

Aimard Gustave

The Trappers of Arkansas: or, The Loyal Heart



Gustave Aimard

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PREFACE

The publication of the present volume of Gustave Aimard's works renders the series complete. It takes its place as the first of all: and it is succeeded by the "Border Rifles," "Freebooters," and "White Scalper." In exciting scenes and perilous adventures, this work, if possible, surpasses all those which have as yet been offered to the English reader. Moreover it enables the development of Aimard's literary talent to be distinctly traced. The critic will discover, that, at first, Gustave Aimard's brain so teemed with incidents, that he paid slight attention to plot, and hence this volume – as is indeed generally the case with works relative to Indian life and character – consists rather of a succession of exciting adventures than of a regularly developed drama. This fault our Author has corrected in his later works: his hand, at first better suited to wield the bowie knife than the pen, has regained its pliancy; and the ever increasing encouragement bestowed on his stories in England, is a gratifying proof that his efforts after artistic improvement have been fully appreciated.

L.W.

PROLOGUE

CHAPTER I. HERMOSILLO

The traveller who for the first time lands in the southern provinces of America involuntarily feels an undefinable sadness.

In fact, the history of the New World is nothing but a lamentable martyrology, in which fanaticism and cupidity continually go hand in hand.

The search for gold was the origin of the discovery of the New World; that gold once found, America became for its conquerors merely a storehouse, whither greedy adventurers came, a poniard in one hand and a crucifix in the other, to gather an ample harvest of the so ardently coveted metal, after which they returned to their own countries to make a display of their riches, and provoke fresh emigrations, by the boundless luxury they indulged in.

It is to this continual displacement that must be attributed, in America, the absence of those grand monuments, the foundation stones as it were of every colony which plants itself in a new country with a view of becoming perpetuated.

If you traverse at the present day this vast continent, which, during three centuries, has been in the peaceable possession of the Spaniards, – you only meet here and there, and at long distances apart, with a few nameless ruins to attest their passage; whilst the monuments erected many ages before the discovery, by the Aztecs and the Incas, are still standing in their majestic simplicity, as an imperishable evidence of their presence in the country and of their efforts to attain civilization.

Alas! what has resulted from those glorious conquests, so envied by the whole of Europe, in which the blood of the executioner was mingled with that of the victims, to the profit of that other nation, at that time so proud of its valiant captains, of its fertile territories, and of its commerce which embraced the entire world? Time has held on his march, and Southern America is at this hour expiating the crimes of which she was the instigation. Torn by factions which contend for an ephemeral power; oppressed by ruinous oligarchies; deserted by the strangers who have fattened upon her substance, she is sinking slowly beneath the weight of her own inertia, without having the strength to lift the leaden winding sheet which stifles her, and is destined never to awaken again till the day when a new race, unstained by homicide, and governed by laws framed after those of God, shall bring to her the labour and liberty which are the life of nations.

In a word, the Hispano-American race has perpetuated itself in the domains bequeathed to it, by its ancestors, without extending their boundaries; its heroism was extinguished in the tomb of Charles V, and it has preserved nothing of the mother country but its hospitable customs, its religious intolerance, its monks, its guitarreros, and its mendicants armed with muskets.

Of all the states that form the vast Mexican confederation, that of Sonora is the only one which, by its conflicts with the Indian tribes that surround it, and a continual intercourse with these races, has preserved a distinctive physiognomy.

The manners of its inhabitants have a certain wild character, which distinguishes them, at the first glance, from those of the interior provinces.

The Rio Gila may be considered the northern limit of this state: on the east and west it is bounded by the Sierra Madre and the Gulf of California.

The Sierra Madre beyond Durango divides into two chains; the principal continues the grand direction from north to south; the other tends towards the west, running along, in the rear of the

states of Durango and Guadalajara, all the regions which terminate at the Pacific. This branch of the Cordilleras forms the southern limits of Sonora.

Nature seems to have taken a delight in lavishing her benefits upon this country. The climate is clear, temperate, salubrious; gold, silver, the most fertile soil, the most delicious fruits, and medicinal herbs abound; there are to be found the most efficacious balms, insects the most useful for dyeing, the rarest marbles, the most precious stones, as well as game and fish of all sorts. But in the vast solitudes of the Rio Gila and the Sierra Madre, the independent Indians, the Comanches, Pawnees, Pimas, Opatas, and Apaches, have declared a rude war against the white race, and in their implacable and incessant incursions, make them pay dearly for the possession of all those riches of which their ancestors despoiled the natives, and which they incessantly endeavour to recover again without ceasing.

The three principal cities of the Sonora are Guaymas, Hermosillo, and Arispe.

Hermosillo, anciently Pitic, and which the expedition of the Count de Raouset Boulbon has rendered famous, is the *entrepôt* of the Mexican commerce of the Pacific, and numbers more than nine thousand inhabitants.

This city, built upon a plateau which sinks towards the north, in a gentle declivity to the sea, leans and shelters itself against a hill named El Cerro de la Campana (Mountain of the Bell), whose summit is crowned with enormous blocks of stone, which, when struck, render a clear metallic sound.

In other respects, like its other American sisters, this ciudad is dirty, built of pisé bricks, and presents to the astonished eyes of the traveller a mixture of ruins, negligence, and desolation which saddens the soul.

On the day in which this story commences, that is to say, the 17th January, 1817, between three and four o'clock in the afternoon, a time when the ordinary population are taking the *siesta* in the most retired apartments of their dwellings, the city of Hermosillo, generally so calm and quiet, presented an unusual aspect.

A vast number of leperos, gambusinos, contrabandists, and, above all, of rateros, were crowded together, with cries, menaces, and wild howlings, in the Calle del Rosario (Street of the Rosary). A few Spanish soldiers, – at that period Mexico had not shaken off the yoke of the mother country, – were endeavouring in vain to re-establish order and disperse the crowd, by striking heavily, right and left, with the shafts of their lances, all the individuals who came in their way.

But the tumult, far from diminishing, on the contrary rapidly increased; the Hiaquis Indians, in particular, mingled with the crowd, yelled and gesticulated in a truly frightful manner.

The windows of the houses were filled with the heads of men and women, who, with looks directed towards the Cerro de la Campana, from the foot of which arose thick clouds of smoke in large volumes towards the heavens, seemed to be in expectation of some extraordinary event.

All at once loud cries were heard; the crowd divided in two, like an overripe pomegranate, everyone throwing himself on one side or the other, with marks of the greatest terror; and a young man, or a boy rather, for he was scarcely sixteen, appeared, borne along like a whirlwind by the furious gallop of a half wild horse.

"Stop him!" cried some.

"Lasso him!" cried others.

"*Válgame Dios!*" the women murmured, crossing themselves. "It is the demon himself."

But everyone, instead of stopping him, got out of his way as quickly as he could; the bold boy continued his rapid course, with a jeering smile upon his lips, his face inflamed, his eye sparkling, and distributing, right and left, smart blows with his *chicote* on all who ventured too near him, or whose unfortunate destiny prevented them from getting out of his way as fast as they would have wished.

"Eh! eh! *Caspita!*" (said, as the boy jostled him in passing, a *vaquero* with a stupid countenance and athletic limbs,) "Devil take the madman, he nearly knocked me down! Eh! but," he added, after having cast a glance at the young man, "if I mistake not, that is Rafaël, my neighbour's son! Wait a moment, *picaro!*"

While speaking this aside between his teeth, the *vaquero* unrolled the lasso which he wore fastened to his belt, and set off running in the direction of the horseman.

The crowd, who understood his intention, applauded with enthusiasm.

"Bravo, bravo!" they cried.

"Don't miss him, Cornejo!" some *vaqueros* encouragingly shouted, clapping their hands.

Cornejo, since we know the name of this interesting personage, gained insensibly upon the boy, before whom obstacles multiplied more and more.

Warned of the perils which threatened him, by the cries of the spectators, the horseman turned his head.

Then he saw the *vaquero*.

A livid paleness covered his countenance; he felt that he was lost.

"Let me escape, Cornejo," he cried, choking with tears.

"No, no!" the crowd howled; "lasso him! lasso him!"

The populace took great interest in this manhunt; they feared to find themselves cheated of a spectacle which gave them much satisfaction.

"Surrender," the giant replied; "or else, I warn you, I will lasso you like a *ciboto*."

"I will not surrender," the boy said resolutely.

The two speakers still held on their way, the one on foot, the other on horseback.

The crowd followed, howling with pleasure. The masses are thus everywhere – barbarous and without pity.

"Leave me, I say," the boy resumed, "or I swear by the blessed souls of purgatory, that evil will befall you!"

The *vaquero* sneered, and whirled his lasso round his head.

"Be warned, Rafaël," he said; "for the last time, will you surrender?"

"No! a thousand times no!" the boy cried, passionately.

"By the grace of God, then!" said the *vaquero*.

The lasso whizzed and flew through the air.

But a strange thing happened at the same moment.

Rafaël stopped his horse short, as if it had been changed into a block of granite; and, springing from the saddle, he bounded like a tiger upon the giant, whom the shock bore down upon the sand; and before anybody could oppose him, he plunged into his throat the knife which all Mexicans wear in their belts.

A long stream of blood spouted into the face of the boy, the *vaquero* writhed about for a few seconds, and then remained motionless.

He was dead!

The crowd uttered a cry of horror and fear.

Quick as lightning, the boy had regained his saddle, and recommenced his desperate course, brandishing his knife, and laughing with the grin of a demon.

When, after the first moment of stupor had passed, the people turned to pursue the murderer, he had disappeared. No one could tell which way he had gone. As is generally the case under such circumstances, the *juez de letras* (criminal judge), accompanied by a crowd of ragged *alguaciles*, arrived on the spot where the murder had been committed when it was too late.

The *juez de letras*, Don Inigo Tormentes Albaceyte, was a man of some fifty years of age, short and stout, with an apoplectic face, who took snuff out of a gold box enriched with diamonds,

and concealed under an apparent *bonhomie* a profound avarice backed by excessive cunning and a coolness which nothing could move.

Contrary to what might have been expected, the worthy magistrate did not appear the least in the world disconcerted by the flight of the assassin; he shook his head two or three times, cast a glance round the crowd, and winked his little grey eye, —

"Poor Cornejo!" he said, stuffing his nose philosophically with snuff: "this was sure to happen to him some day or other."

"Yes," said a lepero, "he was neatly killed!"

"That is what I was thinking," the judge replied; "he who gave this blow knew what he was about; the fellow is a practised hand."

"Humph!" the lepero replied, with a shrug of his shoulders, "he is a boy."

"Bah!" the judge said, with feigned astonishment, and casting an under-glance at the speaker; "a boy!"

"Little more," the lepero added, proud of being thus listened to; "it was Rafaël, Don Ramón's eldest son."

"Ah! ah! ah!" the judge said, with a secret satisfaction. "But no," he went on, "that is not possible; Rafaël is but sixteen at most; he would never have been so foolish as to quarrel with Cornejo, who, by only grasping his arm, could have disabled him."

"Nevertheless, it was as I tell your excellency, — we all saw it. Rafaël had been playing at *monte*, at Don Aguillar's, and it appears that luck was not favourable to him; he lost all the money he had; he then flew into a rage, and to avenge himself, set fire to the house."

"Caspita!" said the judge.

"It was just as I have the honour to tell your excellency; look, the smoke may yet be seen, though the house is in ashes."

"Well, it seems so," the judge said, turning his eyes to the point indicated by the lepero. "And, then —"

"Then," the other continued, "he naturally wished to escape. Cornejo endeavoured to stop him."

"He was right!"

"Well, he was wrong, I think; for Rafaël killed him!"

"That's true! that's true!" said the judge; "but be satisfied, my good people, justice will avenge him."

This promise was received by all present with a smile of doubt.

The magistrate, without concerning himself about the impression produced by his words, ordered his acolytes, who had already examined and plundered the defunct, to take the body away, and transport it to the porch of the nearest church, and then returned to his residence, rubbing his hands with a satisfied air.

The judge put on a travelling dress, placed a brace of pistols in his belt, fastened a long sword to his side, and, after taking a light dinner, went out.

Ten alguaciles, armed to the teeth, and mounted on strong horses, waited for him at the door; a domestic held the bridle of a magnificent black horse, which pawed the ground and champed the bit impatiently. Don Inigo placed himself in the saddle, headed his men, and the troop went off at a gentle trot.

"Eh! eh!" said the curious, who were stationed around upon the doorsteps. "The Juez Albaceyte is going to Don Ramón Garillas's; we shall hear some news tomorrow."

"Caspita!" others replied; "his picaro of a son has fairly earned the cord that is to hang him!"

"Humph!" said a lepero, with a smile of regret; "that would be unfortunate! the lad promises so well! By my word, the *cuchillada* he gave Cornejo was magnificent. The poor devil was neatly killed."

In the meantime, the judge continued his journey, returning with punctuality all the salutations with which he was overwhelmed on his way. He was soon in the country.

Then pulling his cloak tighter round him, he asked, —

"Are the arms all loaded?"

"Yes, excellency," the chief of the alguaciles replied.

"That's well. To the hacienda of Don Ramón Garillas, then; and at a smart pace; we must endeavour to get there before nightfall."

The party set off at a gallop.

CHAPTER II. THE HACIENDA DEL MILAGRO

The environs of Hermosillo are a thorough desert. The road which leads from that city to the Hacienda del Milagro (Farm of the Miracle) is one of the dullest and most arid possible.

Nothing is to be seen but, at rare intervals, ironwood, gum, and Peru trees, with red and spicy clusters, nopales, and cactuses, the only trees that can possibly grow in a soil calcined by the incandescent rays of a perpendicular sun.

At distances are visible, as if in bitter derision, the long poles of cisterns, with a leathern bucket, twisted and shrivelled, at one extremity, and at the other stones fastened by straps; but the cisterns are dry, and the bottom of them is merely a black slimy crust, in which myriads of unclean animals disport; whirlwinds of a fine and impalpable dust, raised by the least breath of wind, choke the panting traveller, and under every blade of dried grass the grasshoppers call with fury for the beneficent night dews.

When, however, with great labour, the traveller has covered six leagues of this burning solitude, the eye reposes with delight upon a splendid oasis, which appears all at once to rise from the bosom of the sands.

This Eden is the Hacienda del Milagro.

At the time our history took place, this hacienda, one of the richest and largest in the province, was composed of a two storied house, built of *tapia* and *adobes*, with a terrace roof of reeds, covered with beaten earth.

Access to the hacienda was gained by passing through an immense court, the entrance of which shaped like an arched portico, was furnished with strong folding gates, and a postern on one side. Four chambers completed the front; the windows had gratings of gilded iron, and shutters inside; they were glazed, an almost unheard-of luxury in that country at that time; on the four sides of the court, or patio, were the apartments for the peons and children, &c.

The ground floor of the principal house was composed of three apartments; a kind of grand vestibule furnished with antique fauteuils and canopies covered with stamped Cordovan leather, with a large nopal table and some stools; upon the walls hung, in gilded frames, several old full-length portraits, representing the members of the family; while the beams of the ceiling, left in relief, were decorated with a profusion of carvings.

Two folding doors opened into the saloon; the side in front of the patio was raised about a foot above the rest of the floor; it was covered by a carpet, and contained a row of curiously carved low stools ornamented with, crimson velvet, and cushions for the feet; there was also a little square table, eighteen inches high, serving as a work table. This portion of the saloon is reserved for the ladies, who there sit cross-legged, in the Moorish fashion; on the other side of the saloon were chairs covered with the same stuff as the stools and the cushions. Facing the entrance of the saloon was the principal bedchamber, with an alcove at the back of a *daïs*, upon which stood a bed of ceremony, ornamented with an infinity of gildings and brocade curtains, with tassels and fringes of gold and silver; the sheets and pillowcases were of the most beautiful linen, bordered with wide lace.

Behind the principal house was a second patio, in which were the kitchens and the corral; beyond this court was an immense garden, surrounded by walls, and more than a hundred perches in length, laid out in the English fashion, and containing the most remarkable exotic plants and trees.

It was holiday time at the hacienda.

It was the period of the *matanza del ganado* (slaughtering of cattle). The peons had formed, at a few paces from the hacienda, an enclosure, in which, after driving the beasts, they separated the lean from the fat, which they drove out, one by one, from the enclosure.

A vaquero, armed with a sharp instrument in the form of a crescent, furnished with points placed at the distance of a foot apart, and who was concealed behind the door of the enclosure, cut, with great address, the hamstrings of the poor beasts, as they passed before him.

If by chance he missed a stroke, which he rarely did, a second vaquero, mounted on horseback, galloped after the animal, threw the lasso round its horns, and held it till the first had succeeded in cutting its hamstrings.

Carelessly leaning against the portico of the hacienda, a man of about forty years of age, clothed in the rich costume of a gentleman farmer, his shoulders covered by a zarapé of brilliant colours, and his head protected from the rays of the setting sun by a fine hat of Panama straw, worth at least five hundred piastres, seemed to be presiding over this scene while enjoying a husk cigarette.

He was a gentleman of lofty bearing, slightly built, but perfectly well-proportioned, and his features well defined with firm and marked lines, denoted loyalty, courage, and, above all, an inflexible will. His large black eyes, shaded by thick eyebrows, displayed indescribable mildness; but when any contradictory chance spread a red glow over his embrowned complexion, his glance assumed a fixity and a force which few could support, and which made even the bravest hesitate and tremble.

His small hands and feet, and more than all, the aristocratic stamp impressed upon his person, denoted, at the first glance, that this man was of pure and noble Castilian race.

In fact, this personage was Don Ramón Garillas de Saavedra, the proprietor of the Hacienda del Milagro, which we have just described.

Don Ramón Garillas was descended from a Spanish family, the head of which had been one of the principal lieutenants of Cortez, and had settled in Mexico after the miraculous conquest of that clever adventurer.

Enjoying a princely fortune, but unnoticed by the Spanish authorities, on account of his marriage with a woman of mixed Aztec blood, he had given himself up entirely to the cultivation of his land, and the amelioration of his vast domains.

After seventeen years of marriage, he found himself the head of a large family, composed of six boys and three girls, in all nine children, of whom Rafaël – he whom we have seen so deftly kill the vaquero – was the eldest.

The marriage of Don Ramón and Doña Jesuita had been merely a marriage of convenience, contracted solely with a view to fortune, but which, notwithstanding, had rendered them comparatively happy; we say comparatively, because, as the girl only left her convent to be married, no love had ever existed between them, but its place had been almost as well occupied by a tender and sincere affection.

Doña Jesuita passed her time in the cares necessitated by her children, surrounded by her Indian women. On his side, her husband, completely absorbed by the duties of his life as a gentleman farmer, was almost always with his vaqueros, his peons, and his huntsmen, only seeing his wife for a few minutes at the hours of meals, and sometimes remaining months together absent in hunting excursions on the banks of the Rio Gila.

Nevertheless, we are bound to add that, whether absent or present, Don Ramón took the greatest care that nothing should be wanting for his wife's comfort; and in order that her least caprices might be satisfied, he spared neither money nor trouble to procure her all she appeared to desire.

Doña Jesuita was endowed with extraordinary beauty and angelic mildness; she appeared to have accepted, if not with joy, at least without any great pain, the kind of life to which her husband had obliged her to submit; but in the depth of her large black languishing eye, in the paleness of her countenance, and, above all, in the shade of sadness which continually obscured her beautiful white brow, it was easy to divine that an ardent soul abode within that seducing statue, and that the

heart, which was ignorant of itself, had turned all its feelings upon her children, whom she adored with all the virginal strength of maternal love, the most beautiful and the most holy of all loves.

As for Don Ramón, always good and anxious for his wife, whom he had never taken the pains to study, he had a right to believe her the happiest creature in the world, which, in fact, she became as soon as God made her a mother.

It was some minutes after sunset; the sky, by degrees, lost its purple tint, and grew rapidly darker; a few stars began to sparkle in the celestial vault, and the evening wind arose with a force that presaged for the night, one of those terrible storms which so often burst over these regions of the sun.

The mayoral, after having caused the rest of the ganado to be carefully shut up in the enclosure, assembled the vaqueros and the peons, and all directed their steps towards the hacienda, where the supper bell announced to them that the hour of rest was at length arrived.

As the major-domo passed the last, with a bow, before his master, the latter asked him:

"Well, Nô Eusebio, how many heads do we count this year?"

"Four hundred and fifty *mi amo*—my master," replied the mayoral, a tall, thin, wizened man, with a grayish head, and a countenance tanned like a piece of leather, stopping his horse and taking off his hat; "that is to say, seventy-five head more than last year. Our neighbours the jaguars and the Apaches have not done us any great damage this season."

"Thanks to you, Nô Eusebio," Don Ramón replied; "your vigilance has been great; I must find means to recompense you for it."

"My best recompense is the kind remark your lordship has just addressed to me," the mayoral, whose rough visage was lit up by a smile of satisfaction, replied. "Ought I not to watch over everything that belongs to you with the same zeal as if it were my own?"

"Thanks," the gentleman remarked with emotion, and shook his servant's hand. "I know how truly you are devoted to me."

"For life and to death, my master! My mother nourished you with her milk; I belong to you and your family."

"Come, come, Nô Eusebio," the hacendero said, gaily; "supper is ready; the señora is by this time at table; we must not keep her waiting."

Upon this, both entered the patio, and Nô Eusebio, as Don Ramón had named him, prepared, as was his custom every evening, to close the gates.

In the meantime, Don Ramón entered the dining hall of the hacienda, where all the vaqueros and peons were assembled.

This hall was furnished with an immense table, which occupied the entire centre; around this table there were wooden forms covered with leather, and two carved armchairs, intended for Don Ramón and the señora. Behind these chairs, an ivory crucifix, four feet high, hung against the wall, between two pictures, representing, the one, "Jesus in the Garden of Olives," the other the "Sermon on the Mount." Here and there, on the whitewashed walls, grinned the heads of jaguars, buffaloes, and elks, killed in the chase by the hacendero.

The table was abundantly supplied with lahua, or thick soup made of the flour of maize boiled with meat, with puchero, or olla podrida, and with pepian; at regular distances there were bottles of mezcal, and decanters of water.

At a sign from the hacendero the repast commenced.

The storm, which had threatened for some time past, now broke forth with fury.

The rain fell in torrents; at every second vivid flashes of lightning dimmed the lights of the hall, preceding awful claps of thunder.

Towards the end of the repast, the hurricane acquired such violence, that the tumult of the conspiring elements drowned the hum of conversation.

The thunder peals clashed with frightful force, a whirlwind filled the hall, after dashing in a window, and extinguished all the lights; the assembly crossed themselves with terror.

At that moment, the bell placed at the gate of the hacienda resounded with a convulsive noise, and a voice, which had nothing human in it, cried twice distinctly, —

"Help! help!"

"Sangre de Cristo!" Don Ramón cried, as he rushed out of the hall, "somebody is being murdered on the plain."

Two pistol shots resounded at almost the same moment, a cry of agony rung through the air, and all relapsed into sinister darkness.

All at once, a pale flash of lightning furrowed the obscurity, the thunder burst with a horrible crash, and Don Ramón reappeared in the hall, bearing a fainting man in his arms.

The stranger was placed in a seat, and all crowded round him.

There was nothing extraordinary in either the countenance or the appearance of this man, and yet, on perceiving him, Rafaël, the eldest son of Don Ramón, could not repress a gesture of terror, and his face became lividly pale.

"O!" he murmured, in a low voice, "it is the juez de letras!"

It was, indeed, the worthy judge, whom we saw leave Hermosillo with such a brilliant equipage.

His long hair, soaked with rain, fell upon his breast, his clothes were in disorder, spotted with blood, and torn in many places.

His right hand convulsively clasped the stock of a discharged pistol.

Don Ramón had likewise recognized the juez de letras, and had unconsciously darted a glance at his son, which the latter could not support.

Thanks to the intelligent care that was bestowed upon him by Doña Jesuita and her women, he breathed a deep sigh, opened his haggard eyes, which he rolled round upon the assembly, without at first seeing anything, and by degrees recovered his senses.

All at once a deep flush covered his brow, which had been so pale a minute before, and his eye sparkled. Directing a look towards Don Rafaël which nailed him to the floor, a prey to invincible terror, he rose painfully, and advancing towards the young man, who saw his approach without daring to seek to avoid him, he placed his hand roughly on his shoulder, and turning towards the peons, who were terrified at this strange scene, of which they comprehended nothing, he said solemnly, —

"I, Don Inigo Tormentes Albaceyte, juez de letras of the city of Hermosillo, arrest this man, accused of assassination, in the king's name!"

"Mercy!" cried Rafaël, falling on his knees, and clasping his hands with despair.

"Woe! woe!" the poor mother exclaimed, as she sank back fainting in her chair.

CHAPTER III. THE SENTENCE

On the morrow the sun rose splendidly on the horizon. The storm of the night had completely cleared the sky, which was one of deep blue; the birds warbled gaily, concealed beneath the leaves, and all nature seemed to have resumed its accustomed festive air.

The bell sounded joyously at the Hacienda del Milagro; the peons began to disperse in all directions, some leading horses to the pasturage, others driving cattle to the artificial prairies, others again wending their way to the fields, whilst the rest were employed in the patio in milking the cows and repairing the damages done by the hurricane.

The only traces left of the tempest of the preceding night were two magnificent jaguars stretched dead before the gate of the hacienda, not far from the carcass of a half-devoured horse.

Nô Eusebio, who was walking about in the patio, carefully overlooking the occupations of all, ordered the rich trappings of the horse to be taken off and cleaned, and the jaguars to be skinned; all of which was done in the shortest time possible.

Nô Eusebio was, however, very uneasy; Don Ramón, generally the first person stirring in the hacienda, had not yet appeared.

On the preceding evening, after the terrible accusation brought by the juez de letras against the eldest son of the hacendero, the latter had ordered his servants to retire, and after having himself, in spite of the tears and prayers of his wife, firmly bound his son, he led Don Inigo Albaceyte into a retired apartment of the farm, where they both remained in private till a far advanced hour of the night.

What had passed in that conversation, in which the fate of Don Rafaël was decided, nobody knew – Nô Eusebio no more than the others.

Then, after having conducted Don Inigo to a chamber he had had prepared for him, and having wished him good night, Don Ramón proceeded to rejoin his son, with whom the poor mother was still weeping: without pronouncing a word, he took the boy in his arms, and carried him into his bedroom, where he laid him on the ground near his bed; then the hacendero shut and locked the door, went to bed, with two pistols under his pillow. The night passed away thus, the father and son darting at each other through the darkness the looks of wild beasts, and the poor mother on her knees on the sill of that chamber, which she was forbidden to enter, weeping silently for her first-born, who, as she had a terrible presentiment, was about to be ravished from her for ever.

"Hum!" the mayoral murmured to himself, biting, without thinking of doing so, the end of his extinguished cigarette, "what will be the end of all this? Don Ramón is not a man to pardon, he will not compromise his honour. Will he abandon his son to the hands of justice! Oh no! but, in that case what will he do?"

The worthy mayoral had arrived at this point in his reflections, when Don Inigo Albaceyte and Don Ramón appeared in the patio.

The countenances of the two men were stern; that of the hacendero, in particular, was dark as night.

"Nô Eusebio," Don Ramón said in a sharp tone, "have a horse saddled, and prepare an escort of four men to conduct this cavalier to Hermosillo."

The mayoral bowed respectfully, and immediately gave the necessary orders.

"I thank you a thousand times," continued Don Ramón, addressing the judge; "you have saved the honour of my house."

"Do not be so grateful, señor," Don Inigo replied; "I swear to you that when I left the city yesterday, I had no intention of making myself agreeable to you."

The hacendero only replied by a gesture.

"Put yourself in my place; I am criminal judge above everything; a man is murdered – a worthless fellow, I admit – but a man, although of the worst kind; the assassin is known, he traverses the city at full gallop, in open daylight, in the sight of everybody, with incredible effrontery. What could I do? – set off in pursuit of him. I did not hesitate."

"That is true," Don Ramón murmured, holding down his head.

"And evil have been the consequences to me. The scoundrels who accompanied me abandoned me, like cowards, in the height of the storm, and took shelter I know not where; and then, to crown my troubles, two jaguars, magnificent animals, by the bye, rushed in pursuit of me; they pressed me so hard that I came and fell at your door like a mass. It is true I killed one of them, but the other was very nearly snapping me up, when you came to my assistance. Could I, after that, arrest the son of the man who had saved my life at the peril of his own? That would have been acting with the blackest ingratitude."

"Thanks, once more."

"No thanks; we are quits, that is all. I say nothing of some thousands of piastres you have given me; they will serve to stop the mouths of my lynxes. Only, let me beg of you, Don Ramón, keep a sharp eye upon your son; if he should fall a second time into my hands, I don't know how I could save him."

"Be at ease, in that respect, Don Inigo; my son will never fall into your hands again."

"The hacendero pronounced these words in so solemn and melancholy a tone, that the judge started at hearing them, and turned round saying, —

"Take care what you are about to do!"

"Oh, fear nothing," replied Don Ramón; "only, as I am not willing that my son should mount a scaffold, and drag my name in the mud, I must endeavour to prevent him."

At that moment the horse was led out, and the juez de letras mounted.

"Well, adieu, Don Ramón," he said in an indulgent voice; "be prudent, this young man may still reform; he is hot blooded, that is all."

"Adieu, Don Inigo Albaceyte," the hacendero replied, in so dry a tone that it admitted of no reply.

The judge shook his head, and clapping spurs to his horse, he set off at full trot, followed by his escort, after having made the farmer a farewell gesture.

The latter looked after him, as long as he could see him, and then re-entered the house with long and hasty strides.

"Nô Eusebio," he said to the mayoral, "ring the bell to call together all the peons, as well as the other servants of the hacienda."

The mayoral, after having looked at his master with astonishment, hastened to execute the order he had received.

"What does all this mean?" he said to himself.

At the sound of the bell, the men employed on the farm ran to answer it in haste, not knowing to what cause they should attribute this extraordinary summons.

They were soon all collected together in the great hall, which served as a refectory. The completest silence reigned among them. A secret pang pressed on their hearts, — they had the presentiment of a terrible event.

After a few minutes of expectation, Doña Jesuita entered, surrounded by her children, with the exception of Rafaël, and proceeded to take her place upon a platform, prepared at one end of the hall.

Her countenance was pale, and her eyes proclaimed that she had been weeping.

Don Ramón appeared.

He was clothed in a complete suit of black velvet without lace; a heavy gold chain hung round his neck, a broad leafed hat of black felt, ornamented with an eagle's feather, covered his head, a long sword, with a hilt of polished steel, hung by his side.

His brow was marked with wrinkles, his eyebrows were closely knitted above his black eyes, which appeared to dart lightning.

A shudder of terror pervaded the ranks of the assembly – Don Ramón Garillas had put on the robe of justice.

Justice was then about to be done?

But upon whom?

When Don Ramón had taken his place on the right hand of his wife, he made a sign.

The mayoral went out, and returned a minute after, followed by Rafaël.

The young man was bareheaded, and had his hands tied behind his back.

With his eyes cast down, and a pale face, he placed himself before his father, whom he saluted respectfully.

At the period at which our history passes, in those countries remote from towns and exposed to the continual incursions of the Indians, the heads of families preserved, in all its purity, that patriarchal authority which the efforts of our depraved civilization have a tendency to lessen, and, at length, to destroy. A father was sovereign in his own house, his judgments were without appeal, and executed without murmurs or resistance.

The people of the farm were acquainted with the firm character and implacable will of their master; they knew that he never pardoned, that his honour was dearer to him than life; it was then with a sense of undefinable fear that they prepared to witness the terrible drama which was about to be performed before them between the father and the son.

Don Ramón arose, cast a dark glance round upon the assembly, and threw his hat at his feet:

"Listen all to me," he said in a sharp but most distinct voice; "I am of an old Christian race, whose ancestors have never done wrong; honour has always in my house been considered as the first of earthly goods; that honour which my ancestors transmitted to me intact, and which I have endeavoured to preserve pure, my first-born son, the inheritor of my name, has sullied by an indelible stain. Yesterday, at Hermosillo, in consequence of a tavern quarrel, he set fire to a house, at the risk of burning down the whole city, and when a man endeavoured to prevent his escape, he killed him with a poniard stroke. What can be thought of a boy who, at so tender an age, is endowed with the instincts of a wild beast? Justice must be done, and, by God's help, I will do it severely."

After these words, Don Ramón crossed his arms upon his breast, and appeared to reflect.

No one durst hazard a word in favour of the accused; all heads were bent down, all hearts were palpitating.

Rafaël was beloved by his father's servants on account of his intrepidity, which yielded to no obstacles, for his skill in managing a horse, and in the use of all arms, and more than all, for the frankness and kindness which formed the most striking features of his character. In this country particularly, where the life of a man is reckoned of so little value, everyone was inwardly disposed to excuse the youth, and to see nothing in the action he had committed but the result of warmth of blood and hasty passion.

Doña Jesuita arose; without a murmur she had always bent to the will of her husband, whom for many years she had been accustomed to respect; the mere idea of resisting him terrified her, and sent a cold shudder through her veins; but all the loving powers of her soul were concentrated in her heart. She adored her children, Rafaël in particular, whose indomitable character stood more in need than the others, of the watchful cares of a mother.

"Sir," she said to her husband, in a voice choked with tears, "remember that Rafaël is your first-born; that his fault, however serious it might be, ought not to be inexcusable in your eyes, as

you are his father; and that I – I – " she continued, falling on her knees, clasping her hands and sobbing, "I implore your pity! pardon, sir! pardon for your son!"

"Don Ramón coldly raised his wife, whose face was inundated with tears, and after obliging her to resume her place in her chair, he said, —

"It is particularly as a father, that my heart ought to be without pity! Rafaël is an assassin and an incendiary; he is no longer my son!"

"What do you mean to do?" Doña Jesuita cried, in accents of terror.

"What does that concern you, madam?" Don Ramón replied harshly; "the care of my honour concerns me alone. Sufficient for you to know that this fault is the last your son will commit."

"Oh!" she said with terror, "will you then become his executioner?"

"I am his judge," the implacable gentleman replied in a terrible voice. "Nô Eusebio, get two horses ready."

"My God! my God!" the poor mother cried, rushing towards her son, whom she folded closely in her arms, "will no one come to my succour?"

All present were moved; Don Ramón himself could not restrain a tear.

"Oh!" she cried with a wild joy, "he is saved! God has softened the heart of this inflexible man!"

"You are mistaken, madam," Don Ramón interrupted, pushing her roughly back, "your son is no longer mine, he belongs to my justice!"

Then fixing on his son a look cold as a steel blade, he said in a voice so stern that in spite of himself it made the young man start.

"Don Rafaël, from this instant you no longer form a part of this society, which your crimes have horrified; it is with wild beasts that I condemn you to live and die."

At this terrible sentence, Doña Jesuita took a few steps towards her son, but, tottering, she fell prostrate – she had fainted.

Up to this moment Rafaël had, with a great effort, suppressed in his heart the emotions which agitated him, but at this last accident he could no longer restrain himself; he sprang towards his mother, burst into tears, and uttered a piercing cry:

"My mother! my mother!"

"Come this way," said Don Ramón, laying his hand upon his shoulder.

The boy stopped, staggering like a drunken man.

"Look, sir! pray look!" he cried, with a heartbroken sob; "my mother is dying!"

"It is you who have killed her!" the hacendero replied coldly.

Rafaël turned round as if a serpent had stung him; he darted at his father a look of strange expression, and, with clenched teeth and a livid brow said to him,

"Kill me, sir; for I swear to you that in the same manner as you have been pitiless to my mother and me, if I live I will be hereafter pitiless to you!"

Don Ramón cast upon him a look of contempt.

"Come on!" he said.

"Come on, then!" the boy repeated in a firm tone.

Doña Jesuita, who was beginning to recover her senses, perceived the departure of her son, as if in a dream.

"Rafaël! Rafaël!" she shrieked.

The young man hesitated for a second; then, with a bound, he sprang towards her, kissed her with wild tenderness, and rejoining his father, said —

"Now I can die! I have bidden adieu to my mother!"

And they went out.

The household, deeply moved by this scene, separated without communicating their impressions to each other, but all penetrated with sincere grief.

Under the caresses of her son, the poor mother had again lost all consciousness.

CHAPTER IV. THE MOTHER

Two horses, held by the bridle by Nô Eusebio, were waiting at the door of the hacienda.

"Shall I accompany you, señor?" asked the major-domo.

"No!" the hacendero replied drily.

He mounted and placed his son across the saddle before him.

"Take back the second horse," he said; "I do not want it."

And plunging his spurs into the sides of his horse, which snorted with pain, he set off at full speed.

The major-domo returned to the house, shaking his head sadly.

As soon as the hacienda had disappeared behind a swell in the ground, Don Ramón stopped, drew a silk handkerchief from his breast, bandaged the eyes of his son without saying a word to him, and then again resumed his course.

This ride in the desert lasted a long time; it had something dismal about it that chilled the soul.

This horseman, clothed in black, gliding silently along through the sands, bearing before him on his saddle a securely-bound boy, whose nervous starts and writhings alone proclaimed his existence, had a fatal and strange aspect, which would have impressed the bravest man with terror.

Many hours had passed without a word being exchanged between the son and the father; the sun began to sink in the horizon, a few stars already appeared in the dark blue of the sky – but the horse still went on.

The desert, every instant, assumed a more dismal and wild appearance; every tree of vegetation had disappeared; only here and there heaps of bones, whitened by time, marbled the sand with livid spots; birds of prey hovered slowly over the horsemen, uttering hoarse cries; and in the mysterious depths of the chaparrals, wild beasts, at the approach of night, preluded their rude concerts with dull roarings.

In these regions twilight does not exist; as soon as the sun has disappeared, the darkness is complete.

Don Ramón continued to gallop on. His son had not addressed a single prayer to him, or uttered a single complaint.

At length, towards eight o'clock, the horsemen stopped. This feverish ride had lasted ten hours. The horse panted and throbbed, and staggered at every step.

Don Ramón cast an anxious glance around him; a smile of satisfaction curled his lip. On all sides the desert displayed its immense plains of sand; on one alone the skirt of a virgin forest cut the horizon with its strange profile, breaking in a sinister manner the monotony of the prospect.

Don Ramón dismounted, placed his son upon the sand, took the bridle from his horse, that it might eat the provender he gave it; then, after having acquitted himself of all these duties, with the greatest coolness he approached his son, and removed the bandage from his eyes.

The boy remained silent, fixing upon his father a dull, cold look.

"Sir!" Don Ramón said, in a sharp, dry tone, "you are here more than twenty leagues from my hacienda, in which you will never set your foot again under pain of death; from this moment you are alone, you have no longer either father, mother, or family; as you have proved yourself almost a wild beast, I condemn you to live with wild beasts; my resolution is irrevocable, your prayers could not change it. Spare them then!"

"I shall not pray to you," the boy replied, "people do not intreat an executioner!"

Don Ramón started; he walked about in feverish agitation; but soon recovering himself, he continued,

"In this pouch are provisions for two days. I leave you this rifle, which in my hands never missed its mark; I give you also these pistols, this machete, and this knife, this hatchet, and powder and balls in these buffalo horns. You will find with the provisions a steel and everything necessary for kindling a fire. I add to these things a Bible, belonging to your mother. You are dead to society, into which you can never return; the desert is before you; it belongs to you; for me, I have no longer a son, adieu! The Lord be merciful to you, all is ended between us on earth; you are left alone, and without a family; it depends upon yourself, then, to commence a second existence, and to provide for your own wants. Providence never abandons those who place their confidence in it; henceforward, it alone will watch over you."

After having pronounced these words, Don Ramón, his countenance still impassible, replaced the bridle on his horse, restored his son to liberty by cutting the cords which bound him, and then getting into his saddle, he set off at his horse best speed.

Rafaël rose upon his knees, bent his head forward, listened with anxiety to the retreating gallop of the horse on the sand, followed with his eyes, as long as he was able, the fatal profile which was thrown in black relief by the moonbeams; and when the horseman was at length confounded with the darkness, the boy placed his hand upon his breast, and an expression of despair impossible to be described convulsed his features.

"My mother! my mother!" he cried.

He fell lifeless upon the sand. He had fainted.

After a long gallop, Don Ramón, insensibly and as if in spite of himself, slackened the speed of his horse, lending a keen ear to the vague noises of the desert, listening with anxiety, without rendering an account to himself why he did so, but expecting, perhaps, an appeal from his unfortunate son to return to him. Twice even his hand mechanically pulled the bridle as if he obeyed a secret voice which commanded him to retrace his steps; but the fierce pride of his race was still the stronger, and he continued his course homewards.

The sun was rising at the moment Don Ramón arrived at the hacienda.

Two persons were standing side by side at the gate, waiting his return.

The one was Doña Jesuita, the other the major-domo.

At sight of his wife, pale, mute, and motionless before him, like the statue of desolation, the hacendero felt an unutterable sadness weigh upon his heart; he wished to pass, but Doña Jesuita, making two steps towards him and seizing the bridle of his horse, said with agonized emotion, —

"Don Ramón, what have you done with my son?"

The hacendero made no reply; on beholding the grief of his wife, remorse shot a pang into his heart, and he asked himself mentally if he had really the right to act as he had done.

Doña Jesuita waited in vain for an answer. Don Ramón looked earnestly at his wife; he was terrified at perceiving the indelible furrows which grief had imprinted upon that countenance, so calm, so placid, but a few hours before.

The noble woman was livid; her contracted features had an inexpressible rigidity; her eyes, burnt with fever, were red and dry, two black and deep lines rendered them hollow and haggard; a large stain marbled each of her cheeks, the trace of tears the source of which was dried up; she could weep no more, her voice was hoarse and broken, and her oppressed breast heaved painfully to allow the escape of a panting respiration.

After having waited some minutes for a reply to her question, "Don Ramón," she repeated, "what have you done with my son?"

The hacendero turned away his head with something like confusion.

"Oh! you have killed him!" she said, with a piercing shriek.

"No;" Don Ramón replied, terrified at her grief, and for the first time in his life forced to acknowledge the power of the mother who demands an account of her child.

"What have you done with him?" she screamed persistently.

"Presently, when you are more calm, you shall know all."

"I am calm," she replied, "why should you feign a pity you do not feel? My son is dead, and it is you who have killed him!"

Don Ramón alighted from his horse.

"Jesuita," he said to his wife, taking her hands and looking at her with tenderness, "I swear to you by all that is most sacred in the world, that your son exists; I have not touched a hair of his head."

The poor mother remained pensive for a few seconds.

"I believe you," she said; then after a pause she added, "What is become of him?"

"Well!" he replied, with some hesitation, "since you insist upon knowing all, learn that I have abandoned your son in the desert, but have left him the means to provide for his safety and his wants."

Doña Jesuita started, a nervous shudder crept through the whole of her frame.

"You have been very clement," she said in a cutting tone, and with bitter irony; "you have been very clement towards a boy of sixteen, Don Ramón; you felt a repugnance to bathe your hands in his blood, and you have preferred leaving that task to the wild beasts and ferocious Indians who alone people those solitudes."

"He was guilty!" the hacendero replied, in a low but firm voice.

"A child is never guilty in the eyes of her who has borne him in her bosom, and nourished him with her milk," she said with energy. "It is well, Don Ramón, you have condemned your son, I – I will save him!"

"What would you do?" the hacendero said, terrified at the resolution he saw kindled in the eyes of his wife.

"What matters it to you? Don Ramón, I will accomplish my duty as you believe you have accomplished yours! God will judge between us! Tremble, lest He should one day demand of you an account of the blood of your son!"

Don Ramón bent his head beneath this anathema; with a pale brow, and a mind oppressed by heavy remorse, he went slowly into the hacienda.

Doña Jesuita looked after him for an instant.

"Oh!" she cried, "may God grant that I may arrive in time!"

She then went out from the portico, followed by Nô Eusebio.

Two horses awaited them, concealed behind a clump of trees. They mounted immediately.

"Where are we going, señora?" the major-domo asked.

"In search of my son!" she replied in a shrill voice.

She seemed transfigured by hope; a bright colour flushed her cheeks; her black eyes darted lightning.

Nô Eusebio untied four magnificent bloodhounds, called rastreros in the country, and which were kept to follow trails; he made them smell a shirt belonging to Rafaël; the hounds rushed forward on the scent, baying loudly. Nô Eusebio and Doña Jesuita galloped after them, exchanging a look of sanguine hope.

The dogs had no trouble in following the scent, it was straight and without obstruction, therefore they did not stop an instant.

When Doña Jesuita arrived at the spot where Rafaël had been abandoned by his father, the place was void! – the boy had disappeared!

The traces of his having sojourned there were visible; a fire was not yet burnt out; everything indicated that Rafaël could not have quitted that place more than an hour.

"What is to be done?" Nô Eusebio asked anxiously.

"Push forward!" Doña Jesuita replied resolutely, urging her horse again into action, and the generous steed responding with unflagging spirit.

Nô Eusebio followed her.

On the evening of that day the greatest consternation prevailed at the Hacienda del Milagro, Doña Jesuita and Nô Eusebio had not returned.

Don Ramón ordered all the household to mount on horseback.

Provided with torches, the peons and vaqueros commenced a battue of an immense extent in search of their mistress and the major-domo.

The whole night passed away without bringing the least satisfactory result.

At daybreak, the horse of Doña Jesuita was found half devoured in the desert. Its trappings were wanting.

The ground round the carcass of the horse appeared to have been the scene of a desperate conflict of some kind.

Don Ramón, in despair, gave orders for return.

"Great Heaven!" he cried, as he re-entered the hacienda, "is it possible that my chastisement has already commenced?"

Weeks, months, years passed away, without any circumstance, lifting the corner of the mysterious veil which enveloped these sinister events, and, notwithstanding the most active and persevering researches, nothing could be learnt of the fate of Rafaël, his mother, and Nô Eusebio.

THE END OF THE PROLOGUE

PART I. THE LOYAL HEART

CHAPTER I. THE PRAIRIE

To the westward of the United States extends, many hundred miles beyond the Mississippi, an immense territory, unknown up to this day, composed of uncultivated lands, on which stands neither the log house of the white man nor the hutto of the Indian.

This vast desert, intersected by dark forests, with mysterious paths traced by the steps of wild beasts, and by verdant prairies with high and tufted herbage that undulates with the slightest breeze, is watered by powerful streams, of which the principal are the great Canadian river, the Arkansas, and the Red River.

Over these plains, endowed with so rich a vegetation, wander innumerable troops of wild horses, buffaloes, elks, bighorns, and those thousands of animals which the civilization of the other parts of America is every day driving back, and which regain their primitive liberty in these regions.

On this account, the most powerful Indian tribes have established their hunting grounds in this country.

The Delawares, the Creeks, and the Osages, prowl along the frontiers of the desert up to the environs of the establishments of the Americans, with whom some few bonds of civilization are beginning to unite them, engaged in constant conflict with the hordes of Pawnees, Blackfeet, Assiniboins, and Comanches, indomitable races, nomads of the prairies, or inhabitants of the mountains, who permeate in all directions this desert, the proprietorship of which none of them venture to assert, but which they appear to agree to devastate, uniting in vast numbers for hunting parties, as if for the purpose of making war.

In fact, the enemies travellers are exposed to encounter in these deserts are of all kinds; without mentioning in this place wild beasts, there are hunters, trappers, and partisans, who are not less formidable to the Indians than to their fellow countrymen.

The prairie, therefore, the sinister theatre of incessant and terrible contests, is nothing in reality but a vast charnel house, in which perish obscurely, every year, in a merciless war of ambuscades, tens of thousands of intrepid men.

Nothing can be more grand or more majestic than the aspect of these prairies, into which Providence has bounteously bestowed such innumerable riches, – nothing, more seductive than these green fields, these thick forests, these large rivers; the melancholy murmur of the waters rippling over the stones of the shallow stream, the songs of thousands of birds concealed under the foliage, the bounding of animals sporting amidst the high grass: everything enchants, everything attracts, and draws aside the fascinated traveller, who soon, the victim of his enthusiasm, will fall into one of those numberless snares laid under his feet among the flowers, and will pay with his life for his imprudent credulity.

Towards the end of the year 1837, in the latter days of the month of September, by the Indians called the moon of the falling leaves – a man, still young, and who, from his complexion, notwithstanding his costume was entirely like that of the Indians, it was easy to perceive was a white man, was seated, about an hour before sunset, near a fire, the want of which began to be felt at this period of the year, at one of the most unfrequented spots of the prairie we have just described.

This man was at most thirty-five to thirty-six years old, though a few deeply marked wrinkles on his broad white forehead seemed to indicate a more advanced age.

His features were handsome and noble, and impressed with that pride and energy which a savage life imparts. His black eyes, starting from his head, and crowned with thick eye-brows, had a mild and melancholy expression, that tempered their brilliancy and vivacity; the lower part of his face disappeared beneath a long, thick beard, the bluish tint of which contrasted with the peculiar paleness spread over his countenance.

He was tall, slender, and perfectly well proportioned; his nervous limbs, upon which rose muscles of extreme rigidity, proved that he was endowed with more than common strength. In short, the whole of his person inspired that respectful sympathy which superior natures attract more easily in these countries than in ours, where physical strength is nearly always the attribute of the brute.

His remarkably simple attire was composed of a mitasse, or a kind of close drawers falling down to his ankles, and fastened to his hips by a leather belt, and of a cotton hunting shirt, embroidered with ornaments in wool of different colours, which descended to his midleg. This blouse, open in front, left exposed his embrowned chest, upon which hung a scapulary of velvet, from a slight steel chain. Short boots of untanned deerskin protected him from the bites of reptiles, and rose to his knees. A cap made of the skin of a beaver, whose tail hung down behind, covered his head, while long and luxuriant curls of black hair, which were beginning to be threaded with white, fell beneath it over his broad shoulder. This man was a hunter.

A magnificent rifle laid within reach of his hand, the game bag which was hung to his shoulder belt and the two buffalo horns, suspended at his girdle, and filled with powder and balls, left no doubt in this respect. Two long double pistols were carelessly thrown near his rifle.

The hunter, armed with that long knife called a machete, or a short-bladed straight sabre, which the inhabitants of the prairies never lay aside, was occupied in conscientiously skinning a beaver, whilst carefully watching the haunch of a deer which was roasting at the fire, suspended by a string, and listening to the slightest noises that arose in the prairies.

The spot where this man was seated was admirably chosen for a halt of a few hours.

It was a clearing at the summit of a moderately elevated hill, which, from its position, commanded the prairie for a great distance, and prevented a surprise. A spring bubbled up at a few paces from the place where the hunter had established his bivouac, and descended, forming a capricious cascade; to the plain. The high and abundant grass afforded an excellent pasto for two superb horses, with wild and sparkling eyes, which, safely tethered, were enjoying their food at a short distance from him. The fire, lighted with dry wood, and sheltered on three sides by the rock, only allowed a thin column of smoke to escape, scarcely perceptible at ten paces' distance, and a screen of all trees concealed the encampment from the indiscreet looks of those persons who were probably in ambush in the neighbourhood.

In short, all precautions necessary for the safety of the hunter had been taken with that prudence which announces a profound knowledge of the life of a wood ranger.

The red fires of the setting sun tinged with beautiful reflections the tops of the great trees, and the sun itself was on the point of disappearing behind the mountains which bounded the horizon, when the horses, suddenly ceasing their repast, raised their heads and pricked their ears – signs of restlessness which did not escape the hunter.

Although he heard no suspicious sound, and all appeared calm around him, he hastened to place the skin of the beaver before the fire, stretched upon two crossed sticks, and, without rising, he put out his hand towards his rifle.

The cry of the jay was heard, and repeated thrice at regular intervals.

The hunter laid his rifle by his side again with a smile, and resumed his watchful attention to the supper. Almost immediately the grass was violently opened, and two magnificent bloodhounds bounded up and lay down by the hunter, who patted them for an instant, and not without difficulty quieted their caresses.

The horses had carelessly resumed their interrupted repast.

The dogs only preceded by a few minutes a second hunter, who made his appearance almost immediately in the clearing.

This new personage, much younger than the first, – for he did not appear to be more than twenty-two years old, – was a tall, thin, agile and powerfully-built man, with a slightly-rounded head, lighted by two grey eyes, sparkling with intelligence, and endowed with a physiognomy open and loyal, to which long light hair gave a somewhat childish appearance.

He was clothed in the same costume as his companion, and on arriving, threw down by the fire a string of birds which he was carrying at his shoulder.

The two hunters then, without exchanging a word, set about preparing one of those suppers which long exercise has always the privilege of causing to be considered excellent.

The night had completely set in; the desert awoke by degrees; the howlings of wild beasts already resounded in the prairie.

The hunters, after supping with a good appetite, lit their pipes, and placing their backs to the fire, in order that the flame should not prevent them from perceiving the approach of any suspicious visitor whom darkness might bring them, smoked with the enjoyment of people who, after a long and painful journey, taste an instant of repose which they may not meet with again for some time.

"Well!" the first hunter said laconically between two puffs of tobacco.

"You were right," the other replied.

"Ah!"

"Yes, we have kept too much to the right, it was that which made us lose the scent."

"I was sure of it," the first speaker replied; "you see, Belhumeur, you trust too much to your Canadian habits: the Indians with whom we have to do here in no way resemble the Iroquois, who visit the hunting grounds of your country."

Belhumeur nodded his head in sign of acquiescence.

"After all," the other continued, "this is of very little importance at this moment; what is urgent is to know who are our thieves."

"I know."

"Good!" the other said, withdrawing his pipe quickly from his mouth; "and who are the Indians who have dared to steal the traps marked with my cipher?"

"The Comanches."

"I suspected as much. By heavens, ten of our best traps stolen during the night! I swear, Belhumeur, that they shall pay for them dearly! And where are the Comanches at this moment?"

"Within three leagues of us at most. It is a party of plunderers composed of a dozen men; according to the direction they are following, they are turning to their mountains."

"They shall not all arrive there," said the hunter, casting a glance at his rifle.

"Parbleu!" said Belhumeur with a loud laugh, "they will only get what they deserve. I leave it to you, Loyal Heart, to punish them for their insult; but you will be still more determined to avenge yourself upon them when you know by whom they are commanded."

"Ah! ah! I know their chief then?"

Belhumeur said, slightly smiling, "it is *Nehu Nutah*."

"Eagle Head!" cried Loyal, almost bounding from his seat. "Oh, oh! yes, I know him, and God grant that this time. I may settle the old account there is between us. His moccasins have long enough trodden the same path with me and barred my passage."

After pronouncing these words with an accent of hatred that made Belhumeur shudder, the hunter, sorry at having allowed the anger which mastered him to appear, resumed his pipe and continued to smoke with a feigned carelessness that did not at all impose upon his companion.

The conversation was interrupted.

The two hunters appeared to be absorbed in profound reflections, and smoked silently by the side of each other.

At length Belhumeur turned towards his companion.

"Shall I watch?" he asked.

"No," Loyal Heart replied, in a low voice; "sleep, I will be sentinel for you and myself too."

Belhumeur, without making the least observation, laid himself down by the fire, and in a few minutes slept profoundly.

When the owl hooted its matin song, which seemed to salute the speedy appearance of the sun, Loyal Heart, who during the night had remained motionless as a marble statue, awakened his companion.

"It is time," said he.

"Very good!" Belhumeur replied, rising immediately.

The hunters saddled their horses, descended the hill with precaution, and galloped off upon the track of the Comanches.

At this moment the sun appeared radiant in the heavens, dissipating the darkness and illuminating the prairie with its magnificent and reviving radiance.

CHAPTER II. THE HUNTERS

A few words now about the personages we have just brought upon the scene, and who are destined to play an important part in this history.

Loyal Heart – this name was the only one by which the hunter was known throughout the prairies of the West – enjoyed an immense reputation for skill, loyalty, and courage among the Indian tribes, with whom the chances of his adventurous existence had brought him in relation. All respected him. The white hunters and trappers, whether Spaniards, North Americans, or half-breeds, had a high opinion of his experience of the woods, and often had recourse to his counsels.

The pirates of the prairies themselves, thorough food for the gallows, the refuse of civilization, who only lived by rapine and exactions, did not dare to attack him, and avoided as much as possible throwing themselves in his way.

Thus this man had succeeded by the sheer force of his intelligence and his will, in creating for himself, and almost unknown to himself, a power accepted and recognized by the ferocious inhabitants of these vast deserts, – a power which he only employed in the common interest, and to facilitate for all the means of following in safety the occupations they had adopted.

No one knew who Loyal Heart was, or whence he came; the greatest mystery covered his early years.

One day, about twenty years before, when he was very young, some hunters had fallen in with him on the banks of the Arkansas in the act of setting traps for beavers. The few questions put to him concerning his preceding life remained unanswered; and the hunters, people not very talkative by nature, fancying they perceived, from the embarrassment and reticence of the young man, that he had a secret which he desired to keep, made a scruple about pressing him further – and nothing more was said on the subject.

At the same time, contrary to other hunters, or trappers of the prairies, who have all one or two companions with whom they associate, and whom they never leave, Loyal Heart lived alone, having no fixed habitation; he traversed the desert in all directions without pitching his tent anywhere.

Always reserved and melancholy, he avoided the society of his equals, although always ready, when occasion offered, to render them services, or even to expose his life for them. Then, when they attempted to express their gratitude, he would clap spurs to his horse, and go and set his traps at a distance, to give time to those he had obliged to forget the service he had rendered.

Every year, at the same period, that is to say, about the month of October, Loyal Heart disappeared for several entire weeks, without anyone being able to suspect whither he was gone; and when he returned it was observed that for several days his countenance was more dark and sad than ever.

One day he came back from one of these mysterious expeditions, accompanied by two magnificent young bloodhounds, which had from that time remained with him, and of which he seemed very fond.

Five years before the period at which we resume our narrative, when returning one evening from laying his traps for the night, he suddenly perceived the fire of an Indian camp through the trees.

A white youth, scarcely seventeen years of age, was fastened to a stake, and served as mark for the knives of the redskins, who amused themselves with torturing him before they sacrificed him to their sanguinary rage.

Loyal Heart, listening to nothing but the pity which the victim inspired, and without reflecting on the terrible danger to which he exposed himself, rushed in among the Indians, and placed himself in front of the prisoner, for whom he made a rampart of his body.

These Indians were Comanches. Astonished by this sudden irruption, which they were far from expecting, they remained a few instants motionless, confounded by so much audacity.

Without losing a moment, Loyal Heart cut the bonds of the prisoner, and giving him a knife, which the other received with joy, they both prepared to sell their lives dearly.

White men inspire Indians with an instinctive, an invincible terror; the Comanches, however, on recovering from their surprise, showed signs of rushing forward to attack the two men who seemed to defy them.

But the light of the fire, which fell full upon the face of the hunter, had permitted some of them to recognize him. The redskins drew back with respect, murmuring among themselves, —

"Loyal Heart! the great paleface hunter!"

Eagle Head, for so was the chief of these Indians named, did not know the hunter; it was the first time he had descended into the plains of the Arkansas, and he could not comprehend the exclamation of his warriors; besides, he cordially detested the palefaces, against whom he had sworn to carry on a war of extermination. Enraged at what he considered cowardice on the part of those he commanded, he advanced alone against Loyal Heart, but then an extraordinary occurrence took place.

The Comanches threw themselves upon their chief, and notwithstanding the respect in which they held him, they disarmed him to prevent his making any attack upon the hunter.

Loyal Heart, after thanking them, himself restored his arms to the chief; who received them coldly, casting a sinister glance at his generous adversary.

The hunter, perceiving this feeling, shrugged his shoulders disdainfully, and departed with the prisoner.

Loyal Heart had, in less than ten minutes, made for himself an implacable enemy and a devoted friend.

The history of the prisoner was simple.

Having left Canada with his father, for the purpose of hunting in the prairies, they had fallen into the hands of the Comanches; after a desperate resistance, his father had fallen covered with wounds. The Indians, irritated at this death, which robbed them of a victim, had bestowed the greatest care upon the young man, in order that he might honourably figure at the stake of punishment, and this would inevitably have happened had it not been for the providential intervention of Loyal Heart.

After having obtained these particulars, the hunter asked the young man what his intentions were, and whether the rough apprenticeship he had gone through as a wood ranger had not disgusted him with a life of adventures.

"By my faith, no!" the other replied; "on the contrary, I feel more determined than ever to follow this career; and, besides," he added, "I wish to avenge my father."

"That is just," the hunter observed.

The conversation broke off at this point.

Loyal Heart, having conducted the young man to one of his *cachés* (a sort of magazines dug in the earth in which trappers collect their wealth), produced the complete equipment of a trapper, — gun, knife, pistols, game bags, and traps, — and then, after placing these things before his *protégé*, he said simply, —

"Go! and God speed you!"

The other looked at him without replying; he evidently did not understand him.

Loyal Heart smiled.

"You are free," he resumed; "here are all the objects necessary for your new trade, — I give them to you, the desert is before you; I wish you good luck!"

The young man shook his head.

"No," he said, "I will not leave you unless you drive me from you; I am alone, without family or friends; you have saved my life, and I belong to you."

"It is not my custom to receive payment for the services I render," said the hunter.

"You require to be paid for them too dearly," the other answered warmly, "since you refuse to accept gratitude. Take back your gifts, they are of no use to me; I am not a mendicant to whom alms can be thrown; I prefer going back and delivering myself up again to the Comanches – adieu!"

And the Canadian resolutely walked away in the direction of the Indian camp.

Loyal Heart was affected. This young man had so frank, so honest and spirited an air, that he felt something in his breast speak strongly in his favour.

"Stop!" he said.

And the other stopped.

"I live alone," the hunter continued; "the existence which you will pass with me will be a sad one: a great grief consumes me; why should you attach yourself to me, who are unhappy?"

"To share your grief, if you think me worthy, and to console you, if that be possible; when man is left alone, he runs the risk of falling into despair; God has ordained that he should seek companions."

"That is true," the still undecided hunter murmured.

"Why do you pause?" the young man asked anxiously.

Loyal Heart gazed at him for a moment attentively; his eagle eye seemed to seek to penetrate his most secret thoughts; then, doubtless, satisfied with his examination, he asked,

"What is your name?"

"Belhumeur," the other replied; "or, if you prefer it, George Talbot; but I am generally known by the first name."

The hunter smiled.

"That is a promising name," he said, holding out his hand. "Belhumeur," he added, "from this time you are my brother; henceforth there is a friendship for life and death between us."

He kissed him above the eyes, as is the custom in the prairies in similar circumstances.

"For life and death," the Canadian replied, with a burst of enthusiasm, warmly pressing the hand which was held out to him, and kissing, in his turn, his new brother under the eyes.

And this was the way in which Loyal Heart and Belhumeur had become known to each other. During five years, not the least cloud, not the shadow of a cloud, had darkened the friendship which these two superior natures had sworn to each other in the desert, in the face of God. On the contrary, every day seemed to increase it; they had but one heart between them. Completely relying on each other, divining each other's most secret thoughts, these two men had seen their strength augment tenfold, and such was their reciprocal confidence, that they doubted nothing, and undertook and carried out the most daring expeditions, in face of which ten resolute men would have paused.

But everything succeeded with them, nothing appeared to be impossible to them; it might be said that a charm protected them, and rendered them invulnerable and invincible.

Their reputation was thus spread far and near, and those whom their name did not strike with admiration repeated it with terror.

After a few months passed by Loyal Heart in studying his companion, drawn away by that natural want which man feels of confiding his troubles to a faithful friend, the hunter no longer had any secrets from Belhumeur. This confidence, which the young man expected impatiently, but which he had done nothing to bring about, had bound still closer, if possible, the ties which united the two men, by furnishing the Canadian with the means of giving his friend the consolations which his bruised spirit required, and of avoiding irritating wounds that were ever bleeding.

On the day we met them in the prairie, they had just been the victims of an audacious robbery, committed by their ancient enemy, Eagle Head, the Comanche chief, whose hatred and rancour, instead of being weakened by time, had, on the contrary, only increased.

The Indian, with the characteristic deceit of his race, had dissembled, and devoured in silence the affront he had undergone from his people, and of which the two palefaced hunters were the direct cause, and awaited patiently the hour of vengeance. He had quietly dug a pit under the feet of his enemies, by prejudicing the redskins by degrees against them, and adroitly spreading calumnies about them. Thanks to this system, he had at length succeeded, or, at least, he thought he had, in making all the individuals dispersed over the prairies, even the white and half-breed hunters, consider these two men as their enemies.

As soon as this result had been obtained, Eagle Head placed himself at the head of thirty devoted warriors; and, anxious to bring about a quarrel that might ruin the men whose death he had sworn to accomplish, he had in one single night stolen all their traps, certain that they would not leave such an insult unpunished, but would try to avenge it.

The chief was not deceived in his calculations; all had fallen out just as he had foreseen it would.

In this position he awaited his enemies.

Thinking that they would find no assistance among the Indians or hunters, he flattered himself that with the thirty men he commanded he could easily seize the two hunters, whom he proposed to put to death with atrocious tortures.

But he had committed the fault of concealing the number of his warriors, in order to inspire more confidence in the hunters.

The latter had only partially been the dupes of this stratagem. Considering themselves sufficiently strong to contend even with twenty Indians, they had claimed the assistance of no one to avenge themselves upon enemies they despised, and had, as we have seen, set out resolutely in pursuit of the Comanches.

Closing here this parenthesis, a rather long one, it is true, but indispensable to understand of what is to follow, we will take up our narrative at the point we broke off at, on terminating the preceding chapter.

CHAPTER III. THE TRAIL

Eagle Head, who wished to be discovered by his enemies, had not taken any pains to conceal his trail.

It was perfectly visible in the high grass, and if now and then it appeared to be effaced, the hunters had but slightly to turn to one side or the other to regain the prints of it.

Never before had a foe been pursued on the prairies in such a fashion. It must have appeared the more singular to Loyal Heart, who, for a long time, had been acquainted with the cunning of the Indians, and knew with what skill, when they judged it necessary, they caused every indication of their passage to disappear.

This facility gave him reason to reflect. As the Comanches had taken no more pains to conceal their track, they must either believe themselves very strong, or else they had prepared an ambush into which they hoped to make their too confident enemies fall.

The two hunters rode on, casting, from time to time, a look right and left, in order to be sure they were not deceived; but the track still continued in a straight line, without turnings or circuits. It was impossible to meet with greater facilities in a pursuit. Belhumeur himself began to think this very extraordinary, and to be made seriously uneasy by it.

But if the Comanches had been unwilling to take the pains of concealing their trail, the hunters did not follow their example; they did not advance a step without effacing the trace of their passage.

They arrived thus on the banks of a tolerably broad rivulet, named the Verdigris, which is a tributary of the great Canadian river.

Before crossing this little stream, on the other side of which the hunters would no longer be very far from the Indians, Loyal Heart stopped, making a sign to his companion to do so likewise.

Both dismounted, and leading their horses by the bridle, they sought the shelter of a clump of trees, in order not to be perceived, if, by chance, some Indian sentinel should be set to watch their approach.

When they were concealed in the thickness of the wood, Loyal Heart placed a finger on his lip to recommend prudence to his companion, and, approaching his lips to his ear, he said, in a voice low as a breath, —

"Before we go any farther, let us consult, in order to ascertain what we had better do."

Belhumeur bent his head in sign of acquiescence.

"I suspect some treachery," the hunter resumed; "Indians are too experienced warriors, and too much accustomed to the life of the prairies, to act in this way without an imperative reason."

"That is true," the Canadian replied, with a tone of conviction; "this trail is too good and too plainly indicated not to conceal a snare."

"Yes, but they have wished to be too cunning; their craft has overshot the mark; old hunters, like us, are not to be deceived thus. We must redouble our prudence, and examine every leaf and blade of grass with care, before we venture nearer the encampment of the redskins."

"Let us do better," said Belhumeur, casting a glance around him; "let us conceal our horses in a safe place, where we can find them again at need, and then go and reconnoitre on foot the position and the number of those whom we wish to surprise."

"You are right, Belhumeur," said Loyal Heart; "your counsel is excellent, we will put it in practice."

"I think we had better make haste in that case."

"Why so? On the contrary, do not let us hurry; the Indians, not seeing us appear, will relax in their watchfulness, and we will profit by their negligence to attack them, if we should be forced

to have recourse to such extreme measures; besides, it would be better to wait for the night before we commence our expedition."

"In the first place, let us put our horses in safety. Afterwards, we shall see what is best to be done."

The hunters left their concealment with the greatest precaution. Instead of crossing the river, they retraced their road, and for some time followed the route they had already traversed, then they bent a little to the left, and entered a ravine, in which they quickly disappeared among the high grass.

"I leave you to be guide, Belhumeur," said Loyal Heart, "I really do not know whither you are leading me!"

"Leave it to me, I have by chance discovered, within two gunshots of the place where we now are, a sort of citadel, where our horses will be as safe as possible, and in which, if so it should fall out, we should be able to sustain a regular siege."

"*Caramba!*" the hunter exclaimed, who, by this oath, which was habitual with him, betrayed his Spanish origin, "how did you make this precious discovery?"

"Faith!" said Belhumeur, "in the simplest manner possible. I had just laid my traps, when, in climbing up the mountain before us in order to shorten my road and rejoin you more quickly, at nearly two-thirds of the ascent, I saw, protruding from the bushes the velvety muzzle of a superb bear."

"Ah! ah! I am pretty well acquainted with that adventure. You brought me that day, if I am not mistaken, not one, but two black bearskins."

"That is the same, my fine fellows were two, one male and the other female. You may easily suppose that at the sight of them my hunter's instincts were immediately roused; forgetful of my fatigue, I cocked my rifle, and set out in pursuit of them. You will see for yourself what sort of a fortress they had chosen," he added, as he alighted from his horse, and Loyal Heart followed his example.

Before them rose, in the shape of an amphitheatre, a mass of rocks, which assumed the most curious and fantastic shapes; thin bushes sprang here and there from the interstices of the stones, climbing plants crowned the summits of the rocks, and gave to this mass, which rose more than six hundred feet above the prairie, the appearance of one of those ancient feudal ruins which are to be met with occasionally on the banks of the great rivers of Europe.

This place was named by the hunters of these plains, the White Castle, from the colour of the blocks of granite which formed it.

"We shall never be able to get up there with our horses," said Loyal Heart, after carefully surveying for an instant the space they had to clear.

"Let us try, at all events!" said Belhumeur, pulling his horse by the bridle.

The ascent was rough, and any other horses than those of hunters, accustomed to the most difficult roads, would have been unable to accomplish it, but would have rolled from the top to the bottom.

It was necessary to choose with care the spot on which the foot must be placed, and then to spring forward at a bound, and all this with turnings and twisting enough to produce a dizziness.

After half an hour of extraordinary difficulties they arrived at a sort of platform, ten yards broad at most.

"This is it!" said Belhumeur, stopping.

"How this?" Loyal Heart replied, looking around on all sides without perceiving an opening.

"Come this way!" said Belhumeur, smiling.

And still dragging his horse after him, he passed behind a block of the rock, the hunter following him with awakened curiosity.

After walking for five minutes in a sort of trench, at most three feet wide, which seemed to wind round upon itself, the adventurers found themselves suddenly before the yawning mouth of a deep cavern.

This road, formed by one of those terrible convulsions of nature so frequent in these regions, was so well concealed behind the rocks and stones which masked it, that it was impossible to discover it except by a providential chance.

The hunters entered.

Before ascending the mountain, Belhumeur had collected a large provision of candlewood; he lit two torches, keeping one for himself, and giving the other to his companion.

Then the grotto appeared to them in all its wild majesty.

Its walls were high and covered with brilliant stalactites, which reflected back the light, multiplying it, and forming a fairy-like illumination.

"This cavern," said Belhumeur, after he had given his friend time to examine it in all its details, "is, I have no doubt, one of the wonders of the prairies; this gallery, which descends in a gentle declivity before us, passes under the Verdigris, and debouches on the other side of the river, at a distance of more than a mile, into the plain. In addition to the gallery by which we entered, and that which is before us, there exist four others, all of which have issues at different places. You see that here we are in no risk of being surrounded, and that these spacious chambers offer us a suite of apartments splendid enough to make the president of the United States himself jealous."

Loyal Heart, enchanted with the discovery of this refuge, wished to examine it perfectly, and although he was naturally very silent, the hunter could not always withhold his admiration.

"Why have you never told me of this place before?" he said to Belhumeur.

"I waited for the opportunity," the latter replied.

The hunters secured their horses, with abundance of provender, in one of the compartments of the grotto, into which the light penetrated by imperceptible fissures; and then, when they were satisfied that the noble animals; could want for nothing during their absence, and could not escape, they threw their rifles over their shoulders, whistled to their dogs, and, descended with hasty steps the gallery which passed under the river.

Soon the air became moist around them, a dull, continuous noise was heard above their heads, – they were passing under the Verdigris. Thanks to a species of lantern, formed by a hollow rock rising in the middle of the river's course, there was light sufficient to guide them.

After half an hour's walk they debouched in the prairie by an entrance masked by bushes and creeping plants.

They had remained a long time in the grotto. In the first place, they had examined it minutely, like men who foresaw that some day or other they should stand in need of seeking a shelter there; next they had made a kind of stable for their horses; and lastly, they had snatched a hasty morsel of food, so that the sun was on the point of setting at the moment when they set off again upon the track of the Comanches.

Then commenced the true Indian pursuit. The two hunters, after having laid on their bloodhounds, glided silently in their traces, creeping on their hands and knees through the high grass, the eye on the watch, the ear on the listen, holding their breath, and stopping at intervals to inhale the air, and interrogate those thousand sounds of the prairies which hunters notice with incredible facility, and which they explain without hesitation.

The desert was plunged in a death-like silence.

At the approach of night in these immense solitudes, nature seems to collect herself, and prepare, by a religious devotion, for the mysteries of darkness.

The hunters continued advancing, redoubling their precautions, and creeping along in parallel lines.

All at once the dogs came silently to a stop. The brave animals seemed to comprehend the value of silence in these parts, and that a single cry would cost their masters their lives.

Belhumeur cast a piercing glance around him. His eye flashed, he gathered himself up, and bounding like a panther, he sprang upon an Indian warrior, who, with his body bent forward, and his head down, seemed to be sensible of the approach of an enemy.

The Indian was roughly thrown upon his back, and before he could utter a cry of distress or for help, Belhumeur had his throat in his grasp and his knee on his breast.

Then, with the greatest coolness, the hunter unsheathed his knife, and plunged it up to the hilt in the heart of his enemy.

When the savage saw that he was lost, he disdained to attempt any useless resistance, but fixing upon the Canadian a look of hatred and contempt, an ironical smile curled his lips, and he awaited death with a calm face.

Belhumeur replaced his knife in his belt, and pushing the body on one side, said imperturbably, —

"One!"

And he crept on again.

Loyal Heart had watched the movements of his friend with the greatest attention, ready to succour him if it were necessary; when the Indian was dead, he calmly took up the trail again.

Ere long the light of a fire gleamed between the trees and an odour of roasted flesh struck the keen smell of the hunters.

They drew themselves up like two phantoms along an enormous cork tree, which was within a few paces of them, and embracing the gnarled trunk, concealed themselves among the tufted branches.

Then they looked out, and found that they were, it might be said, soaring over the camp of the Comanches, situated within ten yards of them, at most.

CHAPTER IV. THE TRAVELLERS

About the same hour that the trappers issued from the grotto, and took up the trail of the Comanches again, at twenty miles' distance from them, a rather large party of white travellers halted upon the banks of the great Canadian river and prepared to encamp for the night in a magnificent position, where there were still some remains of an ancient camp of an Indian hunting party.

The hunters and the half-breed Gambusinos who served as guides to the travellers hastened to unload a dozen mules, which were escorted by Mexican lanceros.

With the bales they made an enclosure of an oval form, in the interior of which they lit a fire; then, without troubling themselves any further about their companions, the guides united together in a little group and prepared their evening repast.

A young officer, of about twenty-five years of age, of martial bearing, with delicately marked features, went up respectfully to a palanquin drawn by two mules and escorted by two horsemen.

"In what place would you wish, señor, the señorita's tent to be pitched?" the young officer asked, as he raised his hat.

"Where you please, Captain Aguilar, provided it be quickly done; my niece is sinking with fatigue," the cavalier, who rode on the right of the palanquin, replied.

He was a man of lofty stature, with hard marked features, and an eagle eye, whose hair was as white as the snows of Chimborazo, and who, under the large military cloak which he wore, allowed glimpses to appear of the splendid uniform, glittering with embroidery, of a Mexican general.

The captain retired, with another bow, and returning to the lanceros, he gave them orders to set up in the middle of the camp enclosure, a pretty tent, striped rose colour and blue, which was carried across the back of a mule.

Five minutes later, the general, dismounting, offered his hand gallantly to a young female, who sprang lightly from the palanquin, and conducted her to the tent, where, thanks to the attentions of Captain Aguilar, everything was so prepared that she found herself as comfortable as circumstances would permit.

Behind the general and his niece, two other persons entered the tent.

One was short and stout, with a full, rosy face, green spectacles, and a light-coloured wig, who appeared to be choking in the uniform of an army surgeon.

This personage, whose age was a problem, but who appeared to be about fifty, was named Jérôme Boniface Duvieux; he was a Frenchman, and a surgeon-major in the Mexican service.

On alighting from his horse, he had seized and placed under his arm, with a species of respect, a large valise fastened to the hinder part of his saddle, and from which he seemed unwilling to part.

The second person was a girl of about fifteen years of age, of a forward and lively mien, with a turn-up nose and a bold look, belonging to the half-breed race, who served as lady's maid to the general's niece.

A superb Negro, decorated with the majestic name of Jupiter, hastened, aided by two or three Gambusinos, to prepare the supper.

"Well! doctor," said the general, smiling, to the fat man, who came in puffing like a bullock, and sat down upon his valise, "how do you find my niece this evening?"

"The señorita is always charming!" the doctor replied gallantly, as he wiped his brow, "Do you not find the heat very oppressive?"

"Faith! no," replied the general, "not more so than usual."

"Well, it appears so to me!" said the doctor with a sigh. "What are you laughing at, you little witch?" added he, turning towards the waiting maid, who, in fact, was laughing with all her might.

"Pay no attention to that wild girl, doctor; you know she is but a child," the young lady said, with a pleasing smile.

"I have always told you, Doña Luz," persisted the doctor, knitting his large eyebrows, and puffing out his cheeks, "that that little girl is a demon, to whom you are much too kind, and who will end by playing you an evil turn some of these days."

"Ooouch! the wicked picker up of pebbles!" the quadroon said with a grin, in allusion to the doctor's mania for collecting stones.

"Come, come, peace!" said the general, "has today's journey fatigued you much, my dear niece?"

"Not exceedingly," the young lady replied, with a suppressed yawn; "during nearly a month that we have been travelling I have become accustomed to this sort of life, which, I confess, at the commencement, I found painful enough."

The general sighed, but made no reply. The doctor was absorbed by the care with which he was classifying the plants and stones which he had collected during the day.

The half-breed girl flew about the tent like a bird, occupied in putting everything in order that her mistress might want.

We will take advantage of this moment of respite to sketch the portrait of the young lady.

Doña Luz de Bermudez was the daughter of a younger sister of the general.

She was a charming girl of sixteen at most. Her large black eyes, surmounted by eyebrows whose deep colour contrasted finely with the whiteness of her fair, pure forehead, were veiled by long velvety lashes, which modestly concealed their splendour; her little mouth was set off by teeth of pearl, edged by lips of coral; her delicate skin wore the down of the ripe peach, and her blue-black hair, when liberated from its bands, formed a veil for her whole person.

Her form was slender and supple, with all the curves of the true line of beauty. She possessed, in an eminent degree, that undulating, gracefully serpentine movement which distinguishes American women; her hands and feet were extremely small, and her step had the careless voluptuousness of the Creole, so full of ever varying attractions.

In short, in the person of this young lady, might be said to be combined all the graces and perfections.

Ignorant as most of her compatriots, she was gay and cheerful; amused with the smallest trifle, and knowing nothing of life but the agreeable side of it.

But this beautiful statue was not animated; it was Pandora before Prometheus had stolen for her fire from heaven, and, to continue our mythological comparison, Love had not yet brushed her with his wing, her brow had not yet been contracted by the pressure of thought, her heart had not yet beaten under the influence of passion.

Brought up under the care of the general in almost cloistral seclusion, she had only quitted it to accompany him in a journey he had undertaken through the prairies.

What was the object of this journey, and why had her uncle so positively insisted upon her making it with him? That was of little consequence to the young girl.

Happy to live in the open air, to be constantly seeing new countries and new objects, to be free in comparison with the life she had hitherto led, she had asked nothing better, and took care never to trouble her uncle with indiscreet questions.

At the period when we met her, then, Doña Luz was a happy girl, living from day to day, satisfied with the present, and thinking nothing of the future.

Captain Aguilar entered, preceding Jupiter, who brought in the dinner.

The table was decked by Phoebe, the waiting maid.

The repast consisted of preserved meats and a joint of roast venison.

Four persons took their places round the table; the general, his niece, the captain, and the doctor.

Jupiter and Phoebe waited.

Conversation languished during the first course; but when the appetite of the party was a little abated, the young girl, who delighted in teasing the doctor, turned to him, and said, —

"Have you made a rich harvest today, doctor?"

"Not too rich, señorita," he replied.

"Well! but," she said, laughing, "there appears to me to be such an abundance of stones on our route, that it only rested with yourself to gather together enough to load a mule."

"You ought to be pleased with your journey," said the general, "for it offers you such an opportunity for indulging in your passion for plants of all sorts."

"Not too great, general, I must confess; the prairie is not so rich as I thought it was; and if it were not for the hope I entertain of discovering one plant, whose qualities may advance science, I should almost regret my little house at Guadeloupe, where my life glided away in such uniform tranquillity."

"Bah!" the captain interrupted, "we are as yet only on the frontiers of the prairies. You will find, when we have penetrated further into the interior, that you will not be able to gather the riches which will spring from under your feet."

"God grant it may be so, captain," said the doctor, with a sigh; "provided I find the plant I seek I shall be satisfied."

"Is it then such a very valuable plant?" asked Doña Luz.

"What, señorita!" cried the doctor, warming with the question. "A plant which Linnaeus has described and classified, and which no one has since found! a plant that would make my reputation! And you ask me if it is valuable?"

"Of what use is it, then?" the young lady asked, in a tone of curiosity.

"Of what use is it?"

"Yes."

"None at all, that I am aware of," the doctor replied, ingeniously.

Doña Luz broke into a silvery laugh, whose pearly notes might have made a nightingale jealous.

"And you call it a valuable plant?"

"Yes – if only for its rarity."

"Ah! that's all."

"Let us hope you will find it, doctor," said the general in a conciliatory tone. "Jupiter, call the chief of the guides hither."

The Negro left the tent, and almost immediately returned, followed by a Gambusino.

The latter was a man of about forty, tall in stature, square-built, and muscular. His countenance, though not exactly ugly, had something repulsive in it for which the spectator was at a loss to account; his wild, sinister-looking eyes, buried under their orbits, cast a savage light, which with his low brow, his curly hair, and his coppery complexion, made altogether a not very agreeable whole. He wore the costume of a wood ranger; he was cold, impassible, of a nature essentially taciturn, and answered to the name of *the Babbler*, which, no doubt, the Indians or his companions had given him by antiphrasis.

"Here, my good fellow," said the general, holding out to him a glass filled to the brim with a sort of brandy, called mescal, from the name of the place where it is distilled, "drink this."

The hunter bowed, emptied the glass, which contained about a pint, at a draught; then, passing his cuff across his moustache, waited.

"I wish," said the general, "to halt for a few days in some safe position, in order to make, without fear of being disturbed, certain researches; shall we be secure here?"

The eye of the guide sparkled: he fixed a burning glance upon the general.

"No," he replied, laconically.

"Why not?"

"Too many Indians and wild beasts."

"Do you know one more suitable?"

"Yes."

"Is it far?"

"No."

"At what distance?"

"Forty miles."

"How long will it take us to arrive there?"

"Three days."

"That will do. Conduct us thither. Tomorrow, at sunrise, we will set forward in our march."

"Is that all?"

"That is all."

"Good night."

And the hunter withdrew.

"What I admire in the Babbler," said the Captain, with a smile, "is that his conversation never tires you."

"I should like it much better if he spoke more," said the doctor, shaking his head. "I always suspect people who are so afraid of saying too much; they generally have something to conceal."

The guide, after leaving the tent, joined his companions, with whom he began to talk in a low voice, but in a very animated manner.

The night was magnificent; the travellers, assembled in front of the tent, were chatting together, and smoking their cigars.

Doña Luz was singing one of those charming Creole songs, which are so full of sweet melody and expression.

All at once a red-tinted light appeared in the horizon, increasing every instant, and a dull continuous noise, like the growling of distant thunder, was heard.

"What is that?" the general cried, rising hastily.

"The prairie is on fire," the Babbler replied, quietly.

At this terrible announcement, made so quietly, the camp was all in confusion.

It was necessary to fly instantly, if they did not choose to run the risk of being burnt alive.

One of the Gambusinos, taking advantage of the disorder, glided away among the baggage, and disappeared in the plain, after exchanging a mysterious signal with the Babbler.

CHAPTER V. THE COMANCHES

Loyal Heart and Belhumeur, concealed among the tufted branches of the cork tree, were observing the Comanches.

The Indians depended upon the vigilance of their sentinels. Far from suspecting that their enemies were so near them and were watching their motions, they crouched or lay around the fires, eating or smoking carelessly.

These savages, to the number of twenty-five, were dressed in their buffalo robes, and painted in the most varied and fantastic manner. Most of them had their faces covered with vermillion, others were entirely black, with a long white stripe upon each cheek; they wore their bucklers on their backs, with their bows and arrows, and near them lay their guns.

By the number of wolves' tails fastened to their moccasins, and which dragged on the ground behind them, it was easy to perceive that they were all picked warriors, renowned in their tribe.

At some paces from the group, Eagle Head leant motionless against a tree. With his arms crossed on his breast, and leaning gently forward, he seemed to be listening to vague sounds, perceptible to himself alone.

Eagle Head was an Osage Indian; the Comanches had adopted him when quite young, but he had always preserved the costume and manners of his nation.

He was, at most, twenty-eight years of age, nearly six feet high, and his large limbs, upon which enormous muscles developed themselves, denoted extraordinary strength.

Differing in this respect from his companions, he only wore a blanket fastened round his loins, so as to leave his bust and his arms bare. The expression of his countenance was handsome and noble; his black, animated eyes, close to his aquiline nose, and his somewhat large mouth, gave him a faint resemblance to a bird of prey. His hair was shaved off, with the exception of a ridge upon the middle of his head, which produced the effect of the crest of a helmet, and a long scalp lock, in which was fixed a bunch of eagle's feathers, hung down behind him.

His face was painted of four different colours – blue, white, black, and red; the wounds inflicted by him upon his enemies were marked in blue upon his naked breast. Moccasins of untanned deerskin came up above his knees, and numerous wolves' tails were fastened to his heels.

Fortunately for the hunters, the Indians were on the warpath, and had no dogs with them; but for this, they would have been discovered long before, and could not possibly have approached so near the camp.

In spite of his statue-like immobility, the eye of the chief sparkled, his nostrils expanded, and he lifted his right arm mechanically, as if to impose silence upon his warriors.

"We are scented," Loyal Heart murmured, in a voice so low that his companion could hardly hear it.

"What is to be done?" Belhumeur replied.

"Act," said the trapper, laconically.

Both then glided silently from branch to branch, from tree to tree, without touching the ground, till they reached the opposite side of the camp, just above the place where the horses of the Comanches were hobbled to graze.

Belhumeur descended softly, and cut the thongs that held them; and the horses, excited by the whips of the hunters, rushed out, neighing and kicking in all directions.

The Indians rose in disorder, and hastened, with loud cries, in pursuit of their horses.

Eagle Head alone, as if he had guessed the spot where his enemies were in ambush, directed his steps straight towards them, screening himself as much as possible behind the trees which he passed.

The hunters drew back, step by step, looking carefully round them, so as not to allow themselves to be encompassed.

The cries of the Indians grew fainter in the distance; they were all in eager pursuit of their horses.

The chief found himself alone in presence of his two enemies.

On arriving at a tree whose enormous trunk appeared to guarantee the desired safety, disdaining to use his gun, and the opportunity seeming favourable, he adjusted an arrow on his bowstring. But whatever might be his prudence and address, he could not make this movement without discovering himself a little. Loyal Heart raised his gun, the trigger was pressed, the ball whizzed, and the chief bounded into the air uttering a howl of rage, and fell upon the ground.

His arm was broken.

The two hunters were already by his side.

"Not a movement, redskin," Loyal Heart said to him; "not a movement, or you are a dead man!"

The Indian remained motionless, apparently stoical, but devouring his rage.

"I could kill you," the hunter continued; "but I am not willing to do so. This is the second time I have given you your life, chief, but it will be the last. Cross my path no more, and, remember, do not steal my traps again; if you do, I swear I will grant you no mercy."

"Eagle Head is a chief renowned among the men of his tribe," the Indian replied, haughtily; "he does not fear death; the white hunter may kill him, he will not hear him complain."

"No, I will not kill you, chief; my God forbids the shedding of human blood unnecessarily."

"Wah!" said the Indian, with an ironical smile, "my brother is a missionary."

"No, I am an honest trapper, and do not wish to be an assassin."

"My brother speaks the words of old women," the Indian continued; "Nehu mutah never pardons, he takes vengeance."

"You will do as you please, chief," the hunter replied, shrugging his shoulders contemptuously, "I have no intention of trying to change your nature; only remember you are warned – farewell!"

"And the devil admire you!" Belhumeur added, giving him a contemptuous shove with his foot.

The chief appeared insensible even to this fresh insult, save that his brows contracted slightly. He did not stir, but followed his enemies with an implacable look, while they, without troubling themselves further about him, plunged into the forest.

"You may say what you like, Loyal Heart," said Belhumeur, "but you are wrong, you ought to have killed him."

"Bah! what for?" the hunter asked, carelessly.

"*Cascaras!* what for? Why, there would have been one head of vermin the less in the prairie."

"Where there are so many," said the other, "one more or less cannot signify much."

"Humph! that's true!" Belhumeur replied, apparently convinced; "but where are we going now?"

"To look after our traps, *caramba!* do you think I will lose them?"

"Humph! that's a good thought."

The hunters advanced in the direction of the camp, but in the Indian fashion – that is to say, by making numberless turnings and windings intended to throw out the Comanches.

After progressing in this way for twenty minutes, they arrived at the camp. The Indians had not yet returned; but in all probability, it would not be long before they did so. All their baggage was scattered about. Two or three horses, which had not felt disposed to run away, were browsing quietly on the peavines.

Without losing time, the hunters set about collecting their traps, which was soon done. Each loaded himself with five, and, without further delay, they resumed the way to the cavern where they had concealed their horses.

Notwithstanding the tolerably heavy weight they carried on their shoulders, the two men marched lightly, much pleased at having so happily terminated their expedition, and laughing at the trick they had played the Indians.

They had gone on thus for some time, and could already hear the murmur of the distant waters of the river, when, all at once, the neighing of a horse struck their ears.

"We are pursued," said Loyal Heart, stopping.

"Hum!" Belhumeur remarked, "it is, perhaps, a wild horse."

"No; a wild horse does not neigh in that manner; it is the Comanches; but we can soon know," he added, as he threw himself down to listen, and placed his ear close to the ground.

"I was sure of it," he said, rising almost immediately; "it is the Comanches; but they are not following a full track – they are hesitating."

"Or perhaps their march is retarded by the wound of Eagle Head."

"That's possible! Oh, oh! do they fancy themselves capable of catching us, if we wished to escape from them?"

"Ah! if we were not loaded, that would soon be done."

Loyal Heart reflected a minute.

"Come," he said, "we have still half an hour, and that is more than we want."

A rivulet flowed at a short distance from them; the hunter entered its bed with his companion, who followed all his movements.

When he arrived in the middle of the stream, Loyal Heart carefully wrapped up the traps in a buffalo skin, that no moisture might come to them, and then he allowed them quietly to drop to the bottom of the stream.

This precaution taken, the hunters crossed the rivulet, and made a false trail of about two hundred paces, and afterwards returned cautiously so as not to leave a print that might betray their return. They then re-entered the forest, after having, with a gesture, sent the dogs to the horses. The intelligent animals obeyed, and soon disappeared in the darkness.

This resolution to send away the dogs was useful in assisting to throw the Indians off the track, for they could scarcely miss following the traces left by the bloodhounds in the high grass.

Once in the forest, the hunters again climbed up a tree, and began to advance between heaven and earth – a mode of travelling much more frequently used than is believed in Europe, in this country where it is often impossible, on account of the underwood and the trees, to advance without employing an axe to clear a passage.

It is possible, by thus passing from branch to branch, to travel leagues together without touching the ground.

It was exactly thus, only for another cause, that our hunters acted at this moment.

They advanced in this fashion before their enemies, who drew nearer and nearer, and they soon perceived them under them, marching in Indian file, that is to say, one behind another, and following their track attentively.

Eagle Head came first, half lying upon his horse, on account of his wound, but more animated than ever in pursuit of his enemies.

When the Comanches passed them, the two trappers gathered themselves up among the leaves, holding their breath. The most trifling circumstance would have sufficed to proclaim their presence. The Indians passed without seeing them. The hunters resumed their leafy march.

"Ouf!" said Belhumeur, at the end of a minute. "I think we have got rid of them this time!"

"Do not cry before you are out of the wood, but let us get on as fast as we can; these demons of redskins are cunning, they will not long be the dupes of our stratagem."

"*Sacrebleu!*" the Canadian suddenly exclaimed, "I have let my knife fall, I don't know where; if these devils find it, we are lost."

"Most likely," Loyal Heart murmured; "the greater reason then for not losing a single minute."

In the meantime, the forest, which till then had been calm, began all at once to grow excited, the birds flew about uttering cries of terror, and in the thick underwood they could hear the dry branches crack under the hurried footfalls of the wild animals.

"What's going on now?" said Loyal Heart, stopping, and looking round him with uneasiness; "the forest appears to be turned topsy-turvy!"

The hunters sprang up to the top of the tree in which they were, and which happened to be one of the loftiest in the forest.

An immense light tinged the horizon at about a league from the spot where they were; this light increased every minute, and advanced towards them with giant strides.

"Curses on them!" cried Belhumeur, "the Comanches have fired the prairie!"

"Yes, and I believe this time that, as you said just now, we are lost," Loyal Heart replied coolly.

"What's to be done?" said the Canadian, "in an instant we shall be surrounded."

Loyal Heart reflected seriously.

At the end of a few seconds he raised his head, and a smile of triumph curled the corners of his mouth.

"They have not got us yet," he replied; "follow me, my brother;" and he added in a low voice, "I must see my mother again!"

CHAPTER VI. THE PRESERVER

In order to make the reader comprehend the position of the hunters, it is necessary to return to the Comanche chief.

Scarce had his enemies disappeared among the trees, ere Eagle Head raised himself softly up, bent his body forward, and listened to ascertain if they were really departing. As soon as he had acquired that certainty, he tore off a morsel of his blanket with which he wrapped up his arm as well as he could, and, in spite of the weakness produced by loss of blood and the pain he suffered, he set off resolutely on the trail of the hunters.

He accompanied them, thus himself unseen, to the limits of the camp. There, concealed behind an ebony tree, he witnessed, without being able to prevent it, though boiling with rage, the search made by the hunters for their traps, and, at length, their departure after recovering them.

Although the bloodhounds which the hunters had with them were excellent dogs, trained to scent an Indian from a distance, by a providential chance, which probably saved the life of the Comanche chief, they had fallen upon the remains of the repast of the redskins, and their masters, not dreaming that they were watched, did not think of commanding their vigilance.

The Comanches at length regained their camp, after having, with infinite difficulty, succeeded in catching their horses.

The sight of their wounded chief caused them great surprise, and still greater anger, of which Eagle Head took advantage to send them all off again in pursuit of the hunters, who, retarded by the traps they carried, could not be far off, and must inevitably fall speedily into their hands.

They had been but for an instant the dupes of the stratagem invented by Loyal Heart, and had not been long in recognising, on the first trees of the forest unequivocal traces of the passage of their enemies.

At this moment, Eagle Head, ashamed of being thus held in check by two determined men, whose cunning, superior to his own, deceived all his calculations, resolved to put an end to them at once, by carrying into execution the diabolical project of setting fire to the forest; a means which, according to the manner in which he meant to employ it, must, he did not doubt, at length deliver his formidable adversaries up to him.

In consequence, dispersing his warriors in various directions, so as to form a vast circle, he ordered the high grass to be set on fire in various places simultaneously.

The idea, though barbarous and worthy of the savage warriors who employed it, was a good one. The hunters, after having vainly endeavoured to escape from the network of flame which encompassed them on all sides, would be obliged, in spite of themselves, if they did not prefer being burnt alive, to surrender quietly to their ferocious enemies.

Eagle Head had calculated and foreseen everything, except the most easy and most simple thing, the only chance of safety that would be left to Loyal Heart and his companions.

As we have said, at the command of their chief the warriors had dispersed, and had lighted the conflagration at several points simultaneously.

At this advanced season of the year, the plants and grass, parched by the incandescent rays of the summer's sun, were immediately in a blaze, and the fire extended in all directions with frightful rapidity.

Not, however, so quickly as not to allow a certain time to elapse before it united.

Loyal Heart had not hesitated. Whilst the Indians were running like demons around the barrier of flame they had just opposed to their enemies, and were uttering yells of joy, the hunter, followed by his friend, had rushed at full speed between two walls of fire, which from right and left advanced upon him, hissing, and threatening to unite at once above his head and beneath his feet.

Amidst calcined trees which fell with a crash, blinded by clouds of thick smoke which stopped their respiration, burnt by showers of sparks which poured upon them from all parts, following boldly their course beneath a vault of flame, the intrepid adventurers had cleared, at the cost of a few trifling burns, the accursed enclosure in which the Indians had thought to bury them for ever, and were already far from the enemies who were congratulating themselves upon the success of their artful and barbarous plan.

The conflagration, in the meantime, assumed formidable proportions; the forest shrivelled up under the grasp of the fire; the prairie was but one sheet of flame, in the midst of which the wild animals, driven from their dens and lairs by this unexpected catastrophe, ran about, mad with terror.

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