderness, the growlings of the wild beast began to mingle their deep notes with the sharper howling of the wild cats.

Don Torribio strained his eyes in vain efforts to penetrate the darkness around him. At last he approached his horse, which was stretched on the ground, and drawing its breath with difficulty. Moved with pity for the faithful companion of so many adventures, he stooped down, removed his pistols from the holsters to his belt, and taking from the saddle, where it was slung, a gourd

filled with rum, began to wash the eyes, nostrils, and mouth of the panting animal. Half an hour's persistence seemed to restore life to the horse. He got on his legs, and, with his natural instinct, soon discovered a neighbouring rill, at which he slaked his thirst.

"All is not yet lost," muttered Don Torribio; "after all, I may make my escape hence."

But a deep roar resounded at a short distance, repeated immediately afterwards in four different directions.

The horse's coat stood on end; and Don Torribio felt a cold shudder run through his veins.

"Curse upon it!" he exclaimed; "I have stumbled upon a drinking place for panthers! What is to be done?"

He stooped, and found the confirmation of his fears in the footprints stamped in the muddy borders of the rill.

Just at this moment he saw, at ten paces from him, two eyes, glimmering like burning coals, fixed upon him with strange intensity.

Don Torribio was a man of well-trying courage. Many a time, before the eyes of his comrades, he had performed deeds of wonderful temerity; but now, alone in the darkness, and surrounded by savage animals, he felt himself overcome by deadly terror: his chest heaved, and his breath came and went with difficulty through his set teeth; a cold sweat broke out on his limbs, and he was on the point of dropping.

But this fit of terror did not last above a minute. By a violent effort of his will, he collected himself, and calling all his energy to his aid, prepared for a desperate struggle, in which he knew he must succumb; yet, preserving that instinct of self-preservation and hope which is seldom utterly extinguished in man, he determined to defend his life to the last moment.

Just then his horse, with a snort of horrible fear, bounded away, and made his escape on to the plain.

"So much the better," muttered Don Torribio; "perhaps the poor brute's speed may save him."

A frightful concert of yells and howling broke out in all parts of the forest at the flight of the horse, and mighty shadows, indistinguishable in the darkness, bounded past Don Torribio.

He smiled bitterly.

"Aha!" said he; "Shall I stand here to be devoured, without attempting to escape? *¡Vive Dios!* It would be the act of a fool! Come, I am not eaten yet: I will go."

A violent gust of wind here cleared the heaven of clouds, and for some minutes the wan light of the moon lit up the wild spot, in which Don Torribio found himself.

A few paces off, the Rio del Norte ran between two steep banks; on all sides, and far away in the distance, the dense masses of the virgin forest extended themselves. A chaos of rocks piled on each other in inextricable confusion, from whose fissures rose clumps of trees overgrown with entangled creepers drooping in fantastic garlands, pushed its ramifications to the verge of the river; the soil, composed of sand and the detritus always abounding in the forests of America, crumbled under the footstep.

Then Don Torribio knew where he was: at least fifteen leagues from the nearest inhabited spot. He was entangled in the first spurs of an immense forest – the only one throughout the country of the Apaches which the hardy pioneers of civilization had not yet dared to explore, such mysterious horrors seemed concealed in its dark recesses.

Don Torribio took no pains to inquire how his headlong course had brought him to this dreaded region. Danger so frightful that it claimed the exertion of all his powers, hung too directly over his head for him to waste time in speculating on anything save the manner of extricating himself.

At this side, the limpid stream we have mentioned issued from a rock; its banks, impressed with numberless footprints of wild beasts, clearly indicating that the spot was a favourite drinking place, when, at sunset, they left their lairs to seek their food and quench their thirst. And as a further

living proof of the fact, two magnificent jaguars, male and female, had at that very moment stopped at its border, and were watching with restless eyes the gambols of their young.

"So," said Don Torribio to himself, "here are pleasant neighbours;" and he mechanically cast his eyes on the other side.

An immense panther, crouched on a rock in the attitude of a cat on the watch, had fixed on him two eyeballs glowing like carbuncle.

Don Torribio, according to the custom in South America, never left home without his weapons. His carbine, of great price, was of remarkable accuracy, and by a providential chance, had not been broken when he fell with his horse. He had placed it as he rose against a rock beside him: he stretched out his arm, and seized it.

"Good!" said he, with a grim smile; "The struggle will cost them dear, at all events."

He shouldered the weapon; but at the moment he was about to fire, a plaintive caterwauling causing him to raise his eyes, he saw a dozen of catamounts and tiger cats of immense size perched in the branches above him, while a number of wolves crept stealthily up and dropped down in the bushes behind him. Poised on the summits of the surrounding rocks, a tribe of vultures, bald buzzards, and *urubus*, with half closed eyes, seemed to be expecting the moment to seize their share of the quarry.

With one bound, Don Torribio threw himself on to an angle of the rock, and from thence, by aid of his hands and knees, he contrived, in the course of a minute or two, to drag himself with enormous difficulty, to a kind of terrace, about twenty feet above the ground. Here he felt himself in comparative security for a time.

The horrible concert performed by the denizens of the forest, attracted one after another by the keenness of their scent, increased in volume with every minute, and had now reached such a pitch, that it drowned the roar of the wind which was raging through the ravines and clearings.

The moon had disappeared behind the clouds, and Don Torribio was once more enveloped in darkness. But if he could no longer distinguish the wild beasts, he knew they were there: he smelt their odour; he saw their eyes flashing through the obscurity; and their yells, nearing him more and more, made him feel that the last spark of hope would soon be extinguished for ever.

Firmly planting his feet on the ground and leaning a little forward to secure his aim, he drew a revolver, and fired six shots in rapid succession at the tiger cats. Six howls of agony, and the noise produced by falling from branch to branch, immediately followed. Six of the beasts were killed or wounded.

Nothing more horrible can be conceived than the uproar caused by this unexpected onslaught. The wolves threw themselves yelling on the victims, which they began to devour eagerly, disputing their booty with the vultures and *zopilotes*, who also claimed their share.

Suddenly there was a strange rustling amongst the leaves and branches of the trees. A body, of indistinguishable shape, shot through the air, and alighted growling on the platform. Don Torribio, clutching his rifle, dealt the animal a terrific blow with the butt on the skull, and the brute rolled howling from the top of the rock to the bottom.

And now his ears were stunned by the uproar arising from a dreadful combat, a few feet below him, between the jaguars and tiger cats on one side, and the panther which had attacked them. Fascinated by the terrible danger to which he was exposed, Don Torribio, forgetful of the evil consequences to him that might ensue, fired two pistol shots into the mass of foes tearing and rushing at each other's throats at his feet.

Thereupon a strange thing occurred: all these animals, natural enemies to each other, seemed to comprehend that it would be better to unite against man, their common foe, than waste their strength in strife among themselves. Suddenly ceasing from the terrible combat in which they were engaged, and abandoning, with one accord, the bloody and half-devoured bodies of the victims, they turned their rage in the direction of the rock on which Don Torribio seemed to set them at

defiance, and attacked it in concert with terrific energy – leaping upon its excrescences, striving to hold on to them, and trying to escalate it on all sides at once.

The situation grew more and more critical. Several tiger cats had already bounded on to the platform. As fast as Don Torribio knocked them over, others took their place. The number of his enemies increased with every minute; his own strength and energy were gradually deserting him.

This strife of one man against a host of ferocious brutes had something grand and striking about it. Don Torribio, like one with the nightmare, strove in vain to beat back the constantly renewed crowds of his assailants: he felt close to him the hot and fetid breath of the tiger cats and panthers; the roaring of the jaguars, and mocking moans of the panthers, poured into his ears a frightful song, that deafened and made him giddy; the eyes of thousands of his invisible foes flashed through the obscurity, and fascinated his own gaze; and sometimes the heavy wing of the vulture or *zopilote* brushed his cheek, from which the cold sweat exuded.

An accurate perception of his own existence had vanished from his soul; he no longer thought: his life, if we may still use the expression, had grown mechanical; his motions and gestures were those of a machine, and his arm rose and fell with the dull regularity of a pendulum.

Talons had already torn his flesh; several catamounts, rushing upon him, had fastened on his throat, and he had been obliged to seize them bodily to force them to quit their hold. His blood was streaming from twenty wounds, superficial, it is true; but the moment was close at hand when the energy which alone sustained him would be worn out, and he would fall from the rock, to be torn in pieces by the brutes who were ever pressing more madly upon him.

At this solemn moment, when strength and courage were alike failing, a last cry issued from his breast – a cry of agony, a cry of horrible expression, which was repeated far and wide by the echoes: the last, the final protest of a bold man, who owns himself vanquished, and instinctively calls on his kind for succour before he falls.

Wonderful to relate, a cry answered his own!

Don Torribio, astonished, and not daring to believe that a miracle was to take place in a wilderness where none before himself had dared to penetrate, fancied his ears had deceived him; yet, confessing to himself how little strength was still left him, and feeling hope faintly reviving in his soul, he uttered a second cry, more poignant, more help-seeking than the former.

As soon as the echoes of the forest were silent after their repetition of the cry, a single word, weak as a sigh, was borne to his listening ears on the wings of the breeze: "Hope!"

Don Torribio recovered himself. Electrified by the word, he seemed to regain new life and strength, and redoubled his strokes on his numberless assailants.

Suddenly the gallop of many horses was heard in the distance, several discharges of firearms illumined the darkness with their transient splendour, and some men, or rather demons, rushed unexpectedly into the thickest crowd of wild beasts, making a horrible slaughter.

At this moment Don Torribio, attacked by two tiger cats, rolled upon the platform struggling with both.

In a very short time the brutes were put to flight by the newcomers, who hastened to light fires to keep them at bay for the rest of the night.

Two of the men armed with burning torches of ocote wood, set themselves to search for the man whose cries of distress had brought them to his aid.

They were not long in finding him stretched out on the platform, surrounded by ten or twelve dead tiger cats, and clutching in his stiffened hands the throat of a strangled catamount.

"Well, Carlocho," exclaimed a voice, "have you found him?"

"Yes," replied the other; "but he seems dead."

"¡Caray!" resumed Pablito; "It would be a pity; for he was a bold fellow. Where is he?"

"There; on the rock opposite you."

"Can you let him down with the *verado's* help?"

"Nothing easier; he is as still as a log."

"Make haste, then, in the name of heaven!" said Pablito; "Every minute's delay may be a year's life stolen from him!"

Carlocho and the *verado* lifted Don Torribio by the feet and shoulders, and with infinite precaution carried him from the improvised fortress he had defended so bravely to one of the fires, and laid him on a bed of leaves prepared by El Zapote; for the four *vaqueros* were, by a strange chance, reunited in this spot.

"¡*Canarios!*!" cried Pablito, at sight of the miserable man; "Poor devil! How they have mauled him! It was high time for help."

"Do you think he will recover?" asked Carlocho, with great interest.

"There is always hope," said Pablito dogmatically, "when the vital organs are uninjured. Let us look at him."

He bent over the body of Don Torribio, unsheathed his poniard, and put the blade to his lips.

"Not a sign of breath!" and he shook his head.

"Are his wounds serious?" asked the *verado*.

"I think not: he has fallen from fatigue and overexcitement."

"But in that case he may come round again?"

"Perhaps he may; perhaps he may not: all depends upon the greater or less violence of the shock to his nervous system."

"Ha!" exclaimed the *verado* joyfully; "Look here! He breathes. ¡*Vive Dios!* He has tried to open his eyes!"

"Then he is saved!" replied Pablito; "He will soon come to his senses. This man has a constitution of iron. He will be able to be in the saddle in a quarter of an hour, if he likes; but we must attend to his wounds."

The *vaqueros*, like the backwoodsmen, live far from inhabited places; and are obliged to be their own doctors; hence they acquire a certain practical knowledge of surgery, and are adepts in the collection and application of the herbs in use among the Indians.

Pablito, aided by Carlocho and the *verado*, bathed the wounds of Don Torribio, first with water, then with rum, and blew tobacco smoke into his nostrils.

The latter, after some minutes of this strange treatment, uttered a scarcely perceptible sigh, moved his lips slightly, and at last opened his eyes, which as yet had no consciousness in them.

"He is saved!" repeated Pablito; "Now let us leave nature to work: she is the best doctor I know."

Don Torribio raised himself up, supporting himself on one elbow, and passed his hand across his forehead, as if to recall his thoughts.

"Who are you?" he said in a feeble tone.

"Friends, señor; fear nothing."

"I am killed; my limbs are all broken."

"It is nothing to signify, señor; it is only fatigue: you are as well as we are?"

Don Torribio sat up and looked attentively at the men who surrounded him.

"I must be mistaken," said he; "I never expected to find you here. By what miracle did you reach me in time to save me? – you, whom I promised to meet at a rendezvous so far from the spot where we are?"

"It was your horse performed the miracle, señor," said the *verado*.

"How is that?" asked Don Torribio, whose voice grew stronger every moment, and who had already managed to stand up.

"The case is very simple. We were skirting the forest, on our road to the place you had pointed out to us, when suddenly a horse passed across us at a giddy speed, a pack of wolves at his heels. We soon relieved him from his incarnate foes. Then, as we thought it unlikely for a saddled horse

to be all alone in a forest into which none dare venture, we set out in search of his rider. Your cry was our pilot."

"Thanks!" replied Don Torribio; "I shall know how to repay the debt I have contracted with you."

"Nonsense! That is not worth speaking of. Come! here is your horse; we can go as soon as you like."

Don Torribio held up his hand.

"Stay here," said he; "we shall find no more suitable place than this to discuss what we have got to say to each other."

CHAPTER III. DON TORRIBIO QUIROGA

There was a long silence after these words of Don Torribio. The *vaqueros*, with their eyes fixed on him, endeavoured to guess his thoughts from the play of his features. But Don Torribio's face, cold and rigid as a block of marble, gave no signs of the thoughts within. At last, after casting a glance of suspicion around, more from habit than from any fear of being overheard, he rolled a cigarette, lit it with the greatest coolness, and began to speak in a careless tone.

"My good *verado*, I am truly sorry that you have taken these honourable *caballeros* from their vocations, and put yourself to inconvenience, in order to repair to the place I had appointed."

"Why so, señor?" asked the *verado*, perfectly puzzled by this commencement.

"For a very simple reason, señor, – because the motives no longer exist which induced me to wish to confer with you."

"What!" cried all the rogues together; "Can that be possible?"

"Oh, yes!" he replied coolly; "All things considered, Don Fernando Carril is a charming *caballero*. I should be in despair if I caused him the slightest inconvenience."

"*Diablo!* not quite so charming!" observed the *verado*; "The fellow who ordered Carlocho to kill me quietly!"

"It was not to me, dear friend," said Carlocho, with great suavity, "but to Don Pablito here, that Señor Don Fernando gave the order."

"You are right; I made a mistake. Accept my excuses, señor."

After this exchange of courtesy, the two bandits again grew silent.

"An honest man sticks to his word," said Tonillo; "and if Don Torribio has changed his mind, we have nothing more to say. That reminds me," he added, with a smothered sigh, "that I must refund to you two hundred piastres, which you advanced to –"

"Keep the trifle, dear señor," said Don Torribio; "the money cannot be in better hands than yours."

The *vaquero*, who had pulled the coins from his pocket with evident reluctance, thrust them back again with a celerity that evinced the greatest satisfaction.

"It is all the same," said he; "I do not consider myself quits with you, señor. I am an honest man, and you may rely upon me."

"On us all!" exclaimed the others in one voice.

"I thank you for your devotion, señores, and appreciate it highly. Unfortunately, as I say once more, it is of no use to me."

"It is unfortunate," said the *verado*; "one does not find such patrons as you every day, señor."

"Pooh!" said he gaily; "Now you are free, what prevents your placing yourselves under the orders of Don Fernando? He is very generous; a *caballero* to the tips of his fingers: I am sure he will pay you well."

"I suppose it will have to be so, señor," said Pablito; "moreover, we can now confess that we have already been thinking of it, and –"

"Have already taken service with him," said Don Torribio carelessly. "I was aware of it."

"You know it?" cried the bandits, struck with astonishment.

"And are not vexed at it?" continued Pablito.

"Why should I be? On the contrary, I am delighted. It is a strange chance; but perhaps you will be even better able to serve me by the change."

"Indeed!" said they, becoming very attentive.

"Certainly you may. So you really are devoted to me?"

"To the last drop of our blood!" shouted the *vaqueros* in touching unison.

"You do not despise money?"

"Money can never hurt those who have none," replied the sententious Pablito.

"When it is earned honourably," added Tonillo with a grin like a monkey.

"I agree with you," said Don Torribio; "particularly when it is a question of a hundred ounces or so," (about three hundred and forty pounds sterling).

The bandits trembled with joy, and their wild eyes sparkled. They exchanged looks of promise to themselves for the future, which did not escape Don Torribio's observation.

"*¡Caray!*" they muttered, hugging themselves with joy.

"So that would suit you, I suppose?"

"*Rayo de Dios!* a hundred ounces! I should think so," said Pablito.

"There may be more," observed Don Torribio.

"But doubtless it will be a difficult job," the *verado* ventured to say.

"*¡Dame!* You know, things are going wrong at present."

"No need to tell us that, señor; the misery is frightful."

"Perhaps there may be a man to kill?" insinuated Carlocho.

"That might happen!" roundly replied Don Torribio.

"So much the worse for him," muttered Pablito.

"Then the offer is agreeable to you, even in that case?"

"More so than ever," growled Tonillo.

"Since that is your opinion, *caballeros*, listen attentively," said Don Torribio, drawing himself up; "I have pledged my honour," he began, "to make no attempts against Don Fernando Carril, either directly or indirectly."

"An honest man sticks to his word," said Tonillo.

"And I intend to keep mine scrupulously, as regards Don Fernando."

The *vaqueros* made signs of approbation.

"But," continued the speaker, "you know as well as I do that Don Fernando is a man made of mysteries, whose life lies hidden under an impenetrable veil."

"Alas, yes!" piteously sighed Tonillo.

"No one knows what becomes of him for the greater part of his time: he disappears for months together, to start up again at the moment when one least expects him."

"It is but too true," said Pablito; "the life of the *caballero* is most extraordinary."

"To how many dangers he must expose himself," continued Don Torribio, "in those perilous adventures, of which no one knows the object, nor the direction in which he seeks them!"

"It is terrible even to think of them," said Carlocho, with an air of conviction.

"One so easily meets with mishap in the wilderness," added the *verado*.

"Without going further, only look what might have happened to yourself tonight, señor!" said Tonillo, looking interested.

"It is dreadful," exclaimed Pablito.

"You will clearly understand, señores," resumed Don Torribio, "that I can by no means be responsible for the numberless accidents to which Don Fernando's manner of life exposes him at every step."

"This is incontestable," cried the others.

"Chance seems to take malignant pleasure in deranging and upsetting the best conceived plans; and it is impossible for me to save him from chance, even with the lively interest I take in his safety."

"There can be no doubt on that head," said Pablito, dogmatically; "and certainly not a soul would have the right to utter a word of reproach against you, señor, should poor Don Fernando be killed in one of his perilous adventures."

"Exactly what I think; but as I am now no longer the enemy, but the friend of Don Fernando, and in that capacity take the greatest interest in knowing all that may happen to him, so that I might fly to his aid if necessary – "

"Or avenge him, if ill luck should have it that he should be killed," said Carlocho, interrupting him.

"I should like," continued Don Torribio, "to be constantly apprised of whatever may happen to him."

"Oh, holy friendship!" exclaimed Tonillo, raising his eyes to heaven with a sanctified air; "Thou art not a mere idle word!"

"*Caballeros*, you could not be in a better position for giving me information; and as all trouble should have its reward, you shall receive at least one hundred ounces to share amongst you, or two hundred, according to the news you may bring me. You understand?"

"Perfectly, señor," replied Carlocho, with imperturbable composure, in the name of his deeply touched companions; "the office you confide to us is most honourable. You may rely on our carrying out your views to your utmost satisfaction."

"Well, that is settled, señores; I rely upon the accuracy of your information, for you must perceive the ridiculous position in which a false report would place me in the eyes of Don Fernando's numerous friends, whom I should be loth to disturb without good cause."

"Trust entirely to us, señor; we will confirm our information by irrefragable proof."

"Good! I see we understand each other; it is useless to pursue the matter further."

"Perfectly useless, señor; we are men of quick comprehension."

"Yes," said Don Torribio, smiling; "but, as your memories may be short, do me the honour of dividing these ten ounces amongst you, – not as the earnest – money of a bargain, for there is no bargain between us, but as a return for the service you have just done me, and as a means of imprinting our conversation on your brains."

The *vaqueros*, without waiting to be pressed, extended their hands, and, with smiling faces, pocketed the ounces so liberally bestowed.

"Now, one word more, *caballeros*: where are we?"

"In the Selva Negra, señor," answered Pablito; "not more than four leagues from the Hacienda del Cormillo, where Don Pedro de Luna and his family are at present residing."

Don Torribio started in astonishment.

"What! Has Don Pedro left Las Norias de San Antonio?"

"Yes, señor; since yesterday."

"What a singular thing! El Cormillo is on the extreme verge of the wilderness, in the midst of the Apaches: it is impossible to understand it."

"They say it was Doña Hermosa who wished for this change, of which scarcely anybody has yet heard."

"What an extraordinary whim! After the dangers to which she was exposed only a few days ago, to come and brave the redskins on their own territory!"

"The *hacienda* is strong, and perfectly safe from sudden assault."

"True: yet the change of residence seems very incomprehensible. At sunrise, I should be happy if you would do me the honour of serving me as guides till I get within sight of the *hacienda*. It is important that I should see Don Pedro without delay."

"We shall be at your orders, señor, as soon as you please to depart," answered Carlocho.

The night was fleeting; and Don Torribio had need of repose to restore his strength, exhausted by his late struggle for life. He rolled himself in his *zarapé*, stretched out his feet towards the fire, and was soon asleep, in spite of the trouble that racked his mind.

The *vaqueros* followed his example, after drawing lots amongst themselves as to who should watch over the common safety.

The post fell to Carlocho: the others closed their eyes; and the silence of the wilderness, which had just been so terribly disturbed, resumed its empire.

Night passed, without anything occurring to disturb the rest of these guests of the forest.

At sunrise the *vaqueros* were up. After feeding and watering their horses, they saddled them, and roused Don Torribio, announcing that the hour of departure had arrived.

The latter rose at once; and, after a short prayer uttered by them all, the five men mounted, and left the clearing which had nearly proved so fatal to one of them.

The Hacienda del Cormillo may be looked upon as the advanced sentinel of the *presidio* of San Lucar; it is, without contradiction, the richest and strongest position on the whole Indian frontier. It rises on a kind of peninsula, three leagues in circumference, on which an incalculable number of cattle pasture at liberty. We will not expatiate much on the description of a dwelling in which only a few scenes of our story are laid; we will confine ourselves to saying, that in the middle of the *hacienda* properly speaking, and perfectly secured behind the massive fortifications, loopholed and bastioned, of the fortress (for El Cormillo was certainly such), there stood a white house, small indeed, but admirably arranged, pleasant and cheerful looking. At a distance, the roof was half concealed by the branches of the trees which covered it with their verdant foliage; from its windows, the eye roamed on one side over the wilderness, on the other over the Rio del Norte, which unrolled itself in the plain like a silver band, and was lost to view in the blue distance of the horizon.

The *vaqueros*, in company with Don Torribio, had struck into the forest. For three hours their route led them along the banks of the Rio Bravo del Norte, till they were opposite the Hacienda del Cormillo, which dimly showed itself in the centre of one of those charming oases created by the deposit of the river, and covered with groups of willows, nopals, mesquites, orange and citron trees, and jasmines in full flower, amongst the branches of which a whole host of birds of varied plumage warbled unceasingly.

Don Torribio halted, and turning towards his companions, who had likewise stopped, addressed them:

"I must leave you here; I thank you for the escort you have done me the honour to give me. Your help is no longer needed. Return to your avocations, señores; you know our agreement, and I reckon on your punctuality."

"Farewell, *caballero*," they replied, bowing ceremoniously to him; "cast aside all anxiety as to the measures we are about to take."

They turned the heads of their horses, made them enter the river as if they intended to cross it, and soon vanished behind a rise in the ground. Don Torribio remained alone.

The families of Don Torribio and Don Pedro de Luna, both originally Spanish, and connected by various ties in old times, had always lived on a footing of great intimacy. The young man and the girl had almost been brought up together. So, when her handsome cousin had come to bid her adieu, and announce his departure for Europe, where he was to stay a few years, in order to complete his education and acquire the manners of the fashionable world, Doña Hermosa, then about twelve years old, had felt sorry to lose him. They had loved each other from infancy, unwittingly obeying the secret impulses of childhood, which is always seeking for happiness.

Don Torribio had left her, carrying his own love with him, and never doubting that Doña Hermosa was preserving hers for him.

On his return to Veracruz, after visiting the most celebrated places of the civilized world, he had hastened to put his affairs in order, and set out for San Lucar, burning with desire to meet her whom he loved so dearly, and whom he had not seen for three years – his Hermosa, that pretty child, who by this time, must have grown into a beautiful and accomplished woman.

The surprise and joy of Don Pedro and his daughter were extreme. Hermosa was particularly happy, for, we must confess, she had thought all day long of Don Torribio, and looked at him

through the medium of her recollections of childhood; yet at the same time she felt her heart disturbed by mingled sensations of pain and pleasure.

Don Torribio perceived it: he understood, or thought he understood, that she still loved him; and his happiness was complete.

"Come, children," the smiling father had said, "embrace each other; you have my permission."

Doña Hermosa, with many blushes, bent forward her forehead to Don Torribio, who respectfully touched it with his lips.

"Is that what you call kissing?" cried Don Pedro. "Come, come, no hypocrisy; embrace each other frankly. Do not play the coquette, Hermosa, because you are a pretty girl and he is a handsome fellow; and you, Torribio, who have come upon us like a thunderbolt, without giving warning, do you think to make me believe you have ridden many hundred leagues, as fast as your horse could carry you, to see me? I know for whom you come all the way from Veracruz to San Lucar! You love each other. Give each other an honest kiss, like betrothed lovers as you are; and if you are wise, you will be married offhand."

The young people, melted by his kind words and pleasant humour, threw themselves into the arms of the venerable man, to hide the depth of their emotion.

In consequence of this reception, Don Torribio had been formally acknowledged as having a claim to the hand of Doña Hermosa, and in that capacity was received by her.

We must do the girl the justice to say, that she sincerely believed she loved her cousin. The ties of relationship, their childish friendship, and the long separation, which had increased the warmth of their feelings, disposed her to think favourably of the marriage proposed by her father. She awaited the day fixed for her espousals without any degree of impatience, and looked forward with a kind of pleasurable hope to the time when she would be indissolubly united to him.

Although such an assertion will most likely make many of our readers cry "Fie!" upon us, we will nevertheless maintain that a young girl's first passion is rarely genuine love. Her second love originates in the heart; the first only in the brain. A young girl who begins to experience the first emotions of her heart naturally allows herself to be attracted by the man who, from circumstances and his relations towards her, has long ago obtained her confidence and excited her interest. This kind of love, then, is only friendship, fortified by habit and magnified by the secret influence exercised by the as yet vague and undecided thoughts which crop up in the brains of sixteen; and lastly, and more than all, by the want of opportunities for comparing her lover with others, and the fact that the marriage is already settled, and she thinks it impossible to recede.

This was the position in which Doña Hermosa, without at all suspecting it, stood towards her cousin. The marriage had been retarded, up to the day about which we are now writing, for divers reasons of age and convenience, although Don Pedro attached immense importance to it, either on account of his intended son-in-law's enormous wealth, or because he was persuaded the union would make his daughter happy.

Matters had proceeded thus between the young people, without any remarkable incident occurring to trouble the calm of their relations to each other, up to the time when the events we have narrated in another place happened to Doña Hermosa in the prairie. But at the first visit Don Torribio paid his betrothed after her return to the Hacienda de las Norias, he perceived, with the clear-sightedness of love, that Doña Hermosa did not receive him with the freedom or the frankness of speech and manner to which he had been accustomed.

The girl seemed sad and dreamy; she scarcely answered the questions he addressed to her, and did not appear to understand the hints he threw out about their approaching marriage.

Don Torribio at first attributed the change to one of those nervous influences to which young girls are subject, without suspecting it. He fancied she was unwell, and left her, without dreaming that another filled the place in the heart of his betrothed which he believed himself alone to occupy.

Moreover, upon whom could his suspicions fall, if he entertained any? Don Pedro lived in great retirement, only receiving at long intervals his old friends, most of them married, or long past the age for marrying.

It was impossible to suppose that, in the two days Doña Hermosa spent in the prairie among the redskins, she could have met with a man whose appearance and manners could have touched her affections.

However, Don Torribio was soon compelled to acknowledge in spite of himself, that what he had at first taken for a girlish whim was a confirmed resolve; or, in one word, that if Doña Hermosa still preserved for him the friendship to which he had a right, as the companion of her childhood, her love, if she had ever felt it for him, had vanished for ever.

When once convinced of this certainty, he became seriously uneasy. The love he felt for his cousin was profound and sincere; he had let it grow into his heart too deeply to be easily eradicated. He saw all his plans of happiness in the future crumble together, and, his hopes once shipwrecked, resolved to have the indispensable explanation from the girl which should tell him how much he had to hope or fear.

It was with the intention of demanding this explanation from Doña Hermosa that, instead of returning to San Lucar, where he lived, he had desired the *vaqueros* to show him the way to the Hacienda del Cormillo. But as soon as his guides left him, and he found himself alone in front of the *hacienda*, his courage nearly evaporated. Foreseeing the result of the step he was about to take, he hesitated to enter the dwelling; for, like all lovers, in spite of the pain caused by the girl's indifference, he would have preferred to go on cheating himself with futile expectations, rather than learn a truth which would break his heart, by robbing him of all hope.

The struggle lasted a long time; more than once he made as if he would ride back; but at last reason conquered passion. He comprehended how difficult the position would be, both for Doña Hermosa and himself. Happen what might, he resolved to end it; and digging his spurs into the flanks of his horse, he galloped towards the *hacienda*, rightly fearing that, if he lingered longer, he would find no strength to accomplish the project he had formed.

When he arrived at El Cormillo, he was informed that Don Pedro and his daughter had gone hunting at sunrise, and would not return before the *oración* (time for mass).

"So much the better," muttered Don Torribio between his teeth, and with a sigh of satisfaction at the respite chance had so opportunely afforded him.

Without stopping for the refreshments offered him, he turned his horse's head in the direction of San Lucar, and galloped off, congratulating himself that the explanation he both dreaded and desired had been thus providentially delayed.

CHAPTER IV. LA TERTULIA (THE PARTY)

We must now introduce our readers to the Hacienda del Cormillo, two days later than the event we have just narrated.

Towards eight o'clock in the evening, two persons were seated in the drawing room of the *hacienda*, close to a *brasero* (brasier); for the nights were still cold.

A stranger opening the doors of this room could have fancied himself transported to the Faubourg St. Germain, it was so elegantly furnished in the French fashion. Parisian luxury was exhibited in the carpets, Parisian taste in the choice of the furniture. Nothing was forgotten, – not even a pianoforte by Erard, on which lay the scores of Parisian operas, nor a magnificent harmonium from the workshops of Alexandre; and as if to prove that glory travels far, and genius has wings, the novels and poems in fashion at Paris strewed a round table by Boule. Everything put you in mind of France and Paris, with the exception of the silver *brasero*, which, with its glowing knots of olive wood, showed that you were in Spanish America. This magnificent withdrawing room was lighted up by candles of rose-coloured wax, in handsome chandeliers.

It was Don Pedro and his daughter who was seated by the *brasero*. Doña Hermosa was clad in a dress of the greatest simplicity, which made her look still more charming. She was smoking a tiny cigarette, rolled in a maize leaf, which did not interrupt the flow of her conversation with her father.

"Yes," said she, "the most lovely birds in the world have been brought to the *presidio*."

"Well, *querida chica*?" (my darling).

"It appears to me that my dearest father is not quite as gallant as usual tonight," she said, pouting a little, like a spoilt child.

"What do you know about that, señorita?" answered Don Pedro, laughing.

"What! Is it the truth?" she exclaimed, as she jumped from her seat, and clapped her hands together; "You have thought –"

"Of buying you the birds. Tomorrow you will see your feathered subjects, and your aviary stocked with parakeets, love birds, Bengalis, hummingbirds, and Heaven knows how many others. There are at least four hundred of them, you little ingrate!"

"Oh, how kind you are! And how I love you!" replied the girl, throwing herself into her father's arms, and kissing him a thousand times.

"That will do, that will do, little monkey! Do you want to stifle me with kisses?"

"What shall I do to show my gratitude for such kind forethought?"

"Poor little dear!" said he sadly; "I have only yourself to love now."

"Say to adore, my dearest father; for it is adoration you feel for me; and I too love you with all the strength of love which God has given me."

"And yet," said Don Pedro, in tones of gentle reproach, "you are not afraid of causing me uneasiness."

"I!" said Hermosa, beginning to tremble.

"Yes, you," he replied, threatening her with uplifted finger; "you are concealing something from me."

"Father!" she murmured softly.

"Daughter, a father's eye can pierce to the bottom of the heart of a girl of sixteen. Some extraordinary change has taken place in you these last few days: your thoughts are strangely preoccupied."

"You are right, father," she replied with a good deal of firmness.

"And what are you dreaming about, little girl?" asked Don Pedro, smiling to conceal his anxiety.

"About Don Torribio de Quiroga, father."

"Aha!" replied he, "Because you love him, I suppose?"

Doña Hermosa drew herself up, and assumed a serious expression.

"I!" said she, placing her hand on her bosom, "No! I deceived myself until today. I do not love Don Torribio, and yet I cannot help thinking of him, although I do not know why. Since his return from Europe, a change has come over him for which I cannot account. It seems to me, that he is not the same person who was brought up with me. His look pains, yet fascinates me; his voice raises a feeling of undefinable sorrow. Certainly, the man is handsome; his manners are noble, and his bearing that of a highbred gentleman: yet there is something nameless about him which chills me, and inspires invincible repugnance."

"How romantic!" said Don Pedro, laughing.

"Laugh at me! Mock me!" she replied, her voice trembling. "Shall I confess everything, father?"

"Speak confidently, dearest child."

"I will. I believe this man, whom I thought I loved, will bring evil upon me."

"Child," replied Don Pedro, kissing her forehead, "what ill could he do you?"

"Father, I cannot tell; but I dread it."

"Do you wish me to break with him, and not to admit him again?"

"Heaven forbid! It would certainly hasten the misfortune that threatens me."

"Pooh! you are a spoilt child! You grow whimsical, and amuse yourself by creating phantoms. All these fears and imaginary presentiments spring from your love for your cousin. The only way to restore your tranquillity is to marry you to him as soon as possible; and be sure, my dear, that is what I intend to do."

Doña Hermosa shook her head sorrowfully, and cast down her eyes, but she made no reply: she felt that her father had completely misunderstood her meaning, and that any attempt to bring him over to her wishes would be vain.

Just at that moment a *peon* announced Don Torribio, who entered the room.

He was dressed in the latest Paris fashion; and the glare of the candles lighted up his handsome face.

Father and daughter both trembled; the one perhaps with joy, the other certainly with fear.

Don Torribio, after gracefully saluting Doña Hermosa, approached her and respectfully offered her a superb bouquet of exotic flowers. She took them with a forced smile, and, without looking at them, placed them on the table.

Soon after, other persons were announced: the governor, Don José Kalbris, and his staff; two or three other families – in all, about twenty people; and lastly, Don Estevan Dias, and Don Fernando Carril.

It was certainly impossible to recognise the hardy backwoodsman, the redoubtable bee-hunter, who a few days before had done Don Pedro and his daughter such signal service, in the elegant caballero who arrived in the company of the *mayor domo* of the hacienda. His irreproachable bearing, his distinguished manner, in short, all about him, banished suspicion, or rather prevented comparison.

We have already said that Don Fernando Carril, although his life was wrapped in impenetrable mystery, was superficially known to all the best society in the provinces, and, thanks to the easy-going manners of the Mexicans, received in the best families. His presence at the hacienda was, therefore, nothing extraordinary. Nevertheless, his appearance excited lively curiosity in the guests; for it was a long time since Don Fernando had been seen at any entertainment.

Like Don Torribio, the hunter, when he entered the room, approached Doña Hermosa, bowed profoundly to her, and respectfully offered her a flower he held in his hand.

"Señorita," said he, in a voice full of suppressed emotion, "deign to accept this modest flower; it grows only in the desert," he added, significantly.

Doña Hermosa trembled at the sound of his voice, which she thought she had recognised; a lively blush rose to her cheeks; and dropping her eyes under the ardent gaze fixed upon her, she took the flower and placed it in her bosom, as she answered inarticulately:

"Everything that comes from the desert will be dear to me henceforth."

The conversation of the guests had by this time grown animated. The little incident passed without remark, except from one person, who, with that kind of intuition which springs from love and jealousy, had divined in Don Fernando one who, if not an openly declared rival, was, at least, preferred in secret.

This person was Don Torribio Quiroga.

Leaning towards Don Estevan, who chanced to be near him, he said, in a voice low indeed but perfectly distinct and audible to all: "What golden key does this man possess, whom nobody knows, by which he introduces himself into honourable families, where his presence is neither desired nor invited?"

"Ask him yourself, señor," said Don Estevan dryly; "he will most likely be able to explain his conduct satisfactorily."

"I shall follow your advice this instant, señor," answered Don Torribio haughtily.

"It is unnecessary, caballero; I heard your words perfectly," said Don Fernando.

His voice was calm, and he made a courteous bow to Don Torribio, while an ironical smile curled his lips for a moment.

All conversation had been suddenly broken off; a profound silence reigned over those present, and the looks of all were turned in curiosity towards the two men.

Doña Hermosa, pale and trembling, cast a look of entreaty on her father.

Don Pedro walked resolutely into the middle, of the room, and placed himself between the two caballeros.

"What does this mean, señores?" said he. "Is this the idea of propriety you have brought back from your travels in Europe, Don Torribio? Do you dare to turn my drawing room into lists wherein to break your lance in personal quarrels? What right have you to cavil at Don Fernando's presence here? You are not my son-in-law yet, as far as I know. I am master here, and can receive whom I think fit."

"Even cutthroats and *salteadores* (highwaymen), cousin, if such is your good pleasure," replied the young man, with an ironical bow.

Don Fernando looked as if he were going to rush upon the man who had thus insulted him, but managed to contain himself.

"Will Don Torribio deign to explain himself," he said calmly, "and not speak in enigmas?"

"And whose fault is it, caballero, if I speak in enigmas? Are you not the cause of the mystery?"

"Enough, caballeros!" exclaimed Don Pedro; "He who utters another word on this subject, makes me his mortal enemy."

The two men bowed respectfully to the hacendero and separated, but not without having exchanged looks of terrible expression.

"Well, colonel," continued Don Pedro, addressing the governor, in the hopes of glossing over the lamentable altercation, "What news from La Ciudad? Is Mexico still tranquil?"

"Our great Santa Anna," replied the colonel, who was choking in his uniform, "has once more soundly beaten the audacious general who has dared to issue a *pronunciamiento* (manifesto) against him."

"Thank God! Perhaps this victory will procure us the tranquillity of which commerce stands so much in need."

"Yes," said a rich hacendero, a neighbour of Don Pedro. "Communication has been so difficult of late, that we can forward nothing."

"Are the redskins at work?" asked a merchant, whom these words had troubled.

"No," said the governor; "there is no danger from them. The last lesson they got was a rude one, and they will not forget it. For a long time they have not dared to invade our frontiers."

An almost imperceptible smile curled the lips of Don Fernando. "You forget the Tigercat and his adherents," said he.

"Oh! the Tigercat is only a bandit," said the governor hastily. "Besides, Government is at this moment preparing an expedition against him, so as to finish, once and for all, with his band of brigands."

"It is an admirable idea," said Don Torribio, with a sarcastic sneer. "It is time this frontier should be cleared of the host of fellows, with more than equivocal habits, who infest it."

"I am quite of the same opinion; it seems a most sensible measure," said Don Fernando quietly, but giving back to his adversary a smile as bitter as his own.

"In case of invasion, do you think the Indians able to give the province much trouble?" asked the merchant.

"H'm!" said Don José, with a patronising air; "People entertain exaggerated ideas of these redskins; in fact, they are but miserable wretches."

Don Fernando smiled again; but this time the smile was savage and sinister.

"Señor *gobernador*," said he, "you are not quite right. To judge by the news you were good enough to communicate, I believe the Indians will keep quite peaceably at home, unless they are determined to tempt ill luck."

"*¡Rayo de Dios!* I should think so," replied the governor.

"Ah! Señorita," said Don Torribio, gracefully turning to Doña Hermosa, "may I pray of your kindness to let us hear that delicious song from the *Domino Noir*, which you sang to such perfection a few days ago?"

Doña Hermosa, darted a look from under her long lashes at Don Fernando. The latter's eyes conveyed a mute prayer of entreaty. Without further hesitation, she placed herself at the piano, and, in a pure and feeling voice, sang the romance in the third act.

"I remember having heard that delicious romance sung in Paris by Madame Demareau, that nightingale who flew away too soon," said Don Torribio, bowing gallantly to Doña Hermosa. "I know not whether you or she sang it with most taste and spirit."

She answered: "Cousin, you have lived too long in France."

"How so, señorita?"

"Because," she replied, with a smile as cold and keen as the point of a poniard, "France has made you a detestable flatterer."

"*¡Bravo!*" chuckled the fat governor, whose cheeks shook with delight. "You see Don Torribio, our creoles rival the Parisian ladies in the smartness of their repartee."

"Incontestably, colonel," answered Don Torribio. "But I can take my own part," he added in an undefinable tone; "I shall soon have my revenge." And he cast a glance at Don Fernando and Doña Hermosa, who were seated close to each other, which made the girl shudder with fear.

"Don Fernando, and you other caballeros, here present," said the governor, addressing the guests, "I hope that tomorrow you will attend the *Te Deum* to be sung in honour of our glorious Santa Anna."

"I shall have the honour," said Don Fernando. The others made a similar response.

"As for me," said Don Torribio, "you must excuse me, colonel; for business compels me to leave tonight."

"What!" cried Don Pedro, in astonishment; "You are going to travel tonight, cousin?"

"I am indeed, Señor Don Pedro; I am obliged to leave you, even though I have but just arrived."

"Well, that is a singular and most unforeseen resolution. Where are you going?"

"Excuse me if I keep the object of my expedition secret. Certain persons must not have the sole right of making mysterious excursions."

"Indeed!" said Don Pedro peevishly. "And do you intend to stay away long?"

"I hope not, but dare not say I am sure."

"So much the better. Come back to us as soon as you can; for," said he significantly, "your return will please all of us here."

"¿Quién sabe?" (who knows?) muttered Don Torribio, with a sinister expression.

Doña Hermosa, who overheard these two words, could no longer master her fears.

While Don Pedro and his cousin were exchanging these words, the girl whispered to Don Estevan:

"Brother, tomorrow, after mass, I want to speak to you at my nurse's."

"To me, or to my friend?" said Don Estevan softly.

"To both," she answered, with feverish agitation.

Don Estevan and Don Fernando now retired with joyful hearts. The latter was sure that Doña Hermosa had recognised him.

The other visitors also gradually departed, till Don Torribio de Quiroga was left alone with his host.

"Cousin," said he, in a low and broken voice, as he bent down to the lady to bid her farewell, "I am about to begin a journey in which I shall incur considerable danger. May I hope you will remember the traveller in your prayers?"

Hermosa looked him in the face for an instant, and replied with an austerity unusual in her:

"Cousin, I cannot pray for the success of a journey the purport of which I do not know."

"Thanks for your frankness, señorita," he replied, without exhibiting emotion; "I shall not forget your words."

"So you are really going, Don Torribio?" said Don Pedro, who joined them at the moment.

"This very instant, cousin: all is ready for my departure."

"Then I wish you luck! I hope we shall soon hear from you?"

"Yes," he replied, with a singular expression; "you shall soon hear of me. Farewell!"

"What is the matter with your cousin, *niña*?" asked Don Pedro, when he found himself alone with his daughter: "His conduct tonight has been very strange."

Before she could answer, the door opened. "The *capataz* of the Hacienda de las Norias," said a *peon* who had entered, "wishes to speak to Señor Don Pedro de Luna on affairs of consequence."

"Admit him instantly," replied Don Pedro to the domestic who had announced the arrival of the *capataz* so pompously.

Don Torribio was terribly agitated when he left the house. He looked back, and cast a venomous eye on the windows of the room, on which he could see the graceful shadow of Doña Hermosa.

"Proud girl," said he in a terrible voice, "I hate you with all the power of the love I once felt for you! Soon, very soon, I will punish you for your disdain."

Then, wrapping his cloak around him, he rapidly took the direction of the nearest *patio* (out-buildings), where he hoped to find his horse. Indeed, he found him there; a *peon* holding the bridle. Don Torribio seized the reins, threw the *peon* a piastre, flung himself into the saddle, and rode off at a gallop.

"Wagh!" said the Indian, picking up the money; "What ails the young master? One would think him mad. How he scampered off!"

In the meantime Don Torribio had left the hacienda behind him, and was making all haste on the road to San Lucar.

But he had not ridden more than a quarter of an hour, when suddenly, at a turn of the road, his horse gave a start of terror, reared, and flew round, with his ears laid close to his head. Don Torribio looked to see what had alarmed the animal.

A man of tall stature, mounted on a strong black horse, held the middle of the road four or five paces in advance of him, and completely barred his passage.

Don Torribio cocked a pistol.

"Holloa, caballero!" he cried in a sharp tone; "Move to the right or the left."

"Neither to one nor the other, Don Torribio de Quiroga. I want to speak to you."

"It is a singular demand at this time of night, and in such a place."

"I did not choose either time or place. Did you not receive a note without a signature today?"

"I did," said Don Torribio, striking his forehead; "and the note proposed – "

"To teach you things," hastily interrupted the stranger, "which it is important you should know at once."

"Those were the words contained in the note."

"It was I who sent it."

"Indeed?" said Don Torribio, surprised; "was it you?"

"Yes; and I am ready to satisfy you; but to do that, you must follow me."

"But what good will it do me to know these matters? Perhaps it would be better to leave them untold."

"As you please; I do not force you to listen to me. Everyone is free to act as he chooses. If you prefer to sit down under insult without avenging yourself, I have no objection."

These words were uttered with such a sneer, that Don Torribio could not help shuddering.

"Do you in truth offer me revenge?" he asked in a voice half stifled with the rage surging at his heart.

"You shall judge, if you will follow me."

"Demon!" cried Don Torribio, "Whoever thou may'st be, lead on, since it must be so! I will follow thee, even unto hell."

"Amen," said the stranger, with a sinister chuckle.

The two riders dashed into the darkness, and the sound of their furious pace was soon merged in profound silence.

CHAPTER V. THE AMBUSH

Don Fernando and his friend, as we have related, left the hacienda a little before Don Torribio. They had made all haste to reach their dwelling. The *tertulia* had ended at nine o'clock; and by eleven they were at the *rancho*.

Doña Manuela was expecting them. In a few words they reported to her all that had happened at the *tertulia*, and hastened to their couches; for they were obliged to leave again at daybreak, if they wished to arrive in good time at San Lucar without over-fatiguing Doña Manuela, who was to accompany them. In fact, according to agreement, they mounted their horses a little before four in the morning.

In Mexico, on account of the intense heat of the day, people generally travel by night; that is to say, from four in the morning till eleven, and from six in the evening till midnight. Nine o'clock struck as the three entered the *presidio*. Don Fernando left his friend and the mother to find their way to the house he possessed in San Lucar, which he had placed at their disposal, while he himself repaired to the governor's house, whither affairs of grave importance called him.

The worthy governor overwhelmed the visitor with civilities, – for the latter had, on more than one occasion, rendered him important service, – and seemed unable to show him sufficient courtesy. But, in spite of the efforts of his host, Don Fernando perceived that Don José Kalbris was a prey to anxiety, which all his sense of the attentions due to his guest did not enable him wholly to conceal.

Don José Kalbris was a brave and worthy soldier, true as his own steel, to whom the Mexican government had given the charge of the *presidio* as a recompense for his valiant services during the War of Independence. For fifteen years the colonel had governed the *presidio*, and, thanks to a certain degree of severity tempered by justice, and to his undoubted courage, had managed to keep it in a state of comparative tranquillity, in spite of the evil passions of the *vaqueros* – a set of rascals, three or four of whom he was obliged to garrote annually, in order to overawe the rest – and the continual raids of the Indians, who pushed up under the guns of the fort in their attempts to carry off cattle and make prisoners, the latter being their favourite booty, especially women.

Don José, endowed with moderate intelligence, but rich in experience, and warmly supported by the better classes, who had entire confidence in him, had contrived to maintain peace in his province without much difficulty up to the time of which we are now speaking. This denoted a certain strength of character in the old soldier, who was without education, and had made his own career, particularly when one takes into consideration the difficulty of his receiving support from his government; so that he was thrown on his own resources, and obliged to take the initiative, and act on his own responsibility, in all cases where he thought fit to exercise the strong arm of the law.

In person the governor was a tall, stout man with a purple and bloated face, perfectly self-satisfied, fond of hearing himself talk, and who laid great stress on every syllable he uttered.

Don Fernando, well acquainted with the colonel's character, and holding him in great esteem, was astounded at the uneasiness he displayed, and the change from his usual placidity of manner. Fancying that want of money might be at the bottom of his embarrassment, he resolved to sound him, and come to his aid, if that were necessary.

"Holloa!" said the colonel, "What good wind blows you to the *presidio* so early, Don Fernando?"

"The wish to see you," replied the latter, pressing the hand the colonel extended.

"It is very kind of you. You will breakfast with me, of course?"

"I came to invite myself."

"That is right," said the colonel, striking a bell.

A domestic entered.

"This caballero will do me the honour to breakfast with me."

The servant, a well-trained soldier, disappeared.

"By the bye, Don Fernando, I have a heap of papers here addressed to you."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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