

Aimard Gustave

The Indian Chief: The Story of a Revolution



Gustave Aimard

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Aimard G.

The Indian Chief: The Story of a Revolution / G. Aimard — «Public Domain»,

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PREFACE

With this volume terminates the series in which Gustave Aimard has described the sad fate of the Count de Raousset-Boulbon, who fell a victim to Mexican treachery. In the next volume to be published, under the title of the "Trail Hunter," will be found the earlier history of some of the characters whose acquaintance the reader has formed, I trust with pleasure, in the present series.

L. W.

CHAPTER I

THE INTERVIEW

The Jesuits founded in Mexico missions round which, with the patience that constantly distinguished them, an unbounded charity, and a perseverance which nothing could discourage, they succeeded in collecting a large number of Indians, whom they instructed in the principal and most touching dogmas of their faith – whom they baptized, instructed, and induced to till the soil.

These missions, at first insignificant and a great distance apart, insensibly increased. The Indians, attracted by the gentle amenity of the good fathers, placed themselves under their protection; and there is no doubt that if the Jesuits, victims to the jealousy of the Spanish viceroys, had not been shamefully plundered and expelled from Mexico, they would have brought around them the majority of the fiercest *Indios Bravos*, have civilised them, and made them give up their nomadic life.

It is to one of these missions we purpose conducting the reader, a month after the events we have narrated in a preceding work.¹

The mission of Nuestra Señora de los Ángeles was built on the right bank of the Rio San Pedro, about sixty leagues from Pitic. Nothing can equal the grandeur and originality of its position. Nothing can compare, in wild grandeur and imposing severity, with the majestically terrible landscape which presents itself to the vision, and fills the heart with terror and a melancholy joy, at the sight of the frightful and gloomy rocks which tower over the river like colossal walls and gigantic parapets, apparently formed by some convulsion of nature; while in the midst of this chaos, at the foot of these astounding precipices, past which the river rushes in impetuous cascades, and in a delicious valley covered with verdure, stands the house, commanded on three sides by immense mountains, which raise their distant peaks almost to the heavens.

Alas! this house, formerly so smiling, so animated, so gay and happy – this remote corner of the world, which seemed a counterpart of Eden, where, morning and night, hymns of gratitude, mingling with the cascade, rose to the Omnipotent – this mission is now dead and desolate, the houses are deserted and in ruins, the church roof has fallen in, the grass has invaded the choir. The terrified members of this simple and innocent community, scattered by persecution, sought refuge in the desert, and returned to that savage life from which they were rescued with so much difficulty. Wild beasts dwell in the house of God, and nothing is heard save the voice of solitude murmuring unceasingly through the deserted houses and crumbling walls, which parasitic plants are rapidly invading, and will soon level with the ground, covering them with a winding sheet of verdure.

It was evening. The wind roared hoarsely through the trees. The sky, like a dome of diamond, flashed with those millions of stars which are also worlds; the moon spread around a vague and mysterious light; and the atmosphere, refreshed by a gusty breeze, was embalmed with those desert odours which it is so healthy to respire.

Still the night was somewhat fresh, and three travellers, crouching round a large *brasero* kindled amid the ruins, seemed to appreciate its kindly warmth. These travellers, on whose hard features the changing flashes of light were reflected, would have supplied a splendid subject for an artist, with their strange costumes, as they were encamped there in the midst of the wild and startling landscape.

A little distance behind the principal group four hobbled horses were munching their provender, while their riders, for their part, were concluding a scanty meal, composed of a slice of venison, a few pieces of *tasajo*, and maize tortillas, the whole washed down with water slightly dashed with *refino* to take off its hardness.

¹ See "Gold-Seekers." Same publishers.

These three men were Count Louis, Valentine, and Don Cornelio. Although they ate like true hunters – that is to say, with good appetite, and not losing a mouthful – it was easy to guess that our friends were engaged with serious matters for thought. Their eyes wandered incessantly around, consulting the shadows, and striving to pierce the darkness. At times the hand stopped half way to the mouth – the lump of *tasajo* remained in suspense: with their left hand they instinctively sought the rifle that lay on the ground near them. They stretched forth their necks, and listened attentively, analysing those thousand nameless noises of the great American deserts, which all have a cause, and are an infallible warning to the man who knows how to understand them.

Still the meal drew to an end. Don Cornelio had seized his *jarana*; but at a sign from Don Louis he laid it again by his side, wrapped himself in his *zarapé*, and stretched himself out on the ground. Valentine was in deep reflection. Louis had risen, and, leaning against a wall, looked cautiously out into the desert. A long period elapsed ere a word was exchanged, until Louis seated himself again by the hunter's side.

"'Tis strange," he said.

"What?" Valentine replied abstractedly.

"Curumilla's prolonged absence. He has left us for nearly three hours without telling us the reason, and has not returned yet."

"Have you any suspicion of him?" the hunter said with a certain degree of bitterness.

"Brother," Louis replied, "you are unjust at this moment. I do not suspect; I am restless, that is all. Like yourself, I feel a too lively and sincere friendship for the chief not to fear some accident."

"Curumilla is prudent; no one is so well acquainted as he with Indian tricks. If he has not returned, there are important reasons for it, be assured."

"I am convinced of it; but the delay his absence causes us may prove injurious."

"How do you know, brother? Perhaps our safety depends on this very absence. Believe me, Louis, I know Curumilla much better than you do. I have slept too long side by side with him not to place the utmost confidence in him. Thus, you see, I patiently await his return."

"But supposing he has fallen into a snare, or has been killed?"

Valentine regarded his foster brother with a most peculiar look; then he replied, with a shrug of his shoulders, and an air of supreme contempt, —

"He fallen into a snare! Curumilla dead! Nonsense, brother, you must be jesting! You know perfectly well that is impossible."

Louis had no objection to offer to this simple profession of faith.

"At any rate," he continued presently, "you must allow that he has kept us waiting a long time."

"Why so? What do we want of him at this moment? You do not intend to leave this bivouac, I fancy? Well, what consequence is it if he return an hour sooner or later?"

Louis made a sign of impatience, wrapped himself up in his *zarapé*, and lay down by Don Cornelio's side, after growling, —

"Good night."

"Good night, brother," Valentine answered with a smile.

Ten minutes later, Don Louis, despite his ill temper, overcome by fatigue, slept as if he were never to wake up again. Valentine allowed a quarter of an hour to elapse ere he made a move; then he rose gently, crept up to his foster brother, bent over him, and examined him attentively for two or three minutes.

"At length," he said, drawing himself up. "I was afraid he would insist on sitting up and keeping me company."

The hunter thrust into his girdle the pistols he had laid on the ground, threw his rifle over his shoulder, and stepping carefully across the stones and rubbish that burdened the soil, rapidly but noiselessly retired, and speedily disappeared in the darkness. He walked in this way for about ten minutes, when he reached a dense thicket. Then he crouched behind a shrub, and, after taking a

cautious survey of the surrounding country, whistled gently thrice, being careful to leave an equal space of time between each signal. At the expiration of two or three minutes the cry of the moorhen was heard twice from the midst of the trees that bordered the river's bank only a few paces from the spot where the hunter was standing.

"Good!" the latter muttered. "Our friend is punctual; but, as the wisdom of nations says somewhere that prudence is the mother of surety, let us be prudent: that can do no harm when dealing with such scamps."

And the worthy hunter set the hammer of his rifle. After taking this precaution he left the thicket in which he had been concealed, and advanced with apparent resolution, but still without neglecting any precaution to avoid a surprise, toward the spot whence the reply to his signal had come. When he had covered about half the distance four or five persons came forward to meet him.

"Oh, oh!" the hunter said; "these people appear very eager to speak with me. Attention!"

Hereupon he stopped, raised his rifle to his shoulder, and aimed at the nearest man.

"Halt," he said, "or I fire!"

"*Capo de Dios!* you are quick, caballero," an ironical voice answered. "You do not allow yourself to be easily approached; but uncock your rifle – you see that we are unarmed."

"Apparently so, I grant; but who guarantees me that you have not arms concealed about your person?"

"My honour, sir," the first speaker answered haughtily. "Would you venture to doubt it?"

The hunter laughed.

"I doubt everything at night, when I am alone in the desert, and see before me four men whom I have every reason for believing are not my friends."

"Come, come, sir, a little more politeness, if you please."

"I wish nothing more. Still, you requested this interview; hence you are bound to accept my conditions, and not I yours."

"As you please, Don Valentine: you shall arrange matters as you will. Still, the first time we had a conference together, I found you much more facile."

"I do not deny it. Come alone, and we will talk."

The stranger gave his companions a sign to stop where they were, and advanced alone.

"That will do," the hunter said as he uncocked his rifle, and rested the butt on the ground, crossing his hands over the muzzle.

The man to whom Valentine displayed so little confidence, or, to speak more clearly, whom he doubted so greatly, was no other than General Don Sebastian Guerrero.

"There, now you must be satisfied. I think I have given you a great proof of my condescension," the general said as he joined him.

"You have probably your reasons for it," the hunter replied, with a cunning look.

"Sir!" the general haughtily objected.

"Let us be brief and clear, like men who appreciate one another correctly," Valentine said dryly. "I am neither a fool nor a man infatuated with his own merits; hence frankness, reciprocal frankness, can alone bring us to any understanding, if that be possible, though I doubt it."

"What do you suppose, then, sir?"

"I suppose nothing, general. I am certain of what I assert, that is all. What probability is there that a great personage like you, general, Governor of Sonora, and Lord knows what else, would lower yourself to solicit from a poor fellow of a hunter like myself an interview at night, in the heart of the desert, unless he hoped to obtain a great advantage from that interview? A man must be mad or a fool not to see that at the first glance; and Heaven be thanked, I am neither one nor the other."

"Suppose that things are as you state?"

"Suppose it, then; I have no objection. Now come to facts."

"Hum! that does not appear to me so easy with you."

"Why so? Our first relations, as you reminded me just now, ought to have proved to you that I am easy enough in business matters."

"That is true. Still the transaction I have to propose to you is of rather a peculiar nature, and I am afraid –"

"What of? That I shall refuse? Hang it! you understand there is a risk to be incurred."

"No; I am afraid that you will not exactly catch the spirit of the affair, and feel annoyed."

"Do you think so? After all, that is possible. Would you like me to save you the trouble of an explanation?"

"How so?"

"Listen to me."

The two men were standing just two paces apart, looking in each other's eyes. Still Valentine, ever on his guard, was carefully watching, though not appearing to do so, the four men left behind.

"Speak!" the general said.

"General, you wish simply to propose to me that I should sell my friend."

Don Sebastian, at these words, pronounced with a cutting accent, involuntarily gave a sign of surprise, and fell back a pace.

"Sir!"

"Is it true – yes or no?"

"You employ terms –" the general stammered.

"Terms have nothing to do with the matter. Now that you have discovered Don Louis is not the accomplice you hoped to find, who would raise you to the president's chair, and as you despair of changing his views, you wish to get rid of him – that is natural."

"Sir!"

"Let me continue. For that purpose you can hit on nothing better than buying him. Indeed, you are used to such transactions. I have in my hands the proofs of several which do you a great deal of honour."

The general was livid with terror and rage. He clenched his fists and stamped, while uttering unconnected words. The hunter seemed not to notice this agitation, and continued imperturbably, —

"Still you are mistaken in applying to me. I am no Dog-face, a fellow with whom you made a famous bargain some years ago. I have dealt in cattle, but never in human flesh. Each man has his speciality, and I leave that to you."

"Stay, sir!" the general exclaimed in a paroxysm of fury. "What do you want to come to? Did you accept this interview for the purpose of insulting me?"

Valentine shrugged his shoulders.

"You do not believe it," he said: "that would be too childish. I want to propose a business transaction."

"What!"

"Or a bargain, if you prefer that term."

"What is its nature?"

"I can tell you in two words. I have in my possession various papers, which, if they saw light, and were, handed to certain persons, might cost you not only your fortune, but possibly your life."

"Papers!" Don Sebastian stammered.

"Yes, general; your correspondence with a certain North American diplomatist, to whom you offered to deliver Sonora and one or two other provinces, if the United States supplied you with the means to seize the presidency of the Mexican Republic."

"And you have those papers?" the general said with ill-restrained anxiety.

"I have the letters, with your correspondent's answers."

"Here?"

"Of course," Valentine said with a laugh.

"Then you will die!" the general yelled, bounding like a panther on the hunter.

But the latter was on his guard. By a movement as quick as his adversary's, he seized the general by the throat, threw himself upon him, and laid his foot on his chest.

"One step further," he said coldly to the general's companions, who were running up at full speed to his aid, "one step, and he is a dead man."

Certainly the general was a brave man. Many times he had supplied unequivocal proofs of a courage carried almost to temerity: still he saw such resolution flashing in the hunter's tawny eye, that he felt a shudder pass through all his limbs – he was lost, he was afraid.

"Stop, stop!" he cried in a choking voice to his friends.

The latter obeyed.

"I could kill you," Valentine said; "you are really in my power; but what do I care for your life or death? I hold both in my hands. Rise! Now, one word – take care that you do nothing against the count."

The general had profited by the hunter's permission to rise; but so soon as he felt himself free, and his feet were firmly attached to the ground, a revolution was effected in him, and he felt his courage return.

"Listen in your turn," he said. "I will be as frank and brutal with you as you were with me. It is now a war to the death between us, without pity and without mercy. If I have to carry my head to the scaffold, the count shall die; for I hate him, and I require his death to satisfy my vengeance."

"Good!" Valentine coldly answered.

"Yes," the general said sarcastically. "Come, I do not fear you! I do not care if you employ the papers with which you threatened me, for I am invulnerable."

"You think so?" the hunter said slowly.

"I despise you; you are only adventurers: You can never touch me."

Valentine bent toward him.

"Perhaps not," he said; "but your daughter?"

And, taking advantage of the general's stupefaction, the hunter uttered a hoarse laugh and rushed into the thicket, where it was impossible to follow him.

"Oh!" the general muttered, at the expiration of a moment, as he passed his hand over his damp forehead, "the demon! My daughter!" he yelled, "my daughter!"

And he rejoined his companions, and went off with them, not responding to one of the questions they asked him.

CHAPTER II

THE MISSION

Valentine, after suddenly parting from the general as we narrated, did not appear at all alarmed about pursuit; and if he hurried on at first, he soon relaxed his speed. On arriving about a hundred yards from the spot where his interview with Don Sebastian had taken place, he stopped, raised his eyes to the sky, and seemed to consult his position. Then he went on; but, instead of proceeding toward the mission, he turned his back completely on it, and returned to the bank of the river, whence he had before been retrograding.

Although the hunter was walking at a quick pace, he seemed greatly preoccupied, and looked mechanically around him. At times he stopped, not to listen to any strange sound, but through the thoughts which oppressed him, and robbed him of all sense of external things. Evidently Valentine was seeking the solution of a problem that troubled him.

At length, after about a quarter of an hour, he saw a faint light a few paces ahead of him. It glistened through the trees, and seemed to indicate an encampment. Valentine stopped and whistled softly. At the same moment the branches of a shrub, about five yards from him, parted, and a man appeared. It was Curumilla.

"Well," Valentine asked, "has she come?" The Araucano bowed his head in reply. The hunter made an angry gesture.

"Where is she?" he asked.

The Indian pointed to the fire the hunter had noticed.

"Deuce take the women!" the hunter growled; "they are the least logical beings in existence. As they let themselves ever be guided by passion, they overthrow unconsciously the surest combinations."

Then he added in a louder voice, —

"Have you not executed my commission, then?"

This time the Indian spoke.

"She will listen to nothing," he said; "she will see."

"I knew it!" the hunter exclaimed. "They are all alike — silly heads, only fit for mule bells; and yet she is one of the better sort. Well, lead me to her. I will try to convince her."

The Indian smiled maliciously, but made no reply. He turned away and led the hunter to the fire. In a few seconds Valentine found himself on the skirt of a vast clearing, in the centre of which, by a good fire of dead wood, Doña Angela and her camarista, Violanta, were seated on piles of furze. Ten paces behind the females, several peons, armed to the teeth, leant on their long lances, awaiting the pleasure of their mistress. Doña Angela raised her head at the sound caused by the hunter's approach, and uttered a slight cry of joy.

"There you are at last!" she exclaimed. "I almost despaired of your coming."

"Perhaps it would have been better had I not done so," he answered with a stifled sigh.

The young lady overheard, or pretended not to hear, the hunter's reply.

"Is your encampment far from here?" she continued.

"Before proceeding there," the hunter said, "we must have a little conversation together, señora."

"What have you to say to me that is so interesting, or rather, so urgent?"

"You shall judge for yourself."

The young lady made a gesture signifying her readiness to hear something which she knew beforehand would be disagreeable.

"Speak!" she said.

The hunter did not allow the invitation to be repeated.

"Where did Curumilla meet you?"

"At the hacienda, just as I was mounting to start. I only awaited him to begin my journey."

"He tried to dissuade you from this step?"

"He did; but I insisted on coming, and compelled him to guide me here."

"You were wrong, niña."

"For what reason?"

"For a thousand."

"That is no answer. Mention one."

"Your father, in the first place."

"He has not yet arrived at the hacienda. I shall have got back before he comes. I have nothing to fear on that side."

"You are mistaken. Your father has arrived: I have seen him – spoken with him."

"You! Where? When?"

"Here, scarce half an hour ago."

"That is impossible," she said.

"It is the fact. I will add that he wanted to kill me."

"He!"

"Yes."

The young lady remained thoughtful for a moment; then she raised her head, and shook it several times.

"All the worse," she said resolutely. "Whatever happens, I will carry it out to the end."

"What do you hope from this interview, niña? Do you not know that your father is our most inveterate foe?"

"What you say is too late now. You ought to have urged these objections when I sent my request to you."

"That is true; but at that time I still had hopes, which I can no longer entertain. Believe me, niña, do not insist on seeing Don Louis. Return as speedily as possible to the hacienda. What will your father think if he does not see you on his arrival?"

"I repeat to you that I will have a most important conversation with Don Louis. It must be, for his sake and for mine."

"Think of the consequences of such a step."

"I think of nothing. I warn you that, if you still refuse to perform your promise to me, I will go alone to find the conde."

The hunter regarded her for an instant with a singular expression. He shook his head sorrowfully, and took her hand, which he pressed affectionately.

"Your will be done," he replied gently. "No one can alter his destiny. Come, then, as you insist on it. God grant that your obstinacy does not entail frightful disaster!"

"You are a bird of ill omen," she said with a laugh. "Come, let us start. You will see all end better than you anticipate."

"I consent; but trust yourself to me, and leave your escort here."

"I ask nothing better. I will only take Violanta with me."

"As you please."

At a sign from her mistress the camarista went up to the peons, who were still motionless, and gave them orders not to leave the clearing under any pretext before her return. Then, guided by Valentine, the two females proceeded toward the camp of the filibusters, Curumilla forming the rear guard. On arriving about a hundred yards from it Valentine stopped.

"What is the matter?" Doña Angela asked him.

"I hesitate about troubling my friend's repose. Perhaps he will be angry with me for having brought you to him."

"No," she said, "you are deceiving me: that is not your thought at this moment."

He regarded her with amazement.

"Good heavens!" she continued with animation, "do you fancy I do not know what is troubling you now? It is to see a girl of my age, rich and well born, take what your countrymen would call an improper step, and which, were it known, would inevitably destroy her reputation. But we Americans are not like your cold and staid European women, who do everything by weight and measure. We love as we hate. It is not blood, but the lava of our volcanoes that circulates in our veins. My love is my life! I care naught for anything else. Remain here a few moments, and let me go on alone. Don Louis, I am convinced, will understand and appreciate my conduct at its just value. He is no common man, I tell you. I love him. In a love so true and ardent as mine there is a certain magnetic attraction which will prevent it being spurned."

The young Mexican was splendidly lovely as she uttered these words. With her head thrown haughtily back, her flashing eye and quivering lip, she was at once a virgin and a Bacchante. Subdued, in spite of himself, by the maiden's accent, and dazzled by her glorious beauty, the hunter bowed respectfully before her, and said, with considerable emotion in his voice, —

"Go, then; and may Heaven grant that, by your aid, my brother may be again led to take an interest in life!"

She smiled with an undefinable expression of archness and serenity, and flew, lightly as a bird, into the thicket. Valentine and Curumilla, who were near enough to the camp to see what occurred, though the sound of voices could not reach them, resolved to wait where they were till their presence became absolutely necessary.

The encampment was in the same state as when the hunter quitted it to go and meet the general. Don Louis and Don Cornelio were fast asleep. Doña Angela remained for a moment silent, fixing on Don Louis a glance in which an unbending resolution flashed. Then she stooped down gently over him. But at the moment when she was about to lay her hand on his shoulder to arouse him, a sudden sound caused her to tremble. She sprang back, threw a startled glance around, and disappeared once again in the thicket.

Hardly had she retired ere the sound which smote on her ears, and interrupted the execution of her project, became louder; and it was soon easy to distinguish the cadenced sound of a large body of men on the march, and the harsh creaking of cartwheels.

"Your companions are arriving," Doña Angela said hurriedly to Valentine as she rejoined him; "they are only a short distance from the mission. Can I still count on you?"

"Always," he answered.

"I have changed my mind: I will not explain my views to the count in this way, but in the presence of all of you, by the light of the sun. You shall soon see me again in your midst. Good-by! I am going back to the hacienda. Prepare the count for my visit."

After making a parting sign to the hunter, and smiling on him, the young girl remounted her horse, and set off at a gallop, followed by her escort.

"Yes, I will prepare Louis to receive her," the hunter muttered, as he followed her with his eyes for a moment. "That child has a noble heart: she really loves my foster brother. Who knows what will be the consequences of this love?"

And, after shaking his head two or three times dubiously he re-entered the encampment, accompanied by Curumilla, whose Indian stoicism was unshaken, and who seemed perfectly a stranger to all that was taking place around him.

Valentine awoke Louis. The latter sprang up at once.

"Have you any news?" he asked.

"Yes, the company is coming up."

"Already! Oh, oh! it has pushed on. That is a good omen."

"Shall we stay here long?"

"No, two days at the most, or long enough to rest the men and cattle."

"Perhaps it would be better to push on at once – "

"I should like it as much as yourself, but it is impossible, as the 40,000 rations we ought to have found here have not yet arrived, and we are forced to await them."

"That is true."

"I am the more annoyed at this oversight, because our provisions are rapidly diminishing. Still, do not let our comrades see our disappointment, but let us put on a good face. They know we went ahead of them to make the commissariat arrangements, so let them fancy we have succeeded."

Valentine bowed in affirmation. The night was almost at an end; already the sky on the horizon was beginning to be shaded with large white strips of cloud; the stars had all disappeared one after the other; and the sun was just about to rise. Curumilla threw a handful of dried wood on the fire in order to make a flame, and neutralise the effect of the icy night air.

"*Caramba!*" Don Cornelio exclaimed, as he woke up suddenly; "I am frozen; the nights are so cold."

"Are they not?" Valentine said to him. "Well, if you want to warm yourself, nothing is easier. Come along with me."

"I am quite willing. Where are you going?"

"Listen."

"I am doing so. Stay!" he said at the expiration of an instant. "Can that be the company?"

"It is. But it is unnecessary for us to put ourselves out of the way, for here they come."

In fact, at this moment, the French advanced guard entered the mission. According to the treaty made with the Atrevida Company, 40,000 rations should have been prepared at the mission for the troop. The count gave the command to Colonel Florés, with orders to push on, and, accompanied by Valentine, Curumilla, and Don Cornelio, had gone on ahead. Unfortunately the company had not carried out its engagements with that loyalty the count had a right to expect. Instead of 40,000 rations he had found scarce half, ranged with a certain degree of symmetry in a ruined cabin. This breach of faith was the more injurious to the interests of the expedition, because the count, owing to this perfidious manoeuvre, found himself almost unable to push on, as he was about definitively to leave the inhabited and cultivated plains to bury himself in the desert.

Indeed, since the company had left Guaymas, the ill-will of the Mexicans had been so evident under all circumstances, that Don Louis had required a superhuman energy and will of iron not to give way to discouragement, and withdraw in the face of these obstacles raised in his path with unparalleled animosity. Still, up to the present, the Mexicans had never dared to break their engagements so boldly as now: hence they must feel themselves very strong, or at least their precautions were so well taken, and they felt so sure of success, that they raised the mask.

Besides, the count had found no one at the mission to hand him over the stores in the name of the company; and the persons who treated him so unworthily had not deigned to weaken by an excuse the treachery of which they were guilty at this moment. Don Louis foresaw, then, that after such behaviour, the *dénouement* of the odious farce played by the Mexicans was at hand, and he prepared to face the storm bravely.

The mission was held in military fashion by the company; for they were on the edge of the desert, and it was wise to begin a careful watch. Cannon were planted at each angle of headquarters – sentinels placed at regular distances; in short, this mission, sad and abandoned on the previous day, seemed to have sprung magically into life again; the rubbish was removed, and the old Jesuit church, more than half in ruins, suddenly assumed the appearance of a fortress.

When the count had given the necessary orders for the instalment of the company, and was assured of their perfect execution, he inquired of Colonel Florés how he had performed his duties as temporary chief. The colonel, alone among the French, and feeling himself consequently in the wolf's throat, was too crafty not to act ostensibly with the utmost loyalty; hence on every occasion he

offered proofs of goodwill, and acted with a degree of circumspection by which Valentine, that eternal doubter, was nearly duped, although he knew perfectly well the nature of the Mexican character.

Then the count withdrew with the hunter, and the two foster brothers held a conversation, which, to judge by its length, and, above all, Don Louis' thoughtful air when it was ended, must have been very important. In fact, Valentine, accomplishing his pledge to Doña Angela, informed the count of the events of the past night, not only telling him all that had passed between him and the young lady, but also the details of his interview with the general on the river bank.

"You see, then," he said in conclusion, "that the situation is growing more and more critical, and they mean war."

"Yes, it is war; but so long as the least hope is left me, be assured, brother, that I shall not give them the satisfaction of supplying a pretext for a rupture."

"You must play more cautiously than ever, brother. However, unless I am greatly mistaken, we shall speedily know what we have to expect."

"That is my opinion too."

At this moment Don Cornelio appeared, accompanied by Curumilla.

"I beg your pardon," he said to the hunter; "but I should feel obliged by your putting matters right with the chief, who persists in telling me that we are at this moment closely watched by an Indian war party."

"What!" Valentine said, frowning. "What is that you say, Don Cornelio?"

"Look here. While walking in the neighbourhood of the mission with the chief, I picked up this –"

"Let me see," Valentine said.

Don Cornelio handed him a moccasin, which the hunter examined attentively for several minutes.

"Hum!" he then said, "this is serious. Where did you find it?"

"On the river bank."

"What do you think of it, chief?" Valentine said, turning to the Araucano.

"The moccasin is new – it has been lost. Curumilla has seen numerous trails."

"Listen," Don Louis said quickly. "Tell no one about this discovery: we must distrust everything, for treachery is hovering around us, and threatens us from all sides at once. While I strengthen our intrenchments under pretext of a longer stay here, you, brother, will go out to reconnoitre with the chief, and assure yourself of what we have really to fear from the Indians."

"Be quiet, brother: on your side, keep a good watch."

CHAPTER III

THE SPY

It was about eight in the morning when Valentine and Curumilla left Don Louis. The hunter had passed the whole night without closing an eye. He felt fatigued: his eyelids, weighed down with sleep, closed involuntarily. Still he prepared to make the researches his foster brother had intrusted to him, when Curumilla, noticing his condition, invited him to take a few hours' rest, remarking that he did not absolutely want him in following up the trail he had noticed in the morning, and that he would give him a good account of all he did.

Valentine placed the most entire confidence in Curumilla. Many times, during the course of their common existence, he had been in a position to appreciate the sagacity, cleverness, and experience of the chief; hence he needed but little pressing to consent to his proposition of going out alone, and after giving him the warmest recommendations, he wrapped himself up in his cloak, and fell off to sleep at once.

He had enjoyed for about two hours a peaceful and refreshing nap when he felt a hand gently laid on his shoulder. So light as the touch was, it was sufficient to arouse the hunter, who, like all men habituated to prairie life, maintained, if we may use the expression, a sense of external things even during sleep. He opened his eyes, and looked fixedly at the man who had come to disturb the rest he was enjoying, while mentally consigning him to the deuce.

"Well," he said, with the harsh accent of a man aroused at the pleasantest moment of a dream, "what do you want of me, Don Cornelio? Could you not select a more favourable moment to talk with me, for I suppose what you have to say to me is not extremely important?"

Don Cornelio (for it was really that gentleman who awoke Valentine) laid his finger on his mouth, while looking suspiciously around, as if to recommend caution to the hunter; then he leant over his ear.

"Pardon me, Don Valentine," he said; "but I believe that the communication I have to make to you is of the utmost importance."

Valentine sprang up as if moved by a spring, and looked the Spaniard in the face.

"What is the matter, then?" he asked in a low and concentrated voice, which, however, had something imperious about it.

"I will tell you in two words. Colonel Florés (whose face, by the way, does not at all please me) has been doing nothing but prowl round the mission since the morning, inquiring what has been done and left undone, gossiping with one or the other, and trying, above all, to discover the opinion of our men as regards the chief. There was not much harm in that, perhaps, but, so soon as he saw you were asleep, he learnt that the count, who was engaged with his correspondence, had given orders that he should not be disturbed for some hours. Upon this he pretended, to retire to a half-ruined cabin situated at the outskirts of the mission; but a few minutes after, when he supposed that no one was thinking about him, instead of taking a siesta as he had given out, he slipped away from the hut among the trees like a man afraid of being surprised, and disappeared in the forest."

"Ah, ah!" Valentine said thoughtfully, "what interest can that man have in absenting himself so secretly?" Then he added, "Has he been gone long?"

"Hardly ten minutes."

Valentine rose.

"Remain here," he said. "In case the colonel returns during my absence, watch him carefully; but do not let him suspect anything. I thank you for not having hesitated to wake me. The matter is serious."

Then, breaking off the conversation, the hunter quitted Don Cornelio, and gliding along under the shadow of the ruins, so as to attract no attention, entered the forest. In the meanwhile, Colonel Florés, believing Valentine to be asleep, and knowing that the count was writing, felt no apprehension about being followed. He walked rapidly toward the river, not taking any trouble to hide his footsteps – an imprudence by which the hunter profited, and which placed him at once on the track of the man he was watching.

The colonel soon arrived at the river. The most complete calm prevailed around; the alligators were wallowing in the mud; the flamingoes were fishing negligently: all, in a word, evidenced the absence of man. Still, the colonel had scarce appeared on the bank ere an individual, hanging by his arms from the branch of a tree, descended to the ground scarce a couple of paces from him. At this unexpected apparition the colonel recoiled, stifling a cry of surprise and alarm; but he had not the time to recover from his emotion ere a second individual leaped in the same fashion on the sand. Mechanically Don Francisco raised his eyes to the tree.

"Oh, oh!" the first arrival said with a coarse laugh, "you need not take the trouble to look up there, Garrucholo; no one is left there."

At the name of Garrucholo the colonel shuddered, and attentively examined the two men who had presented themselves in so strange a manner, as they stood motionless before him, and looked at him derisively. The first of the two was a white man, as could be easily recognised at the first glance, in spite of his bronzed complexion, which was almost of the colour of brick. The clothes he wore were exactly like those of the Indians. This interesting personage was armed to the teeth, and held a long rifle in his hand. His comrade was a redskin, painted and armed for war.

"Eh?" the first speaker continued. "I fancy you do not recognise me, boy. By God, you have a short memory!"

This oath, and, above all, the strong accent with which the man expressed himself in Spanish, although he spoke that language fluently, were a ray of light for the colonel.

"El Buitre!" he exclaimed, striking his forehead.

"Come," the other said with a laugh, "I felt certain that you had not forgotten me, compañero."

This, unexpected meeting was anything but agreeable to the colonel; still he considered it prudent not to let it be seen.

"By what accident are you here, then?" he asked.

"And you?" the other answered boldly.

"I! My presence is perfectly natural, and easily to be explained."

"And mine too."

"Ah!"

"Hang it! I am here because you are so."

"Hum!" the colonel said, maintaining a reserve. "Explain that to me, will you?"

"I am quite ready to do so, but the spot is badly selected for talking. Come with me."

"I beg your pardon, Buitre, my friend. We are, as you said yourself, old acquaintances."

"Which means?"

"That I doubt you excessively."

The bandit began laughing.

"A confidence that honours me," he said, "and of which I am deserving. Did you find in the mission church the hilt of a dagger with an S engraved on the pommel?"

"Yes."

"Very good. That hilt signified, I think, that you were to take a walk in this quarter?"

"It did."

"Well, the persons with whom you must converse are before you. Do you now understand?"

"Perfectly."

"Then let us have a talk; but as what we have to say only concerns ourselves, and it is unnecessary to mix up in our business people who have no concern with it, we will proceed to a spot where we shall have nothing to fear from indiscreet ears."

"Who the deuce do you expect will surprise you here?"

"No one, probably; but, my esteemed friend, as prudence is the mother of safety, I have become, since our last parting, extraordinarily prudent."

"I'll go wherever you please."

"Come on."

The three men re-entered the forest.

Valentine followed them pace by pace. They did not go far. On arriving a certain distance from the river they stopped at the entrance of a large clearing, in the centre of which rose an enormous block of green rock. The three men clambered up, and, on reaching the top, lay down at their ease on a species of platform.

"There!" El Buitre said, "I believe we can talk here in perfect surety."

Valentine was for an instant rather disappointed at this precaution on the part of the bandits. Still he did not give in. The hunter was accustomed to see material impossibilities arise before him of the same nature as in the present case. After a few seconds' reflection he looked around him with a malicious glance.

"Now to see who is the most cunning," he muttered.

He lay down on the ground. The grass grew tall, green, and close in the clearing; and Valentine began crawling, with a slow and almost imperceptible motion, in the direction of the rocks, passing through the grass without imparting the slightest oscillation to it. After about a quarter of an hour of this manoeuvre the hunter saw his efforts crowned with success; for he reached a spot where it was possible for him to rise, and whence he was enabled to overhear perfectly all that was said on the platform, while himself remaining invisible.

Unfortunately the time he had employed in gaining his observatory prevented him hearing what were probably very important matters. At the moment he began listening El Buitre was the speaker.

"Bah, bah!" he said with that mocking accent peculiar to him, "I answer for success. Even if the French are devils, each of them is not equal to two men. Hang it all, let me alone!"

"*Canarios!* may I be hanged if I interfere at all in this affair! I have done too much already," the colonel made answer.

"You are always a trembler. How do you expect that men half demoralised, fatigued by a long journey, can resist the combined and well-directed attack of my brother's, this Apache chief's, band, supported as they will be by the eighty scoundrels the Mexican Government has placed at my disposal for this expedition?"

"I do not know what the French will do; but you will, perhaps, learn that they are stout fellows."

"All the better – we shall have the more fun."

"Take care not to have too much," El Garrucholo said with a grin.

"Go to the deuce with your observations! Besides, I have a grudge against their chief, as you know."

"Bah! how can a man like you have a grudge against anyone in particular? He only has a grudge against riches. Who are your men?"

"*Cívicos*– real bandits – regular game for the gallows. My dear fellow, they will perform miracles."

"What! *cívicos*? The idea is glorious – the men whom the hacenderos pay and support for the purpose of fighting the redskins."

"Good Lord, yes, that is the way of the world. This time they will fight by the side of the redskins against the whites. The idea is original, is it not, especially as, for this affair, they will be disguised as Indians?"

"Better still. And the chief, how many warriors has he with him?"

"I do not know; he will tell you himself."

The chief had remained gloomy and silent during this conversation, and the colonel now turned toward him with an inquiring glance.

"Mixcoatzin is a powerful chief," the redskin said in his guttural voice: "two hundred Apache warriors follow his war plume."

El Garrucholo gave a significant whistle.

"Well," he continued, "I maintain what I said."

"What?"

"You will receive an awful thrashing."

El Buitre repressed with difficulty a gesture of ill-temper.

"Enough," he said; "you do not know the Indians. This chief is one of the bravest sachems of his tribe. His reputation is immense in the prairies. The warriors placed under his orders are all picked men."

"Very good. Do what you please: I wash my hands of it."

"Can we at least reckon on you?"

"I will execute punctually the orders I received from the general."

"I ask no more."

"Then nothing is changed?"

"Nothing. Always the same hour and the same signal."

"In that case it is useless for us to remain longer together. I will return to the mission, for I must try to avoid any suspicion."

"Go, and may the demon continue his protection to you!"

"Thanks."

The colonel left the platform. Valentine hesitated a moment, thinking whether he should follow him; but, after due reflection, he felt persuaded that all was not finished yet, and that he should probably still obtain some precious information. El Buitre shrugged his shoulders, and turning to the Indian chief, who was still impassive, said, —

"Pride has ruined that man. He was a jolly comrade a few years back."

"What will my brother do now?"

"Not much. I shall remain in hiding here until the sun has run two-thirds of its course, and then go and rejoin my comrades."

"The chief will retire. His warriors are still far off."

"Very good. Then we shall not meet again till the appointed moment?"

"No. The paleface will attack on the side of the forest, while the Apaches advance by the river."

"All right! But let us be prudent, for a misunderstanding might prove fatal. I will draw as near as possible to the mission; but I warn you that I shall not budge till I hear your signal."

"Wah! my brother will open his ears, and the miawling of the tiger-cat will warn him that the Apaches have arrived."

"I understand perfectly. One parting remark, chief."

"I listen to the paleface."

"It is clearly understood that the booty will be shared equally between us?"

The Indian gave a wicked smile.

"Yes," he said.

"No treachery between us, redskin, or, by God! I warn you that I will flay you alive like a mad dog."

"The palefaces have too long a tongue."

"That is possible; but if you do not wish misfortune to fall on you, profit by my words."

The Indian only replied by a gesture of contempt: he wrapped himself in his buffalo robe, and retired slowly.

The bandit looked after him for a moment.

"Miserable dog!" he muttered, "so soon as I can do without you I will settle your account, be assured."

The Indian had disappeared.

"Hum! what shall I be after now?" El Buitre continued.

Suddenly a man bounded like a jaguar, and, before the bandit could even understand what was happening, he was firmly garotted, and reduced to a state of complete powerlessness.

"You do not know what to be after? Well, I will tell you," Valentine remarked, as he sat down quietly by his side.

The first moment of surprise past, the bandit regained all his coolness and audacity, and looked impudently at the hunter.

"By God! I do not know you, comrade," he said; "but I must confess you managed that cleverly."

"You are a connoisseur."

"Slightly so."

"Yes, I am aware of it."

"But you have tied me a little too tightly. Your confounded reata cuts into my flesh."

"Bah! you will grow used to it."

"Hum!" the bandit remarked. "Did you hear all we said?"

"Nearly all."

"Deuce take me if people can now talk in the desert without having listeners!"

"What would you? It is a melancholy fact."

"Well, I must put up with it, I suppose. You were saying –"

"I! I did not say a word."

"Ah! I beg your pardon in that case; but I fancied you were cross-questioning me. You probably did not tie me up like a plug of tobacco for the mere fun of the thing."

"There is some truth in your observation. I had, I allow, another object."

"What is it?"

"To enjoy your conversation for a moment."

"You are a thousand times too kind."

"Opportunities for conversing are so rare in the desert."

"That is true."

"So you are on an expedition?"

"Yes, I am: a man must be doing something."

"That is true also. Be good enough to give me a few details."

"About what?"

"Why, this expedition."

"Ah, ah! I should like to do so, but unfortunately that is impossible."

"Only think of that! Why so?"

"I know very little."

"Ah!"

"Yes; and then I am of a very crooked temper. A person need only ask me to do a thing for me to refuse."

Valentine smiled, and drew his knife, whose dazzling blade emitted a bluish flash.

"Even if convincing reasons are offered you?"

"I do not know any," the bandit answered with a grin.

"Oh, oh!" Valentine remarked. "Still I hope I shall alter your opinion."

"Try it. Stay!" he added, suddenly changing his tone. "Enough of that sort of farce. I am in your power – nothing can save me. Kill me – no matter, I shall not say a word."

The two men exchanged glances of strange expressiveness.

"You are an idiot," Valentine answered coldly; "you understand nothing."

"I understand that you want to know the secrets of the expedition."

"You are a fool, my dear friend. Did I not tell you that I knew all?"

The bandit seemed to reflect for a minute.

"What do you want, then?" he said.

"Merely to buy you."

"Hum! that will be dear."

"You do not say no?"

"I never say no to anything."

"I see you are becoming reasonable."

"Who knows?"

"At how much do you estimate your share of this night's booty?"

El Buitre looked at him as if wishful to read the thoughts in his heart.

"Hang it! that will mount high."

"Yes, especially if you are hung!"

"Oh!"

"Everything must be foreseen in such a business."

"You are right."

"The more so as, if you refuse the bargain I offer you, I will kill you like a dog."

"That's a chance."

"It is very probable. So take my word, let us bargain. Give me your figure."

"Fifteen thousand piastres," the bandit exclaimed; "not an ochavo less."

"Pooh!" Valentine said, "that is little."

"Eh?" he remarked in amazement.

"I will give you twenty thousand."

In spite of the bonds that held him the bandit gave a start.

"Done!" he exclaimed; but in a moment added, "Where is the sum?"

"Do you fancy me such a fool as to pay you beforehand?"

"Hang it! I fancy –"

"Nonsense! You are mad, compadre. Now that we understand one another, let me undo you – that will freshen up your ideas."

He took off the reata. El Buitre rose at once, stamped his foot to restore the circulation, and then turning to the hunter, who stood watching him laughingly, with his hands crossed on the muzzle of his rifle, said, —

"At least you have some security to give me?"

"Yes, and an excellent one."

"What?"

"The word of an honest man."

The bandit made a gesture; but Valentine continued, not seeming to notice it, —

"I am the man whom the whites and Indians have surnamed the 'Trail-hunter.' My name is Valentine Guillois."

"What!" El Buitre exclaimed with strange emotion, "are you really the Trail-hunter?"

"I am," Valentine answered simply.

El Buitre walked up and down the platform hastily, muttering in a low voice broken sentences, and evidently a prey to intense emotion. Suddenly he stopped before the hunter.

"I accept," he said hurriedly.

"Tomorrow you shall receive your money."

"I will none of it."

"What do you mean?"

"Valentine, allow me to remain master of my secret for a few days; I will then explain my conduct to you. Though I am a bandit, every feeling is not yet dead in my heart; there is one which has remained pure, and that is gratitude. Trust to me. Henceforth you will not have a more devoted slave, either for good or evil."

"Your accent is not that of a man who has the intention of deceiving. I trust to you, asking no explanation of your sudden change of feeling."

"At a later date you shall know all, I tell you; and now that we are alone, explain to me your plan in all its details, in order that I may help you effectively."

"Yes," Valentine said, "time presses."

The two men remained alone for about two hours discussing the hunter's plan, and when all was settled they separated – Valentine to return to the mission, and El Buitre to rejoin his companions, who were concealed a short distance off.

CHAPTER IV

THE EXPLOSION

During Valentine's absence facts of extreme gravity had occurred at the mission. The Count de Prébois Crancé had finished his correspondence, and held in his hand the letters he had just written, while he gave a peon, already mounted, his final instructions. At this moment the advanced posts uttered the cry of "Who goes there?" which was immediately taken up along the whole line. Louis felt his heart contracted by this shout, to which he was, however, accustomed; a cold perspiration beaded on his temples; a mortal pallor covered his face; and he was forced to lean against a wall lest he should fall, so weak did he feel.

"Good heavens!" he stammered in a low voice, "what can be the matter with me?"

Let who can explain the cause of this strange emotion, this inner presentiment which warned the count of a misfortune; for our part, we confess our inability, and content ourselves with recording the fact.

The count, however, wrestled with this extraordinary emotion, for which there was no plausible reason. Owing to a supreme effort of the will, a perfect reaction took place in him, and he became once more cold, calm, and stoical, ready to sustain, without weakness as without bravado, the blow by which he instinctively felt himself menaced.

In the meanwhile an answer had been returned to the sentries' challenge, and words exchanged. Don Cornelio came up to the count, his face quite discomposed by astonishment, and himself a prey to the most lively emotion.

"Señor conde – " he said in a panting voice, and then stopped.

"Well," the count asked, "what is the meaning of those challenges I heard?"

"Señor," Don Cornelio continued with an effort, "General Guerrero, accompanied by his daughter, several other ladies, a dozen officers, and a powerful escort, requests to be introduced to your presence."

"He is welcome. At length, then, he consents to treat directly with me."

Don Cornelio withdrew to carry out the orders he had received, and soon a brilliant cavalcade, at the head of which was General Guerrero, entered the mission. The general was pale, and frowned: it was easy to see that he with difficulty suppressed a dumb fury that filled his heart. The adventurers, in scattered groups, and haughtily wrapped up in their rags, regarded curiously these smart Mexican officers, so vain and so glittering with gold, who scarce deigned to bestow a glance upon them. The count walked a few paces toward the general, and uncovered with a movement full of singular grace.

"You are welcome, general," he said in his gentle voice; "I am happy to receive your visit."

The general did not even lift his finger to his embroidered hat, but, suddenly stopping his horse when scarce two paces from the count, —

"What is the meaning of this, sir?" he exclaimed in an angry voice. "You are guarded as if in a fortress! You have, Heaven pardon me! sentries and patrols round your encampment, as if you were in command of a regular army."

The count bit his lips; but he restrained himself, and replied in a calm, though grave voice, —

"We are on the edge of the *despoblados* (deserts), general, and our safety depends on our vigilance. Although I am not the commander of an army, I answer for the safety of the men I have the honour of leading. But will you not dismount, general, so that we may discuss more at our ease the grave questions which doubtless bring you here?"

"I will not dismount, sir, nor anyone of my suite, before you have explained to me your strange conduct."

Such a flash sparkled in the count's blue eye that, in spite of himself, the general turned his head away. This conversation had taken place under the vault of heaven, in the presence of the Frenchmen, who had collected round the newcomers. The patience of the adventurers was beginning to grow exhausted, and hoarse, mutterings were heard. With a sign the count appeased the storm, and silence was immediately re-established.

"General," Don Louis continued with perfect calmness, "the words you address to me are severe. I was far from expecting them, especially after the way in which I have acted since my landing in Mexico, and the moderation I have constantly displayed."

"All that is trifling," the general said furiously. "You Frenchmen have a honeyed tongue when you wish to deceive us. But, by heavens, I will teach you differently! You are warned once for all."

The count drew himself up, and a feverish flush suffused his cheeks. He put on again the hat he had hitherto held in his hand, and looked the general boldly in the face.

"I would observe, Señor Don Sebastian Guerrero," he said, in a voice broken by emotion, which he attempted in vain to check, "that you have not returned me my salute, and that you employ strange language in addressing a gentleman at least as noble as yourself. Is this the boasted Mexican courtesy? Come to the facts, caballero, without holding language unworthy of yourself or me; explain yourself frankly, that I may know, once for all, what I have to hope or fear from these eternal tergiversations, and the continued treachery of which I am the victim."

The general remained for a moment thoughtful after this rude apostrophe. At length he made up his mind, removed his hat, saluted the count graciously, and suddenly changed his manner.

"Pardon me, caballero," he said; "I was so far carried away by my temper as to employ expressions which I deeply regret."

The count smiled disdainfully.

"Your apologies are sufficient, sir," he said.

At the word "apologies" the general quivered, but soon regained command of himself.

"Where do you desire that I should communicate to you the orders of my Government?"

"At this spot, sir. I have, thanks to Heaven, nothing to hide from my brave comrades."

The general, though evidently annoyed, dismounted. The ladies and officers who accompanied him did the same. The escort alone remained on horseback, with their ranks closed up. At an order from Don Louis several tables were produced, and instantaneously covered with refreshments, of which the French officers began to do the honours with the grace and gaiety that distinguish their nation. The general and the count seated themselves on butacas, placed in the doorway of the mission church, near a table, on which were pen, ink, and paper.

There was a lengthened silence. It was evident that neither wished to be the first to speak. The general at length opened the conversation.

"Oh, oh!" he said, "you have guns with you?"

"Did you not know it, general?"

"My faith, no!"

And he added, with a sarcastic smile, —

"Do you intend to pursue the Apaches with such weapons?"

"At the present moment less than ever, general," Don Louis answered dryly. "I do not know of what use this artillery will be to me. Still it is good, and I am convinced that it will not betray me in the hour of need."

"Is that a menace, sir?" the general asked significantly.

"What is the use of threatening when you can act?" the count said concisely. "But that is not the question, for the present at least. I am awaiting your pleasure, sir, to explain to me the intentions of your Government with regard to me."

"They are kind and paternal, sir."

"I will wait till you have told me them ere I express any opinion."

"This is the message I am charged to deliver to you."

"Ah! have you a message for me?"

"Yes."

"I am listening, caballero."

"The message is quite paternal."

"I am certain of it. Let us see what your Government's intentions are."

"I should have wished them better, but I consider them acceptable in their present form."

"Be kind enough to communicate them to me, general."

"I was anxious to come myself, señor conde, in order to lessen by my presence any apparent bitterness these proposals might contain."

"Ah!" the count remarked, "propositions are made to me; in other words, and speaking by the card, conditions which it is desired to impose on me. Very good."

"Oh, conde, conde, how badly you take what I say to you!"

"Pardon me, general, you know that I do not speak your magnificent Spanish very well; still I thank you from my heart for your kindness in accepting the harsh mission of communicating these propositions to me."

This was said with an accent of fine raillery which completely discountenanced the general.

"I would observe, general, that we are now only a few leagues from the mine, and the alternative offered me is most painful, especially after the evasive answers constantly made to me and the persons I sent with full powers to treat personally with the authorities of the country."

"That is true; I can comprehend that. Colonel Florés, whom you sent to me a few days back, will have told you how pained I felt at all that is happening. I lose as much as yourself. Unfortunately, you will understand me, my dearest count, I must obey, whether I like it or not."

"I understand perfectly," Louis answered ironically, "how deeply pained you must feel."

"Alas!" the general said, more embarrassed than ever, and who began to regret in his heart that he was not accompanied by a larger force.

"Well, as it is useless to prolong this position indefinitely, as it is so cruel for you, explain yourself without further circumlocution, I beg."

"Hum! Remember that I am in no way responsible."

The fact is the general was afraid.

"Go on – go on!"

"The propositions are as follow: – You are enjoined – "

"Oh! that is a harsh term," Louis observed.

The general shrugged his shoulders, as much as to say that he had nothing to do with drawing up the document.

"Well, then," the count said, "we are enjoined – "

"Yes, First. Either to consent to give up your nationality as Frenchmen – "

"Pardon me," the count interrupted, and laid his hand on the general's arm, "an instant, if you please. As I see that what you are commissioned to communicate to me interests all my comrades, it is my duty to invite them to be present at the reading of these propositions; for you have them in writing, I believe?"

"Yes," the general stammered, turning livid.

"Very good. Buglers!" the count shouted in a high and imperative voice, "sound the assembly."

Ten minutes later the whole company was ranged round the table, at which the general and the count were seated. Don Louis looked carefully around, and then noticed the Mexican officers and ladies, who, curious to know what was going on, had also drawn nearer.

"Chairs for these ladies and caballeros," he said. "Pray excuse me, señoras, if I do not pay you all the attention you deserve; but I am only a poor adventurer, and we are in the desert."

Then, when all had taken their seats, —

"Give me a copy of these proposals," he said to the general; "I will read them myself."

The general obeyed mechanically.

"Gentlemen and dear comrades," Don Louis then said in a sharp voice, in which, however, a scarcely suppressed anger could be noticed, "when I enrolled you at San Francisco, I showed you the authentic documents conferring on me the ownership of the mines of the Plancha de Plata, did I not?"

"Yes!" the adventurers shouted with one voice.

"You read at the foot of those documents the names of Don Antonio Pavo, President of the Mexican Republic, and of General Don Sebastian Guerrero, present here at this moment. You then knew on what conditions you enlisted, and also the engagements the Mexican Government entered into with you. Today, after three months' marching and counter-marching; after suffering without a murmur all the annoyances it pleased the Mexican Government to inflict on you; when you have proved, by your good conduct and severe discipline, that you were in every way worthy to fulfil honourably the mission that was intrusted to you; when, finally, in spite of the incessant obstacles continually raised in your path, you have arrived within less than ten leagues of the mines, do you know what the Mexican Government demands of you? Listen: I will tell you, for you are even more interested than myself in the question."

A thrill of curiosity ran through the ranks of the adventurers.

"Speak – speak!" they shouted.

"You have three alternatives: – First. You are enjoined to resign your French nationality, and become Mexicans, and will be permitted to work the mines, without any pay, under the supreme command of General Guerrero, whose aide-de-camp I shall become."

An Homeric burst of laughter greeted this proposition.

"The second – let us have the second!" some shouted.

"*Sapristi!*" others remarked, "these Mexicans are not fools to wish to have us for their countrymen."

"Go on – go on!" the remainder howled.

The count gave a sign, and silence was re-established.

"Secondly. You are ordered to take out cards of surety if you wish to remain Frenchmen. By means of such cards you can go anywhere: still, as foreigners, you will be forbidden any possession – that is to say, working – of the mines. You have quite understood me, I presume?"

"Yes, yes! The last one – the last one!"

"I did not fancy the Mexicans were such funny fellows," a soldier remarked.

"Thirdly. I personally am ordered to reduce the company to fifty men, to hand over my command to a Mexican officer, and on that condition you can at once take possession of the mines."

When the captain had ended his reading there was such an explosion of laughter, shouts, and yells, that for nearly a quarter of an hour it was almost impossible to hear anything. At length the count succeeded in restoring some degree of order and silence, though with considerable difficulty.

"Such are the paternal intentions of the Mexican Government as regards us. What do you think of them, my friends? Still, I implore you, do not allow yourselves to be carried away by your just indignation, but reflect deeply on what you think it your duty to do for your own interests. As for myself, my resolution is formed – it is immutable; and even if it cost my life, I shall not alter it. But you, my friends, my brethren, your private interests cannot be mine; hence do not sacrifice yourselves through friendship and devotion to me. You know me well enough to put faith in my words. Those among you who wish to leave me will be free to do so: not only will I not oppose their departure, but I shall bear them no ill will. The strange position in which we are placed by the ill faith of the Mexicans imposes on me obligations and a line of conduct to which you can refuse to submit without disgrace. From this moment I release you from every engagement with me. I am no longer your chief, but I will ever be your friend and brother."

These words had scarce been uttered ere the adventurers, through an irresistible impulse, overthrowing all in their way, rushed toward the count, surrounded him with shouts and cries, lifted him in their arms, and showered on him assurances of their complete devotion.

"Long live the count! Long live Louis! Long live our chief! Death to the Mexicans! Down with the traitors!"

Their effervescence assumed proportions which threatened to become dangerous to the Mexicans at the moment in the camp. The exasperation was at its height. Still, owing to the influence the count exerted over his comrades, and the energetic conduct of the officers, the tumult gradually died out, and all returned nearly to the normal condition.

General Guerrero, at first alarmed by the effect produced on the French by the untoward propositions of which he had constituted himself the bearer, soon reassured himself, however, especially on seeing with what abnegation and loyalty the count protected him against the just indignation of his companions. Nearly sure of running no risk, owing to the noble character of the man he had so unjustly deceived, he resolved to strike the final blow.

"Caballeros," he said in that honeyed voice peculiar to the Mexicans, "permit me to address a few words to you."

At this request the tumult was on the point of recommencing: still the count succeeded in producing a stormy silence, if we may be allowed to employ the phrase.

"General, you can speak," he said to him.

"Gentlemen," Don Sebastian went on, "I have only a few words to add. The Count de Prébois Crancé has read you the conditions the Mexican Government imposes, but he was unable to read to you the consequences of a refusal to obey those conditions."

"That is true, sir. Be good enough, therefore, to make them known to us."

"It is a terrible duty for me to fulfil; still I must do so for your benefit, caballeros."

"Come to the point!" the adventurers shouted.

The general unfolded a paper, and after a moment of hesitation he read as follows, with a voice which, spite of all his efforts, slightly trembled: —

"Count Don Louis de Prébois Crancé, and all the men who remain faithful to him, will be regarded as pirates; placed without the pale of the law, and arrested as such; tried by a military commission, and shot within twenty-four hours."

"Is that all, sir?" the count asked coldly.

At a sign from the count the two papers containing the proposals and the proclamation of outlawry were nailed on the trunk of a tree.

"And now, sir, you have fulfilled your mission, I believe? You have nothing further to add?"

"I regret, señor conde —"

"Enough, sir. Were I really a pirate, as you so charitably call me, it would be easy for me to retain you, as well as the persons that accompany you, which would supply me with ample means for the satisfaction of my vengeance; but, whatever you may say, neither I nor the men I have the honour to command are pirates. You will leave here as free as you came: still I fancy you would do well not to delay your departure."

The general did not need to hear this twice. For two hours he had seen death several times too near, or at least he fancied so, to desire to prolong his stay in the camp; and hence he gave the necessary orders for immediate departure. At this moment Doña Angela, suddenly emerged from the group of ladies among whom she had hitherto stood, and walked forward, majestically robed in her *rebozo*, her eye flashing with a sombre fire.

"Stay!" she said with an accent so firm and so imposing that each was silent, and regarded her with astonishment.

"Madam," Don Louis said to her, "I conjure you —"

"Let me speak," she said energetically; "let me speak, señor conde. As no one in this hapless country dares to protest against the odious treachery of which you are a victim, I – a woman, the daughter of your most implacable enemy – declare openly before all, that you, count, are the only man whose genius is powerful enough to regenerate this unhappy country. You are misunderstood – insulted; and the epithet of pirate is attached to your name. Well, pirate – be it so. Don Louis, I love you! Henceforth I am yours – yours alone. Persevere in your noble enterprise. As long as I live there will be a woman in this accursed land who will pray for you. And now, farewell! I leave my heart with you."

The count knelt before the noble woman, kissed her hand respectfully, and raised his eyes to heaven.

"Doña Angela," he said with emotion, "I thank you. I love you, and whatever may happen, I will prove to you that I am worthy of your love."

"Now, my father, let us go," she said to the general, who was half mad with rage, and who yet did not dare give way to his passion; and turning for the last time to the count, she said, "Good-by, Don Louis! My betrothed, we shall soon meet again."

And she left the camp, accompanied by the enthusiastic shouts of the adventurers.

The Mexicans marched out with drooping heads and a blush on their foreheads. In spite of themselves they were ashamed of the infamous treachery they had dealt out to men whom they had earnestly summoned, whom they had deluded during four months with false promises, and whom they were now preparing to rush upon like wild beasts.

Scarce two hours after these events occurred Valentine re-entered the camp.

CHAPTER V

THE FIRST POWDER BURNT

The emotion caused by the general's visit gradually calmed down. The Frenchmen, so long the sport of Mexican bad faith, experienced almost joy at seeing themselves at length liberated from the inextricable web of trickery which had encompassed them. With that carelessness which forms the basis of the national character, they began laughing and jibing at the Mexicans generally, and especially at the authorities of the country, of whom they had to complain so greatly, though without daring to offer the least observation, through respect for their chief. Full of confidence in the count, without calculating that they were only a handful of men abandoned to their own resources, without help or possible protection, more than six thousand leagues from their country, they indulged to the fullest extent of their imagination in the wildest dreams, discussing among themselves the most extraordinary and daring plans, without ever supposing, in their candid filibustering simplicity, that even the least extravagant of their dreams was impossible to realise.

Louis would not allow the ardour of his volunteers to be chilled. After consulting with his officers, to whom he submitted his plans, which they accepted enthusiastically, by Valentine's advice he ordered a general assembly of the company. The bugles at once sounded, and the adventurers collected around headquarters.

"Gentlemen," the count said, "you see in what a position the breach of faith of the Mexican authorities has placed us; but this position, in my opinion, is far from being desperate. Still I must not conceal from you that it is extremely grave, and, from certain information I have from a good source, it threatens to become still more so. We have two modes in which to act. The first is to proceed by forced marches to Guaymas, seize a vessel, and embark ere our enemies have thought about opposing our departure."

A long murmur of dissatisfaction greeted these words.

"Gentlemen," the count continued, "it was my duty to submit this proposition to you, and you will discuss it amongst yourselves. If it does not suit you, no more need be said. And now for the second. Mexico, since its emancipation, has languished in a state of the most scandalous barbarism. It would be grand to regenerate this people, or at least attempt it. The American emigration from the United States is at this moment invading California, leaving other emigrants no means, I will not say of prospering, but even of keeping on a footing of equality with the Yankees. We are here in Sonora, 200 resolute Frenchmen, well armed and disciplined. Let us seize a large town to have a basis of operations; then we will summon to us the French emigrants from California and all America. Let us emancipate Sonora, make it free and strong, civilise it in spite of itself, and not only shall we have created an outlet for French immigration, but have regenerated a people and formed a colony which will advantageously balance American influence on these shores, and oppose a dyke to its incessant encroachments. We shall have acquired a claim to the gratitude of our country, and have avenged ourselves on our enemies in the way Frenchmen revenge themselves; that is to say, by responding to their insults by kindness. Such, gentlemen, are the two sole methods we can select which would be worthy of men like us. Weigh my words carefully; reflect on my propositions; and tomorrow, at sunrise, you will inform me of your intentions through the channel of your officers. Remember one thing before all, comrades, and that is, you must maintain strict discipline among yourselves. Obey me passively, and place unbounded faith in me. If you fail in one of the duties I impose on you at this moment, we are all lost; for the struggle will become impossible, and consequently our enemies will gain an easy victory over us. In conclusion, brethren, accept my word that whatever may be the circumstances in which we find ourselves – however magnificent the offers that may be made me – I will never abandon you. We will perish or succeed together."

This speech was greeted as it deserved to be; that is to say, with an enthusiasm impossible to describe. The count then withdrew with Valentine.

"Alas, brother!" he said to him, with an expression of heart-rending sorrow, "the die is now cast. I, Count de Prébois Crancé, am a rebel, a pirate: I am at open war with a recognised power, with a constitutional Government. What can I do with the few men I command? I shall perish in the first battle – the combat is senseless. I shall be ere long the laughing stock of the world. Who could have predicted this when I left San Francisco, full of hope, to work those mines which I shall never see? What has become of my fair dreams, my seductive hopes?"

"Do not allow yourself to be downcast, brother," Valentine answered. "At present, above all, you need all your intellect and all your energy to fulfil worthily the task accident imposes on you. Remember that from this intellect and this energy depends the safety of two hundred of your countrymen, whom you have sworn to lead back to the seashore; and you must keep your oath."

"I will die with them. What more can they demand?"

"That you should save them," the hunter replied sternly.

"That is my most anxious desire."

"Your position is a fine one – you are not so alone as you fancy."

"How so?"

"Have you not the French colony of Guetzalli, founded by the Count de Lhorailles?"

"Yes," Louis answered sadly; "but the count is dead."

"He is; but the colony exists, and is prosperous. You will find there fifty to sixty resolute men, who ask no better than to join you, even if merely through the spirit of adventure."

"Fifty men are very few."

"Nonsense! They are more than you need when dealing with Mexicans. Do one thing more: prepare an insurrection among the half savage population, whose alcaldes pine secretly at their secondary position, and the species of vassaldom into which the Mexican Government forces them."

"Oh, oh!" Louis said, "that is a good idea. But where is the man who will undertake to visit this people, and negotiate with the alcaldes of the Pueblos?"

"I will, if you like."

"I did not dare ask it. Thank you. I, for my part, will prepare everything in order to begin with a terrible blow, which will startle the Mexican Government by giving it an idea of our strength."

"Good! Before all, do not forget that, until fresh orders, the war you undertake must be an uninterrupted succession of daring blows."

"Oh! you may be at ease. Now that the Mexicans have lifted the mask, and forced me to defend myself, they will learn to know the men they have so long despised, and whom they fancied cowards because they were good-hearted."

"Has Colonel Florés left?"

"No, not yet."

"Keep him here till tomorrow, no matter by what pretext."

"Why so?"

"Let me alone: you shall know. And now prepare to sustain an attack from the Indians: if my presentiments do not deceive me, it will be warm."

"What makes you suppose that?"

"Certain information I picked up for myself, and other still more important I obtained from Curumilla. So try to prevent the Mexican colonel leaving the camp, but do not let him suspect he is watched."

"It shall be done. You know that I trust to you for the precautions to be taken?"

"Externally, yes; but do you watch that the lines are not forced."

The greatest animation prevailed in the camp. Armories and smiths were busily working with feverish ardour to place weapons, carts, and gun carriages in working condition. On all sides joyous

shouts and bursts of laughter could be heard; for these worthy adventurers had regained all their gaiety, now that there was a prospect of fighting; that is, of dealing and receiving blows.

Colonel Florés wandered about rather sadly in the midst of the confusion: his position was becoming difficult, and he felt it. Still he did not know how to prolong his stay among the Frenchmen, now that war was declared, and the interests of the company of which he was the delegate were completely laid aside; and thus the only plausible reason he could allege for remaining was cut away. Since the Frenchmen's arrival in Mexico the double character played by the colonel brought him handsome sums: his profession of spy, rendered easy by the confiding frankness of the adventurers, had been to him a source of enormous profit, and people do not give up without pain a lucrative engagement.

Thus the colonel's brow was anxious, for he racked his brains in vain for a plausible excuse to offer the count. In the height of his diplomatic combinations Valentine came to him, and told him, with the most innocent air possible, that Don Louis was seeking for him, and wished to speak with him. The colonel shuddered at the news: he thanked the hunter, and hastened to the count. Valentine looked after him with an ironical smile; and, certain that Louis would detain him long enough by his side, he commenced the execution of the plan he had prepared.

While all this was occurring night had set in – a gloomy and sad night, without a star in the sky. The clouds shot rapidly across the sickly disc of the moon, and intercepted its rays. The wind lamented sadly as it whistled through the branches of the trees, which dashed against each other with a lugubrious sound. In the mysterious depths of the forest could be heard growls and savage yells, mingled with the dashing of the cascade and the monotonous clashing of the pebbles rolled on the bank by the river. It was one of those nights in which nature seems to associate herself with human sorrows, and lament at the crimes for which her gloomy shadows serve as a veil.

By Valentine's orders the trees had been cut down for a distance of fifty yards round the camp, in order to clear the ground, and deprive the enemy of the chance of creeping up to the intrenchments unseen. On the space thus left free enormous fires were kindled at regular intervals. These fires, whose tall flames illumined the prairie for a considerable distance, formed a brilliant circle round the camp, which was itself plunged in complete obscurity. Not the slightest light flashed in the mission. The intrenchments appeared to be deserted – not a sentry could be seen. The mission had fallen back into the silence of solitude – all was calm and tranquil.

But this calm concealed the tempest. In the shadow palpitated the anxious hearts of the men who, with ear on the watch, and finger on the trigger, awaited motionless the arrival of their enemies. The hours, however, passed away slowly one after the other, and nothing justified the apprehensions expressed by Valentine as to a speedy attack.

The count was walking up and down the church which served as his retreat, listening anxiously to the slightest sounds that interrupted the silence at intervals. At times he turned an angry and impatient look upon the desert country, but nothing stirred – the same calm continued ever to oppress nature. Wearied by this long and enervating delay, he quitted the church, and proceeded toward the intrenchments. The adventurers were at their posts, stretched on the ground, each man with his hand on the trigger.

"Have you seen or heard nothing yet?" the count asked, though he knew beforehand the answer he would receive, and rather for the purpose of deceiving his impatience than with any other object.

"Nothing," Don Cornelio answered coldly, who happened to be close to him.

"Ah! it is you," the count said. "And Colonel Florés, what have you done with him?"

"I followed your instructions, commandant. He is asleep."

"You are sure of it?"

The Spaniard smiled.

"I guarantee that he will sleep at least till sunrise," he said. "I managed matters well."

"Very good; in that case we have nothing to fear from him."

"Nothing at all."

"Has anyone seen Don Valentine or the Indian chief?"

"No; they both went out at sunset, and have not reappeared since."

While speaking thus the two men were looking out, and their eyes attentively examined the plain: hence they made a gesture of surprise, almost of alarm, on suddenly perceiving a man who seemed to emerge from the ground, and rose between them like a phantom.

"*Válgame Dios!*" the superstitious Spaniard said as he crossed himself, "what is this?"

The count quickly drew a revolver from his girdle.

"Do not fire," the newcomer said as he laid his hand on the count's arm.

"Curumilla!" the count exclaimed in surprise.

"Silence!" the Araucano commanded.

"Where is Valentine?"

"He sent me."

"Then the redskins will not attack us this night?"

Curumilla regarded the count with amazement.

"Does not my brother see them?" he said.

"Where?" the count asked in astonishment.

"There!" Curumilla answered, stretching out his arm in the direction of the plain.

Don Louis and Don Cornelio looked out for several instants with the most sustained attention; but, in spite of all their efforts, they perceived nothing. The plain was still just as naked, lighted up by the ruddy glare from the braseros: here and there alone lay the trunks of the trees felled during the day to leave an open prospect.

"No," they said at length, "we see nothing."

"The eyes of the white men are closed at night," the chief muttered sententiously.

"But where are they?" the count asked impatiently. "Why did you not warn us?"

"My brother Koutonepi sends me for that purpose."

The name of Koutonepi – that is to say, the Valiant – had been given to Valentine by the Araucanos on his arrival in America, and Curumilla never called him otherwise.

"Then make haste to teach us, chief, that we may foil the accursed stratagem which these demons have doubtlessly invented."

"Let my brother warn his brothers to be ready to fight."

The word ran immediately along the line from one to the other. Curumilla then tranquilly shouldered his rifle, and aimed at a trunk of a tree rather nearer the intrenchments than the rest.

Never did a shot produce such an effect. A horrible yell rose from the plain, and a swarm of redskins, rising, as if moved by a spring, from behind the stems of trees that sheltered them, rushed toward the intrenchments, bounding like coyotes, uttering fearful yells, and brandishing their weapons furiously.

But the Frenchmen were prepared for this attack: they received the Indians at the bayonet point without recoiling an inch, and answering their ferocious yells with the unanimous shout of "VIVE LA FRANCE!"

From this moment war was, *de facto*, declared. The French had smelled powder, and the Mexicans were about to learn, at their own expense, what rude enemies they had so madly brought on themselves.

Still the redskins, led and animated by their chief, fought with extraordinary obstinacy. The majority of the Frenchmen who composed the company were ignorant of the way of fighting with the Indians, and it was the first time they had come into collision with them. While valiantly resisting them, and inflicting on them terrible losses, they could not refrain from admiring the audacious temerity of these men, who, half naked and wielding wretched weapons, yet rushed upon them with invincible courage, and only fell back when dead.

Suddenly a second band, more numerous than the first, and composed entirely of horsemen, burst on to the battlefield, and sustained the efforts of the assailants. The latter, feeling themselves supported, redoubled their yells and efforts. The medley became terrible: the combatants fought hand to hand, lacerating each other like wild beasts.

The French bugles and drums sounded the charge heartily.

"A sortie – a sortie!" the adventurers shouted, ashamed at being thus held in check by enemies apparently so insignificant.

"Kill, kill!"

The Indians responded with their war cry.

An Indian chief, mounted on a magnificent black horse, and with his body naked to the waist, curveted in the front rank of his men, dropping with his club every man that came within reach of his arm. Twice he had made his steed leap at the barricades, and twice he scaled them, though unable to clear them completely. This chief was Mixcoatzin. His black eye flashed with a sombre fire; his arm seemed indefatigable; and everyone withdrew from this terrible enemy, who was apparently invincible.

The sachem redoubled his boldness, incessantly urging on his men, and insulting the whites by his shouts and ironical gestures.

Suddenly a third troop appeared on the battlefield, which, owing to the braziers, was as light as day. But this troop, composed, like the second, of horsemen, instead of joining the Indians, formed a semicircle, and charged them furiously, shouting, —

"*A muerte—*a muerte!*"*

Valentine's powerful voice at this moment rose above the tumult of battle, and even reached those he wished to warn.

"Now is the time!" he shouted.

The count heard him. Turning then to fifty of the adventurers who had remained inactive since the beginning of the action, chafing and trailing their arms, —

"It is our turn, comrades!" he shouted as he drew his long sword. Then, opening the wicket, he bounded boldly into the *mêlée*, followed by his party, who rushed after him with shouts of joy. The Indians were caught between two fires – a thing which rarely happens – and compelled to fight in the open. Still they were not discouraged, for Indian bravery surpasses all belief. Finding themselves surrounded, they resolved to die bravely sooner than surrender; and though not nearly so well armed as their enemies, they received their attack with unlesened resolution.

But the Indians, on this occasion, had not to do with Mexicans, and soon discovered the difference. The charge of the Frenchmen was irresistible: they passed like a tornado through the redskins, who, in spite of their resolution, were compelled to give ground. But flight was impossible. Recalled by the voices of their chiefs, who, while themselves fighting bravely, did not cease to urge them to redouble their efforts, they returned to the combat. The struggle then assumed the gigantic proportions of a horrible carnage. It was no longer a battle, but a butchery, in which each sought to kill, caring little about falling himself, so long as he dragged down his foeman with him.

Valentine, the greater part of whose life had been spent in the desert, and who had frequently encountered the Indians, had never before seen them display so great animosity, and, above all, such obstinacy; for usually, when they suffer a check, far from obstinately continuing a fight without any possible advantageous result for themselves, they retire immediately, and seek safety in a hurried flight; but this time their mode of fighting was completely changed, and it seemed that the more they recognised the impossibility of victory, the more anxious they felt to resist.

The count, ever in front of his comrades, whom he encouraged by his gestures and voice, tried to approach Mixcoatzin, who, still curveting on his black horse, performed prodigies of valour, which electrified his men, and threatened, if not to change the face of the combat, at any rate to prolong it. But each time that chance brought him in front of the chief, and he prepared to rush upon him,

a crowd of combatants, driven back by the changing incidents of the fight, came between them, and neutralised his efforts.

For his part, the sachem also strove to approach the count, with whom he burned to measure himself, persuaded that, if he succeeded in killing the chief of the palefaces, the latter would be struck with terror, and abandon the battlefield.

At length, as if by mutual agreement, the white men and Indians fell back a few paces, doubtlessly to prepare for a final contest; and it was then that, for the first time since the combat, the count and the sachem found themselves face to face. The two men exchanged a flashing glance, and rushed upon each other furiously. Neither of the chiefs had firearms: the sachem brandished his terrible club, and the count waved his long sword, which was reddened to the hilt.

"At last!" the count shouted, as he raised his weapon over his head.

"Begging dog of the palefaces," the Indian said with a grin, "you bring me, then, your scalp, that I may attach it to the entrance of my cabin!"

They were only two paces from each other, each awaiting the favourable moment to rush on his enemy. On seeing their chiefs ready to engage, the two parties rushed forward impetuously, in order to separate them and recommence the combat; but Don Louis, with a gesture of supreme command, ordered his companions not to interfere. The adventurers remained motionless. On his side, Mixcoatzin, seeing the noble and gallant courtesy of the count, commanded his comrades to keep back. The redskins obeyed, and the question was left to be decided between Don Louis and the sachem.

CHAPTER VI

REPRISALS

The two enemies hesitated for a moment; but suddenly the sachem bounded forward. The count remained motionless; but at the moment the Indian reached him, with a movement rapid as thought, he seized the nostrils of the chief's horse with the left hand, so that it reared with a shriek of pain, and thrust his sword into the Indian's throat: the latter's lifted arm fell down, his eyes opened widely, a jet of blood poured from the gaping wound, and he rolled on the ground, uttering a yell of agony, and writhing like a serpent. The count placed his foot on the chief's chest, and nailed him to the ground. Then he shouted to his comrades in a powerful voice, —

"Forward – forward!"

The adventurers responded by a shout of triumph, and rushed once more on the redskins. But the latter no longer awaited their attack. Terrified by the death of Mixcoatzin, one of their most revered sachems, a panic seized upon them, and they fled in every direction. Then began a real manhunt, with all its hideous and atrocious interludes. As we have said, the Indians were surrounded: flight had become impossible. The adventurers, exasperated by the long contest they had been obliged to sustain, pitilessly massacred their conquered enemies, who would have implored mercy in vain. The distracted Indians ran hither and thither, sabred as they passed, transfixed by bayonets, and trampled underfoot by the horses, which, as cruel as their masters, and intoxicated by the sharp odour of blood, stamped on them frenziedly. The corpses were piled up in the centre of the fatal circle which incessantly closed in around them.

Their courage and strength all exhausted, the wretched redskins had thrown away their arms, and, with their hands crossed on their chests, they gave up any further struggle for life, and awaited death with that gloomy calmness of despair and stoicism which characterises their race.

The count had wished for a long time to arrest this horrible carnage; but, in the intoxication of victory, his orders were not so much disobeyed as unheard. Still the Frenchmen stopped, struck with admiration at the sight of the stoical resignation displayed by their brave enemies, who disdained to ask mercy, and prepared to die worthily, without any weakness or bravado. The Frenchmen hesitated, looked at one another, and then raised their bayonets. The count profited by this truce, and rushed before his men, brandishing in the air his sword, reddened to the hilt.

"Enough, comrades," he shouted, "enough! We are soldiers, not hangmen or butchers. Leave to the Mexicans all cowardly acts, and remain what you have ever been – brave and clement men. Mercy for these poor wretches!"

"Mercy – mercy!" the Frenchmen shouted as they brandished their weapons above their heads.

At this moment the sun rose gloriously in a flood of vapour. It was a scene at once imposing and full of sublime horror which the battlefield offered – still smoking with the last explosions of the firearms, covered with corpses, and in the midst of which thirty disarmed men appeared to bid defiance to a circle of men stained with blood and powder, and whose features were contracted by passion.

The count then returned his sword to its scabbard, and walked slowly toward the Indians, who watched his approach restlessly; for they understood nothing of what had just occurred. The Indians are implacable, and clemency is unknown to them. In the prairies the only law is *va victis*. The redskins, being pitiless, never implore the mercy of their foes, and endure unmurmuring the harsh law which it may please their conquerors to mete out to them.

The adventurers had piled their arms, and had already forgotten all their rancour: they were laughing and talking gaily together. Valentine and Curumilla had rejoined the count.

"What is your intention?" the hunter asked.

"Have you not guessed it?" Louis replied. "I pardon them."

"All?"

"Of course," he said with surprise.

"Then you will restore them to liberty?"

"Yes."

"Hum!" the hunter said.

"Do you see anything to prevent it?"

"Possibly."

"Explain yourself."

"I see no harm in your forgiving the Indians, for that may produce a good effect among the tribes, especially as the redskins have an excellent memory, and will long remember the severe lesson they received this night."

"Well?"

"But," the hunter went on, "all those men are not Indians."

"What do you mean?"

"That there are disguised Mexicans among them."

"You are certain of that?"

"Yes, the more so because I was warned by the man who commands the horsemen that proved such useful auxiliaries to you."

"But are not those horsemen Apaches?"

"You are mistaken, my dear friend: they are white men, and what is more, *cívicos*; that is to say, men paid and enrolled by the hacenderos to chase the Indians. You see how honourably they carry out their duties; but that must not astonish you, for you are sufficiently well acquainted with the manners of this country to find that perfectly natural, I have no doubt."

Louis stopped thoughtfully.

"What you tell me confounds me," he muttered.

"Why so?" the hunter replied carelessly. "It is, on the contrary, most simple. But we have not to trouble ourselves about the horsemen at present – they are beside the question."

"Certainly. Indeed, I owe them my thanks."

"They will save you the trouble, and I too. Let us only deal with the men down there."

"Then you are sure there are white men among them?"

"Quite sure."

"But how to recognise them?"

"Curumilla will undertake that."

"What you tell me is strange. For what purpose are these men leagued with our enemies?"

"We shall soon know that."

They then went on, and stood by the group. Valentine made a sign to Curumilla: the chief then approached the Indians, and began examining them attentively in turn, the count and Valentine watching him with considerable interest. The Araucano was as cold and gloomy as usual – not a muscle of his face quivered. On seeing him examine them thus, the Indians could not refrain from shuddering: they trembled at the sight of this dumb and unarmed man, whose piercing glance seemed to try and read their hearts; Curumilla laid his finger on an Indian's chest.

"One!" he said, and passed on.

"Come out!" Valentine said to the redskin.

The latter stood apart.

Curumilla pointed out in this way nine in succession, and then rejoined his comrades.

"Is that all?" Valentine asked.

"Yes," he answered.

"Disarm those men, and bind them firmly," the count commanded.

His orders being obeyed, Don Louis then walked up to the Apaches.

"My brothers may take their arms and mount their horses again," he said. "They are valiant warriors. The palefaces have appreciated their courage, and esteem them. My brothers will return to their villages, and tell the old men and sages of their nation that the palefaces who have conquered them are not cruel men, like the ferocious Yoris, and that they desire to bury the hatchet so deeply between themselves and the Apaches, that it may never be found again for ten thousand years."

An Indian advanced from the group, and saluted majestically.

"Strong Heart is a terrible warrior: he is a jaguar during the combat, but he becomes an antelope after the victory. The words his breast breathes are inspired in him by the Great Spirit – the Wacondah loves him. My nation was deceived by the Yoris. Strong Heart is generous – he has pardoned. Henceforth there will be friendship between the Apaches and the warriors of Strong Heart."

The redskins, according to their custom, had, with that poesy which distinguishes them, given Don Louis the name of Strong Heart.

After this address on the part of the Indian, who was a celebrated chief, and known as the White Buffalo, there was an interchange of good offices between the adventurers and Apaches. Their horses and arms were returned to them, and the ranks were opened to let them pass. When they had disappeared in the forest, El Buitre ordered his men to wheel, and retired in his turn. Don Louis for a moment had the idea of recalling this auxiliary, who had been so useful to him during the action; but Valentine opposed it.

"Let those men go, brother," he said to him. "You must not have any public relations with them."

Don Louis did not insist.

"Now," Valentine went on, "let us finish what we have so well begun."

"That is right," the count answered.

The order was at once given to bury the dead and attend to the wounded. The Frenchmen had suffered a serious loss: they had ten men killed and twenty odd wounded. It is true that the majority of these wounds were not mortal; still the victory cost dearly: it was a warning for the future.

Two hours later the company, assembled by the bugle call, ranged themselves silently in the mission square, in the centre of which Don Louis, Valentine, and three officers were gravely seated at a table, on which lay sundry papers. Don Cornelio was writing at a smaller table. The count had summoned his comrades, and appointed a court martial, of which he was president, in order to try the prisoners captured during the fight. Don Louis rose amidst a solemn silence.

"Bring forward the prisoners," he said.

The men previously pointed out by Curumilla appeared, led by a detachment of adventurers, and were freed from their bonds. Although they still wore the costume of Apache warriors, they had been compelled to wash themselves, and remove the paint that disguised them. These men appeared not so much to repent of their detected roguery, but merely ashamed of being made a public spectacle.

"Bring in the last prisoner," Don Louis commanded.

At this order the adventurers looked round in surprise, not understanding what the count meant, for the nine Mexicans were all present. But at the expiration of a moment their surprise was changed into anger, and a dull murmur ran along their ranks like an electric current.

Colonel Florés had made his appearance. He was unarmed, and his head bare; but his face, stamped with boldness and defiance, had a gloomily malicious expression, which gave him a most unpleasant appearance. Curumilla accompanied him. The count made a sign, and silence was re-established.

"What is the meaning of this?" the colonel asked in a haughty tone.

Don Louis did not allow him to continue.

"Silence!" he said in a firm voice, turning a flashing glance upon him.

Subdued, in spite of himself, by the count's accent, the colonel blushed and remained silent. Don Louis continued: —

"Brothers and comrades," he said, "unfortunately for us, circumstances have placed us in an exceptional situation. On all sides treachery surrounds us. By falsehood after falsehood, trick upon trick, they have led us onto this desert, where we are abandoned to ourselves, far from all help, and having our courage alone to count upon to save us. Yesterday Don Sebastian Guerrero, believing himself at length sure of the success of his infamous plans, which he has so long been forming against us, decided on raising the mask. He declared us outlaws, and branded us with the disgraceful epithet of pirates. Scarce two hours after his departure we were attacked by Indians. Our enemies' measures were well calculated, and were within an ace of success. But God was on the watch, and saved us this time again. Now, do you know the man who made himself the generals right arm, and carried into effect the odious treachery of which we were so nearly the victims?"

"This man," he said, pointing with his finger with an expression of crushing contempt, "is the villain who, since our departure from Guaymas, has attached himself to us, and never left us. He pretended to love and defend us, that he might surprise our secrets, and sell them to our enemies. It is the wretch whom we treated as a brother – to whom we offered the most delicate and enduring attention. It is the man, lastly, who assumes the title of colonel, and name of Francisco Florés, and who lied in doing so; for he is a nameless half-breed, surnamed El Garrucholo, ex-lieutenant of El Buitre, that ferocious brigand who commands a *cuadrilla* of salteadores that has desolated Upper Mexico for several years. Look at him! Now that he is detected, he trembles – villain that he is; for he knows that the supreme hour of justice has rung for him."

In fact, at this terrible revelation, thus made in the presence of all, the bandit's boldness suddenly gave way, and an expression of hideous terror contracted his features.

"See," the count continued, "the men whom our enemies are not ashamed to employ against us; and yet they treat us as pirates! Well, we accept this brand, brothers; and these bandits who have fallen into our hands shall be judged according to the summary law of pirates."

The adventurers warmly applauded their chief's address. Besides, all recognised the truth and logic of his remarks. In the critical situation in which they found themselves they could forgive nothing: clemency would have been culpable weakness. They could only regain their position by boldness and energy, by terrifying their foes, and compelling them to treat with them. The count sat down again.

"Don Cornelio," he said, "read to the accused the charges brought against him."

The Spaniard rose, and began a long charge against the colonel, supported by numerous letters written by Don Francisco, or received by him from various persons, principally General Guerrero, which clearly and indubitably proved the colonel's guilt. Don Cornelio finished by describing the interview on the previous day between Don Francisco, El Buitre, and the Apache chief. The adventurers listened to this long enumeration of crimes and felonies in the most profound silence. When Don Cornelio had ended the count addressed the colonel.

"Do you recognise the truth of the charge brought against you?"

The bandit raised his head: his mind was made up, and he shrugged his shoulders contemptuously.

"Of what use to deny?" he said. "It is all true."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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