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The Free Lances: A Romance of the Mexican Valley

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Содержание

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Chapter One
Volunteers for Texas

"I'll go!"

This laconism came from the lips of a young man who was walking along the Levee of New Orleans. Just before giving utterance to it he had made a sudden stop, facing a dead wall, enlivened, however, by a large poster, on which were printed, in conspicuous letters, the words —

"Volunteers for Texas!"

Underneath, in smaller type, was a proclamation, setting forth the treachery of Santa Anna and the whole Mexican nation, recalling in strong terms the Massacre of Fanning, the butchery of Alamo, and other like atrocities; ending in an appeal to all patriots and lovers of freedom to arm, take the field, and fight against the tyrant of Mexico and his myrmidons.

"I'll go!" said the young man, after a glance given to the printed statement; then, more deliberately re-reading it, he

repeated the words with an emphasis that told of his being in earnest.

The poster also gave intimation of a meeting to be held the same evening at a certain *rendezvous* in Poydras Street.

He who read only lingered to make note of the address, which was the name of a noted *café*. Having done this, he was turning to continue his walk when his path was barred by a specimen of humanity, who stood full six foot six in a pair of alligator leather boots, on the *banquette* by his side, "So ye're goin', air ye?" was the half-interrogative speech that proceeded from the individual thus confronting him.

"What's that to you?" bluntly demanded the young fellow, his temper a little ruffled by what appeared an impertinent obstruction on the part of some swaggering bully.

"More'n you may think for, young 'un," answered the booted Colossus, still standing square in the way; "more'n you may think for, seein' it's through me that bit o' paper's been put up on that 'ere wall."

"You're a bill-sticker, I suppose?" sneeringly retorted the "young 'un."

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the giant, with a cachinnation that resembled the neighing of a horse. "A bill-sticker, eh! Wal; I likes that. An' I likes yur grit, too, young feller, for all ye are so sassy. But ye needn't git riled, an' I reckon ye won't, when I tell ye who I am."

"And who are you; pray?"

"Maybe ye mount a hearn o' Cris Rock?"

"What! Cris Rock of Texas? He who at Fanning's – "

"At Fannin's massacree war shot dead, and kim alive agin."

"Yes," said the interrogator, whose interrogatory referred to the almost miraculous escape of one of the betrayed victims of the Goliad butchery.

"Jess so, young feller. An' since ye 'pear to know somethin' 'bout me, I needn't tell ye I ain't no *bill-sticker*, nor why I 'peared to show impartinence by putting in my jaw when I heern ye sing out, 'I'll go.' I thort it wouldn't need much introduxshun to one as I mout soon hope to call kumarade. Yer comin' to the rendyvoo the night, ain't ye?"

"Yes; I intend doing so."

"Wal, I'll be there myself; an' if ye'll only look high enough, I reck'n ye kin sight me 'mong the crowd. 'Tain't like to be the shortest thar," he added, with a smile that bespoke pride in his superior stature, "tho' ye'll see some tall 'uns too. Anyhow, jest look out for Cris Rock; and, when foun', that chile may be of some sarvice to ye."

"I shall do so," rejoined the other, whose good humour had become quite restored.

About to bid good-bye, Rock held out a hand, broad as the blade of a canoe-paddle. It was freely taken by the stranger, who, while shaking it, saw that he was being examined from head to foot.

"Look hyar!" pursued the Colossus, as if struck by some

thought which a closer scrutiny of the young man's person had suggested; "hev ye ever did any sogerin'? Ye've got the look o' it."

"I was educated in a military school – that's all."

"Where? In the States?"

"No. I am from the other side of the Atlantic."

"Oh! A Britisher. Wal, that don't make no difference in Texas. Thar's all sorts thar. English, ain't ye?"

"No," promptly answered the stranger, with a slight scornful curling of the lip: "I'm an Irishman, and not one of those who deny it."

"All the better for that. Thar's a bit of the same blood somewhar in my own veins, out o' a grandmother, I b'lieve, as kim over the mountains into Kaintuck, 'long wi' Dan Boone an' his lot. So ye've been eddycated at a milintary school, then? D'ye unnerstan' anything about the trainin' o' sogers?"

"Certainly I do."

"Dog-goned, ef you ain't the man we want! How'd ye like to be an officer? I reck'n ye're best fit for that."

"Of course I should like it; but as a stranger among you, I shouldn't stand much chance of being elected. You choose your officers, don't you?"

"Sartin, we eelect 'em; an' we're goin' to hold the eelections this very night. Lookee hyar, young fellur; I like yer looks, an' I've seed proof ye've got the stuff in ye. Now, I want to tell ye somethin' ye oughter to know. I belong to this company that's jest a formin', and thar's a fellur settin' hisself up to be its capting.

He's a sort o' half Spanish, half French-Creole, o' Noo-Orleans hyar, an' we old Texans don't think much o' him. But thar's only a few o' us; while 'mong the Orleans city fellurs as are goin' out to, he's got a big pop'larity by standin' no eend o' drinks. He ain't a bad lookin' sort for sogerin', and has seen milintary sarvice, they say. F'r all that, thar's a hangdog glint 'bout his eyes this chile don't like; neither do some o' the others. So, young un, if you'll come down to the rendyvoo in good time, an' make a speech – you kin speechify, can't ye?"

"Oh, I suppose I could say something."

"Wal, you stump it, an' I'll put in a word or two, an' then we'll perpose ye for capting; an' who knows we mayent git the majority arter all? You'er willin' to try, ain't ye?"

"Quite willing," answered the Irishman, with an emphasis which showed how much the proposal was to his mind. "But why, Mr Rock, are you not a candidate yourself? You have seen service, and would make a good officer, I should say."

"Me kandydate for officer! Wal, I'm big enough, thet's true, and ef you like, ugly enuf. But I ain't no ambeeshum thet way. Besides, this chile knows nothin' 'bout *drill*; an' that's what's wanted bad. Ye see, we ain't had much reg'lar sogerin' in Texas. Thar's whar the Mexikins hev the advantage o' us, an' thar's whar you'll hev the same if you'll consent to stan'. You say you will?"

"I will, if you wish it."

"All square then," returned the Texan, once more taking his *protégé* by the hand, and giving it a squeeze like the grip of a

grizzly bear. “I’ll be on the lookout for ye. Meanwhile, thar’s six hours to the good yet afore it git sundown. So go and purpar’ yur speech, while I slide roun’ among the fellurs, an’ do a leetle for ye in the line o’ canvassin’.”

After a final bruin-like pressure of the hand the giant had commenced striding away, when he came again to a halt, uttering a loud “Hiloo!”

“What is it?” inquired the young Irishman.

“It seems that Cris Rock air ’bout one o’ the biggest nummorskulls in all Noo-Orleans. Only to think! I was about startin’ to take the stump for a kandydate ’ithout knowin’ the first letter o’ his name. How wur ye crissened, young fellur?”

“Kearney – Florence Kearney.”

“Florence, ye say? Ain’t that a woman’s name?”

“True; but in Ireland many men bear it.”

“Wal, it do seem a little kewrious; but it’ll do right slick, and the Kearney part soun’s well. I’ve hern speak o’ Kate Kearney; thar’s a song ’bout the gurl. Mout ye be any connexshun o’ hern?”

“No, Mr Rock; not that I’m aware of. She was a Killarney woman. I was born a little further north on the green island.”

“Wal, no matter what part o’ it, yur are welkim to Texas, I reck’n, or the States eyther. Kearney – I like the name. It hev a good ring, an’ it’ll soun’ all the better wi’ ‘Capting’ for a handle to ’t – the which it shall hev afore ten o’clock this night, if Cris Rock ain’t astray in his reck’nin’. But see as ye kum early to the rendyvoo, so as to hev time for a talk wi’ the boys. Thar’s a

somethin' in that; an' if ye've got a ten dollar bill to spare, spend it on drinks all round. Thar's a good deal in that too."

So saying, the Texan strode off, leaving Florence Kearney to reflect upon the counsel so opportunely extended.

Chapter Two
A Lady in the Case

Who Florence Kearney was, and what his motive for becoming a "filibuster," the reader shall be told without much tediousness of detail.

Some six months before the encounter described, he had landed from a Liverpool cotton ship on the Levee of New Orleans. A gentleman by birth and a soldier-scholar by education, he had gone to the New World with the design to complete his boyhood's training by a course of travel, and prepare himself for the enacting the *métier* of a man. That this travel should be westward, over fresh untrodden fields, instead of along the hackneyed highways of the European tourist, was partly due to the counsels of a tutor – who had himself visited the New World – and partly to his own natural inclinations.

In the course of his college studies he had read the romantic history of Cortez's conquest, and his mind had become deeply imbued with the picturesqueness of Mexican scenes; so that among the fancies of his youthful life one of the pleasantest was that of some day visiting the land of Anahuac, and its ancient capital, Tenochtitlan. After leaving college the dream had grown into a determination, and was now in the act of being realised. In New Orleans he was so far on his way. He came thither expecting

to obtain passage in a coasting vessel to some Mexican seaport – Tampico or Vera Cruz.

Why he had not at once continued his journey thither was due to no difficulty in finding such a vessel. There were schooners sailing every week to either of the above ports that would have accommodated him, yet still he lingered in New Orleans. His reason for thus delaying was one far from uncommon – this being a lady with whom he had fallen in love.

At first the detention had been due to a more sensible cause. Not speaking the Spanish language, which is also that of Mexico, he knew that while travelling through the latter country he would have to go as one dumb. In New Orleans he might easily obtain a teacher; and having sought soon found one, in the person of Don Ignacio Valverde, – a refugee Mexican gentleman, a victim of the tyrant Santa Anna, who, banished from his country, had been for several years resident in the States as an exile. And an exile in straitened circumstances, one of the hardest conditions of life. Once, in his own country, a wealthy landowner, Don Ignacio was now compelled to give lessons in Spanish to such stray pupils as might chance to present themselves. Among the rest, by chance came Florence Kearney, to whom he had commenced teaching it.

But while the latter was making himself master of the Andalusian tongue, he also learnt to love one who spoke it as purely, and far more sweetly, than Don Ignacio. This was Don Ignacio's daughter.

After parting with Cris Rock, the young Irishman advanced along the Levee, his head bowed forward, with eyes to the ground, as if examining the oyster-shells that thickly bestrewed the path; anon giving his glance to the river, as though stirred by its majestic movement. But he was thinking neither of the empty bivalves, nor the flow of the mighty stream. Nor yet of the speech he had promised to make that same night at the *rendezvous* of filibusters. Instead he was reflecting upon that affair of the heart, from which he had been for some time suffering.

To make known his feelings it is necessary to repeat what passed through his mind after he had separated from the Texan.

"There's something odd in all this," soliloquised he, as he strode on. "Here am I going to fight for a country I care nothing about, and against one with which I have no cause of quarrel. On the contrary, I have come four thousand miles to visit the latter, as a peaceful friendly traveller. Now I propose making entry into it, sword in hand, as an enemy and invader! The native land, too, of her who has taken possession of my heart! Ah! therein lies the very reason: *I have not got hers*. I fear – nay, I am certain of that, from what I saw this morning. Bah! What's the use of thinking about it, or about her? Luisa Valverde cares no more for me than the half-score of others – these young Creole 'bloods,' as they call themselves – who flit like butterflies around her. She's a sweet flower from which all of them wish to sip. Only one will succeed, and that's Carlos Santander. I hate the very sight of the man. I believe him to be a cheat and a scoundrel. No matter to

her. The cheat she won't understand; and, if report speak true of her country and race, the scoundrel would scarcely qualify him either. Merciful heavens! to think I should love this Mexican girl, warned as I've been about her countrywomen! 'Tis a fascination, and the sooner I get away from it and her presence, the better it may be for me. Now, this Texan business offers a chance of escaping the peril. If I find she cares not for me, it will be a sort of satisfaction to think that in fighting against her country I may in a way humiliate herself. Ah, Texas! If you find in me a defender, it will not be from any patriotic love of you, but to bury bitter thoughts in oblivion."

The chain of his reflections, momentarily interrupted was after a time continued: "My word," he exclaimed, "there's surely something ominous in my encounter with this Cris Rock! Destiny seems to direct me. Here am I scheming to escape from a thraldom of a siren's smiles, and, to do so, ready to throw myself into the ranks of a filibustering band! On the instant a friend is found – a patron who promises to make me their leader! Shall I refuse the favour, which fortune herself seems to offer? Why should I? It is fate, not chance; and this night at their meeting I shall know whether it is meant in earnest. So, canvass your best for me, Cris Rock; and I shall do my best to make a suitable speech. If our united efforts prove successful, then Texas shall gain a friend, and Luisa Valverde lose *one* of her lovers."

At the conclusion of this speech – half boastful, half bitter – Florence Kearney had reached the hotel where he was stopping

– the celebrated “Saint Charles,” and entering its grand saloon, sat down to reflect further on the step he was about to take.

Chapter Three
Officering the Filibusters

The volunteer *rendezvous* was in a tavern, better known by the name of "Coffee House," in the street called Poydras. The room which had been chartered for the occasion was of ample dimensions, capable of containing three hundred men. Drawn together by the printed proclamation that had attracted the attention of the young Irishman in his afternoon stroll, two-thirds of the above number had collected, and of these at least one-half were determined upon proceeding to Texas.

It was a crowd composed of heterogeneous elements – such as has ever been, and ever will be, the men who volunteer for a military, more especially a filibustering expedition.

Present in the hall were representatives of almost every civilised nation upon earth. Even some that could scarce boast of civilisation; for among the faces seen around the room were many so covered with beards, and so browned with sun, as to tell of long sojourn in savage parts, if not association with the savages themselves. In obedience to the counsels of the Texan, Florence Kearney – a candidate for command over this motley crew – made early appearance in their midst. Not so early as to find that, on entering the room, he was a stranger to its occupants. Cris Rock had been there before him, along with a half-score of

his *confrères*– old Texans of the pure breed – who having taken part in most of the struggles of the young Republic, had strayed back to New Orleans, partly for a spree, and partly to recruit fresh comrades to aid them in propagating that principle which had first taken them to Texas – the "Monroe Doctrine."

To these the young Irishman was at once confidentially introduced, and "stood drinks" freely. He would have done so without care of what was to come of it; since it was but the habit of his generous nation. Nor would this of itself have given him any great advantage, for not long after entering the room, he discovered that not only drinks, but dollars, were distributed freely by the opposition party, who seemed earnestly bent upon making a captain of their candidate.

As yet Kearney had not looked upon his competitor, and was even ignorant of his name. Soon, however, it was communicated to him, just as the man himself, escorted by a number of friends, made his appearance in the room. The surprise of the young Irishman may be imagined; when he saw before him one already known, and too well-known, – his rival in the affections of Luisa Valverde!

Yes; Carlos Santander was also a candidate for the command of the filibusters.

To Kearney the thing was a surprise, and something besides. He knew Santander to be on terms of very friendly and intimate relationship not only with Don Ignacio, but other Mexicans he had met at the exile's house. Strange, that the Creole should be

aspiring to the leadership of a band about to invade their country! For it was *invasion* the Texans now talked of, in retaliation for a late raid of the Mexicans to their capital, San Antonio. But these banished Mexicans being enemies of Santa Anna it was after all not so unnatural. By humiliating the Dictator, they would be aiding their own party to get back into power – even though the help came from their hereditary foemen, the squatters of Texas.

All this passed through the mind of the young Irishman, though not altogether to satisfy him. The presence of Santander there, as aspirant for leadership, seemed strange notwithstanding.

But he had no opportunity for indulging in conjectures – only time to exchange frowns at his rival and competitor, when a man in undress uniform – a Texan colonel – who acted as chairman of the meeting, mounting upon a table, cried "Silence!" and, after a short pithy speech, proposed that the election of officers should at once proceed. The proposal was seconded, no one objecting; and, without further parley, the "balloting" began.

There was neither noise nor confusion. Indeed, the assembly was one of the quietest, and without any street crowd outside. There were reasons for observing a certain secrecy in the proceedings; for, although the movement was highly popular all over the States, there were some compromising points of International law, and there had been talk of Government interference.

The election was conducted in the most primitive and simple

fashion. The names of the candidates were written upon slips of paper, and distributed throughout the room – only the members who had formed the organisation having the right to vote. Each of them chose the slip bearing the name of him he intended to vote for, and dropped it into a hat carried round for the purpose. The other he threw away, or slipped if to his pocket.

When all had deposited their ballots, the hat was capsized, and the bits of paper shaken out upon the table. The chairman, assisted by two other men, examined the votes and counted them. Then ensued a short interval of silence, broken only by an occasional word of direction from the chairman, with the murmuring hum of the examiners, and at length came in a clear loud voice – that of the Texan colonel – "*The votes are in favour of Kearney! Florence Kearney elected Captain by a majority of thirty-three*!"

A cheer greeted the announcement, in which something like a screech from Cris Rock could be heard above all voices; while the giant himself was seen rushing through the crowd to clasp the hand of his *protégé*, whom he had voluntarily assisted in promoting to a rank above himself.

During the excitement, the defeated candidate was observed to skulk out of the room. Those who saw him go could tell by his look of sullen disappointment he had no intention of returning; and that the filibustering cohort was not likely to have the name, "Carlos Santander," any longer on its roll-call.

He and his were soon forgotten. The lieutenants were yet to

be chosen. One after another – first, second, and *brevet*– was proposed, balloted for, and elected in the same way as the captain.

Then there was a choice of sergeants and corporals, till the organisation was pronounced complete. In fine, fell a shower of congratulations, with "drinks all round," and for several successive rounds. Patriotic speeches also, in the true "spread-eagle" style, with applauding cheers, and jokes about Santa Anna and his *cork-leg*; when the company at length separated, after singing the "Star-Spangled Banner."

Chapter Four
An Invitation to Supper

Florence Kearney, parting from his new friends, the filibusters, sauntered forth upon the street.

On reaching the nearest corner he came to a stop, as if undecided which way to turn.

Not because he had lost his way. His hotel was but three blocks off; and he had, during his short sojourn in the Crescent City, become acquainted with almost every part of it. It was not ignorance of the locality, therefore, which was causing him to hesitate; but something very different, as the train of his thoughts will tell.

"Don Ignacio, at least, will expect me – wish me to come, whether she do or not. I accepted his invitation, and cannot well – oh! had I known what I do now – seen what I saw this morning – Bah! I shall return to the hotel and never more go near her!"

But he did not return to his hotel; instead, still stood irresolute, as if the thing were worth further considering.

What made the young man act thus? Simply a belief that Luisa Valverde did not love him, and, therefore, would not care to have him as a companion at supper; for it was to supper her father had asked him. On the day before he had received the invitation, and signified acceptance of it. But he had seen something since

which had made him half repent having done so; a man, Carlos Santander, standing beside the woman he loved, bending over her till his lips almost touched her forehead, whispering words that were heard, and, to all appearance, heeded. What the words were Florence Kearney knew not, but could easily guess their nature. They could only be of love; for he saw the carmine on her cheeks as she listened to them.

He had no right to call the young lady to an account. During all his intercourse with Don Ignacio, he had seen the daughter scarce half a score times; then only while passing out and in – to or from his lessons. Now and then a few snatches of conversation had occurred between them upon any chance theme – the weather, the study he was prosecuting (how he wished *she* had been his teacher), and the peculiarities of the New Orleans life, to which they were both strangers. And only once had she appeared to take more than an ordinary interest in his speech. This, when he talked of Mexico, and having come from his own far land, "Irlandesa," with an enthusiastic desire to visit hers, telling her of his intention to do so. On this occasion he had ventured to speak of what he had heard about Mexican banditti; still more of the beauty of the Mexican ladies – naïvely adding that he would no doubt be in less danger of losing his life than his heart.

To this he thought she had listened, or seemed to listen, with more than ordinary attention, looking pensive as she made reply.

"Yes, Don Florencio! you will see much in Mexico likely to give you gratification. 'Tis true, indeed, that many of my

countrywomen are fair – some very fair. Among them you will soon forget – "

Kearney's heart beat wildly, hoping he would hear the monosyllable "me." But the word was not spoken. In its place the phrase "us poor exiles," with which somewhat commonplace remark the young Mexican concluded her speech.

And still there was something in what she had said, but more in her manner of saying it, which made pleasant impression upon him – something in her tone that touched a chord already making music in his heart. If it did not give him surety of her love, it, for the time, hindered him from despairing of it.

All this had occurred at an interview he had with her only the day before; and, since, sweet thoughts and hopes were his. But on the same morning they were shattered – crushed out by the spectacle he had witnessed, and the interpretation of those whispered words he had failed to hear. It had chased all hope out of his heart, and sent him in wild, aimless strides along the street, just in the right frame of mind for being caught by that call which had attracted his eyes on the poster —

"Volunteers for Texas." And just so had he been caught; and, as described, entered among the filibustering band to be chosen its chief. To the young Irishman it was a day of strange experiences, varying as the changes of a kaleidoscope; more like a dream than reality; and after reflecting upon it all, he thus interrogated himself —

"Shall I see her again, or not? Why not? If she's lost, she

cannot be worse lost by my having another interview with her. Nor could I feel worse than I do now. Ah! with this laurel fresh placed upon my brow! What if I tell her of it – tell her I am about to enter her native land as an invader? If she care for her country, that would spite her; and if I find she cares not for me, her spite would give me pleasure."

It was not an amiable mood for a lover contemplating a visit to his sweetheart. Still, natural enough under the circumstances; and Florence Kearney, wavering no longer, turned his steps towards that part of the city where dwelt Don Ignacio Valverde.

Chapter Five
A Studied Insult

In a small house of the third Municipality, in the street called Casa Calvo, dwelt Don Ignacio Valverde. It was a wooden structure – a frame dwelling – of French-Creole fashion, consisting of but a single story, with casement windows that opened on a verandah, in the Southern States termed *piazza*; this being but little elevated above the level of the outside street. Besides Don Ignacio and his daughter, but one other individual occupied the house – their only servant, a young girl of Mexican nativity and mixed blood, half white, half Indian – in short, a *mestiza*. The straitened circumstances of the exile forbade a more expensive establishment. Still, the insignia within were not those of pinched poverty. The sitting-room, if small, was tastefully furnished, while, among other chattels speaking of refinement, were several volumes of books, a harp and a guitar, with accompaniment of sheets of music. The strings of these instruments Luisa Valverde knew how to touch with the skill of a professional, both being common in her own country.

On that night, when the election of the filibustering officers was being held in Poydras Street, her father, alone with her in the same sitting-room, asked her to play the harp to the accompaniment of a song. Seating herself to the instrument, she

obeyed, singing one of those *romanzas* in which the language of Cervantes is so rich. It was, in fact, the old song "El Travador," from which has been filched the music set to Mrs Norton's beautiful lay, "Love not." But on this night the spirit of the Mexican señorita was not with her song. Soon as it was finished, and her father had become otherwise engaged, she stepped out of the room, and, standing in the piazza, glanced through the trellised lattice-work that screened it from the street. She evidently expected some one to come that way. And as her father had invited Florence Kearney to supper, and she knew of it, it would look as if he were the expected one.

If so, she was disappointed for a time, though a visitor made his appearance. The door bell, pulled from the outside, soon after summoned Pepita, the Mexican servant, to the front, and presently a heavy footfall on the wooden steps of the porch, told of a man stepping upon the piazza.

Meanwhile the young lady had returned within the room; but the night being warm, the hinged casement stood ajar, and she could see through it the man thus entering. An air of disappointment, almost chagrin, came over her countenance, as the moonlight disclosed to her view the dark visage of Carlos Santander.

"*Pasa V. adientro, Señor Don Carlos*," said her father also recognising their visitor through the casement; and in a moment after the Creole stepped into the room, Pepita placing a chair for him.

"Though," continued Don Ignacio, "we did not expect to have the honour of your company this evening, you are always welcome."

Notwithstanding this polite speech, there was a certain constraint or hesitancy in the way it was spoken, that told of some insincerity. It was evident that on that night at least Don Carlos' host looked upon him in the light of an intruder. Evidence of the same was still more marked on the countenance, as in the behaviour of Don Ignacio's daughter. Instead of a smile to greet the new-comer, something like a frown sat upon her beautiful brow, while every now and then a half-angry flash from her large liquid eyes, directed towards him, might have told him he was aught but welcome. Clearly it was not for him she had several times during the same night passed out into the piazza and looked through its lattice-work.

In truth, both father and daughter seemed disturbed by Santander's presence, both expecting one whom, for different reasons, they did not desire him to meet. If the Creole noticed their repugnance, he betrayed no sign of it. Don Carlos Santander, besides being physically handsome, was a man of rare intellectual strength, with many accomplishments, among others the power of concealing his thoughts under a mask of imperturbable coolness. Still, on this night his demeanour was different from its wont. He looked flurried and excited, his eyes scintillating as with anger at some affront lately offered him, and the sting of which still rankled in his bosom. Don Ignacio

noticed this, but said nothing. Indeed, he seemed to stand in awe of his guest, as though under some mysterious influence. So was he, and here it may as well be told. Santander, though by birth an American and a native of New Orleans, was of Mexican parentage, and still regarded himself as a citizen of the country of his ancestors. Only to his very intimates was it known that he held a very high place in the confidence of Mexico's Dictator. But Don Ignacio knew this, and rested certain hopes upon it. More than once had Santander, for motives that will presently appear, hinted to him the possibility of a return to his own land, with restoration of the estates he had forfeited. And the exiled patriot, wearied with long waiting, was at length willing to lend an ear to conditions, which, in other days, he might have spurned as humiliating if not actually dishonourable.

It was to talk of these Santander had now presented himself; and his host suspecting it, gave the young lady a side look, as much as to say, "Leave the room, Luisita."

She was but too glad to obey. Just then she preferred a turn upon the piazza; and into this she silently glided, leaving her father alone with the guest who had so inopportunely intruded.

It is not necessary to repeat what passed between the two men. Their business was to bring to a conclusion a compact they had already talked of, though only in general terms. It had reference to the restitution of Don Ignacio's confiscated estates, with, of course, also the ban of exile being removed from him. The price of all this, the hand of his daughter given to Carlos

Santander. It was the Creole who proposed these terms, and insisted upon them, even to the humiliation of himself. Madly in love with Luisa Valverde, he suspected that on her side there was no reciprocity of the passion. But he would have her hand if he could not her heart.

On that night the bargain was not destined to reach a conclusion, their conference being interrupted by the tread of booted feet, just ascending the front steps, and crossing the floor of the piazza. This followed by an exchange of salutations, in which the voice of Luisa Valverde was heard mingling with that of a man.

Don Ignacio looked more troubled than surprised. He knew who was there. But when the words spoken outside reached the ears of Carlos Santander, first, in openly exchanged salutations and then whispers seemingly secret and confidential, he could no longer keep his seat, but springing up, exclaimed —

"*Carrai*! It's that dog of an *Irlandes*!"

"Hish!" continued his host. "The Señor Florencio will hear you."

"I wish him to hear me. I repeat the expression, and plainly in his own native tongue. I call him a cur of an Irishman."

Outside was heard a short, sharp ejaculation, as of a man startled by some sudden surprise. It was followed by an appealing speech, this in the softer accents of a woman. Then the casement was drawn abruptly open, showing two faces outside. One, that of Florence Kearney, set in an angry frown; the other, Luisa

Valverde's, pale and appealing. An appeal idle and too late, as she herself saw. The air had become charged with the electricity of deadliest anger, and between the two men a collision was inevitable.

Without waiting for a word of invitation, Kearney stepped over the casement sill, and presented himself inside the room. Don Ignacio and the Creole were by this also on their feet; and for a second or so the three formed a strange triangular *tableau*– the Mexican with fear on his face, that of Santander still wearing the expression of insult, as when he had exclaimed, "Cur of an Irishman!" Kearney confronting him with a look of indignant defiance.

There was an interval of silence, as that of calm preceding storm. It was broken by the guest latest arrived saying a few words to his host, but in calm, dignified tone; an apology for having unceremoniously entered the room.

"No need to apologise," promptly rejoined Don Ignacio. "You are here by my invitation, Señor Don Florencio, and my humble home is honoured by your presence."

The Hidalgo blood, pure in Valverde's veins, had boiled up at seeing a man insulted under his roof.

"Thanks," said the young Irishman.

"And now, sir," he continued, turning to Santander and regarding him with a look of recovered coolness, "having made my apology, I require *yours*."

"For what?" asked Santander, counterfeiting ignorance.

"For using language that belongs to the *bagnios* of New Orleans, where, I doubt not, you spend most part of your time."

Then, suddenly changing tone and expression of face, he added —

"Cur of a Creole! you must take back your words!"

"Never! It's not my habit to take, but to give; and to you I give this!"

So saying, he stepped straight up to the Irishman, and spat in his face.

Kearney's heart was on fire. His hand was already on the butt of his pistol; but, glancing behind, he saw that pale appealing face, and with an effort restrained himself, calmly saying to Santander —

"Calling yourself a gentleman, you will no doubt have a card and address. May I ask you to favour me with it, as to-morrow I shall have occasion to write to you? If a scoundrel such as you can boast of having a friend, you may as well give him notice he will be needed. Your card, sir!"

"Take it!" hissed the Creole, flinging his card on the table. Then glaring around, as if his glance would annihilate all, he clutched hold of his hat, bowed haughtily to Don Ignacio, looked daggers at his daughter, and strode out into the street.

Though to all appearance defeated and humbled, he had in truth succeeded in his design, one he had long planned and cherished to bring about, – a duel with Kearney, in which his antagonist should be challenger. This would give him the choice

of weapons, which, as he well knew, would ensure to him both safety and success. Without the certainty of this, Carlos Santander would have been the last man to provoke such an encounter; for, with all his air of *bravache*, he was the veriest of cowards.

Chapter Six
"To the Salute!"

The thick "swamp-fog" still hovered above the Crescent City, when a carriage, drawn by two horses, rolled out through one of its suburbs, and on along the Shell Road, and in the direction of Lake Pontchartrain.

It was a close carriage – a hackney – with two men upon the driver's seat, and three inside. Of these last, one was Captain Florence Kearney, and another Lieutenant Francis Crittenden, both officers of the filibustering band, with *titles* not two days old. Now on the way neither to Texas nor Mexico, but to the shore of Lake Pontchartrain, where many an affair of honour has been settled by the spilling of much blood. A stranger in New Orleans, and knowing scarce a soul, Kearney had bethought him of the young fellow who had been elected first-lieutenant, and asked him to act as his second. Crittenden, a Kentuckian, being one of those who could not only stand fire, but *eat* it, if the occasion called, eagerly responded to the appeal; and they were now *en route* along the Shell Road to meet Carlos Santander and whoever he might have with him.

The third individual inside the carriage belonged to that profession, one of whose members usually makes the third in a duel – the doctor. He was a young man who, in the capacity of

surgeon, had attached himself to the band of filibusters.

Besides the mahogany box balanced upon his thigh there was another lying on the spare bit of cushion beside him, opposite to where Crittenden sat. It was of a somewhat different shape; and no one who had ever seen a case of duelling pistols could mistake it for aught else – for it was such.

As it had been arranged that swords were to be the weapons, and a pair of these were seen in a corner of the carriage, what could they be wanting with pistols?

It was Kearney who put this question; now for the first time noticing what seemed to him a superfluous armament. It was asked of Crittenden, to whom the pistols belonged, as might have been learnt by looking at his name engraved on the indented silver plate.

"Well," answered the Kentuckian, "I'm no great swordsman myself. I usually prefer pistols, and thought it might be as well to bring a pair along. I didn't much like the look of your antagonist's friend, and it's got into my head that before leaving the ground I may have something to say to *him* on my own account. So, if it come to that, I shall take to the barkers."

Kearney smiled, but said nothing, feeling satisfied that in case of any treachery, he had the right sort of man for his second.

He might have felt further secure, in a still other supporting party, who rode on the box beside the driver. This was a man carrying a long rifle, that stood with the barrel two feet above his shoulders, and the butt rested between his heavily booted feet.

It was Cris Rock, who had insisted on coming along, as he said, to see that the fight was all "fair and square." He too had conceived an unfavourable opinion of both the men to be met, from what he had seen of them at the *rendezvous*; for Santander's second had also been there. With the usual caution of one accustomed to fighting Indians, he always went armed, usually with his long "pea" rifle.

On reaching a spot of open ground alongside the road, and near the shore of the lake, the carriage stopped. It was the place of the appointed meeting, as arranged by the seconds on the preceding day.

Though their antagonists had not yet arrived, Kearney and Crittenden got out, leaving the young surgeon busied with his cutlery and bandage apparatus.

"I hope you won't have to use them, doctor," remarked Kearney, with a light laugh, as he sprang out of the carriage. "I don't want you to practise upon me till we've made conquest of Mexico."

"And not then, I trust," soberly responded the surgeon.

Crittenden followed, carrying the swords; and the two, leaping across the drain which separated the road from the duelling ground, took stand under a tree.

Rock remained firm on the coach-box, still seated and silent. As the field was full under his view, and within range of his rifle, he knew that, like the doctor, he would be near enough if wanted.

Ten minutes passed – most of the time in solemn silence,

on the part of the principal, with some anxious thoughts. No matter how courageous a man may be – however skilled in weapons, or accustomed to the deadly use of them – he cannot, at such a crisis, help having a certain tremor of the heart, if not a misgiving of conscience. He has come there to kill, or be killed; and the thought of either should be sufficient to disturb mental equanimity. At such times, he who is not gifted with natural courage had needs have a good cause, and confidence in the weapon to be used. Florence Kearney possessed all three; and though it was his first appearance in a duel, he had no fear for the result. Even the still, sombre scene, with the long grey moss hanging down from the dark cypress trees, like the drapery of a hearse, failed to inspire him with dread. If, at times, a slight nervousness came over him, it was instantly driven off by the thought of the insult he had received – and, perhaps also, a little by the remembrance of those dark eyes he fancied would flash proudly if he triumphed, and weep bitterly were he to suffer discomfiture. Very different were his feelings now from those he experienced less than forty-eight hours before, when he was on his way to the house of Don Ignacio Valverde. That night, before leaving it, he was good as sure he possessed the heart of Don Ignacio's daughter. Indeed, she had all but told him so; and was this not enough to nerve him for the encounter near at hand?

Very near now – close to commencing. The rumbling of wheels heard through the drooping festoonery of the trees, proclaimed that a second carriage was approaching along the

Shell Road. It could only be that containing the antagonists. And it was that. In less than ten minutes after, it drew up on the causeway, about twenty paces to the rear of the one already arrived. Two men got out, who, although wrapped in cloaks and looking as large as giants through the thick mist, could be recognised as Carlos Santander and his second. There was a third individual, who, like the young surgeon, remained by the carriage – no doubt a doctor, too, – making the duelling party symmetrical and complete.

Santander and his friend having pulled off their cloaks and tossed them back into the carriage, turned towards the wet ditch, and also leaped over it.

The first performed the feat somewhat awkwardly, drooping down upon the further bank with a ponderous thud. He was a large, heavily built man – altogether unlike one possessing the activity necessary for a good swordsman.

His antagonist might have augured well from his apparent clumsiness, but for what he had heard of him. For Carlos Santander, though having the repute of a swaggerer, with some suspicion of cowardice, had proved himself a dangerous adversary by twice killing his man. His second – a French-Creole, called Duperon – enjoyed a similar reputation, he, too, having been several times engaged in affairs that resulted fatally. At this period New Orleans was emphatically the city of the *duello*– for this speciality, perhaps the most noted in the world.

As already said, Florence Kearney knew the sort of man he

had to meet, and this being his own first appearance in a duelling field, he might well have been excused for feeling some anxiety as to the result. It was so slight, however, as not to betray itself, either in his looks or gestures. Confiding in his skill, gained by many a set-to with buttoned foils, and supported, as he was, by the gallant young Kentuckian, he knew nothing that could be called fear. Instead, as his antagonist advanced towards the spot where he was standing, and he looked at the handsome, yet sinister face – his thoughts at the same time reverting to Luisa Valverde, and the insult upon him in her presence – his nerves, not at all unsteady, now became firm as steel. Indeed, the self-confident, almost jaunty air, with which his adversary came upon the ground, so far from shaking them – the effect, no doubt, intended – but braced them the more.

When the new-comers had advanced a certain distance into the meadow, Crittenden, forsaking his stand under the tree, stepped out to meet them, Kearney following a few paces behind.

A sort of quadruple bow was the exchanged salutation; then the principals remained apart, the seconds drawing nigher to one another, and entering upon the required conference.

Only a few words passed between them, as but few were required; the weapons, distance, and mode of giving the word, having all been pre-arranged.

There was no talk of apology – nor thought of it being either offered or accepted. By their attitude, and in their looks, both the challenged and challenger showed a full, firm determination

to fight.

Duperon did not seem to care much one way or the other, and the Kentuckian was not the sort to seek conciliation – with an insult such as his captain had received calling for chastisement.

After the preliminaries were passed over, the seconds again separated – each to attend upon his principal.

The young Irishman took off his coat, and rolled back his shirt sleeves up to the elbow. Santander, on the other hand, who wore a red flannel shirt under his ample *sacque*, simply threw aside the latter, leaving the shirt sleeves as they were, buttoned around the wrist.

Everybody was now silent; the hackney-drivers on their boxes, the doctors, the gigantic Texan, all looming large and spectral-like through the still lingering mist, while the streamers of Spanish moss hanging from the cypresses around were appropriate drapery for such a scene.

In the midst of the death-like silence a voice broke in, coming from the top of a tall cypress standing near. Strange and wild, it was enough not only to startle, but awe the stoutest heart. A shrill, continued cachinnation, which, though human-like, could scarce be ascribed to aught human, save the laughter of a maniac.

It frightened no one there, all knowing what it was – the cackling cry of the white-headed eagle.

As it ended, but before its echoes had ceased reverberating among the trees, another sound, equally awe-inspiring, woke the echoes of the forest further down. This, the *whoo-whoo-whooa*

of the great southern owl, seemingly a groan in answer to the eagle's laugh.

In all countries, and throughout all ages, the hooting of the owl has been superstitiously dreaded as ominous of death, and might have dismayed our duellists, had they been men of the common kind of courage. Neither were, or seemed not to be; for, as the lugubrious notes were still echoing in their ears, they advanced, and with rapiers upraised, stood confronting each other, but one look on their faces, and one thought in their hearts – "*to kill*!"

Chapter Seven
A Duel "to the Death."

The duellists stood confronting one another, in the position of "salute," both hands on high grasping their swords at hilt and point, the blades held horizontally. The second of each was in his place, on the left hand of his principal, half a pace in advance. But a moment more all were waiting for the word. The second of the challenger had the right to give it, and Crittenden was not the man to make delay.

"*Engage*!" he cried out, in a firm clear voice, at the same time stepping half a pace forward, Duperon doing the same. The movement was made as a precaution against foul play; sometimes, though not always intended. For in the excitement of such a moment, or under the impatience of angry passion, one or other of the principals may close too quickly – to prevent which is the duty of the seconds.

Quick, at the "engage," both came to "guard" with a collision that struck sparks from the steel, proving the hot anger of the adversaries. Had they been cooler, they would have crossed swords quietly. But when, the instant after, they came to *tierce*, both appeared more collected, their blades for a while keeping in contact, and gliding around each other as if they had been a single piece.

For several minutes this cautious play continued, without further sparks, or only such as appeared to scintillate from the eyes of the combatants. Then came a counter-thrust, quickly followed by a counter parry, with no advantage to either.

Long ere this, an observer acquainted with the weapons they were wielding, could have seen that of the two Kearney was the better swordsman. In changing from *carte* to *tierce*, or reversely, the young Irishman showed himself possessed of the power to keep his arm straight and do the work with his wrist, whilst the Creole kept bending his elbow, thus exposing his forearm to the adversary's point. It is a rare accomplishment among swordsmen, but, when present, insuring almost certain victory, that is, other circumstances being equal.

In Kearney's case, it perhaps proved the saving of his life; since it seemed to be the sole object of his antagonist to thrust in upon him, heedless of his own guard. But the long, straight point, from shoulder far outstretched, and never for an instant obliquely, foiled all his attempts.

After a few thrusts, Santander seemed surprised at his fruitless efforts. Then over his face came a look more like fear. It was the first time in his duelling experience he had been so baffled, for it was his first encounter with an adversary who could keep a *straight arm*.

But Florence Kearney had been taught *tierce* as well as *carte*, and knew how to practise it. For a time he was prevented from trying it by the other's impetuous and incessant thrusting, which

kept him continuously at guard, but as the sword-play proceeded, he began to discover the weak points of his antagonist, and, with a well-directed thrust, at length sent his blade through the Creole's outstretched arm, impaling it from wrist to elbow.

An ill-suppressed cry of triumph escaped from the Kentuckian's lips, while with eyes directed towards the other second, he seemed to ask —

"Are you satisfied?"

Then the question was formally put.

Duperon looked in the face of his principal, though without much show of interrogating him. It seemed as if he already divined what the answer would be.

"*A la mort*!" cried the Creole, with a deadly emphasis and bitter determination in his dark sinister eyes.

"To the death be it!" was the response of the Irishman, not so calmly, and now for the first time showing anger. Nor strange he should, since he now knew he had crossed swords with a man determined on taking his life.

There was a second or two's pause, of which Santander availed himself, hastily whipping a handkerchief round his wounded arm – a permission not strictly according to the code, but tacitly granted by his gallant antagonist.

When the two again closed and came to guard, the seconds were no longer by their sides. At the words "*à la mort*" they had withdrawn – each to the rear of his principal – the mode of action in a duel to the death. Their *rôle* henceforth was simply to look

on, with no right of interference, unless either of the principals should attempt foul play. This, however, could not well occur. By the phrase "*à la mort*" is conveyed a peculiar meaning, well-known to the Orleans duellist. When spoken, it is no longer a question of sword-skill, or who draws first blood; but a challenge giving free licence to kill – whichever can.

In the present affair it was followed by silence more profound and more intense than ever, while the attention of the spectators, now including the seconds, seemed to redouble itself.

The only sound heard was a whistling of wings. The fog had drifted away, and several large birds were seen circling in the air above, looking down with stretched necks, as if they, too, felt interested in the spectacle passing underneath. No doubt they did; for they were vultures, and could see – whether or not they scented it – that blood was being spilled.

Once more, also, from the tree tops came the mocking laughter of the eagle; and out of the depths, through long, shadowy arcades, the mournful hootings of the great white owl – fit music for such fell strife.

Disregarding these ominous sounds – each seeming a death-warning in itself – the combatants had once more closed, again and again crossing sword-blades with a clash that frightened owl, eagle, and vulture, for an instant causing them to withhold their vocal accompaniment.

Though now on both sides the contest was carried on with increased anger, there was not much outward sign of it. On

neither any rash sword-play. If they had lost temper they yet had control over their weapons; and their guards and points, though perhaps more rapidly exchanged, displayed as much skill as ever.

Again Kearney felt surprised at the repeated thrusts of his antagonist, which kept him all the time on the defensive, while Santander appeared equally astonished and discomfited by that far-reaching arm, straight as a yardstick, with elbow never bent. Could the Creole have but added six inches to his rapier blade, in less than ten seconds the young Irishman would have had nearly so much of it passed between his ribs.

Twice its point touched, slightly scratching the skin upon his breast, and drawing blood.

For quite twenty minutes the sanguinary strife continued without any marked advantage to either. It was a spectacle somewhat painful to behold, the combatants themselves being a sight to look upon. Kearney's shirt of finest white linen showed like a butcher's; his sleeves encrimsoned; his hands, too, grasping his rapier hilt, the same – not with his own blood, but that of his adversary, which had run back along the blade; his face was spotted by the drops dashed over it from the whirling wands of steel.

Gory, too, was the face of Santander; but gashed as well. Bending forward to put in a point, the Creole had given his antagonist a chance, resulting to himself in a punctured cheek, the scar of which would stay there for life.

It was this brought the combat to an end; or, at all events, to its

concluding stroke. Santander, vain of his personal appearance, on feeling his cheek laid open, suddenly lost command of himself, and with a fierce oath rushed at his adversary, regardless of the consequences.

He succeeded in making a thrust, though not the one he intended. For having aimed at Kearney's heart, missing it, his blade passed through the buckle of the young Irishman's braces, where in an instant it was entangled.

Only for half a second; but this was all the skilled swordsman required. Now, first since the fight began, his elbow was seen to bend. This to obtain room for a thrust, which was sent, to all appearance, home to his adversary's heart.

Every one on the ground expected to see Santander fall; for by the force of the blow and direction Kearney's blade should have passed through his body, splitting the heart in twain. Instead, the point did not appear to penetrate even an inch! As it touched, there came a sound like the chinking of coin in a purse, with simultaneously the snap of a breaking blade, and the young Irishman was seen standing as in a trance of astonishment, in his hand but the half of a sword, the other half gleaming amongst the grass at his feet.

It seemed a mischance, fatal to Florence Kearney, and only the veriest dastard would have taken advantage of it. But this Santander was, and once more drawing back, and bringing his blade to *tierce*, he was rushing on his now defenceless antagonist, when Crittenden called "Foul play!" at the same time springing

forward to prevent it.

His interference, however, would have been too late, and in another instant the young Irishman would have been stretched lifeless along the sward, but for a second individual who had watched the foul play – one who had been suspecting it all along. The sword of Santander seen flying off, as if struck out of his grasp, and his arm dropping by his side, with blood pouring from the tips of his fingers, were all nearly simultaneous incidents, as also the crack of a rifle and a cloud of blue smoke suddenly spurting up over one of the carriages, and half-concealing the colossal figure of Cris Rock, still seated on the box. Out of that cloud came a cry in the enraged voice of the Texan, with words which made all plain —

"Ye darned Creole cuss! Take that for a treetur an' a cowart! Strip the skunk! He's got sumthin' steely under his shirt; I heerd the chink o' it."

Saying which he bounded down from the box, sprang over the water-ditch, and rushed on towards the spot occupied by the combatants.

In a dozen strides he was in their midst, and before either of the two seconds, equally astonished, could interfere, he had caught Santander by the throat, and tore open the breast of his shirt!

Underneath was then seen another shirt, not flannel, nor yet linen or cotton, but link-and-chain steel!

Chapter Eight
A Disgraced Duellist

Impossible to describe the scene which followed, or the expression upon the faces of those men who stood beside Santander. The Texan, strong as he was big, still kept hold of him, though now at arm's length; in his grasp retaining the grown man with as much apparent ease as though it were but a child. And there, sure enough, under the torn flannel shirt, all could see a doublet of chain armour, impenetrable to sword's point as plate of solid steel.

Explanation this of why Carlos Santander was so ready to take the field in a duel, and had twice left his antagonist lifeless upon it. It explained also why, when leaping across the water-ditch, he had dropped so heavily upon the farther bank. Weighted as he was, no wonder.

By this time the two doctors, with the pair of hackney-drivers, seeing that something had turned up out of the common course, parting from the carriages, had also come upon the ground; the jarveys, in sympathy with Cris Rock, crying, "Shame!" In the Crescent City even a cabman has something of chivalry in his nature – the surroundings teach and invite it – and now the detected scoundrel seemed without a single friend. For he – hitherto acting as such, seeing the imposture, which had been

alike practised on himself, stepped up to his principal, and looking him scornfully in the face, hissed out the word "*Lâche*!"

Then turning to Kearney and Crittenden he added —

"Let that be my apology to you, gentlemen. If you're not satisfied with it, I'm willing and ready to take his place – with either of you."

"It's perfectly satisfactory, monsieur," frankly responded the Kentuckian, "so far as I'm concerned. And I think I may say as much for Captain Kearney."

"Indeed, yes," assented the Irishman, adding: "We absolve you, sir, from all blame. It's evident you knew nothing of that shining panoply till now;" as he spoke, pointing to the steel shirt.

The French-Creole haughtily, but courteously, bowed thanks. Then, facing once more to Santander, and repeating the "*Lâche*" strode silently away from the ground.

They had all mistaken the character of the individual, who, despite a somewhat forbidding face, was evidently a man of honour, as he had proved himself.

"What d'ye weesh me to do wi' him?" interrogated the Texan, still keeping Santander in firm clutch. "Shed we shoot him or hang him?"

"Hang!" simultaneously shouted the two hackney-drivers, who seemed as bitter against the disgraced duellist as if he had "bilked" them of a fare.

"So I say, too," solemnly pronounced the Texan; "shootin's too good for the like o' him; a man capable o' sech a cowardly,

murderous trick desarves to die the death o' a dog."

Then, with an interrogating look at Crittenden, he added: "Which is't to be, lootenant?"

"Neither, Cris," answered the Kentuckian. "If I mistake not, the *gentleman* has had enough punishment without either. If he's got so much as a spark of shame or conscience – "

"Conshence!" exclaimed Rock, interrupting. "Sech a skunk don't know the meanin' o' the word. Darn ye!" he continued, turning upon his prisoner, and shaking him till the links in the steel shirt chinked, "I feel as if I ked drive the blade o' my bowie inter ye through them steel fixin's an' all."

And, drawing his knife from its sheath, he brandished it in a menacing manner.

"Don't, Rock! Please don't!" interposed the Kentuckian, Kearney joining in the entreaty. "He's not worth anger, much less revenge. So let him go."

"You're right thar, lootenant," rejoined Rock. "He ain't worth eyther, that's the truth. An' 'twould only be puttin' pisen on the blade o' my knife to smear it wi' his black blood. F'r all, I ain't a-gwine to let him off so easy's all that, unless you an' the captain insists on it. After the warmish work he's had, an' the sweat he's put himself in by the wearin' o' two shirts at a time, I guess he won't be any the worse of a sprinkling o' cold water. So here goes to gie it him."

Saying which, he strode off towards the ditch, half-dragging, half-carrying Santander along with him.

The cowed and craven creature neither made resistance, nor dared. Had he done so, the upshot was obvious. For the Texan's blade, still bared, was shining before his eyes, and he knew that any attempt on his part, either to oppose the latter's intention or escape, would result in having it buried between, his ribs. So, silently, sullenly, he allowed himself to be taken along, not as a lamb to the slaughter, but a wolf, or rather dog, about to be chastised for some malfeasance.

In an instant after, the chastisement was administered by the Texan laying hold of him with both hands, lifting him from off his feet, and then dropping him down into the water-ditch, where, weighted with the steel shirt, he fell with a dead, heavy plunge, going at once to the bottom.

"That's less than your desarvin's," said the Texan, on thus delivering his charge. "An' if it had been left to Cris Rock 'twould 'a been *up*, 'stead o' *down*, he'd 'a sent ye. If iver man desarved hangin', you're the model o' him. Ha – ha – ha! Look at the skunk now!"

The last words, with the laugh preceding them, were elicited by the ludicrous appearance which Santander presented. He had come to the surface again, and, with some difficulty, owing to the encumbrance of his under-shirt, clambered out upon the bank. But not as when he went under. Instead, with what appeared a green cloak over his shoulders, the scum of the stagnant water long collecting undisturbed. The hackney-driver – there was but one now, the other taken off by Duperon, who had

hired him, their doctor too – joined with Rock in his laughter, while Kearney, Crittenden, and their own surgeon could not help uniting in the chorus. Never had tragic hero suffered a more comical discomfiture.

He was now permitted to withdraw from the scene of it, a permission of which he availed himself without further delay; first retreating for some distance along the Shell Road, as one wandering and distraught; then, as if seized by a sudden thought, diving into the timbered swamp alongside, and there disappearing.

Soon after the carriage containing the victorious party rattled past; they inside it scarce casting a look to see what had become of Santander. He was nothing to them now, at best only a thing to be a matter of ludicrous remembrance. Nor long remained he in their thoughts; these now reverting to Texas, and their necessity for hastening back to the Crescent City, to make start for "The Land of the Lone Star."

Chapter Nine
A Spartan Band

In ancient days Sparta had its Thermopylae, while in those of modern date Sicily saw a thousand men in scarlet shirts make landing upon her coast, and conquer a kingdom defended by a military force twenty or thirty times their number!

But deeds of heroism are not alone confined to the history of the Old World. That of the New presents us with many pages of a similar kind, and Texas can tell of achievements not surpassed, either in valour or chivalry, by any upon record. Such was the battle of San Jacinto, where the Texans were victorious, though overmatched in the proportion of ten to one: such the defence of Fort Alamo, when the brave Colonel Crockett, now world-known, surrendered up his life, alongside the equally brave "Jim Bowie," he who gave his name to the knife which on that occasion he so efficiently wielded – after a protracted and terrible struggle dropping dead upon a heap of foes who had felt its sharp point and keen edge.

Among the deeds of great renown done by the defenders of the young Republic, none may take higher rank, since none is entitled to it, than that known as the battle of Mier. Though they there lost the day – a defeat due to the incapacity of an ill-chosen leader – they won glory eternal. Every man of them who fell

had first killed his foeman – some half a score – while of those who survived there was not one so craven as to cry "Quarter!" The white flag went not up till they were overwhelmed and overpowered by sheer disparity of numbers.

It was a fight at first with rifles and musketry at long range; then closer as the hostile host came crowding in upon them; the bullets sent through windows and loopholed walls – some from the flat parapetted roofs of the houses – till at length it became a conflict hand to hand with knife, sword, and pistol, or guns clubbed – being empty, with no time to reload them – many a Texan braining one antagonist with the butt of his piece after having sent its bullet through the body of another!

Vain all! Brute strength, represented by superior numbers, triumphed over warlike prowess, backed by indomitable courage; and the "Mier Expedition," from which Texas had expected so much, ended disastrously, though ingloriously; those who survived being made prisoners, and carried off to the capital of Mexico.

Of the Volunteer Corps which composed this ill-fated expedition – and they were indeed all volunteers – none gave better account of itself than that organised in Poydras Street, New Orleans, and among its individual members no man behaved better than he whom they had chosen as their leader. Florence Kearney had justified their choice, and proved true to the trust, as all who outlived that fatal day ever after admitted. Fortunately, he himself was among the survivors; by a like

good luck, so too were his first-lieutenant Crittenden and Cris Rock. As at "Fanning's Massacre," so at Mier the gigantic Texan performed prodigies of valour, laying around him, and slaying on all sides, till at length wounded and disabled, like a lion beset by a *chevaux-de-frise* of Caffre assegais, he was compelled to submit. Fighting side by side, with the man he had first taken a fancy to on the Levee of New Orleans, and afterwards became instrumental in making captain of his corps – finding this man to be what he had conjecturally believed and pronounced him – of the "true grit" – Cris Rock now felt for Florence Kearney almost the affection of a father, combined with the grand respect which one gallant soul is ever ready to pay another. Devotion, too, so strong and real, that had the young Irishman called upon him for the greatest risk of his life, in any good or honourable cause, he would have responded to the call without a moment's hesitancy or murmur. Nay, more than risk; he would have laid it down, absolutely, to save that of his cherished leader.

Proof of this was, in point of fact, afforded but a short while after. Any one acquainted with Texan history will remember how the Mier prisoners, while being taken to the city of Mexico, rose upon their guards, and mastering them, made their escape to the mountains around. This occurred at the little town of El Salado, and was caused by the terrible sufferings the captives had endured upon the march, added to many insults and cruelties, to which they had been subjected, not only by the Mexican soldiers, but the officers having them in charge. These had grown

altogether insupportable, at El Salado reaching the climax.

It brought about the crisis for a long time accumulating, and which the Texans anticipated. For they had, at every opportunity afforded them, talked over and perfected a plan of escape.

By early daybreak on a certain morning, as their guards were carelessly lounging about an idle hour before continuing that toilsome journey, a signal shout was heard.

"Now, boys, up and at them!" were the words, with some others following, which all well understood – almost a repetition of the famous order of Wellington at Waterloo. And as promptly obeyed; for on hearing it the Texans rushed at the soldiers of the escort, wrenched from them their weapons, and with those fought their way through the hastily-formed ranks of the enemy out into the open country.

So far they had succeeded, though in the end, for most of them, it proved a short and sad respite. Pursued by an overwhelming force – fresh troops drawn from the garrisons in the neighbourhood, added to the late escort so shamefully discomfited, and smarting under the humiliation and defeat – the pursuit carrying them through a country to which they were entire strangers – a district almost uninhabited, without roads, and, worse still, without water, – not strange that all, or nearly all, of them were recaptured, and carried back to El Salado.

Then ensued a scene worthy of being enacted by savages, for little better than savages were those in whose custody they were. Exulting fiend-like over their recapture, at first the word

went round that all were to be executed; this being the general wish of their captors. No doubt the deed of wholesale vengeance would have been done, and our hero, Florence Kearney, with his companion, Cris Rock, never more have been heard of; in other words, the novel of the "Free Lances" would not have been written. But among those reckless avengers there were some who knew better than to advocate indiscriminate slaughter. It was "a far cry to Loch Awe," all knew; the Highland loch typified not by Texas, but the United States. But the more knowing ones always knew that, however far, the cry might be heard, and then what the result? No mere band of Texan filibusters, ill-organised, and but poorly equipped, to come across the Rio Grande; instead a well-disciplined army in numbers enough for sure retaliation, bearing the banner of the "Stars and Stripes."

In fine, a more merciful course was determined upon; only *decimation* of the prisoners – every tenth man to suffer death.

There was no word about degrees in their guiltiness – all were alike in this respect – and the fate of each was to be dependent on pure blind chance.

When the retaken escapadoes had been brought back to El Salado, they were drawn up in line of single file, and carefully counted. A helmet, snatched from the head of one of the Dragoons guarding them, was made use of as a ballot-box. Into this were thrown a number of what we call French or kidney beans – the *pijoles* of Mexico – in count corresponding to that of the devoted victims. Of these *pijoles* there are several varieties,

distinguishable chiefly by their colour. Two sorts are common, the black and white; and these were chosen to serve as tickets in that dread lottery of life and death. For every nine white beans there was a black one; he who drew black would be shot within the hour!

Into the hard soldier's head-piece, appropriate for such purpose, the beans were dropped, and the drawing done as designed. I, who now write of it long after, can truthfully affirm that never in the history of human kind has there been a grander exhibition of man's courage than was that day given at El Salado. The men who exemplified it were of no particular nation. As a matter of course, the main body of the Texans were of American birth, but among them were also Englishmen, Scotchmen, Irishmen, French, and Germans – even some who spoke Spanish, the language of their captors, now their judges, and about to become their executioners. But when that helmet of horrible contents was carried round, and held before each, not one showed the slightest fear or hesitancy to plunge his hand into it, though knowing that what they should bring up between their fingers might be the sealing of their fate. Many laughed and made laughter among their comrades, by some quaint *jeu d'esprit*. One reckless fellow – no other than Cris Rock – as he fearlessly rattled the beans about, cried aloud —

"Wal, boys, I guess it's the tallest gamblin' I've ever took a hand at. But this child ain't afeerd. I was born to good luck, an' am not likely to go under – jest yet."

The event justified his confidence, as he drew *blank*– not *black*, the fatal colour.

It was now Kearney's turn to undergo the dread ordeal; and, without flinching, he was about to insert his hand into the helmet, when the Texan, seizing hold of it, stayed him.

"No, Cap!" he exclaimed; "I'm wownded, putty bad, as ye see," – (he had received a lance thrust in their struggle with the Guards) – "an' mayent git over it. Thurfor, your life's worth more'n mine. Besides, my luck's good jest now. So let me take your chance. That's allowed, as these skunks hev sayed themselves."

So it was – a declaration having been made by the officer who presided over the drawing – from humane motives as pretended – that any one who could find a substitute might himself stand clear. A grim mockery it seemed; and yet it was not so; since, besides Cris Rock, more than one courageous fellow proposed the same to comrade and friend – in the case of two brothers the elder one insisting upon it.

Though fully, fervently appreciating the generous offer, Florence Kearney was not the man to avail himself of it.

"Thanks, brave comrade!" he said, with warmth, detaching his hand from the Texan's grasp, and thrusting it into the helmet. "What's left of your life yet is worth more than all mine; and my luck may be good as yours – we'll see."

It proved so, a murmur of satisfaction running along the line as they saw his hand drawn out with a white bear between the

fingers.

"Thanks to the Almighty!" joyously shouted the Texan, as he made out the colour. "Both o' us clar o' that scrape, by Job! An' as there ain't no need for me dyin' yet, I mean to live it out, an' git well agin."

And get well he did, despite the long after march, with all its exposures and fatigues; his health and strength being completely restored as he stepped over the threshold, entering within his prison-cell in the city of Mexico.

Chapter Ten
The Acordada

One of the most noted "lions" in the City of Mexico is the prison called La Acordada. Few strangers visit the Mexican capital without also paying a visit to this celebrated penal establishment, and few who enter its gloomy portals issue forth from them without having seen something to sadden the heart, and be ever afterwards remembered with repugnance and pain.

There is, perhaps, no prison in the universal world where one may witness so many, and such a variety of criminals; since there is no crime known to the calendar that has not been committed by some one of the gaol-birds of the Acordada.

Its cells, or cloisters – for the building was once a monastery – are usually well filled with thieves, forgers, ravishers, highway robbers, and a fair admixture of murderers; none appearing cowed or repentant, but boldly brazening it out, and even boasting of their deeds of villainy, fierce and strong as when doing them, save the disabled ones, who suffer from wounds or some loathsome disease.

Nor is all their criminal action suspended inside the prison walls. It is carried on within their cells, and still more frequently in the courtyards of the ancient convent, where they are permitted to meet in common and spend a considerable portion

of their time. Here they may be seen in groups, most of them ragged and greasy, squatted on the flags, card-playing – and cheating when they can – now and then quarrelling, but always talking loud and cursing.

Into the midst of this mass of degraded humanity were thrust two of the unfortunate prisoners, taken at the battle of Mier – the two with whom our tale has alone to do.

For reasons that need not be told, most of the captives were excepted from this degradation; the main body of them being carried on through the city to the pleasant suburban village of Tacubaya.

But Florence Kearney and Cris Rock were not among the exceptions; both having been consigned to the horrid pandemonium we have painted.

It was some consolation to them that they were allowed to share the same cell, though they would have liked it better could they have had this all to themselves. As it was, they had not; two individuals being bestowed in it along with them.

It was an apartment of but limited dimensions – about eight feet by ten – the cloister of some ancient monk, who, no doubt, led a jolly enough life of it there, or, if not there, in the refectory outside, in the days when the Acordada was a pleasant place of residence for himself and his cowled companions. For his monastery, as "Bolton Abbey in the olden time," saw many a scene of good cheer, its inmates being no anchorites.

Beside the Texan prisoners, its other occupants now were

men of Mexican birth. One of them, under more favourable circumstances, would have presented a fine appearance. Even in his prison garb, somewhat ragged and squalid, he looked the gentleman and something more. For there was that in his air and physiognomy, which proclaimed him no common man. Captivity may hold and make more fierce, but cannot degrade, the lion. And just as a lion in its cage seemed this man in a cell of the Acordada. His face was of the rotund type, bold in its expression, yet with something of gentle humanity, seen when searched for, in the profound depths of a dark penetrating eye. His complexion was a clear olive, such as is common to Mexicans of pure Spanish descent, the progeny of the Conquistadors; his beard and moustache coal-black, as also the thick mass of hair that, bushing out and down over his ears, half concealed them.

Cris Rock "cottoned" to this man on sight. Nor liked him much the less when told he had been a robber! Cris supposed that in Mexico a robber may sometimes be an honest man, or at all events, have taken to the road through some supposed wrong – personal or political. Freebooting is less a crime, or at all events, more easy of extenuation in a country whose chief magistrate himself is a freebooter; and such, at this moment, neither more nor less, was the chief magistrate of Mexico, Don Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna.

Beyond the fact, or it might be only suspicion, that Ruperto Rivas was a robber, little seemed to be known of him among the inmates of the Acordada. He had been there only a short while,

and took no part in their vulgar, commonplace ways of killing time; instead, staying within his cell. His name had, however, leaked out, and this brought up in the minds of some of his fellow-prisoners certain reminiscences pointing to him as one of the road fraternity; no common one either, but the chief of a band of "salteadores."

Altogether different was the fourth personage entitled to a share in the cell appropriated to Kearney and Cris Rock; unlike the reputed robber as the Satyr to Hyperion. In short, a contrast of the completest kind, both physically and mentally. No two beings claiming to be of human kind could have presented a greater dissimilarity – being very types of the extreme. Ruperto Rivas, despite the shabby habiliments in which the gaol authorities had arrayed him, looked all dignity and grandeur, while El Zorillo – the little fox, as his prison companions called him – was an epitomised impersonation of wickedness and meanness; not only crooked in soul, but in body – being in point of fact an *enano* or dwarf-hunchback.

Previous to the arrival of those who were henceforth to share their cell, this ill-assorted pair had been kept chained together, as much by way of punishment as to prevent escape. But now, the gaol-governor, as if struck by a comical idea, directed them to be separated, and the dwarf linked to the Texan Colossus – thus presenting a yet more ludicrous contrast of couples – while the ex-captain of the filibusters and the reputed robber were consigned to the same chain.

Of the new occupants of the cloister, Cris Rock was the more disgusted with the situation. His heart was large enough to feel sympathy for humanity in any shape, and he would have pitied his deformed fellow-prisoner, but for a deformity of the latter worse than any physical ugliness; for the Texan soon learnt that the hideous creature, whose couch as well as chain he was forced to share, had committed crimes of the most atrocious nature, among the rest murder! It was, in fact, for this last that he was now in the Acordada – a cowardly murder, too – a case of poisoning. That he still lived was due to the proofs not being legally satisfactory, though no one doubted of his having perpetrated the crime. At first contact with this wretch the Texan had recoiled in horror, without knowing aught of his past. There was that in his face which spoke a history of dark deeds. But when this became known to the new denizens of the cell, the proximity of such a monster was positively revolting to them.

Vengeance itself could not have devised a more effective mode of torture. Cris Rock groaned under it, now and then grinding his teeth and stamping his feet, as if he could have trodden the mis-shapen thing into a still more shapeless mass under the heels of his heavy boots.

For the first two days of their imprisonment in the Acordada neither of the Texans could understand why they were being thus punished – as it were to satisfy some personal spite. None of the other Mier prisoners, of whom several had been brought to the same gaol, were submitted to a like degradation. True, these were

also chained two and two; but to one another, and not to Mexican criminals. Why, then, had they alone been made an exception? For their lives neither could tell or guess, though they gave way to every kind of conjecture. It was true enough that Cris Rock had been one of the ringleaders in the rising at El Salado, while the young Irishman had also taken a prominent part in that affair. Still, there were others now in the Acordada who had done the same, receiving treatment altogether different. The attack upon the Guards, therefore, could scarce be the cause of what they were called upon to suffer now; for besides the humiliation of being chained to criminals, they were otherwise severely dealt with. The food set before them was of the coarsest, with a scarcity of it; and more than once the gaoler, whose duty it was to look after them, made mockery of their irksome situation, jesting on the grotesque companionship of the dwarf and giant. As the gaol-governor had shown, on his first having them conveyed to their cells, signs of a special hostility, so did their daily attendant. But for what reason neither Florence Kearney nor his faithful comrade could divine.

They learnt it at length – on the third day after their entrance within the prison. All was explained by the door of their cell being drawn open, exposing to view the face and figure of a man well-known to them. And from both something like a cry escaped, as they saw standing without, by the side of the gaol-governor – Carlos Santander.

Chapter Eleven
A Colonel in Full Feather

Yes; outside the door of their cell was Carlos Santander. And in full war panoply, wearing a magnificent uniform, with a glittering sword by his side, and on his head a cocked hat, surmounted by a *panache* of white ostrich feathers!

To explain his presence there, and in such guise, it is necessary to return upon time and state some particulars of this man's life not yet before the reader. As already said, he was a native of New Orleans, but of Mexican parentage, and regarding himself as a Mexican citizen. Something more than a mere citizen, indeed; as, previous to his encounter with Florence Kearney, he had been for a time resident in Mexico, holding some sort of appointment under that Government, or from the Dictator himself – Santa Anna. What he was doing in New Orleans no one exactly knew, though among his intimates there was an impression that he still served his Mexican master, in the capacity of a secret agent – a sort of *procurador*, or spy. Nor did this suspicion do him wrong: for he was drawing pay from Santa Anna, and doing work for him in the States, which could scarce be dignified with the name of diplomacy. Proof of its vile character is afforded by the action he took among the volunteers in Poydras Street. His presenting himself at their rendezvous, getting enrolled in the corps, and

offering as a candidate for the captaincy, were all done under instructions, and with a design which, for wickedness and cold-blooded atrocity, was worthy of Satan himself. Had he succeeded in becoming the leader of this ill-fated band, for them the upshot might have been no worse; though it would not have been better; since it was his intention to betray them to the enemy at the first opportunity that should offer. Thwarted in this intent, knowing he could no longer show his face among the filibusters, even though it were but as a private in the ranks; fearing, furthermore, the shame that awaited him in New Orleans soon as the affair of the steel shirt should get bruited about, he had hastily decamped from that place, and, as we now know, once more made his way to Mexico.

Luckily for him, the shirt, or rather under-shirt, business leaked not out; at least not to reach the ears of any one in the Mexican capital.

Nor, indeed, was it ever much known in New Orleans. His second, Duperon, for his own sake not desiring to make it public, had refrained from speaking of it; and their doctor, a close little Frenchman, controlled by Duperon, remained equally reticent; while all those on the other side – Kearney, Crittenden, Rock and the surgeon – had taken departure for Texas on the very day of the duel; from that time forward having "other fish to fry."

But there were still the two hackney-drivers, who, no doubt, had they stayed in the Crescent City in pursuit of their daily avocation, would have given notoriety to an occurrence curious

as it was scandalous.

It chanced, however, that both the jarveys were Irishmen; and suddenly smitten with warlike aspirations – either from witnessing the spectacle of the duel, or the gallant behaviour of their young countryman – on that same day dropped the ribbons, and, taking to a musket instead, wore among the men who composed the ill-started expedition which came to grief on the Rio Grande.

So, for the time, Carlos Santander had escaped the brand of infamy due to his dastardly act.

His reappearance on the scene in such grand garb needs little explanation. A fairly brave and skilled soldier, a vainer man than General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna never wore sword, and one of his foibles was to see himself surrounded by a glittering escort. The officers of his staff were very peacocks in their gaudy adornment, and as a rale, the best-looking of them were his first favourites. Santander, on returning to Mexico, was appointed one of his aides-de-camp, and being just the sort – a showy fellow – soon rose to rank; so that the defeated candidate for a captaincy of Texan Volunteers, was now a colonel in the Mexican Army, on the personal staff of its Commander-in-Chief.

Had Florence Kearney and Cris Rock but known they were to meet this man in Mexico – could they have anticipated seeing him, as he was now, at the door of their prison-cell – their hearts would have been fainter as they toiled along the weary way, and perchance in that lottery of life and death they might have little

cared whether they drew black or white.

At the sight of him there rose up all at once in their recollection that scene upon the Shell Road; the Texan vividly recalling how he had ducked the caitiff in the ditch, as how he looked after crawling out upon the bank – mud bedraggled and covered with the viscous scum, – in strange contrast to his splendid appearance now! And Kearney well remembered the same, noting in addition a scar on Santander's cheek – he had himself given – which the latter vainly sought to conceal beneath whiskers since permitted to grow their full length and breadth.

These remembrances were enough to make the heart of the captive Irishman beat quick, if it did not quail; while that of the Texan had like reason to throb apprehensively.

Nor could they draw any comfort from the expression on Santander's face. Instead, they but read there what they might well believe to be their death sentence. The man was smiling, but it was the smile of Lucifer in triumph – mocking, malignant, seeming to say, without spoken word but, for all that, emphatically and with determination —

"I have you in my power, and verily you shall feel my vengeance."

They could tell it was no accident had brought him thither no duty of prison inspection – but the fiendish purpose to flaunt his grandeur before their eyes, and gloat over the misery he knew it would cause them. And his presence explained what had hitherto been a puzzle to them – why they two were being

made an exception among their captive comrades, and thrown into such strange fellowship. It must have been to humiliate them; as, indeed, they could now tell by a certain speech which the gaol-governor addressed to Santander, as the cell door turned back upon its hinges.

"There they are, Señor Colonel! As you see, I've had them coupled according to orders. What a well-matched pair!" he added, ironically, as his eyes fell upon Cris Rock and the hunchback. "*Ay Dios*! It's a sight to draw laughter from the most sober-sided recluse that ever lodged within these walls. Ha! ha! ha!"

It drew this from Carlos Santander; who, relishing the jest, joined in the "ha! ha!" till the old convent rang with their coarse ribaldry.

Chapter Twelve
"Do your darndest."

During all this time – only a few seconds it was – the four men within the cell preserved silence; the dwarf, as the door alone was drawn open, having said to the gaol-governor: "*Buenas Dias Excellenza*! you're coming to set us free, aren't you?"

A mere bit of jocular bravado; for, as might be supposed, the deformed wretch could have little hope of deliverance, save by the gallows, to which he had actually been condemned. A creature of indomitable pluck, however, this had not so far frightened him as to hinder jesting – a habit to which he was greatly given. Besides, he did not believe he was going to the *garota*. Murderer though he was, he might expect pardon, could he only find money sufficient to pay the price, and satisfy the conscience of those who had him in keeping.

His question was neither answered nor himself taken notice of; the attention of those outside being now directed upon the other occupants of the cell. Of these only two had their faces so that they could be seen. The third, who was the reputed robber, kept his turned towards the wall, the opened door being behind his back; and this attitude he preserved, not being called upon to change it till Santander had closed his conversation with Cris Rock and Kearney. He had opened it in a jaunty, jeering tone,

saying —

"Well, my brave Filibusters! Is this where you are? *Caspita*! In a queer place and queer company, too! Not so nice, Señor Don Florencio, as that you used to keep in the Crescent City. And you, my Texan Colossus! I take it you don't find the atmosphere of the Acordada quite so pleasant as the fresh breezes of prairie-land, eh?"

He paused, as if to note the effect of his irony; then continued —

"So this is the ending of the grand Mier Expedition, with the further invasion of Mexico! Well, you've found your way to its capital, anyhow, if you haven't fought it. And now you're here, what do you expect, pray?"

"Not much o' good from sich a scoundrel as you," responded Rock, in a tone of reckless defiance.

"What! No good from me! An old acquaintance – friend, I ought rather to call myself, after the little scene that passed between us on the shores of Pontchartrain. Come, gentlemen! Being here among strangers you should think yourselves fortunate in finding an old comrade of the filibustering band; one owing you so many obligations. Ah! well; having the opportunity now, I shall try my best to wipe out the indebtedness."

"You kin do your darndest," rejoined Rock in the same sullen tone. "We don't look for marcy at your hands nosomever. It ain't in ye; an if 't war, Cris Rock 'ud scorn to claim it. So ye may do yur crowing on a dunghill, whar there be cocks like to be scared

at it. Thar ain't neery one o' that sort hyar."

Santander was taken aback by this unlooked-for rebuff. He had come to the Acordada to indulge in the luxury of a little vapouring over his fallen foes, whom he knew to be there, having been informed of all that had befallen them from Mier up to Mexico. He expected to find them cowed, and eager to crave life from him; which he would no more have granted than to a brace of dogs that had bitten him. But so far from showing any fear, both prisoners looked a little defiant; the Texan with the air of a caged wolf seeming ready to tear him if he showed but a step over the threshold of the cell.

"Oh! very well," he returned, making light of what Rock had said. "If you won't accept favours from an old, and, as you know, tried friend, I must leave you so without them. But," he added, addressing himself more directly to Kearney:

"You, Señor Irlandes – surely you won't be so unreasonable?"

"Carlos Santander," said the young Irishman, looking his *ci-devant* adversary full in the face, "as I proved you not worth thrusting with my sword, I now pronounce you not worth words – even to call you coward, – though that you are from the crown of your head to the soles of your feet. Not even brave when your body is encased in armour. Dastard! I defy you."

Though manifestly stung by the reminder, Santander preserved his coolness. He had this, if not courage – at least a knack of feigning it. But again foiled in the attempt to humble the enemy, and, moreover, dreading exposure in the eyes of the

gaol-governor – an old *militario*– should the story of the *steel shirt* come out in the conversation, he desisted questioning the *Tejanos*. Luckily for him none of the others there understood English – the language he and the Texans had used in their brief, but sharp exchange of words. Now addressing himself to the governor, he said —

"As you perceive, Señor Don Pedro, these two gentlemen are old acquaintances of mine, whose present unfortunate position I regret, and would gladly relieve. Alas! I fear the law will take its course."

At which commiserating remark Don Pedro smiled grimly; well aware of the sort of interest Colonel Santander took in the pair of prisoners committed to his care. For the order so to dispose of them he knew to have come from Santander himself! It was not his place, nor was he the kind of man to inquire into motives; especially when these concerned his superiors. Santander was an officer on the staff of the Dictator, besides being a favourite at Court. The gaol-governor knew it, and was subservient. Had he been commanded to secretly strangle the two men thus specially placed in his charge, or administer poison to them, he would have done it without pity or protest. The cruel tyrant who had made him governor of the Acordada knew his man, and had already, as rumour said, with history to confirm it, more than once availed himself of this means to get rid of enemies, personal or political.

During all this interlude the robber had maintained his

position and silence, his face turned to the blank wall of the cloister, his back upon all the others. What his motive for this was neither of the Texans could tell; and in all likelihood Santander knew not himself any more who the man was. But his behaviour, from its very strangeness, courted inquiry; and seemingly struck with it, the staff-colonel, addressing himself to the gaol-governor, said —

"By the way, Don Pedro, who is your prisoner, who makes the fourth in this curious quartette? He seems shy about showing his face, which would argue it an ugly one like my own."

A bit of badinage in which Carlos Santander oft indulged. He knew that he was anything but ill-favoured as far as face went.

"Only a gentleman of the road —*un salteador*" responded the governor.

"An interesting sort of individual then," said Santander. "Let me scan his countenance, and see whether it be of the true brigand type – a Mazaroni or Diavolo."

So saying, he stepped inside the cell, and passed on till he could see over the robber's shoulder, who now slightly turning his head, faced towards him. Not a word was exchanged between the two, but from the looks it was clear they were old acquaintances, Santander starting as he recognised the other; while his glance betrayed a hostility strong and fierce as that felt for either Florence Kearney or the Texan. A slight exclamation, involuntary, but telling of anger, was all that passed his lips as his eyes met a pair of other eyes which seemed to pierce his very

heart.

He stayed not for more; but turning upon his heel, made direct for the door. Not to reach it, however, without interruption. In his hurry to be gone, he stumbled over the legs of the Texan, that stretched across the cell, nearly from side to side. Angered by the obstruction, he gave them a spiteful kick, then passed on outward. By good fortune fast and far out of reach, otherwise Cris Rock, who sprang to his feet, and on for the entrance, jerking the dwarf after, would in all probability there and then have taken his life.

As it was, the gaol-governor, seeing the danger, suddenly shut the cloister door, so saving it.

"Jest as I've been tellin' ye all along, Cap," coolly remarked Rock, as the slammed door ceased to make resonance; "we shed ha' hanged the skunk, or shot him thar an' then on the Shell Road. 'Twar a foolish thing lettin' him out o' that ditch when I had him in it. Darn the luck o' my not drownin' him outright! We're like to sup sorrow for it now."

Chapter Thirteen
The Exiles Returned

Of the *dramatis personae* of our tale, already known to our reader, Carlos Santander, Florence Kearney, and Cris Rock were not the only ones who had shifted residence from the City of New Orleans to that of Mexico. Within the months intervening two others had done the same – these Don Ignacio Valverde and his daughter. The banished exile had not only returned to his native land, but his property had been restored to him, and himself reinstated in the favour of the Dictator.

More still, he had now higher rank than ever before; since he had been appointed a Minister of State.

For the first upward step on this progressive ladder of prosperity Don Ignacio owed all to Carlos Santander. The handsome *aide-de-camp*, having the ear of his chief, found little difficulty in getting the ban removed, with leave given the refugee – criminal only in a political sense – to come back to his country.

The motive will easily be guessed. Nothing of either friendship or humanity actuated Santander. Alone the passion of love; which had to do not with Don Ignacio – but his daughter. In New Orleans he himself dared no longer live, and so could no more see Luisa Valverde there. Purely personal then; a selfish love, such as he could feel, was the motive for his

intercession with the political chief of Mexico to pardon the political criminal. But if he had been the means of restoring Don Ignacio to his country, that was all. True, there was the restitution of the exile's estates, but this followed as a consequence on reinstatement in his political rights. The after honours and emoluments – with the appointment to a seat in the Cabinet – came from the Chief of the State, Santa Anna himself. And his motive for thus favouring a man who had lately, and for long, been his political foe was precisely the same as that which actuated Carlos Santander. The Dictator of Mexico, as famed for his gallantries in love as his gallantry in war – and indeed somewhat more – had looked upon Luisa Valverde, and "saw that she was fair."

For Don Ignacio himself, as the recipient of these favours, much may be said in extenuation. Banishment from one's native land, with loss of property, and separation from friends as from best society; condemned to live in another land, where all these advantages are unattainable, amidst a companionship uncongenial; add to this the necessity of work, whether mental or physical toil, to support life – the *res augustae domi*; sum up all these, and you have the history of Don Ignacio Valverde during his residence in New Orleans. He bore all patiently and bravely, as man could and should. For all he was willing – and it cannot be wondered at that he was – when the day came, and a letter reached him bearing the State seal of the Mexican Republic – for its insignia were yet unchanged – to say that he had received

pardon, and could return home.

He knew the man who had procured it for him – Carlos Santander – and had reason to suspect something of the motive. But the mouth of a gift horse must not be too narrowly examined; and Santander, ever since that night when he behaved so rudely in Don Ignacio's house, had been chary in showing his face. In point of fact, he had made but one more visit to the Callé de Casa Calvo here, presenting himself several days after the duel with a patch of court plaister on his cheek, and his arm in a sling. An invalid, interesting from the cause which made him an invalid, he gave his own account of it, knowing there was but little danger of its being contradicted; Duperon's temper, he understood, with that of the French doctor, securing silence. The others were all G.T.T. (gone to Texas), the hack-drivers, as he had taken pains to assure himself. No fear, therefore, of what he alleged getting denial or being called in question.

It was to the effect that he had fought Florence Kearney, and given more and worse wounds than he himself had received – enough of them, and sufficiently dangerous, to make it likely that his adversary would not long survive.

He did not say this to Luisa Valverde – only to her father. When she heard it second hand, it came nigh killing her. But then the informant had gone away – perhaps luckily for himself – and could not further be questioned. When met again in Mexico, months after, he told the same tale. He had no doubt, however, that his duelling adversary, so terribly gashed as to be in danger

of dying, still lived. For an American paper which gave an account of the battle of Mier, had spoken of Captain Kearney in eulogistic terms, while not giving his name in the death list; this Santander had read. The presumption, therefore, was of Kearney being among the survivors.

Thus stood things in the city of Mexico at the time the Mier prisoners entered it, as relates to the persons who have so far found place in our story – Carlos Santander, a colonel on the staff of the Dictator; Don Ignacio Valverde, a Minister of State; his daughter, a reigning belle of society, with no aspirations therefor, but solely on account of her beauty; Florence Kearney, late Captain of the Texan filibusters, with Cris Rock, guide, scout, and general skirmisher of the same – these last shut up in a loathsome prison, one linked leg to leg with a robber, the other sharing the chain of a murderer, alike crooked in soul as in body!

That for the Texan prisoners there was yet greater degradation in store – one of them, Kearney, was made aware the moment after the gaol-governor had so unceremoniously shut the door of their cell. The teaching of Don Ignacio in New Orleans had not been thrown away upon him; and this, with the practice since accruing through conversation with the soldiers of their escort, had made him almost a master of the Spanish tongue.

Carlos Santander either did not think of this, or supposed the cloister door too thick to permit of speech in the ordinary tone passing through it. It did, notwithstanding; what he said outside to the governor reaching the Irishman's ear, and giving him a yet

closer clue to that hitherto enigma – the why he and Cris Rock had been cast into a common gaol, among the veriest and vilest of malefactors.

The words of Santander were —

"As you see, Señor Don Pedro, the two Tejanos are old acquaintances of mine. I met them not in Texas, but the United States – New Orleans – where we had certain relations; I need not particularise you. Only to say that both the gentlemen left me very much in their debt; and I now wish, above all things, to wipe out the score. I hope I may count upon you to help me!"

There could be no mistaking what he meant. Anything but a repayal of friendly services, in the way of gratitude; instead, an appeal to the gaol-governor to assist him in some scheme of vengeance. So the latter understood it, as evinced by his rejoinder —

"Of course you can, Señor Colonel. Only say what you wish done. Your commands are sufficient authority for me."

"Well," said Santander, after an interval apparently spent in considering, "as a first step, I wish you to give these gentlemen an airing in the street; not alone the Tejanos, but all four."

"*Caspita*!" exclaimed the governor, with a look of feigned surprise. "They ought to be thankful for that."

"They won't, however. Not likely; seeing their company, and the occupation I want them put at."

"Which is?"

"A little job in the *zancas*!"

"In which street?"

"The Callé de Plateros. I observe that its stones are up."

"And when?"

"To-morrow – at midday. Have them there before noon, and let them be kept until night, or, at all events, till the procession has passed. Do you quite understand me?"

"I think I do, Señor Colonel. About their *jewellery*– is that to be on?"

"Every link of it. I want them to be coupled, just as they are now – dwarf to giant, and the two grand gentlemen together."

"*Bueno*! It shall be done."

So closed the curious dialogue, or, if continued, what came after it did not reach the ears of Florence Kearney; they who conversed having sauntered off beyond his hearing. When he had translated what he heard to Cris Rock, the latter, like himself, was uncertain as to what it meant. Not so either of their prison companions, who had likewise listened to the conversation outside – both better comprehending it.

"*Bueno*, indeed!" cried the dwarf, echoing the gaol-governor's exclamation. "It shall be done. Which means that before this time to-morrow, we'll all four of us be up to our middle in mud. Won't that be nice? Ha! ha! ha!"

And the imp laughed, as though, instead of something repulsive, he expected a pleasure of the most enjoyable kind.

Chapter Fourteen
On the Azotea

In the city of Mexico the houses are flat-roofed, the roof bearing the name of *azotea*. A parapetted wall, some three or four feet in height, runs all round to separate those of the adjacent houses from one another when they chance to be on the same level, and also prevent falling off. Privacy, besides, has to do with this protective screen; the azotea being a place of almost daily resort, if the weather be fine, and a favourite lounging place, where visitors are frequently received. This peculiarity in dwelling-house architecture has an oriental origin, and is still common among the Moors, as all round the Mediterranean. Strange enough, the Conquistadors found something very similar in the New World – conspicuously among the Mexicans – where the Aztecan houses were flat or terrace-topped. Examples yet exist in Northern and New Mexico, in the towns of the Pecos Zuñis, and Moquis. It is but natural, therefore, that the people who now call themselves Mexicans should have followed a pattern thus furnished them by their ancestry in both hemispheres.

Climate has much to do with this sort of roof, as regards its durability; no sharp frosts or heavy snows being there to affect it. Besides, in no country in the world is out-door life more

enjoyable than in Mexico, the rainy months excepted; and in them the evenings are dry. Still another cause contributes to make the roof of a Mexican house a pleasant place of resort. Sea-coal and its smoke are things there unknown; indeed chimneys, if not altogether absent, are few and far between; such as there are being inconspicuous. In the *siempre-verano* (eternal spring) of Anahuac there is no call for them; a wood fire here and there kindled in some sitting-room being a luxury of a special kind, indulged in only by the very delicate or very rich. In the kitchens, charcoal is the commodity employed, and as this yields no visible sign, the outside atmosphere is preserved pure and cloudless as that which overhung the Hesperides.

A well-appointed azotea is provided with pots containing shrubs and evergreen plants; some even having small trees, as the orange, lime, camellia, ferns, and palms; while here and there one is conspicuous by a *mirador* (belvedere) arising high above the parapet to afford a better view of the surrounding country.

It would be difficult to find landscape more lovely, or more interesting, than that which surrounds the city of Mexico. Look in what direction one will, the eye is furnished with a feast. Plains, verdant and varied in tint, from the light green of the *milpas* (young maize), to the more sombre *maguey* plants, which, in large plantations (magueyals), occupy a considerable portion of the surface; fields of *chili* pepper and frijoles (kidney beans); here and there wide sheets of water between, glistening silver-like under the sun; bounding all a periphery of mountains, more

than one of their summits white with never-melting snow – the grandest mountains, too, since they are the Cordilleras of the Sierra Madre or main Andean chain, which here parted by some Plutonic caprice, in its embrace the beautiful valley of Mexico, elevated more than seven thousand feet above the level of the sea.

Surveying it from any roof in the city itself, the scene is one to delight the eye and gladden the heart. And yet on the azotea of a certain house, or rather in the *mirador* above it, stood a young lady, who looked over it without delight in her eye or gladness in her heart. Instead, the impression upon her countenance told of thoughts that, besides being sad, dwelt not on the landscape or its beauties.

Luisa Valverde it was, thinking of another land, beautiful too, where she had passed several years in exile; the last of them marked by an era the sweetest and happiest of her life. For it was there she first loved; Florence Kearney being he who had won her heart. And the beloved one – where was he now? She knew not; did not even know whether he still lived. He had parted from her without giving any clue, though it gave pain to her – ignorant of the exigencies which had ruled his sudden departure from New Orleans. He had told her, however, of his becoming captain of the volunteer band; which, as she soon after became aware, had proceeded direct to Texas. Furthermore, she had heard all about the issue of the ill-fated expedition; of the gallant struggle made by the men composing it, with the havoc caused in their ranks; of the survivors being brought on to the city of Mexico, and the

cruel treatment they had been submitted to on the march; of their daring attempt to escape from the Guards, its successful issue for a time, till their sufferings among the mountains compelled them to a second surrender – in short, everything that had happened to that brave band of which her lover was one of the leaders.

She had been in Mexico throughout all this; for shortly after the departure of the volunteers for Orleans, her father had received the pardon we have spoken of. And there she had been watching the Mier Expedition through every step of its progress, eagerly collecting every scrap of information relating to it published in the Mexican papers; with anxious heart, straining her ears over the lists of killed and wounded. And when at length the account came of the shootings at El Salado, apprehensively as ever scanned she that death-roll of nigh twenty names – the *decimated*; not breathing freely until she had reached the last, and saw that no more among these was his she feared to find.

So far her researches were, in a sense, satisfactory. Still, she was not satisfied. Neither to read or hear word of him – that seemed strange; was so in her way of thinking. Such a hero as he, how could his name be hidden? Gallant deeds were done by the Tejanos, their Mexican enemies admitted it. Surely in these Don Florencio had taken part, and borne himself bravely? Yes, she was sure of that. But why had he not been mentioned? And where was he now?

The last question was that which most frequently occupied her mind, constantly recurring. She could think of but one answer to

it; this saddening enough. He might never have reached the Rio Grande, but perished on the way. Perhaps his life had come to an inglorious though not ignominious end – by disease, accident, or other fatality – and his body might now be lying in some lonely spot of the prairies, where his marching comrades had hastily buried it.

More than once had Luisa Valverde given way to such a train of reflection during the months after her return to Mexico. They had brought pallor to her cheeks and melancholy into her heart. So much, that not all the honours to which her father had been restored – not all the compliments paid to herself, nor the Court gaieties in which she was expected to take part – could win her from a gloom that seemed likely to become settled on her soul.

Chapter Fifteen
Waiting and Watching

As a rule, people of melancholy temperament, or with a sorrow at the heart, give way to it within doors in the privacy of their own apartments. The daughter of Don Ignacio had been more often taught to assuage hers upon the house-top, to which she was accustomed to ascend daily, staying there for hours alone. For this she had opportunity; her father, busied with State affairs, spending most of his time – at least during the diurnal hours – at Government headquarters in the *Palacio*.

On this day, however, Luisa Valverde mounted up to the azotea with feelings, and under an impulse, very different from that hitherto actuating her. Her behaviour, too, was different. When she made her way up and took stand inside the mirador, her eyes, instead of wandering all around, or resting dreamily on the landscape, with no care for its attractions, were turned in a particular direction, and became fixed upon a single point. This was where the road, running from the city to Tacubaya, alongside the aqueduct of Chapultepec, parts from the latter, diverging abruptly to the left. Beyond this point the causeway, carried on among maguey plants, and Peruvian pepper trees, cannot be seen from the highest house-top in the city.

Why on this day, more than any other, did the young

lady direct her glance to the bend in the road, there keeping it steadfast? For what reason was the expression upon her countenance so different from that of other days? No listless look now; instead, an earnest eager gaze, as though she expected to see some one whose advent was of the greatest interest to her. It could only be the coming of some one, as one going would have been long since visible by the side of the aqueduct.

And one she did expect to come that way; no grand cavalier on prancing steed, but a simple pedestrian – in short, her own servant. She had sent him on an errand to Tacubaya, and was now watching for, and awaiting his return. It was the nature of his errand which caused her to look for him so earnestly.

On no common business had he been despatched, but one of a confidential character, and requiring tact in its execution. But José, a *mestizo* whom she had commissioned, possessed this, besides having her confidence, and she had no fear of his betraying her. Not that it was a life or death matter; only a question of delicacy. For his errand was to inquire, whether among the Texan prisoners taken to Tacubaya one was called Florence Kearney.

As it was now the third day after their arrival in Mexico, it may be wondered why the young lady had not sought this information before. The explanation is easy. Her father owned a country house in the environs of San Augustine, some ten miles from the city; and there staying she had only the day before heard that the captive train, long looked-for, had at length arrived. Soon as

hearing it, she had hastened her return to town, and was now taking steps to ascertain whether her lover still lived.

She did not think of making inquiry at the Acordada, though a rumour had reached her that some of the prisoners were there. But surely not Don Florencio! If alive, it was not likely he would be thus disgraced: at least she could not believe it. Little dreamt she of the malice that was moving, and in secret, to degrade in her eyes the man who was uppermost in her thoughts.

And as little suspected she when one of the house domestics came upon the azotea and handed her a large ornamental envelope, bearing the State arms, that it was part of the malignant scheme.

Breaking it open she drew out an embossed and gilded card – a ticket. It came from the Dictator, inviting Doña Luisa Valverde to be present in a grand procession, which was to take place on the following day; intimating, moreover, that one of the State carriages would be at the disposal of herself and party.

There were but few ladies in the city of Mexico who would not have been flattered by such an invitation; all the more from the card bearing the name, Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna, signed by himself, with the added phrase "con estima particular."

But little cared she for the flattery. Rather did it cause her a feeling of disgust, with something akin to fear. It was not the first time for the ruler of Mexico to pay compliments and thus press his attentions upon her.

Soon as glanced over, she let the despised thing fall, almost

flinging it at her feet; and once more bent her eyes upon the Tacubaya Road, first carrying her glance along the side of the aqueduct to assure herself that her messenger had not in the meanwhile rounded the corner.

He had not, and she continued to watch impatiently; the invitation to ride in the State carriage being as much out of her mind as though she had never received it.

Not many minutes longer before being intruded on. This time, however, by no domestic; instead a lady – like herself, young and beautiful, but beauty of an altogether different style. Though of pure Spanish descent, Luisa Valverde was a *güera*; her complexion bright, with hair of sunny hue. Such there are in Mexico, tracing their ancestry to the shores of Biscay's famous bay.

She who now appeared upon the azotea was dark; her skin showing a tinge of golden brown, with a profusion of black hair plaited and coiled as a coronet around her head. A crayon-like shading showed upon her upper lip – which on that of a man would have been termed a moustache – rendering whiter by contrast teeth already of dazzling whiteness; while for the same reason, the red upon her cheeks was of the deep tint of a damask rose. The tones of all, however, were in perfect harmony; and distributed over features of the finest mould produced a face in which soft feminine beauty vied with a sort of savage picturesqueness, making it piquantly attractive.

It was altogether a rare bewitching face; part of its witchery

being due to the *raza Andalusiana*– and beyond that the Moriscan – but as much of it coming from the ancient blood of Anahuac – possibly from the famed Malinche herself. For the young lady delineated was the Condes Almonté – descended from one of Conquistadors who had wedded an Aztec princess – the beautiful Ysabel Almonté whose charms were at the time the toast of every *cercle* in Mexico.

Chapter Sixteen
A Mutual Misapprehension

Luisa Valverde and Ysabel Almonté were fast friends – so fondly intimate that scarcely a day passed without their seeing one another and exchanging confidences. They lived in the same street; the Condesa having a house of her own, though nominally owned by her grand-aunt and guardian. For, besides being beautiful and possessed of a title – one of the few still found in Mexico, relics of the old *régime*– Ysabel Almonté was immensely rich; had houses in the city, *haciendas*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.