

REID MAYNE

THE WAR TRAIL: THE
HUNT OF THE WILD
HORSE

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**The War Trail: The
Hunt of the Wild Horse**

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Mayne Reid

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Chapter One. Souvenirs

Land of the nopal and maguey – home of Moctezuma and Malinché! – I cannot wring thy memories from my heart! Years may roll on, hand wax weak, and heart grow old, but never till both are cold can I forget thee! I *would* not; for thee would I remember. Not for all the world would I bathe my soul in the waters of Lethe. Blessed be memory for thy sake!

Bright land of Anahuac! my spirit mounts upon the aerial wings of Fancy, and once more I stand upon thy shores! Over thy broad savannahs I spur my noble steed, whose joyous neigh tells that he too is inspired by the scene. I rest under the shade of the *corozo* palm, and quaff the wine of the *acocomia*. I climb thy mountains of amygdaloid and porphyry – thy crags of quartz, that yield the white silver and the yellow gold. I cross thy fields of lava, rugged in outline, and yet more rugged with their coverture of strange vegetable forms – acacias and cactus, yuccas and zamias. I traverse thy table-plains through bristling rows of giant aloes, whose sparkling juice cheers me on my path. I stand upon the limits of eternal snow, crushing the Alpine lichen under my heel; while down in the deep barranca, far down below, I behold the feathery fronds of the palm, the wax-like foliage of the orange, the broad shining leaves of the pothos, of arums, and bananas! O that I could again look with living eye on these bright pictures, that even thus palely outlined upon the retina of memory, impart pleasure to my soul!

Land of Moctezuma! I have other souvenirs of thee, more deeply graven on my memory than these pictures of peace. Thou recallest scenes of war. I traversed thy fields a foeman – sword in hand – and now, after years gone by, many a wild scene of soldier-life springs up before me with all the vividness of reality.

The Bivouac! – I sit by the night camp-fire; around are warlike forms and bearded faces. The blazing log reflects the sheen of arms and accoutrements – saddles, rifles, pistols, canteens, strewn the ground, or hanging from the branches of adjacent trees. Picketed steeds loom large in the darkness, their forms dimly outlined against the sombre background of the forest. A solitary palm stands near, its curving fronds looking hoary under the fire-light. The same light gleams upon the fluted columns of the great organ-cactus, upon agaves and bromelias, upon the silvery *tillandsia*, that drapes the tall trees as with a toga.

The wild tale is told – the song is sung – the jest goes round – the hoarse peal echoes through the aisles of the forest, frightening the parrot on its perch, and the wolf upon his prowl. Little reck they who sing, and jest, and laugh – little reck they of the morrow.

The Skirmish! – Morning breaks. The fragrant forest is silent, and the white blue light is just tinging the treetops. A shot rings upon the air: it is the warning-gun of the picket-sentinel, who comes galloping in upon the guard. The enemy approaches! ‘To horse!’ the bugle thrills in clear loud notes. The slumberers spring to their feet – they seize their rifles, pistols, and sabres, and dash through the smouldering fires till ashes cloud the air. The steeds snort and neigh; in a trice they are saddled, bridled, and mounted; and away sweeps the troop along the forest road.

The enemy is in sight – a band of *guerilleros*, in all their picturesqueness of *manga* and *serapé* – of scarlet, purple, and gold. Lances, with shining points and streaming pennons, o’ertop the trees.

The bugle sounds the charge; its notes are drowned by the charging cheer. We meet our swarthy foemen face to face; spear-thrusts are answered by pistol-shots; our sabres cross and clink, but our snorting steeds rear back, and will not let us kill each other. We wheel and meet again, with deadlier aim, and more determined arm; we strike without remorse – we strike for freedom!

The Battle-field! – The serried columns and the bristling guns – the roar of cannon and the roll of drums – the bugle's wildest notes, the cheer, the charge – the struggle hand to hand – the falling foeman and his dying groan – the rout, retreat, the hoarse huzza for victory! I well remember, but I cannot paint them.

Land of Anahuac! thou recallest other scenes, far different from these – scenes of tender love or stormy passion. The strife is o'er – the war-drum has ceased to beat, and the bugle to bray; the steed stands chafing in his stall, and the conqueror dallies in the halls of the conquered. Love is now the victor, and the stern soldier, himself subdued, is transformed into a suing lover. In gilded hall or garden bower, behold him on bended knee, whispering his soft tale in the ear of some dark-eyed *dongella*, Andalusian or Aztec!

Lovely land! In truth have I sweet memories of thee; for who could traverse thy fields without beholding some fair flower, ever after to be borne upon his bosom! And yet, not all my souvenirs are glad. Pleasant and painful, sweet and sad, they thrill my heart with alternate throes. But the sad emotions have been tempered by time, and the glad ones, at each returning tide, seem tinged with brighter glow. In thy bowers, as elsewhere, roses must be plucked from thorns; but in memory's mellowed light I see not the thorns – I behold only the bright and beautiful roses.

Chapter Two.

A Mexican frontier village

A Mexican *pueblita* on the banks of the Rio Bravo del Norte – a mere *rancheria*, or hamlet. The quaint old church of Morisco-Italian style, with its cupola of motley japan, the residence of the *cura*, and the house of the *alcaldé*, are the only stone structures in the place. These constitute three sides of the *piazza*, a somewhat spacious square. The remaining side is taken up with shops or dwellings of the common people. They are built of large unburnt bricks (*adobes*), some of them washed with lime, others gaudily coloured like the proscenium of a theatre, but most of them uniform in their muddy and forbidding brown. All have heavy jail-like doors, and windows without glass or sash. The *reja* of iron bars, set vertically, opposes the burglar, not the weather.

From the four corners of the *piazza*, narrow, unpaved, dusty lanes lead off to the country, for some distance bordered on both sides by the adobe houses. Still farther out, on the skirts of the village, and sparsely placed, are dwellings of frailer build, but more picturesque appearance; they are *ridge-roofed* structures, of the split trunks of that gigantic lily, the arborescent yucca. Its branches form the rafters, its tough fibrous leaves the thatch. In these *ranchitos* dwell the poor peons, the descendants of the conquered race.

The stone dwellings, and those of mud likewise, are *flat-roofed*, tiled or cemented – sometimes tastefully japanned – with a parapet breast-high running round the edge. This flat roof is the *azotea*, characteristic of Mexican architecture.

When the sun is low and the evening cool, the *azotea* is a pleasant lounging-place, especially when the proprietor of the house has a taste for flowers; then it is converted into an aerial garden, and displays the rich flora for which the picture-land of Mexico is justly celebrated. It is just the place to enjoy a cigar, a glass of *piñolé*, or, if you prefer it, *Catalan*. The smoke is wafted away, and the open air gives a relish to the beverage. Besides, your eye is feasted; you enjoy the privacy of a drawing-room, while you command what is passing in the street. The slight parapet gives security, while hindering a too free view from below; you see, without being seen. The world moves on, busied with earthly affairs, and does not think of looking up.

I stand upon such an *azotea*: it is that over the house of the *alcaldé*; and his being the tallest roof in the village, I command a view of all the others. I can see beyond them all, and note the prominent features of the surrounding country. My eye wanders with delight over the deep rich verdure of its tropic vegetation; I can even distinguish its more characteristic forms – the cactus, the yucca, and the agave. I observe that the village is girdled by a belt of open ground – cultivated fields – where the maize waves its silken tassels in the breeze, contrasting with the darker leaves of the capsicums and bean-plants (*frijoles*). This open ground is of limited extent. The *chapparal*, with its thorny thicket of acacias, mimosae, ingas, and robinias – a perfect maze of leguminous trees – hems it in; and so near is the verge of this jungle, that I can distinguish its undergrowth of stemless *sabal* palms and bromelias – the sun-scorched and scarlet leaves of the *pita* plant shining in the distance like lists of fire.

This propinquity of the forest to the little *pueblita* bespeaks the indolence of the inhabitants; perhaps not. It must be remembered that these people are not agriculturists, but *vaqueros* (herdsmen); and that the glades and openings of that thick *chapparal* are speckled with herds of fierce Spanish cattle, and droves of small sharp-eared Andalusian horses, of the race of the Barb. The fact of so little cultivation does not abnegate the existence of industry on the part of the villagers. Grazing is their occupation, not farming; only a little of the latter to give them maize for their *tortillas*, chile to season it with, and black beans to complete the repast. These three, with the half-wild beef of their wide pastures, constitute the staple of food throughout all Mexico. For drink, the denizen of the high table-

land find his favourite beverage – the rival of champagne – in the core of the gigantic aloe; while he of the tropic coast-land refreshes himself from the juice of another native endogen, the *acrocomia* palm.

Favoured land! Ceres loves thee, and Bacchus too. To thy fields both the god and the goddess have been freely bounteous. Food and drink may be had from them on easy terms. Alas! as in all other lands – one only excepted – Nature's divine views have been thwarted, her aim set aside, by the malignity of man. As over the broad world the blight of the despot is upon thy beauty.

Why are these people crowded together – hived, as it were, in towns and villages? Herdsmen – one would expect to find them scattered by reason of their occupation. Besides, a sky continually bright, a genial climate, a picturesqueness of scene – all seem to invite to rural life; and yet I have ridden for hours, a succession of lovely landscapes rising before my eyes, all of them wild, wanting in that one feature which makes the rural picture perfect – the house, the dwelling of man! Towns there are; and at long intervals the huge *hacienda* of the landed lord, walled in like a fortress; but where are the *ranchos*, the homes of the common people? True, I have noticed the ruins of many, and that explains the puzzle. I remember, now that I am on the *frontier*: that for years past the banks of the Rio Bravo, from its source to the sea, have been hostile ground – a war-border of fifteen hundred miles in length! Many a red conflict has occurred – is still occurring – between those Arabs of the American desert – the *Horse* Indians – and the pale-faced descendants of the Spaniard. That is why the *ranchos* exist only in ruins – that is why the *haciendas* are loopholed, and the populace pent up within walls. The condition of feudal Europe exists in free America, on the banks of the Rio Bravo del Norte!

Nearly a mile off, looking westward, I perceive the sheen of water: it is a reach of the great river that glances under the setting sun. The river curves at that point; and the summit of a gentle hill, half girdled by the stream, is crowned by the low white walls of a *hacienda*. Though only one story high, this *hacienda* appears, from its extent, and the style of its architecture, to be a noble mansion. Like all of its class, it is flat-roofed; but the parapet is crenated, and small ornamental turrets over the angles and the great gateway relieve the monotony of its outlines. A larger tower, the belfry of a chapel, appears in the background, the Mexican *hacienda* is usually provided with its little *capilla*, for the convenient worship of the peon retainers. The emblems of religion, such as it is, are thick over the land. The glimmer of glass behind the iron *rejas* relieves to some extent the prison-like aspect, so characteristic of Mexican country-houses. This is further modified by the appearance over the parapet of green foliage. Forms of tropic vegetation show above the wall; among others, the graceful curving fronds of a palm. This must be an exotic, for although the lower half of the Rio Bravo is within the zone of the palms, the species that grow so far north are fan-palms (*chamaerops* and *sabal*). This one is of far different form, with plume-shaped pinnate fronds, of the character of *cocos*, *phoenix*, or *euterpe*. I note the fact, not from any botanical curiosity with which it inspires me, but rather because the presence of this exotic palm has a significance. It illustrates a point in the character of him – it may be *her* – who is the presiding spirit of the place. No doubt there is a fair garden upon the *azotea* – perhaps a fair being among its flowers! Pleasant thoughts spring up – anticipations. I long to climb that sloping hill, to enter that splendid mansion, and, longing still, I gaze.

The ring of a bugle startles me from this pleasant reverie. 'Tis only a stable-call; but it has driven sweet reflections out of my mind, and my eyes are turned away from the bright mansion, and rest upon the *piazza* of the *publita*. There, a far different scene greets their glance.

Chapter Three.

The rangers on picket

The centre of the piazza presents a salient point in the picture. There the well (*el poso*), with its gigantic wheel, its huge leathern belt and buckets, its trough of cemented stone-work, offers an Oriental aspect. Verily, it is the Persian wheel! 'Tis odd to a northern eye to find such a structure in this Western land; but the explanation is easy. The Persian wheel has travelled from Egypt along the southern shores of the Mediterranean. With the Moors it crossed the Straits of Gibraltar, and the Spaniard has carried it over the Atlantic. The reader of the sacred volume will find many a familiar passage illustrated in the customs of Mexico. The genius of the Arab has shaped many a thought for the brain of the Aztec!

My eye rests not long upon the well, but turns to gaze on the scene of active life that is passing near and around it. Forms, and varied ones, I trow, are moving there.

Gliding with silent step and dubious look – his wide *calzoneros* flapping around his ankles, his arms and shoulders shrouded in the mottled serape, his black broad-brimmed hat darkening still more his swarth face – goes the *poblano*, the denizen of the adobe hut. He shuns the centre of the piazza, keeping around the walls; but at intervals his eyes are turned towards the well with a look of mingled fierceness and fear. He reaches a doorway – it is silently opened by a hand within – he enters quickly, and seems glad to get out of sight. A little afterwards, I can catch a glimpse of his sombre face dimly visible behind the bars of the *reja*.

At distant corners, I descry small groups of his class, all similarly costumed in *calzoneros*, striped blankets, and glaze hats; all, like him, wearing uneasy looks. They gesticulate little, contrary to their usual habit, and converse only in whispers or low mutterings. Unusual circumstances surround them.

Most of the women are within doors; a few of the poorer class – of pure Indian race – are seated in the piazza. They are hucksters, and their wares are spread before them on a thin palm-leaf mat (*petaté*), while another similar one, supported umbrella-like on a stem, screens them and their merchandise from the sun. Their dyed woollen garments, their bare heads, their coarse black hair, adorned with twists of scarlet worsted, impart to them somewhat of a gipsy look. They appear as free of care as the zingali themselves: they laugh, and chatter, and show their white teeth all day long, asking each new-comer to purchase their fruits and vegetables, their *piñolé*, *atolé*, and *agua dulce*. Their not unmusical voices ring pleasantly upon the ear.

Now and then a young girl, with red *olla* poised upon her crown, trips lightly across the piazza in the direction of the well. Perhaps she is a *poblana* – one of the belles of the village – in short-skirted, bright-coloured petticoat, embroidered but sleeveless chemisette, with small satin slippers upon her feet; head, shoulders, and bosom, shrouded in the blue-grey *reboso*; arms and ankles bare. Several of these may be seen passing to and fro. They appear less uneasy than the men; they even smile at intervals, and reply to the rude badinage uttered in an unknown tongue by the odd-looking strangers around the well. The Mexican women are courageous as they are amiable. As a race, their beauty is undeniable.

But who are these strangers? They do not belong to the place, that is evident; and equally so that they are objects of terror to those who do. At present they are masters here. Their numbers, their proud confident swagger, and the bold loud tone of their conversation, attest that they are masters of the ground. Who are they?

Odd-looking, I have styled them; and the phrase is to be taken in its full significance. A more odd-looking set of fellows never mustered in a Mexican piazza, nor elsewhere. There are fourscore of them; and but that each carries a *yäger* rifle in his hand, a knife in his belt, and a Colt's pistol on

his thigh, you could not discover the slightest point of resemblance between any two of them. Their arms are the only things about them denoting *uniformity*, and some sort of organisation; for the rest, they are as unlike one another as the various shapes and hues of coarse broadcloth, woollen jeans, cottonades, coloured blankets, and buckskin, can make them. They wear caps of 'coon-skin, and cat's-skin, and squirrel; hats of beaver, and felt, and glaze, of wool and palmetto, of every imaginable shape and slouch. Even of the modern monster – the silken “tile” – samples might be seen, *badly crushed*. There are coats of broadcloth, few in number, and well worn; but many are the garments of “Kentucky jeans” of bluish-grey, of copper-coloured nigger cloth, and sky-coloured cottonade. Some wear coats made of green blankets, others of blue ones, and some of a scarlet red. There are hunting-shirts of dressed deerskin, with plaited skirt, and cape, fringed and jauntily adorned with beads and embroidery – the favourite style of the backwoods hunter, but others there are of true Indian cut – open only at the throat, and hanging loose, or fastened around the waist with a belt – the same that secures the knife and pistol. There are cloth jackets too, such as are worn by sailors, and others of sky-blue cottonade – the costume of the Creole of Louisiana; some of red-brown leather – the *jaqueta* of the Spano-American; and still another fashion, the close-fitting embroidered “spencer” of the Mexican *ranchero*. Some shoulders are covered by serapes, and some by the more graceful and toga-like *manga*. Look lower down: examine the limbs of the men of this motley band: the covering of these is not less varied than their upper garments. You see wrappers of coarse cloth, of flannel, and of baize: they are blue, and scarlet, and green. You see leggings of raw hide and of buckskin; boots of horse-leather reaching to the thighs; “nigger boots” of still coarser fabric, with the pantaloons tucked under *brogans* of unstained calf-skin, and moccasins of varied cut, betokening the fashion of more than one Indian tribe. You may see limbs encased in calzoneros, and others in the heavy stamped leather *botas* of the Mexican horseman, resembling the greaves of warriors of the olden time.

The heels of all are armed, though their armature is as varied as the costumes. There are spurs of silver and steel, some plated, and some with the plating worn off; some strapped, and others screwed into the heel of the boot; some light, with small rowels and tiny teeth, while others are seen (the heavy spur of Mexico) of several pounds' weight, with rowels five inches in diameter, and teeth that might be dashed through the ribs of a horse! – cruel weapons of the Mexican *cavallero*.

But these spurs in the piazza, these *botas* and calzoneros, these mangas and serapes, are not worn by *Mexicans*. Their present wearers are men of a different race. Most of those tall stalwart bodies are the product of the maize-plant of Kentucky and Tennessee, or the buckwheat and “hog-meat” of the fertile flats of Ohio, Indiana, and the Illinois. They are the squatters and hunters of the backwoods, the farmers of the great western slopes of the Alleghanies, the boatmen of the Mississippi, the pioneers of Arkansas and Missouri, the trappers of prairie-land, the *voyageurs* of the lake-country, the young planters of the lower states, the French Creoles of Louisiana, the adventurous settlers of Texas, with here and there a gay city spark from the larger towns of the “great west.” Yes, and from other sources are individuals of that mixed band. I recognise the Teutonic type – the fair hair and whitish-yellow moustache of the German, the florid Englishman, the staid Scot, and his contrast the noisy Hibernian; both equally brave. I behold the adroit and nimble Frenchman, full of laugh and chatter, the stanch soldierly Swiss, and the moustached exile of Poland, dark, sombre, and silent. What a study for an ethnologist is that band of odd-looking men! Who are they?

You have thrice asked the question. I answer it. They are a corps of “Rangers” —*the guerilla of the American army*.

And who am I? I am their captain – their chief.

Yes, I am the leader of that queer crew; and, despite their rough motley aspect, I dare affirm, that not in Europe, not in America elsewhere, not upon the great globe's surface, can be found a band, of like numbers, to equal them in strength, daring, and warlike intelligence. Many of them have spent half a life in the sharpening practice of border warfare – Indian or Mexican – and from these the others have learnt. Some have been gentlemen upon whom fortune has frowned; a few have been

desperadoes within the pale of civilised life; and a smaller few, perhaps, *outlaws* beyond it – bad materials wherewith to *colonise*; not so bad, if you go but to *conquer*.

Rude as is the *coup d'oeil* of the corps, I am proud to say that a high sentiment of honour pervades it – higher than will be found in the picked *corps de garde* of an emperor. True, they appear rough and reckless – terrible, I might say; for most of them – with their long beards and hair, dust-begrimed faces, slouched hats, and odd habiliments, belted as they are with knife, pistol, powder-horn, and pouch – present such an aspect.

But you would wrong them to take them as they look. Few among them are the pure bandits whose aim is plunder. Many a noble heart beats beneath a rude exterior – many a one truly humane. There are hearts in that band that throb under the influence of patriotism; some are guided by a still nobler impulse, a desire to extend the area of freedom: others, it is true, yearn but for revenge. These last are chiefly Texans, who mourn a friend or brother slain by Mexican treachery. They have not forgotten the cowardly assassination of Goliad; they remember the red butchery of the Alamo.

Perhaps I alone, of all the band, have no motive for being here; if one, 'tis slight – scarce so noble as vengeance. Mere chance, the love of excitement and adventure, perhaps some weak fondness for power and fame, are all the excuses I can urge for taking a hand in this affair. A poor adventurer – without friends, without home, without country, for my native land is no more a nation – my heart is not cheered by a single throb of patriotism. I have no private wrong to redress, no public cause, no country for which to combat.

During intervals of inaction, these thoughts recur to me, and give me pain.

The men have picketed their horses in the church enclosure; some are tied to trees, and others to the reja-bars of the windows: like their riders, a motley group, various in size, colour, and race. The strong high-mettled steed of Kentucky and Tennessee, the light “pacer” of Louisiana, the cob, the barb, his descendant the “mustang,” that but a few weeks ago was running wild upon the prairies, may all be seen in the troop. Mules, also, of two distinct races – the large gaunt mule of North America, and the smaller and more sprightly variety, native of the soil.

My own black steed, with his pretty fern-coloured muzzle, stands near the fountain in the centre of the piazza. My eye wanders with a sort of habitual delight over the oval outlines of his body. How proudly he curves his swan like neck, and with mock anger paws up the dust! He knows that my eyes are upon him.

We have been scarcely an hour in the rancheria; we are perfect strangers to it: we are the first American troop its people have yet seen – although the war has been going on for some months farther down the river. We have been despatched upon scouting duty, with orders to scour the surrounding country as far as it is safe. The object in sending us hither is not so much to guard against a surprise from our Mexican foe, who is not upon this side, but to guard *them*, the Mexicans, from another enemy – an enemy of *both of us* – the Comanche! These Indian Ishmaelites, report says, are upon the “*war-trail*” and have quite an army in the field. It is said they are foraging higher up the river, where they have it all to themselves, and have just pillaged a settlement in that direction – butchered the men, as is their wont, and carried off the women, children, and chattels. We came hither to conquer the Mexicans, but we must *protect* while *conquering* them! *Cosas de Mexico!*

Chapter Four. Making a captive

I was musing upon the singular character of this *triangular* war, when my reverie was disturbed by the hoof strokes of a horse. The sounds came from a distance, outside the village; the strokes were those of a horse at full gallop.

I stepped hastily across the azotea, and looked over the parapet, in hopes of obtaining a view of this rapid rider. I was not disappointed – as I neared the wall, the road and the rider came full under my eyes.

In the latter, I beheld a picturesque object. He appeared to be a very young man – a mere youth, without beard or moustache, but of singularly handsome features. The complexion was dark, almost brown; but even at the distance of two hundred yards, I could perceive the flash of a noble eye, and note a damask redness upon his cheeks. His shoulders were covered with a scarlet manga, that draped backward over the hips of his horse; and upon his head he wore a light sombrero, laced, banded, and tasselled with bullion of gold. The horse was a small but finely proportioned mustang – spotted like a jaguar upon a ground colour of cream – a true Andalusian.

The horseman was advancing at a gallop, without fear of the ground before him: by chance, his eyes were raised to the level of the azotea, on which I stood; my uniform, and the sparkle of my accoutrements, caught his glance; and quick as thought, as if by an involuntary movement, he reined up his mustang, until its ample tail lay clustered upon the dust of the road. It was then that I noted the singular appearance of both horse and rider.

Just at that moment, the ranger, who held picket on that side of the village, sprang forth from his hiding-place, and challenged the horseman to halt. The challenge was unheeded. Another jerk of the rein spun the mustang round, as upon a pivot; and the next instant, impelled by the spur, the animal resumed his gallop. He did not return by the road, but shot off in a new direction, nearly at right angles to his former course. A rifle-bullet would have followed, and most likely have stopped the career of either horse or rider, had not I, just in the “nick” of time, shouted to the sentry to hold his fire.

A reflection had occurred to me; the game was too noble, too beautiful, to be butchered by a bullet; it was worth a chase and a capture.

My horse was by the water-trough. I had noticed that he was not yet unsaddled, and the bridle was still on. He had been warmed by the morning’s scout; and I had ordered my negro groom to walk him round for an hour or so before letting him at the water.

I did not wait to descend by the *escalera*; I sprang upon the parapet, and from that into the piazza. The groom, perceiving my intention, met me half-way with the horse.

I seized the reins, and bounded into the saddle. Several of the readiest of the rangers followed my example; and as I galloped down the lane that led out of the rancheria, I could tell by the clattering of hoofs that half-a-dozen of them were at my heels. I cared not much for that, for surely I was a match for the stripling we meant to chase. I knew, moreover, that speed at the moment was of more importance than strength; and that if the spotted horse possessed as much “bottom” as he evidently did “heels,” his rider and I would have it to ourselves in the end. I knew that all the horses of my troop were less swift than my own; and from the half-dozen springs I had witnessed on the part of the mustang, I felt satisfied that it remained only for me to overhaul him.

My springing down from the roof and up into the saddle had occupied scarcely two minutes’ time; and in two more, I had cleared the houses, and was scouring across the fields after the scarlet horseman. He was evidently making to get round the village, and continue the journey our presence had so suddenly interrupted.

The chase led through a field of *milpas*. My horse sank deeply in the loose earth, while the lighter mustang bounded over it like a hare. He was distancing me, and I began to fear I should lose him, when all at once I saw that his course was intercepted by a list of magueys, running transversely right and left. The plants were of luxuriant growth, eight or ten feet high, and placed alternately, so that their huge hooked blades interlocked with each other, forming a natural *chevaux-de-frise*.

This barrier at first glance seemed impassable for either man or horse. It brought the Mexican to a halt. He was turning to skirt it, when he perceived that I had leaned into the diagonal line, and could not fail to head him. With a quick wrench upon the rein, he once more wheeled round, set his horse against the magueys, plied the spur, and dashed right into their midst. In a moment, both horse and rider were out of sight; but as I spurred up to the spot, I could hear the thick blades crackle under the hoofs of the mustang.

There was no time for reflection. I must either follow, or abandon the pursuit. The alternative was not thought of. I was on my honour, my steed upon his mettle; and without halt we went plunging through the magueys.

Torn and bleeding, we came out on the opposite side; and I perceived, to my satisfaction, that I had made better time than the red rider before me; his halt had lessened the distance between us.

But another field of milpas had to be passed, and he was again gaining upon me, as we galloped over the heavy ground.

When nearly through the field, I perceived something glancing before us: it was water – a wide drain or ditch, a *zequia* for irrigating the field. Like the magueys, it ran transversely to our course.

“That will stop him,” thought I; “he must take to the right or left, and then – ”

My thoughts were interrupted. Instead of turning either to right or left, the Mexican headed his horse at the *zequia*, and the noble creature rushing forward, rose like a bird upon the wing, and cleared the canal!

I had no time to expend in admiring the feat; I hastened to imitate it, and galloping forward, I set myself for the leap. My brave steed needed neither whip nor spur; he had seen the other leap the *zequia*, and he knew what was expected of him. With a bound he went over, clearing the drain by several feet; and then, as if resolved upon bringing the affair to an end, he laid his head forward, and stretched himself at race-course speed.

A broad grassy plain – a savannah – lay before us, and the hoofs of both horses, pursuer and pursued, now rang upon hard firm turf. The rest of the chase would have been a simple trial of speed, and I made sure of overhauling the mustang before he could reach the opposite side, when a new obstacle presented itself. A vast herd of cattle and horses studded the savannah throughout its whole extent; these, startled by our wild gallop, tossed their heads, and ran affrighted in every direction, but frequently as otherwise, directly in our way. More than once I was forced to rein in, to save my neck or my horse’s from being broken over a fierce bull or a long-horned lumbering ox; and more than once I was compelled to swerve from my course.

What vexed me most, was that in this zigzag race, the mustang, from practice perhaps, had the advantage; and while it continued, he increased his distance.

We cleared the drove at length; but to my chagrin I perceived that we were nearly across the plain. As I glanced ahead, I saw the chapparal near, with taller trees rising over it; beyond, I saw the swell of a hill, with white walls upon its summit. It was the hacienda already mentioned: we were riding directly towards it.

I was growing anxious about the result. Should the horseman reach the thicket, I would be almost certain to lose him. *I dared not let him escape*. What would my men say, if I went back without him? I had hindered the sentry from firing, and permitted to escape, perhaps a spy, perhaps some important personage. His desperate efforts to get off favoured the supposition that he was one or the other. *He must be taken!*

Under fresh impulse, derived from these reflections, I lanced the flanks of my horse more deeply than ever. Moro seemed to divine my thoughts, and stretched himself to his utmost. There were no more cattle, not an obstacle, and his superior speed soon lessened the distance between himself and the mustang. Ten seconds more would do it.

The ten seconds flew by. I felt myself within shooting distance; I drew my pistol from its holster. “*Alto! o yo tiro*” (Halt! or I fire), I cried aloud.

There was no reply: the mustang kept on!

“Halt!” I cried again, unwilling to take the life of a fellow-creature – “halt! or you are a dead man!”

No reply again!

There were not six yards between myself and the Mexican horseman. Riding straight behind him, I could have sent a bullet into his back. Some secret instinct restrained me; it was partly, though not altogether, a feeling of admiration: there was an indefinable idea in my mind at the moment. My finger rested on the trigger, and I could not draw it.

“He must not escape! He is nearing the trees! He must not be allowed to enter the thicket; I must cripple the horse.”

I looked for a place to aim at – his hips were towards me – should I hit him there he might still get off. Where should I aim?

At this moment the animal wheeled, as if guided by his own impulse – perhaps by the knees of his rider – and shot off in a new direction. The object of this manoeuvre was to throw me out of the track. So far it was successful; but it gave me just the opportunity to aim as I wanted; as it brought the mustang’s side towards me; and levelling my pistol, I sent a bullet through his kidneys. A single plunge forward was his last, and both horse and rider came to the ground.

In an instant the latter had disengaged himself from his struggling steed, and stood upon his feet. Fearing that he might still endeavour to escape to the cover of the thicket, I spurred forward, pistol in hand, and pointed the weapon at his head. But he made no attempt either at further flight or resistance. On the contrary, he stood with folded arms, fronting the levelled tube, and, looking me full in the face, said with an air of perfect coolness —

“*No matame, amigo! Soy muger!*” (Do not kill me, friend! I am a woman!)

Chapter Five.

My captive

“Do not kill me, friend! I am a woman!”

This declaration scarcely astonished me; I was half prepared for it. During our wild gallop, I had noticed one or two circumstances which led me to suspect that the spy I pursued was a female. As the mustang sprung over the zequia, the flowing skirt of the manga was puffed upward, and hung for some moments spread out in the air. A velvet bodice beneath, a tunic-like skirt, the *tournure* of the form, all impressed me as singular for a cavallero, however rich and young. The limbs I could not see, as the goat-skin *armas-de-agua* were drawn over them; but I caught a glimpse of a gold spur, and a heel of a tiny red boot to which it was attached. The clubbed hair, too, loosened by the violent motion, had fallen backward, and in two thick plaits, slightly dishevelled, rested upon the croup of the horse. A young Indian’s might have been equally as long, but *his* tresses would have been jet-black and coarse-grained, whereas those under my eyes were soft, silky, and nut-brown. Neither the style of riding —à la *Duchesse de Berri*— nor the manlike costume of manga and hat, were averse to the idea that the rider was a woman. Both the style and costume are common to the *rancheras* of Mexico. Moreover, as the mustang made his last double, I had caught a near view of the side face of the rider. The features of no man – not of the Trojan shepherd, not of Adonis or Endymion – were so exquisitely chiselled as they. Certainly a woman! Her declaration at once put an end to my conjectures, but, as I have said, did not astonish me.

I was astonished, however, by its tone and manner. Instead of being uttered in accents of alarm, it was pronounced as coolly as if the whole thing had been a jest! Sadness, not supplication, was the prevailing tone, which was further carried out as she knelt to the ground, pressed her lips to the muzzle of the still breathing mustang, and exclaimed —

“Ay-de-mi! pobre yegua! muerte! muerte!” (Alas me! poor mare! dead! dead!)

“A woman?” said I, feigning astonishment. My interrogatory was unheeded; she did not even look up.

“Ay-de-mi! pobre yegua! Lola, Lolita!” she repeated, as coolly as if the dead mustang was the only object of her thoughts, and I, the armed assassin, fifty miles from the spot! “A woman?” I again ejaculated – in my embarrassment scarcely knowing what to say.

“Si, señor; nada mas—que quiere V.?” (Yes, sir nothing more – what do you want?)

As she made this reply, she rose to her feet, and stood confronting me without the slightest semblance of fear. So unexpected was the answer, both in tone and sentiment, that for the life of me I could not help breaking into a laugh.

“You are merry, sir. You have made *me* sad; you have killed my favourite!”

I shall not easily forget the look that accompanied these words – sorrow, anger, contempt, defiance, were expressed in one and the same glance. My laughter was suddenly checked; I felt humiliated in that proud presence.

“Señorita,” I replied, “I deeply regret the necessity I have been under: it might have been worse – ”

“And how, pray? – how worse?” demanded she, interrupting me.

“My pistol might have been aimed at *yourself*, but for a suspicion – ”

“Carrambo!” cried she, again interrupting me, “it could not have been worse! I loved that creature dearly – dearly as I do my life —as I love my father—pobre yegua—yeguita—ita—ita!”

And as she thus wildly expressed herself, she bent down, passed her arms around the neck of the mustang, and once more pressed her lips to its velvet muzzle. Then gently closing its eyelids, she

rose to an erect attitude, and stood with folded arms, regarding the lifeless form with a sad and bitter expression of countenance.

I scarcely knew what to do. I was in a dilemma with my fair captive. I would have given a month of my “payroll” to have restored the spotted mustang to life; but as that was out of the question, I bethought me of some means of making restitution to its owner. An offer of money would not be delicate. What then?

A thought occurred to me, that promised to relieve me from my embarrassment. The eagerness of the rich Mexicans to obtain our large American horses —*frisones*, as they term them – was well known throughout the army. Fabulous prices were often paid for them by these *ricos*, who wanted them for display upon the *Paseo*. We had many good half-bred bloods in the troop; one of these, thought I, might be acceptable even to a lady who had lost her pet.

I made the offer as delicately as I could. It was rejected with scorn!

“What, señor!” cried she, striking the ground with her foot till the rowels rang – “what? A horse to me? —*Mira!*” she continued, pointing to the plain: “look there, sir! There are a thousand horses; they are mine. Now, know the value of your offer. Do I stand in need of a horse?”

“But, señorita,” stammered I apologetically, “these are horses of native race. The one I propose to – ”

“Bah!” she exclaimed, interrupting me, and pointing to the mustang; “I would not have exchanged *that native* for all the *frisones* in your troop. Not one of them was its equal!”

A personal slight would not have called forth a contradiction; yet this defiance had that effect. She had touched the chord of my vanity – I might almost say, of my affection. With some pique I replied —

“*One, señorita?*”

I looked towards Moro as I spoke. Her eyes followed mine, and she stood for some moments gazing at him in silence. I watched the expression of her eye; I saw it kindle into admiration as it swept over the gracefully curving outlines of my noble steed. He looked at the moment superb; the short skurry had drawn the foam from his lips, and flakes of it clung against his neck and counter, contrasting finely with the shining black of his skin; his sides heaved and fell in regular undulations, and the smoke issued from his blood-red nostrils; his eye was still on fire, and his neck proudly arched, as though conscious of his late triumph, and the interest he was now exciting.

For a long while she stood gazing upon him, and though she spoke not a word, I saw that she recognised his fine points.

“You are right, cavallero,” she said at length, and thoughtfully; “*he is.*”

Just then a series of reflections were passing through my mind, that rendered me extremely uncomfortable; and I felt regret that I had so pointedly drawn her attention to the horse. Would she demand *him*? That was the thought that troubled me. I had not promised her *any* horse in my troop, and Moro I would not have given for her herd of a thousand; but on the strength of the offer I had made, what if she should fancy *him*? The circumstances were awkward for a refusal; indeed, under any circumstances refusal would have been painful. I began to feel that I could deny her nothing. This proud beautiful woman already *divided my interest with Moro!*

My position was a delicate one; fortunately, I was relieved from it by an incident that carried our thoughts into a new current: the troopers who had followed me at that moment rode up.

She seemed uneasy at their presence; that could not be wondered at, considering their wild garb and fierce looks. I ordered them back to their quarters. They stared for a moment at the fallen mustang with its rich blood-stained trappings, at its late rider, and her picturesque garments; and then, muttering a few words to one another, obeyed the order. I was once more alone with my captive.

Chapter Six. Isolina De Vargas

As soon as the men were out of hearing, she said interrogatively, “*Tejanos?*”

“Some of them are Texans – not all.”

“You are their chief?”

“I am.”

“Capitan, I presume?”

“That is my rank.”

“And now, Señor Capitan, am I your captive?”

The question took me by surprise, and, for the moment, I did not know what answer to make. The excitement of the chase, the encounter, and its curious developments – perhaps above all other things, the bewitching beauty of my captive – had driven out of my mind the whole purpose of the pursuit; and for some minutes I had not been thinking of any result. The interrogatory reminded me that I had a delicate duty to perform. Was this lady a *spy*?

Such a supposition was by no means improbable, as my old campaigner can testify. “Fair ladies – though never one so fair as she – have, ere now, served their country in this fashion. She may be the bearer of some important dispatch for the enemy. If so, and I permit her to go free, the consequences may be serious – unpleasant even to myself.” So ran my reflections.

On the other hand, I disliked the duty of taking her back a prisoner. I feared to execute it; I dreaded *her* displeasure. *I wished to be friends with her*. I felt the influence of that mysterious power which transcends all strength – the power of beauty. I had been but ten minutes in the company of this brown-skinned maiden, and already she controlled my heart as though she had been its mistress for life!

I knew not how to reply. She saw that I hesitated, and again put the question —

“Am I your captive?”

“I fear, señorita, I am *yours*.”

I was prompted to this declaration, partly to escape from a direct answer, and partly giving way to the passion already fast gathering in my bosom. It was no coquetry on my part, no desire to make a pretty passage of words. Though I spoke only from impulse, I was serious; and with no little anxiety did I watch the effect of my speech.

Her large lustrous eyes rested upon me, at first with a puzzled expression; this gradually changed to one of more significance – one that pleased me better. She seemed for a moment to throw aside her indifference, and regard me with more attention. I fancied, from the glance she gave, that she was contented with what I had said. For all that, the slight curl upon her pretty lip had a provoking air of triumph in it; and she resumed her proud *hauteur* as she replied —

“Come, cavallero; this is idle compliment. Am I free to go?”

I wavered betwixt duty and over-politeness: a compromise offered itself.

“Lady,” said I, approaching her, and looking as seriously as I could into her beautiful eyes, “if you give me your word that you are *not a spy*, you are free to go: your word – I ask nothing more.”

I prescribed these conditions rather in a tone of entreaty than command. I affected sternness, but my countenance must have mocked me.

My captive broke into unrestrained laughter, crying out at intervals —

“I a spy! – a spy! Ha, ha, ha! Señor Capitan, you are jesting?”

“I hope, señorita, *you* are in earnest. You are no spy, then? – you bear no dispatch for our enemy?”

“Nothing of the sort, mio capitan;” and she continued her light laughter.

“Why, then, did you try to make away from us?”

“Ah, caballero! are you not Tejanos? Do not be offended when I tell you that your people bear but an indifferent reputation among us Mexicans.”

“But your attempt to escape was, to say the least, rash and imprudent: you risked life by it.”

“*Carrambo*, yes! I perceive I did;” and she looked significantly at the mustang, while a bitter smile played upon her lips. “I perceive it now; I did not then. I did not think there was a horseman in all your troop could come up with me. *Merced!* there was *one*. *You* have overtaken me: *you alone* could have done it.”

As she uttered these words, her large brown eyes were once more turned upon me – not in a fixed gaze, but wandering. She scanned me from the forage-cap on my crown to the spur upon my heel. I watched her eye with eager interest: I fancied that its scornful expression was giving way; I fancied there was a ray of tenderness in the glance, I would have given the world to have divined her thoughts at that moment.

Our eyes met, and parted in mutual embarrassment – at least I fancied so; for on turning again, I saw that her head drooped, and her gaze was directed downward, as if some new thought occupied her.

For some moments, both were silent. We might have remained longer thus, but it occurred to me that I was acting rudely. The lady was still my captive. I had not yet given her permission to depart: I hastened to tender it.

“Spy or no spy, señorita, I shall not detain you. I shall bear the risk: you are free to go.”

“*Gracias I caballero!* And now, since you have behaved so handsomely, I shall set your mind at rest about the *risk*. Read!”

She handed me a folded paper; at a glance, I recognised the *safe-guard* of the commander-in-chief, enjoining upon all to respect its bearer – the *Doña Isolina de Vargas*.

“You perceive, mio capita I was not your captive after all? Ha! ha! ha!”

“Lady, you are too general not to pardon the rudeness to which you have been subjected?”

“Freely, capitan – freely.”

“I shudder at thought of the risk you have run. Why did you act with such imprudence? Your sudden flight at sight of our picket caused suspicion, and of course it was our duty to follow and capture you. With the safeguard, you had no cause for flight.”

“Ha! it was that very safe-guard that caused me to fly.”

“The safe-guard, señorita? Pray, explain!”

“Can I trust *your* prudence, capitan?”

“I promise – ”

“Know, then, that I was not certain you were *Americanos*; for aught I could see, you might have been a guerilla of my *countrymen*. How would it be if this paper, and sundry others I carry, were to fall into the hands of *Caiales*? You perceive, capitan, we fear our *friends* more than our *enemies*.”

I now fully comprehended the motive of her flight.

“You speak Spanish too well, mio capitan,” continued she. “Had you cried ‘Halt!’ in your native tongue, I should at once have pulled up, and perhaps saved my pet. Ah, me! —*pobre yegua! pobre Zola!*”

As she uttered the last exclamation, her feelings once more overcame her; and sinking down upon her knees, she passed her arms around the neck of the mustang, now stiff and cold. Her face was buried in the long thick mane, and I could perceive the tears sparkling like dew-drops over the tossed hair.

“*Pobre Lolita!*” she continued, “I have good cause to grieve; I had reason to love you well. More than once you saved me from the fierce Lipan and the brutal Comanche. What am I to do now? I dread the Indian foray; I shall tremble at every sign of the savage. I dare no more venture upon the prairie; I dare not go abroad; I must tamely stay at home. *Mia querida!* you were my wings: they are clipped – I fly no more.”

All this was uttered in a tone of extreme bitterness; and I – I who so loved my own brave steed – could appreciate her feelings. With the hope of imparting even a little consolation, I repeated my offer.

“Señorita,” I said, “I have swift horses in my troop – some of noble race – ”

“You have no horse in your troop I value.”

“You have not seen them all?”

“All – every one of them – to-day, as you filed out of the city.”

“Indeed?”

“Indeed, yes, noble capitan. I saw you as you carried yourself so cavalierly at the head of your troop of *filibusteros*– Ha, ha, ha!”

“Señorita, I saw not you.”

“*Carrambo!* it was not for the want of using your eyes. There was not a *balcon* or *reja* into which you did not glance – not a smile in the whole street you did not seem anxious to reciprocate – Ha, ha, ha! I fear, Señor Capitan, you are the Don Juan de Tenorio of the north.”

“Lady, it is not my character.”

“Nonsense! you are proud of it. I never saw man who was not. But come! a truce to badinage. About the horse – you have none in your troop I value, save *one*.”

I trembled as she spoke.

“It is *he*,” she continued, pointing to Moro.

I felt as if I should sink into the earth. My embarrassment prevented me for some time from replying. She noticed my hesitation, but remained silent, awaiting my answer.

“Señorita,” I stammered out at length, “that steed is a great favourite – an old and tried friend. *If* you desire – to possess him, he is – he is at your service.”

In emphasising the “if,” I was appealing to her generosity. It was to no purpose.

“Thank you,” she replied coolly; “he shall be well cared for. No doubt he will serve my purpose. *How is his mouth?*”

I was choking with vexation, and could not reply. I began to hate her.

“Let me try him,” continued she. “Ah! you have a curb bit – that will do; but it is not equal to ours. I use a *mameluke*. Help me to that *lazo*.”

She pointed to a *lazo* of white horsehair, beautifully plaited, that was coiled upon the saddle of the mustang.

I unloosed the rope – mechanically I did – and in the same way adjusted it to the horn of my saddle. I noticed that the noose-ring was of silver! I shortened the leathers to the proper length.

“Now, capitan!” cried she, gathering the reins in her small gloved hand – “now I shall see how he performs.”

At the word, she bounded into the saddle, her small foot scarcely touching the stirrup. She had thrown off her *manga*, and her woman’s form was now displayed in all its undulating outlines. The silken skirt draped down to her ankles, and underneath appeared the tiny red boot, the glancing spur, and the lace ruffle of her snow-white *calzoncillas*. A scarlet sash encircled her waist, with its fringed ends drooping to the saddle; and the tight bodice, lashed with lace, displayed the full rounding of her bosom, as it rose and fell in quiet regular breathing – for she seemed in no way excited or nervous. Her full round eye expressed only calmness and courage.

I stood transfixed with admiration. I thought of the Amazons: were they beautiful like her? With a troop of such warriors one might *conquer a world!*

A fierce-looking bull, moved by curiosity or otherwise, had separated from the herd, and was seen approaching the spot where we were. This was just what the fair rider wanted. At a touch of the spur, the horse sprang forward, and galloped directly for the bull. The latter, cowed at the sudden onset, turned and ran; but his swift pursuer soon came within *lazo* distance. The noose circled in the air, and, launched forward, was seen to settle around the horns of the animal. The horse was now

wheeled round, and headed in an opposite direction. The rope tightened with a sudden pluck, and the bull was thrown with violence to the plain, where he lay stunned and apparently lifeless. Before he had time to recover himself, the rider turned her horse, trotted up to the prostrate animal, bent over in the saddle, unfastened the noose, and, after coiling the rope under her arm, came galloping back.

“Superb! – magnificent!” she exclaimed, leaping from the saddle and gazing at the steed. “Beautiful! – most beautiful! Ah, Lola, poor Lola! I fear I shall soon forget thee!”

The last words were addressed to the mustang. Then turning to me, she added —

“And this horse is mine?”

“Yes, lady, if you will it,” I replied somewhat cheerlessly, for I felt as if my best friend was about to be taken from me.

“But I do *not* will it,” said she, with an air of determination; and then breaking into a laugh, she cried out, “Ha! capitan, I know your thoughts. Think you I cannot appreciate the sacrifice you would make? Keep your favourite. Enough that one of us should suffer;” and she pointed to the mustang. “Keep the brave black; you well know how to ride him. Were he mine, no mortal could influence me to part with him.”

“There is *but one* who could influence *me*.”

As I said this, I looked anxiously for the answer. It was not in words I expected it, but in the glance. Assuredly there was no frown; I even fancied I could detect a smile – a blending of triumph and satisfaction. It was short-lived, and my heart fell again under her light laugh.

“Ha! ha! ha! That one is of course your lady-love. Well, noble capitan, if you are as true to her as to you brave steed, she will have no cause to doubt your fealty. I must leave you. Adios!”

“Shall I not be permitted to accompany you to your home?”

“*Gracias!* no, señor. I am at home. *Mira!* my father’s house!” She pointed to the hacienda. “Here is one who will look to the remains of poor Lola;” and she signalled to a vaquero at that moment coming from the herd. “Remember, capitan, you are an enemy; I must not accept your politeness; neither may I offer you hospitality. Ah! you know not us – you know not the tyrant Santa Anna. Perhaps even at this moment his spies are – ” She glanced suspiciously around as she spoke. “O Heavens!” she exclaimed with a start, as her eyes fell upon the form of a man advancing down the hill. “*Santissima Virgen!* it is Ijurra!”

“Ijurra?”

“Only my cousin; but – ” She hesitated, and then suddenly changing to an expression of entreaty, she continued: “O leave me, señor! *Por amor Dios!* leave me. Adieu, adieu!”

Though I longed to have a nearer view of “Ijurra,” the hurried earnestness of her manner overcame me; and without making other reply than a simple “Adios,” I vaulted into the saddle, and rode off.

On reaching the border of the woods, curiosity – a stronger feeling perhaps – mastered my politeness; and, under the pretence of adjusting my stirrup, I turned in the saddle, and glanced back.

Ijurra had arrived upon the ground.

I beheld a tall dark man, dressed in the usual costume of the ricos of Mexico: dark cloth polka-jacket, blue military trousers, with scarlet sash around his waist, and low-crowned, broad-brimmed hat upon his head. He appeared about thirty years of age, whiskered, moustached, and, after a fashion, handsome. It was not his age, nor his personal appearance, nor yet his costume, that had my attention at the moment. I watched only his actions. He stood confronting his cousin, or rather he stood *over* her, for she appeared before him in an attitude of fear! He held a paper in one hand, and I saw he was pointing to it as he spoke. There was a fierce vulture-like expression upon his face; and even in the distance I could tell, from the tones of his voice, that he was talking angrily!

Why should she fear *him*? Why submit to such rude rebuke? He must have a strange power over that spirit who could force it thus tamely to listen to reproach?

These were my reflections. My impulse was to drive the spurs into the sides of my horse, and gallop back upon the ground. I might have done so had the scene lasted much longer; but I saw the lady suddenly leave the spot, and walk rapidly in the direction of the hacienda.

I wheeled round again, and plunging under the shadows of the forest, soon fell into a road leading to the rancheria. With my thoughts full of the incident that had just transpired, I rode unconsciously, leaving my horse to his own guidance.

My reverie was interrupted by the challenge of one of my own sentries, which admonished me that I had arrived at the entrance of the village.

Chapter Seven.

An order to forage

My adventure did not end with the day; it was continued into the night, and repeated in my dreams. I rode the chase over again; I dashed through the magueys, I leaped the *zequia*, and galloped through the affrighted herd; I beheld the spotted mustang stretched lifeless upon the plain, its rider bending and weeping over it. That face of rare beauty, that form of exquisite proportion, that eye rotund and noble, that tongue so free, and heart so bold – all were again encountered in dreamland. A dark face was in the vision, and at intervals crossed the picture like a cloud. It was the face of Ijurra.

I think it was that awoke me, but the *reveille* of the bugle was ringing in my ears as I leaped from my couch.

For some moments I was under the impression that the adventure had been a dream: an object that hung on the opposite wall came under my eyes, and recalled the reality – it was my saddle, over the holsters of which lay a coil of white horsehair rope, with a silver ring at the end. I remembered the lazo.

When fairly awake, I reviewed my yesterday's adventure from first to last. I tried to think calmly upon it; I tried to get it out of my thoughts, and return seriously to my duties. A vain attempt! The more I reflected upon the incident, the more I became conscious of the powerful interest its heroine had excited within me. Interest, indeed! Say rather *passion* – a passion that in one single hour had grown as large as my heart!

It was not *the first* love of my life. I was nigh thirty years of age. I had been enamoured before – more than once, it may be – and I understood what the feeling was. I needed no Cupid to tell me I was in love again – to the very ends of my fingers.

To paint the object of my passion is a task I shall not attempt. Beauty like hers must be left to the imagination. Think of the woman you *yourself* love or have loved; fancy her in her fairest moments, in bower or boudoir – perchance a blushing bride – and you may form some idea – No, no, no! you could never have looked upon woman so lovely as Isolina de Vargas.

Oh! that I could fix that fleeting phantom of beauty – that I could paint that likeness for the world to admire! It cannot be. The most puissant pen is powerless, the brightest colour too cold. Though deeply graven upon the tablet of my heart, I cannot multiply the impression.

It is idle to talk of wavy hair, profuse and glossed – of almond eyes with long dark fringes – of pearl-white teeth, and cheeks tinted with damascene. All these had she, but they are not peculiar characteristics. Other women are thus gifted. The traits of *her* beauty lay in the intellectual as much as the physical – in a happy combination of both. The soul, the spirit, had its share in producing this incomparable picture. It was to behold the play of those noble features, to watch the changing cheek, the varying smile, the falling lash, the flashing eye, the glance now tender, now sublime – it was to look on all this, and be impressed with an idea of the divinest loveliness.

As I ate my frugal breakfast, such a vision was passing before me. I contemplated the future with pleasant hopes, but not without feelings of uneasiness. I had not forgotten the abrupt parting – no invitation to renew the acquaintance, no hope, no prospect that I should ever behold that beautiful woman again, unless blind chance should prove my friend.

I am not a fatalist, and I therefore resolved not to rely upon mere destiny, but, if possible, to help it a little in its evolution.

Before I had finished my coffee, a dozen schemes had passed through my mind, all tending towards one object – the renewal of my acquaintance with Isolina de Vargas. Unless favoured by some lucky accident, or, what was more desirable, *by the lady herself*, I knew we might never meet again.

In such times, it was not likely she would be much “out-of-doors;” and in a few days, hours perhaps, I might be ordered *en route* never more to return to that interesting outpost.

As the district was, of course, under martial law, and I was *de facto* dictator, you will imagine that I might easily have procured the right of entry anywhere. Not so. Whatever be the licence of the mere soldier as regards the common people of a conquered country, the position of the officer with its higher class is essentially different. If a gentleman, he naturally feels a delicacy in making any advances towards an acquaintance; and his honour restrains him from the freer forms of introduction. To take advantage of his position of power would be a positive meanness, of which a true gentleman cannot be guilty. Besides, there may be rancour on the part of the conquered – there usually is – but even when no such feeling exists, another barrier stands in the way of free association between the officer and “society.” The latter feels that the position of affairs will not be permanent; the enemy will in time evacuate, and then the vengeance of mob-patriotism is to be dreaded. Never did the ricos of Mexico feel more secure than while under the protection of the American army: many of them were disposed to be friendly; but the phantom of the future, with its mob *émeutes*, stared them in the face, and under this dread they were forced to adopt a hypocritical exclusiveness. Epaulettes must not be seen glancing through the windows of their drawing-rooms!

Under such circumstances, my situation was difficult enough. I might gaze upon the outside walls of that handsome hacienda till my heart ached, but how was I to effect an entrance?

To charge a fort, a battery, an intrenched camp – to storm a castle, or break a solid square – one or all would have been child’s play compared with the difficulty of crossing that glacial line of etiquette that separated me from my beautiful enemy.

To effect this purpose, a dozen schemes were passed through my mind, and rejected, till my eyes at length rested upon the most interesting object in the apartment – the little white rope that hung from my saddlebow. In the lazo, I recognised my “forlorn-hope.” That pretty implement must be returned to its owner. *I myself should take it home!* So far *destiny* should be guided by *me*; beyond, I should have to put my trust in destiny.

I think best under the influence of a cigar; and lighting one, I ascended to the azotea, to complete my little scheme.

I had scarcely made two turns of the roof, when a horseman galloped into the piazza. He was in dragoon uniform, and I soon perceived he was an orderly from headquarters, inquiring for the commandant of the outpost. One of the men pointed to me; and the orderly trotting forward, drew up in front of the alcalde’s house, and announced that he was the bearer of a dispatch from the general-in-chief, at the same time showing a folded paper. I directed him to pass it up on the point of his sabre, which he did; and then saluting me, he turned his horse and galloped back as he had come.

I opened the dispatch, and read: —

“*Head-quarters, Army of Occupation, —*

“*July – th, 1846.*

“Sir, – You will take a sufficient number of your men, and proceed to the hacienda of Don Ramon de Yargas, in the neighbourhood of your station. You will there find five thousand head of beeves, which you will cause to be driven to the camp of the American army, and delivered to the commissary-general. You will find the necessary drivers upon the ground, and a portion of your troop will form the escort. The enclosed *note* will enable you to understand the nature of your duty.

“A.A. Adjutant-general.

“Captain Warfield.”

“Surely,” thought I, as I finished reading – “surely there is a ‘Providence that shapes our ends.’ Just as I was cudgelling my brains for some scheme of introduction to Don Ramon de Vargas, here comes one ready fashioned to my hand.”

I thought no more about the lazo: the rope was no longer an object of prime interest. Trimmed and embellished with the graceful excuse of “duty,” I should now ride boldly up to the hacienda,

and enter its gates with the confident air of a welcome guest. Welcome, indeed! A contract for five thousand beeves, and at war-prices! A good stroke of business on the part of the old Don. Of course, I shall see him – “embrace him” – hobnob with him over a glass of Canario or Xeres – get upon the most intimate terms, and so be “asked back.” I am usually popular with old gentlemen, and I trusted to my bright star to place me *en rapport* with Don Ramon de Vargas. The coralling of the cattle would occupy some time – a brace of hours at the least. That would be outside work, and I could intrust it to my lieutenant or a sergeant. For myself, I was determined to stay by the walls. The Don must go out to look after his vaqueros. It would be rude to leave me alone. He would introduce me to his daughter – he could not do less – a customer on so large a scale! We should be left to ourselves, and then – Ha! Ijurra! I had forgotten *him*. Would *he* be there?

The recollection of this man fell like a shadow over the bright fancies I had conjured up.

A dispatch from head-quarters calls for prompt attention and my reflections were cut short by the necessity of carrying the order into execution. Without loss of time, I issued the command for about fifty of the rangers to “boot and saddle.”

I was about to pay more than ordinary attention to my toilet, when it occurred to me I might as well first peruse the “note” referred to in the dispatch. I opened the paper; to my surprise the document was in Spanish. This did not puzzle me, and I read: —

“The five thousand beeves are ready for you, according to the contract, but *I* cannot take upon me to deliver them. *They must be taken from me with a show of force*; and even a *little rudeness*, on the part of those you send, would not be out of place. My vaqueros are at your service, but *I* must not command them. You may *press* them.

“Ramon de Vargas.”

This note was addressed to the commissary-general of the American army. Its meaning, though to the uninitiated a little obscure, was to me as clear as noonday; and, although, it gave me a high opinion of the administrative talents of Don Ramon de Vargas, it was by no means a welcome document. It rendered null every act of the fine programme I had sketched out. By its directions, there was to be no “embracing,” no hobnobbing over wine, no friendly chat with the Don, no *tête-à-tête* with his beautiful daughter – no; but, on the contrary, I was to ride up with a swagger, bang the doors, threaten the trembling porter, kick the peons, and demand from their master five thousand head of beef-cattle – all in true freebooting style!

A nice figure I shall cut, thought I, in the eyes of Isolina.

A little reflection, however, convinced me that that intelligent creature would be in the secret. Yes, she will understand my motives. I can act with as much mildness as circumstances will permit. My Texan lieutenant will do the kicking of the peons, and that without much pressing. If she be not cloistered, I will have a glimpse at her; so here goes. “*To horse!*”

The bugle gave the signal; fifty rangers – with Lieutenants Holingsworth and Wheatley – leaped into their saddles, and next moment were filing by twos from the piazza, myself at their head.

A twenty minutes’ trot brought us to the front gate of the hacienda, where we halted. The great door, massive and jail-like, was closed, locked, and barred; the shutters of the windows as well. Not a soul was to be seen outside, not even the apparition of a frightened peon. I had given my Texan lieutenant his cue; he knew enough of Spanish for the purpose.

Flinging himself out of the saddle, he approached the gate, and commenced hammering upon it with the butt of his pistol.

“*Ambre la puerta!*” (Open the door!) cried he.

No answer.

“*La puerta—la puerta!*” he repeated in a louder tone.

Still no answer.

“*Ambre la puerta!*” once more vociferated the lieutenant, at the same time thundering on the woodwork with his weapon.

When the noise ceased, a faint “*Quien es?*” (Who is it?) was heard from within.

“*Yo!*” bawled Wheatley, “*ambre! ambre!*”

“*Si, señor,*” answered the voice in a somewhat tremulous key.

“*Anda! anda! Somos hombres de bien!*” (Quick then! We are honest men.)

A rattling of chains and shooting of bolts now commenced, and lasted for at least a couple of minutes, at the end of which time the great folding-doors opened inward, displaying to view the swarthy leather-clad *portero*, the brick-paved *saguan*, and a portion of the *patio*, or courtyard within.

As soon as the door was fairly open, Wheatley made a rush at the trembling porter, caught him by the jerkin, boxed both his ears, and then commanded him in a loud voice to summon the *dueño*!

This conduct, somewhat unexpected on the part of the rangers, seemed to be just to their taste; and I could hear behind me the whole troop chuckling in half-suppressed laughter. *Guerilleros* as they were, they had never been allowed much licence in their dealings with the inhabitants – the non-combatants – of the country, and much less had they witnessed such conduct on the part of their officers. Indeed, it was cause of complaint in the ranks of the American army, and with many officers too, that even hostile Mexicans were treated with a lenient consideration denied to themselves. Wheatley’s behaviour, therefore, touched a chord in the hearts of our following, that vibrated pleasantly enough; they began to believe that the campaign was about to become a little more jolly.

“*Señor,*” stammered the porter, “the du – du – *dueño* has given or – orders – he wi – wi – will not s–see any one.”

“*Will not?*” echoed Wheatley; “go, tell him he *must!*”

“Yes, *amigo,*” I said soothingly; for I began to fear the man would be too badly frightened to deliver his message. “Go, say to your master that an American officer has business with him, and *must* see him immediately.”

The man went off, after a little more persuasion from the free hand of Wheatley, of course leaving the gates open behind him.

We did not wait for his return. The patio looked inviting; and, directing Holingsworth to remain outside with the men, and the Texan lieutenant to follow me, I headed my horse for the great archway, and rode in.

Chapter Eight.

Don Ramon

On entering the courtyard, a somewhat novel scene presented itself – a Spanish picture, with some transatlantic touches. The *patio* of a Mexican house is its proper front. Here you no longer look upon jail-like door and windows, but façades gaily frescoed, curtained verandahs, and glazed sashes that reach to the ground. The patio of Don Ramon's mansion was paved with brick. A fountain, with its tank of japanned mason-work, stood in the centre; orange-trees stretched their fronds over the water: their golden globes and white wax-like flowers perfumed the atmosphere, which, cooled by the constant evaporation of the *jet*, felt fresh and fragrant. Around three sides of the court extended a verandah, its floor of painted tiles rising but a few inches above the level of the pavement. A row of *portales* supported the roof of this verandah, and the whole corridor was railed in, and curtained. The curtains were close-drawn, and except at one point – the entrance between two of the *portales* – the corridor was completely screened from our view, and consequently all the windows of the house, that opened into the verandah. No human face greeted our searching glances. In looking to the rear – into the great *corral*, or cattle-yard – we could see numerous peons in their brown leathern dresses, with naked legs and sandalled feet; vaqueros in all their grandeur of velveteens, bell-buttons, and gold or silver lace; with a number of women and young girls in coloured *naguas* and rebosos. A busy scene was presented in that quarter. It was the great cattle enclosure, for the estate of Don Ramon de Vargas was a *hacienda de ganados*, or grand grazing-farm – a title which in no way detracts from the presumed respectability of its owner, many of the noble hidalgos of Mexico being *graziers* on a large scale.

On entering the patio, I only glanced back at the corral; my eyes were busy with the curtained verandah, and, failing there were carried up to the azotea, in hopes of discovering the object of my thoughts. The house, as I have elsewhere stated, was but a single story in height, and from the saddle I could almost look into the azotea. I could see that it was a sanctuary of rare plants, and the broad leaves and bright corollas of some of the taller ones appeared over the edge of the parapet. Abundance of fair flowers I could perceive, but not that one for which I was looking. No face yet showed, no voice greeted us with a welcome. The shouts of the vaqueros, the music of singing-birds caged along the corridor, and the murmur of the fountain, were the only sounds. The two former suddenly became hushed, as the hoofs of our horses rang upon the stone pavement, and the heedless water alone continued to utter its soft monotone.

Once more my eyes swept the curtain, gazing intently into the few apertures left by a careless drawing; once more they sought the azotea, and glanced along the parapet: my scrutiny still remained unrewarded.

Without exchanging a word, Wheatley and I sat silent in our saddles, awaiting the return of the portero. Already the peons, vaqueros, and wenchs, had poured in through the back gateway, and stood staring with astonishment at the unexpected guests.

After a considerable pause, the tread of feet was heard upon the corridor, and presently the messenger appeared, and announced that the *dueño* was coming.

In a minute after, one of the curtains was drawn back, and an old gentleman made his appearance behind the railing. He was a person of large frame, and although slightly stooping with age, his step was firm, and his whole aspect bespoke a wonderful energy and resolution. His eyes were large and brilliant, shadowed by heavy brows, upon which the hair still retained its dark colour, although that of his head was white as snow. He was simply habited – in a jacket of nankeen cloth, and wide trousers of like material. He wore neither waistcoat nor cravat. A full white shirt of finest

linen covered his breast, and a sash of dull blue colour was twisted around his waist. On his head was a costly hat of the “Guayaquil grass,” and in his fingers a husk cigarrito smoking at the end.

Altogether, the aspect of Don Ramon – for it was he – despite its assumed sternness, was pleasing and intelligent; and I should have relished a friendly chat with him, even upon his own account.

This, however, was out of the question. I must abide by the spirit of my orders: the farce must be played out; so, touching the flanks of my horse, I rode forward to the edge of the verandah, and placed myself *vis-à-vis* with the Don.

“Are you Don Ramon de Vargas?”

“Si, señor,” was the reply, in a tone of angry astonishment.

“I am an officer of the American army” – I spoke loud, and in Spanish, of course, for the benefit of the peons and vaqueros. “I am sent to offer you a contract to supply the army with beeves. I have here an order from the general-in-chief – ”

“I have no beeves for sale,” interrupted Don Ramon, in a loud, indignant voice; “I shall have nothing to do with the American army.”

“Then, sir,” retorted I, “I must take your beeves without your consent. You shall be paid for them, but take them I must; my orders require that I should do so. Moreover, your vaqueros must accompany us, and drive the cattle to the American camp.”

As I said this, I signalled to Holingsworth, who rode in with his following; and then the whole troop, filing through the back gateway, began to collect the frightened vaqueros, and set them about their work.

“I protest against this robbery!” shouted Don Ramon. “It is infamous – contrary to the laws of civilised warfare. I shall appeal to my government – to yours – I shall have redress.”

“You shall have payment, Don Ramon,” said I, apparently trying to pacify him.

“Payment, *carrambo!* – payment from robbers, *filibusteros*– ”

“Come, come, old gentleman!” cried Wheatley, who was only half behind the scenes, and who spoke rather in earnest, “keep a good tongue in your head, or you may lose something of more value to you than your cattle. Remember whom you are talking to.”

“*Tejanos! ladrones!*” hissed Don Ramon, with an earnest application of the latter phrase that would certainly have brought Wheatley’s revolver from his belt, had I not, at the moment, whispered a word in the lieutenant’s ear.

“Hang the old rascal!” muttered he in reply to me. “I thought he *was* in earnest. Look here, old fellow!” he continued, addressing himself to Don Ramon, “don’t you be scared about the dollars. Uncle Sam’s a liberal trader and a good paymaster. I wish your beef was mine, and I had *his* promise to pay for it. So take things a little easier, if you please; and don’t be so free of your ‘filibusteros’ and ‘ladrones’: free-born Texans ain’t used to such talk.”

Don Ramon suddenly cut short the colloquy by angrily closing the curtains, and hiding himself from our sight.

During the whole scene I had great difficulty in controlling my countenance. I could perceive that the Mexican laboured under a similar difficulty. There was a laughing devil in the corner of his keen eye that required restraint; and I thought once or twice either he or I should lose our equanimity. I certainly should have done so, but that my heart and eyes were most of the time in other quarters. As for the Don, he was playing an important part; and a suspicion of his hypocrisy, on the minds of some of the leather-clad *greasers* who listened to the dialogue, might have afterwards brought him to grief. Most of them were his own domestics and retainers, but not all. There were free *rancheros* among them – some who belonged to the pueblita itself – some, perchance, who had figured in *pronunciamentos*– who voted at elections, and styled themselves *citizens*. The Don, therefore, had good reasons for assuming a character; and well did the old gentleman sustain it.

As he drew the curtain, his half-whispered “Adios capitán!” heard only by myself, sounded full of sweetness and *promise*; and I felt rather contented as I straightened myself in the saddle, and issued the order for *rieving* his cattle.

Chapter Nine. “Un Papelcito.”

Wheatley now rode after the troop, with which Holingworth had already entered the corral. A band of drivers was speedily pressed into service; and with these the two lieutenants proceeded to the great plain at the foot of the hill, where most of Don Ramon's cattle were at pasture. By this arrangement I was left alone, if I except the company of half-a-dozen slippered wenches – the deities of the *cocina*– who, clustered in the corner of the patio, eyed me with mingled looks of curiosity and fear.

The verandah curtains remained hermetically closed, and though I glanced at every aperture that offered a chance to an observing eye, no one appeared to be stirring behind them.

“Too high-bred – perhaps indifferent?” thought I. The latter supposition was by no means gratifying to my vanity. “After all, now that the others are gone out of the way, Don Ramon *might* ask me to step inside. Ah! no – these mestizo women would tell tales: I perceive it would never do. I may as well give it up. I shall ride out, and join the troop.”

As I turned my horse to put this design into execution, the fountain came under my eyes. Its water reminded me that I was thirsty, for it was a July day, and a hot one. A gourd cup lay on the edge of the tank. Without dismounting, I was able to lay hold of the vessel, and filling it with the cool sparkling liquid, I drained it off. It was very good water, but not Canario or Xeres.

Sweeping the curtain once more, I turned with a disappointed glance, and jaggng my horse, rode doggedly out through the back gateway.

Once in the rear of the buildings, I had a full view of the great meadow already known to me; and pulling up, I sat in the saddle, and watched the animated scene that was there being enacted. Bulls, half wild, rushing to and fro in mad fury, vaqueros mounted on their light mustangs, with streaming sash and winding lazo; rangers upon their heavier steeds, offering but a clumsy aid to the more adroit and practised herdsmen; others driving off large groups that had been already collected and brought into subjection: and all this amidst the fierce bellowing of the bulls, the shouts and laughter of the delighted troopers, the shriller cries of the vaqueros and peons: the whole forming a picture that, under other circumstances, I should have contemplated with interest. Just then my spirits were not attuned to its enjoyment, and although I remained for some minutes with my eyes fixed upon the plain, my thoughts were wandering elsewhere.

I confess to a strong faith in woman's curiosity. That such a scene could be passing under the windows of the most aristocratic mansion, without its most aristocratic inmate deigning to take a peep at it, I could not believe. Besides, Isolina was the very reverse.

“Ha! Despite that jealous curtain, those beautiful eyes are glancing through some aperture – window or loophole, I doubt not;” and with this reflection I once more turned my face to the buildings.

Just then it occurred to me that I had not sufficiently reconnoitred the *front* of the dwelling. As we approached it, we had observed that the shutters of the windows were closed; but these opened inward, and since that time one or other of them might have been set a little ajar. From my knowledge of Mexican interiors, I knew that the front windows are those of the principal apartments – of the *sola* and grand *cuarto*, or drawing-room – precisely those where the inmates of that hour should be found.

“Fool!” thought I, “to have remained so long in the patio. Had I gone round to the front of the house, I might have – ’Tis not too late – there's a chance yet.”

Under the impulse of this new hope, I rode back through the corral, and re-entered the patio. The brown-skinned mestizas were still there, chattering and flurried as ever, and the curtain had not been stirred. A glance at it was all I gave; and without stopping I walked my horse across the paved court, and entered under the arched *saguan*. The massive gate stood open, as we had left it; and on

looking into the little box of the portero, I perceived that it was empty. The man had hid himself, in dread of a second interview with the Texan lieutenant!

In another moment I had emerged from the gateway, and was about turning my horse to inspect the windows, when I heard the word “Capitan,” pronounced in a voice, that sounded soft as a silver bell, and thrilled to my heart like a strain of music.

I looked towards the windows. It came not thence; they were close shut as ever. Whence —

Before I had time to ask myself the question, the “Capitan” was repeated in a somewhat louder key, and I now perceived that the voice proceeded from above – from the azotea.

I wrenched my horse round, at the same time turning my eyes upward. I could see no one; but just at that moment an arm, that might have been attached to the bust of Venus, was protruded through a notch in the parapet. In the small hand, wickedly sparkling with jewels, was something white, which I could not distinguish until I saw it projected on the grass – at the same moment that the phrase “Un papelcito” reached my ears.

Without hesitation I dismounted – made myself master of the *papelcito*; and then leaping once more into the saddle, looked upward. I had purposely drawn my horse some distance from the walls, so that I might command a better view. I was not disappointed – Isolina!

The face, that lovely face, was just distinguishable through the slender embrasure, the large brown eyes gazing upon me with that half-earnest, half-mocking glance I had already noticed, and which produced within me both pleasure and pain!

I was about to speak to her, when I saw the expression suddenly change: a hurried glance was thrown backwards, as if the approach of some one disturbed her; a finger rested momentarily on her lips, and then her face disappeared behind the screening wall of the parapet.

I understood the universal sign, and remained silent.

For some moments I was undecided whether to go or stay. She had evidently withdrawn from the front of the building, though she was still upon the azotea. Some one had joined her; and I could hear voices in conversation; her own contrasting with the harsher tones of a man. Perhaps her father – perhaps – that other *relative*– less agreeable supposition!

I was about to ride off, when it occurred to me that I had better first master the contents of the “papelcito.” Perhaps it might throw some light on the situation, and enable me to adopt the more pleasant alternative of remaining a while longer upon the premises.

I had thrust the *billet* into the breast of my frock; and now looked around for some place where I might draw it forth and peruse it unobserved. The great arched gateway, shadowy and tenantless, offered the desired accommodation; and heading my horse to it, I once more rode inside the saguan.

Facing around so as to hide my front from the *cocineras*, I drew forth the strip of folded paper, and spread it open before me. Though written in pencil, and evidently in a hurried impromptu, I had no difficulty in deciphering it. My heart throbbed exultingly as I read: —

“Capitan! I know you will pardon our dry hospitality? A cup of cold water – ha! ha! ha! Remember what I told you yesterday: we fear our *friends* more than our *foes*, and we have a *guest in the house my father dreads more than you and your terrible filibusteros*. I am not angry with you for my pet, but you have carried off my lazo as well. Ah, capitan! would you rob me of *everything*? – Adios!

“*Isolina.*”

Thrusting the paper back into my bosom, I sat for some time pondering upon its contents. Part was clear enough – the remaining part full of mystery.

“We fear our *friends* more than *our foes*.” I was behind the scenes sufficiently to comprehend what was intended by that cunningly worded phrase. It simply meant that Don Ramon de Vargas was *Ayankieado*– in other words, a friend to the American cause, or, as some loud demagogues would have pronounced him, a “traitor to his country.” It did not follow, however, that he was anything of

the kind. He might have wished success to the American arms, and still remained a true friend to his country – not one of those blind bigots whose standard displays the brigand motto, “Our country right or wrong;” but an enlightened patriot, who desired more to see Mexico enjoy peace and happiness under foreign domination, than that it should continue in anarchy under the iron rule of native despots. What is there in the empty title of *independence*, without peace, without liberty? After all, patriotism in its ordinary sense is but a doubtful virtue – perhaps nearer to a crime! It will one day appear so; one day in the far future it will be supplanted by a virtue of higher order – the patriotism that knows no boundaries of nations, but whose *country* is the whole earth. That, however, would *not* be “patriotism!”

Was Don Ramon de Vargas a patriot in this sense – a man of progress, who cared not that the *name* of “Mexico” should be blotted from the map, so long as peace and prosperity should be given to his country under another name? Was Don Ramon one of these? It might be. There were many such in Mexico at that time, and these principally of the class to which Señor de Vargas belonged – the *ricos*, or proprietors. It is easy enough to explain why the Ayankieados were of the class of *ricos*.

Perhaps the affection of Don Ramon for the American cause had less lofty motives; perhaps the five thousand beeves may have had something to do with it? Whether or no, I could not tell; nor did I stay to consider. I only reflected upon the matter at all as offering an explanation to the ambiguous phrase now twice used by his fair daughter – “We fear our *friends* more than our *foes*.” On either supposition, the meaning was clear.

What followed was far from being equally perspicuous. *A guest in the house dreaded by her father?* Here was mystery indeed. Who could that guest be? – who but *Ijurra*?

But *Ijurra* was her cousin – she had said so. If a cousin, why should he be dreaded? Was there still another guest in the house? That might be: I had not been inside to see. The mansion was large enough to accommodate another – half a score of others. For all that, my thoughts constantly turned upon *Ijurra*, why I know not, but I could not resist the belief that he was the person pointed at – the guest that was “dreaded!”

The behaviour which I had noticed on the day before – the first and only time I had ever seen the man – his angry speech and looks addressed to *Isolina* – her apparent fear of him: these it was, no doubt, that guided my instincts; and I at length came to the conviction that he was the fiend dreaded by Don Ramon. And she too feared him! “God grant she do not also *love* him!”

Such was my mental ejaculation, as I passed on to consider the closing sentences of the hastily written note. In these I also encountered ambiguity of expression; whether I construed it aright, time would tell. Perhaps my wish was too much parent to my thoughts: but it was with an exulting heart I read the closing sentence and rode forth from the gateway.

Chapter Ten. An old enmity

I rode slowly, and but a few paces before reining up my horse. Although I was under the impression that it would be useless remaining, and that an interview with Isolina was impossible – for that day at least – I could not divest myself of the desire to linger a little longer near the spot. Perhaps she might appear again upon the azotea; if but for a moment; if but to wave her hand, and waft me an adieu; if but —

When a short distance separated me from the walls, I drew up; and turning in the saddle, glanced back to the parapet. A face was there, where hers had been; but, oh, the contrast between her lovely features and those that now met my gaze! Hyperion to the Satyr! Not that the face now before me was ugly or ill-featured. There are some, and women too, who would have termed it handsome; to my eyes it was hideous! Let me confess that this hideousness, or more properly its cause, rested in the moral, rather than the physical expression; perhaps, too, little of it might have been found in my own heart. Under other circumstances, I might not have criticised that face so harshly. All the world did not agree with me about the face of Rafael Ijurra – for it was he who was gazing over the parapet.

Our eyes met; and that first glance stamped the relationship between us – hostility for life! Not a word passed, and yet the looks of each told the other, in the plainest language, “*I am your foe.*” Had we sworn it in wild oaths, in all the bitter hyperbole of insult, neither of us would have felt it more profound and keen.

I shall not stay to analyse this feeling of sudden and unexpressed hostility, though the philosophy of it is simple enough. You too have experienced it – perhaps more than once in your life, without being exactly able to explain it. I am not in that dilemma: I could explain it easily enough; but it scarcely merits an explanation. Suffice to say, that while gazing upon the face of that man, I entertained it in all its strength.

I have called it an *unexpressed* hostility. Therein I have spoken without thought: it was fully expressed by both of us, though not in words. Words are but weak symbols of a passion, compared with the passion itself, exhibited in the clenched hand, the lip compressed, the flashing eye, the clouded cheek, the quick play of the muscles – weak symbols are words compared with signs like these. No words passed between Ijurra and myself; none were needed. Each read in the other a rival – a rival in love, a competitor for the heart of a lovely woman, the *loveliest* in Mexico! It is needless to say that, under such an aspect, each hated the other at sight.

In the face of Ijurra I read more. I saw before me a man of bad heart and brutal nature. His large, and to speak the truth, beautiful eyes, had in them an animal expression. They were not without intelligence, but so much the worse, for that intelligence expressed ferocity and bad faith. His beauty was the beauty of the jaguar. He had the air of an accomplished man, accustomed to conquest in the field of love – heartless, reckless, false. O mystery of our nature, there are those who love such men!

In Ijurra’s face I read more: *he knew my secret!* The significant glance of his eye told me so. He knew why I was lingering there. The satiric smile upon his lip attested it. He saw my efforts to obtain an interview, and confident in his own position, held my failure but lightly – a something only to amuse him. I could tell all this by the sardonic sneer that sat upon his features.

As we continued to gaze, neither moving his eyes from the other, this sneer became too oppressive to be silently borne. I could no longer stand such a satirical reading of my thoughts. The insult was as marked as words could have made it; and I was about to have recourse to words to reply, when the clatter of a horse’s hoofs caused me to turn my eyes in an opposite direction. A horseman was coming up the hill, in a direct line from the pastures. I saw it was one of the lieutenants – Holingsworth.

A few more stretches of his horse brought the lieutenant upon the ground, where he pulled up directly in front of me.

“Captain Warfield!” said he, speaking in an official tone, “the cattle are collected; shall we proceed –”

He proceeded no further with that sentence; his eye, chance directed, was carried up to the azotea, and rested upon the face of Ijurra. He started in his saddle, as if a serpent had stung him; his hollow eyes shot prominently out, glaring wildly from their sockets, while the muscles of his throat and jaws twitched in convulsive action!

For a moment, the desperate passion seemed to stifle his breathing, and while thus silent, the expression of his eyes puzzled me. It was of frantic joy, and ill became that face where I had never observed a smile. But the strange look was soon explained – it was not of friendship, but the joy of anticipated vengeance!

Breaking into a wild laugh, he shrieked out —

“Rafael Ijurra, by the eternal God!”

This awful and emphatic recognition produced its effect. I saw that Ijurra knew the man who addressed him. His dark countenance turned suddenly pale, and then became mottled with livid spots, while his eyes scintillated, and rolled about in the unsteady glances of terror. He made no reply beyond the ejaculation “Demonio!” which seemed involuntarily to escape him. He appeared unable to reply; surprise and fright held him spell-bound and speechless!

“Traitor! villain! murderer!” shrieked Holingsworth, “we’ve met at last; now for a squaring of our accounts!” and in the next instant the muzzle of his rifle was pointing to the notch in the parapet – pointing to the face of Ijurra!

“Hold, Holingsworth! – hold!” cried I, pressing my heel deeply into my horse’s flanks, and dashing forward.

Though my steed sprang instantly to the spur, and as quickly I caught the lieutenant’s arm, I was too late to arrest the shot. I spoiled his aim, however; and the bullet, instead of passing through the brain of Rafael Ijurra, as it would certainly have done, glanced upon the mortar of the parapet, sending a cloud of lime-dust into his face.

Up to that moment the Mexican had made no attempt to escape beyond the aim of his antagonist. Terror must have glued him to the spot. It was only when the report of the rifle, and the blinding mortar broke the spell, that he was able to turn and fly. When the dust cleared away, his head was no longer above the wall.

I turned to my companion, and addressed him in some warmth —

“Lieutenant Holingsworth! I command –”

“Captain Warfield,” interrupted he, in a tone of cool determination, “you may command me in all matters of duty, and I shall obey you. This is a private affair; and, by the Eternal, the General himself – Bah! I lose time; the villain will escape!” and before I could seize either himself or his bridle-rein, Holingsworth had shot his horse past me, and entered the gateway at a gallop.

I followed as quickly as I could, and reached the patio almost as soon as he; but too late to hinder him from his purpose.

I grasped him by the arm, but with determined strength he wrenched himself free – at the same instant gliding out of the saddle.

Pistol in hand, he rushed up the *escalera*, his trailing scabbard clanking upon the stone steps as he went. He was soon out of my sight, behind the parapet of the azotea.

Flinging myself from the saddle, I followed as fast as my legs would carry me.

While on the stairway, I heard loud words and oaths above, the crash of falling objects, and then two shots following quick and fast upon each other. I heard screaming in a woman’s voice, and then a groan – the last uttered by a man.

One of them is dead or dying, thought I.

On reaching the azotea – which I did in a few seconds of time – I found perfect silence there. I saw no one, male or female, living or dead! True, the place was like a garden, with plants, shrubs, and even trees growing in gigantic pots. I could not view it all at once. They might still be there behind the screen of leaves?

I ran to and fro over the whole roof; I saw flower-pots freshly broken. It was the crash of them I had heard while coming up. I saw no man, neither Holingsworth nor Ijurra! They could not be standing up, or I should have seen them. “Perhaps they are down among the pots – both. There were two shots. Perhaps both are down – dead.”

But where was she who screamed? Was it Isolina?

Half distracted, I rushed to another part of the roof. I saw a small escalera – a private stair – that led into the interior of the house. Ha! they must have gone down by it? she who screamed must have gone that way?

For a moment I hesitated to follow; but it was no time to stand upon etiquette; and I was preparing to plunge down the stairway, when I heard shouting outside the walls, and then another shot from a pistol.

I turned, and stepped hastily across the azotea in the direction of the sounds. I looked over the parapet. Down the slope of the hill two men were running at the top of their speed, one after the other. The hindmost held in his hand a drawn sabre. It was Holingsworth still in pursuit of Ijurra!

The latter appeared to be gaining upon his vengeful pursuer, who, burdened with his accoutrements, ran heavily. The Mexican was evidently making for the woods that grew at the bottom of the hill; and in a few seconds more he had entered the timber, and passed out of sight. Like a hound upon the trail, Holingsworth followed, and disappeared from my view at the same spot.

Hoping I might still be able to prevent the shedding of blood, I descended hastily from the azotea, mounted my horse, and galloped down the hill.

I reached the edge of the woods where the two had gone in, and followed some distance upon their trail; but I lost it at length, and came to a halt.

I remained for some minutes listening for voices, or, what I more expected to hear, the report of a pistol. Neither sound reached me. I heard only the shouts of the vaqueros on the other side of the hill; and this reminding me of my duty, I turned my horse, and rode back to the hacienda.

There, everything was silent: not a face was to be seen. The inmates of the house had hidden themselves in rooms barred up and dark; even the damsels of the kitchen had disappeared – thinking, no doubt, that an attack would be made upon the premises, and that spoliation and plunder were intended.

I was puzzled how to act. Holingsworth’s strange conduct had disarranged my ideas. I should have demanded admission, and explained the occurrence to Don Ramon; but I had no explanation to give; I rather needed one for myself; and under a painful feeling of suspense as to the result, I rode off from the place.

Half-a-dozen rangers were left upon the ground with orders to await the return of Holingsworth, and then gallop after us; while the remainder of the troop, with Wheatley and myself in advance of the vast drove, took the route for the American camp.

Chapter Eleven.

Rafael Ijurra

In ill-humour I journeyed along. The hot sun and the dusty road did not improve my temper, ruffled as it was by the unpleasant incident. I was far from satisfied with my first lieutenant, whose conduct was still a mystery. Wheatley could not explain it. Some old enmity, no doubt – both of us believed – some story of wrong and revenge.

No everyday man was Holingsworth, but one altogether of peculiar character and temperament – as unlike him who rode by my side as acid to alkali. The latter was a dashing, cheerful fellow, dressed in half-Mexican costume, who could ride a wild horse and throw the lazo with any vaquero in the crowd. He was a true Texan, almost by birth; had shared the fortunes of the young republic since the days of Austin: and was never more happy than while engaged in the border warfare, that, with slight intervals, had been carried on against either Mexican or Indian foeman, ever since the lone-star had spread its banner to the breeze. No raw recruit was Wheatley; though young, he was what Texans term an “old Indian fighter” – a real “Texas ranker.”

Holingsworth was not a Texan, but a Tennessean, though Texas had been for some years his adopted home. It was not the first time he had crossed the Rio Grande. He had been one of the unfortunate Mier expedition – a survivor of that decimated band – afterwards carried in chains to Mexico, and there compelled to work breast-deep in the mud of the great *zancas* that traverse the streets. Such experience might account for the serious, somewhat stern expression that habitually rested upon his countenance, and gave him the character of a “dark saturnine man.” I have said incidentally that I never saw him smile – never. He spoke seldom, and, as a general thing, only upon matters of duty; but at times, when he fancied himself alone, I have heard him mutter threats, while a convulsive twitching of the muscles and a mechanical clenching of the fingers accompanied his words, as though he stood in the presence of some deadly foe! I had more than once observed these frenzied outbursts, without knowing aught of their cause. Harding Holingsworth – such was his full name – was a man with whom no one would have cared to take the liberty of asking an explanation of his conduct. His courage and war-prowess were well known among the Texans; but it is idle to add this, since otherwise he could not have stood among them in the capacity of a leader. Men like them, who have the election of their own officers, do not trust their lives to the guidance of either stripling or coward.

Wheatley and I were talking the matter over as we rode along, and endeavouring to account for the strange behaviour of Holingsworth. We had both concluded that the affair had arisen from some old enmity – perhaps connected with the Mier expedition – when accidentally I mentioned the Mexican’s name. Up to this moment the Texan lieutenant had not seen Ijurra – having been busy with the cattle upon the other side of the hill – nor had the name been pronounced in his hearing.

“Ijurra?” he exclaimed with a start, reining up, and turning upon me an inquiring look.

“Ijurra.”

“*Rafael Ijurra*, do you think?”

“Yes, Rafael – that is the name.”

“A tall dark fellow, moustached and whiskered? – not ill-looking?”

“Yes; he might answer that description,” I replied.

“If it be the same Rafael Ijurra that used to live at San Antonio, there’s more than one Texan would like to raise *his* hair. The same – it must be – there’s no two of the name; ’taint likely – no.”

“What do you know of him?”

“Know? – that he’s about the most precious scoundrel in all Texas or Mexico either, and that’s saying a good deal. Rafael Ijurra? ’Tis he, by thunder! It *can* be nobody else; and Holingsworth – Ha!

now I think of it, it's just the man; and Harding Holingsworth, of all men living, has good reasons to remember *him*.”

“How? Explain!”

The Texan paused for a moment, as if to collect his scattered memories, and then proceeded to detail what he knew of Rafael Ijurra. His account, without the expletives and emphatic ejaculations which adorned it, was substantially as follows: —

Rafael Ijurra was by birth a Texan of Mexican race. He had formerly possessed a hacienda near San Antonio de Bexar, with other considerable property, all of which he had spent at play, or otherwise dissipated, so that he had sunk to the status of a professional gambler. Up to the date of the Mier expedition he had passed off as a citizen of Texas, under the new regime, and pretended much patriotic attachment to the young republic. When the Mier adventure was about being organised, Ijurra had influence enough to have himself elected one of its officers. No one suspected his fidelity to the cause. He was one of those who at the halt by Laredo urged the imprudent advance upon Mier; and his presumed knowledge of the country – of which, he was a native – gave weight to his counsel. It afterwards proved that his free advice was intended for the benefit of the enemy, with whom he was in secret correspondence.

On the night before the battle Ijurra was missing. The Texan army was captured after a brave defence – in which they slew more than their own number of the enemy – and, under guard, the remnant was marched off for the capital of Mexico. On the second or third day of their march, what was the astonishment of the Texan prisoners to see Rafael Ijurra *in the uniform of a Mexican officer, and forming part of their escort!* But that their hands were bound, they would have torn him to pieces, so enraged were they at this piece of black treason.

“I was not in that ugly scrape,” continued the lieutenant. “As luck would have it, I was down with a fever in Brazos bottom, or I guess I should have had to *draw my bean* with the rest of 'em, poor fellows!”

Wheatley's allusion to “drawing his bean” I understood well enough. All who have ever read the account of this ill-starred adventure will remember, that the Texans, goaded by ill-treatment, rose upon their guard, disarmed, and conquered them; but in their subsequent attempt to escape, ill managed and ill guided, nearly all of them were recaptured, and *decimated*— each tenth man having been shot like a dog!

The mode of choosing the victims was by lot, and the black and white beans of Mexico (*frijoles*) were made use of as the expositors of the fatal decrees of destiny. A number of the beans, corresponding to the number of the captives, was placed within an earthen *olla*— there being a black bean for every nine white ones. He who drew the black bean must die!

During the drawing of this fearful lottery, there occurred incidents exhibiting character as heroic as has ever been recorded in story.

Read from an eye-witness: —

“They all drew their beans with manly dignity and firmness. Some of lighter temper jested over the bloody tragedy. One would say, ‘*Boys! this beats raffling all to pieces!*’ Another, ‘*Well, this is the tallest gambling-scraps I ever was in.*’ Robert Beard, who lay upon the ground exceedingly ill, called his brother William, and said, ‘Brother, if you draw a black bean, I'll take your place – I want to die!’ The brother, with overwhelming anguish, replied, ‘No, I will keep my own place; *I am stronger, and better able to die than you.*’ Major Cocke, when he drew the fatal bean, held it up between his finger and thumb, and, with a smile of contempt, said, ‘Boys! I told you so: I never failed in my life to draw a prize!’ He then coolly added, ‘They only rob me of forty years.’ Henry Whaling, one of Cameron's best fighters, as he drew his black bean, said, in a joyous tone, ‘Well, they don't make much out of me anyhow: I know I've killed twenty-five of them.’ Then demanding his dinner in a firm voice, he added, ‘They shall not cheat me out of it!’ Saying this, he ate heartily, smoked a cigar, and in twenty minutes after had ceased to live! The Mexicans fired fifteen shots at Whaling before

he expired! Young Torrey, quite a youth but in spirit a giant, said that he 'was perfectly willing to meet his fate – for the glory of his country he had fought, and for her glory he was willing to die.' Edward Este spoke of his death with the coolest indifference. Cash said, 'Well, they murdered my brother with Colonel Fannin, and they are about to murder me.' J.L. Jones said to the interpreter, 'Tell the officer to look upon men who are not afraid to die for their country.' Captain Eastland behaved with the most patriotic dignity; he desired that his country should not particularly avenge his death. Major Dunham said he was prepared to die for his country. James Ogden, with his usual equanimity of temper, smiled at his fate and said, 'I am prepared to meet it.' Young Robert W. Harris behaved in the most unflinching manner, and called upon his companions to avenge their murder.

"They were bound together – their eyes being bandaged – and set upon a log near the wall with their backs towards their executioners. They all begged the officer to shoot them in front, and at a short distance, saying they '*were not afraid to look death in the face.*' This request the Mexican refused; and to make his cruelty as refined as possible, caused the fire to be delivered from a distance, and to be continued for ten or twelve minutes, lacerating and mangling those heroes in a manner too horrible for description."

When you talk of Thermopylae think also of Texas!

"But what of Holingsworth?" I asked.

"Ah! Holingsworth!" replied the lieutenant; "*he has* good cause to remember Ijurra, now I think of it. I shall give the story to you as I heard it;" and my companion proceeded with a relation, which caused the blood to curdle in my veins, as I listened. It fully explained, if it did not palliate, the fierce hatred of the Tennessean towards Rafael Ijurra.

In the Mier expedition Holingsworth had a brother, who, like himself, was made prisoner. He was a delicate youth, and could ill endure the hardships, much less the barbarous treatment, to which the prisoners were exposed during that memorable march. He became reduced to a skeleton, and worse than that, footsore, so that he could no longer endure the pain of his feet and ankles, worn skinless, and charged with the spines of acacias, cactus, and the numerous thorny plants in which the dry soil of Mexico is so prolific. In agony he fell down upon the road.

Ijurra was in command of the guard; from him Holingsworth's brother begged to be allowed the use of a mule. The youth had known Ijurra at San Antonio, and had even lent him money, which was never returned.

"To your feet and forward!" was Ijurra's answer.

"I cannot move a step," said the youth, despairingly.

"Cannot! *Carrai!* we shall see whether you can. Here, Pablo," continued he, addressing himself to one of the soldiers of the guard; "give this fellow the spur; he is restive!"

The ruffian soldier approached with fixed bayonet, seriously intending to use its point on the poor wayworn invalid! The latter rose with an effort, and made a desperate attempt to keep on; but his resolution again failed him. He could not endure the agonising pain, and after staggering a pace or two, he fell up against a rock.

"I cannot!" he again cried – "I cannot march farther: let me die here."

"Forward! or you *shall* die here," shouted Ijurra, drawing a pistol from his belt, and cocking it, evidently with the determination to carry out his threat. "Forward!"

"I cannot," faintly replied the youth.

"Forward, or I fire!"

"Fire!" cried the young man, throwing open the flaps of his hunting-shirt, and making one last effort to stand erect.

"You are scarce worth a bullet," said the monster with a sneer; at the same instant he levelled his pistol at the breast of his victim, and fired! When the smoke was blown aside, the body of young Holingsworth was seen lying at the base of the rock, doubled up, dead!

A thrill of horror ran through the line of captives. Even their habitually brutal guards were touched by such wanton barbarity. The brother of the youth was not six yards from the spot, tightly bound, and witness of the whole scene! Fancy his feelings at that moment!

“No wonder,” continued the Texan – “no wonder that Harding Holingsworth don’t stand upon ceremony as to where and when he may attack Rafael Ijurra. I verily believe that the presence of the Commander-in-chief wouldn’t restrain him from taking vengeance. It ain’t to be wondered at!”

In hopes that my companion might help me to some knowledge of the family at the hacienda, I guided the conversation in that direction.

“And Don Ramon de Vargas is Ijurra’s uncle?”

“Sure enough, he must be. Ha! I did not think of that. Don Ramon *is* the uncle. I ought to have known him this morning – that confounded *mezcal* I drank knocked him out of my mind altogether. I have seen the old fellow several times. He used to come to San Antonio once a-year on business with the merchants there. I remember, too, he once brought a daughter with him – splendid girl that, and no mistake! Faith, she crazed half the young fellows in San Antonio, and there was no end of duels about her. She used to ride wild horses, and fling the lazo like a Comanche. But what am I talking about? That *mezcal* *has* got into my brains, sure enough. It must have been *her* you chased? Sure as shooting it was!”

“Probable enough,” I replied, in a careless way. My companion little knew the deep, feverish interest his remarks were exciting, or the struggle it was costing me to conceal my emotions.

One thing I longed to learn from him – whether any of these amorous duellists had been favoured with the approbation of the lady. I longed to put this question, and yet the absolute dread of the answer restrained my tongue! I remained silent, till the opportunity had passed.

The hoof-strokes of half-a-dozen horses coming rapidly from the rear, interrupted the conversation. Without surprise, I perceived that it was Holingsworth and the rangers who had been left at the hacienda.

“Captain Warfield!” said the Tennessean as he spurred alongside, “my conduct no doubt surprises you. I shall be able to explain it to *your* satisfaction when time permits. It’s a long story – a painful one to me: you will not require it from me now. This much let me say – for good reason, I hold Rafael Ijurra as my most deadly foe. *I came to Mexico to kill that man*; and, by the Eternal! if I don’t succeed, I care not who kills *me*!”

“You have *not* then – ”

With a feeling of relief, I put the question, for I read he answer in the look of disappointed vengeance that gleamed in the eyes of the Tennessean. I was not permitted to finish the interrogatory; he knew what I was going to ask, and interrupted me with the reply —

“No, no; the villain has escaped; but by – ”

The rest of the emphatic vow was inaudible; but the wild glance that flashed from the speaker’s eye expressed his deep purpose more plainly than words.

The next moment he fell back to his place in the troop, and with his head slightly bent forward, rode on in silence. His dark taciturn features were lit up at intervals by an ominous gleam, showing that he still brooded over his unavenged wrong.

Chapter Twelve.

The yellow domino

The next two days I passed in feverish restlessness. Holingsworth's conduct had quite disconcerted my plans. From the concluding sentences of Isolina's note, I had construed an invitation to revisit the hacienda in some more quiet guise than that of a filibustero; but after what had transpired, I could not muster courage to present myself under any pretence. It was not likely I should be welcome – I, the associate – nay, the commander – of the man who had attempted to take the life of a nephew – a cousin! Don Ramon had stipulated for a “little rudeness;” he had had the full measure of his bargain, and a good deal more. He could not otherwise than think so. Were I to present myself at the hacienda, I could not be else than coldly received – in short, unwelcome.

I thought of apologies and pretexts, but to no purpose. For two days I remained in vacillating indecision; I neither saw nor heard of her who engrossed my thoughts.

News from head-quarters! A “grand ball” to be given in the city!

This bit of gossip fell upon my ear without producing the slightest impression, for I cared little for dancing, and less for grand balls; in early youth I had liked both; but not then.

The thing would at once have passed from my thoughts, had it not been for some additional information imparted at the same time, which to me at once rendered the ball attractive.

The information I allude to was, that the ball was got up “by authority,” and would be upon a grand scale. Its object was political; in other words, it was to be the means of bringing about a friendly intercourse between the conquerors and the conquered – a desirable end. Every effort would be made to draw out the “native society,” and let them see that we Yankee officers were not such “barbarians” as they affected to deem, and in reality pronounced us. It was known – so stated my informant – that many families of the Ayankieados would be present; and in order to make it pleasanter for those who feared *proscription*, the ball was to be a masked one —*un bailé de mascara*.

“The Ayankieados are to be there! and she – ”

My heart bounded with new hope: and I resolved to make one of the maskers – not that I intended to go in *costume*. In my slender wardrobe was a civilian dress proper cut, and tolerably well preserved: that would answer my purpose. The ball was to come off on the night following that on which I had word of it. My suspense would be short.

The time appeared long enough, but at length he arrived, and, mounting my good steed, I started off for the city. A brisk ride of two hours brought me on the ground, and I found that I was late enough to be fashionable.

As I entered the ball-room, I saw that most of the company had arrived, and the floor was grouped with dancers. It was evident the affair was a “success.” There were four or five hundred persons present, nearly half of them ladies. Many were in character costumes, as Tyrolese peasants, Andalusian *majas*, Bavarian broom-girls, Wallachian boyards, Turkish sultanas, and bead-bedecked Indian belles. A greater number were disguised in the ungraceful domino, while not a few appeared in regular evening dress. Most of the ladies wore masks; some simply hid their faces behind the coquettish *reboso topado*, while others permitted their charms to be gazed upon. As the time passed on, and an occasional *copita de vino* strengthened the nerves of the company, the uncovered faces became more numerous, and masks got lost or put away.

As for the gentlemen, a number of them also wore masks – some were in costume, but uniforms predominated, stamping the ball with a military character. It was not a little singular to see a number of *Mexican* officers mingling in the throng! These were of course prisoners on *parole*; and their more brilliant uniforms, of French patterns, contrasted oddly with the plain blue dresses of their conquerors. The presence of these prisoners, in the full glitter of their gold-lace, was not exactly in

good taste; but a moment's reflection convinced one it was not a matter of choice with them. Poor fellows! had they abided by the laws of etiquette, they could not have been there; and no doubt they were as desirous of shaking their legs in the dance as the gayest of their captors. Indeed, in this species of rivalry they far outstripped the latter.

I spent but little time in observing these peculiarities; but one idea engrossed my mind, and that was to find Isolina de Vargas – no easy task amid such a multitude of maskers.

Among the uncovered faces she was not. I soon scanned them all, or rather glanced at them. It needed no scanning to recognise hers. If there, she was one of the *mascaritas*, and I addressed myself to a close observation of the *dames en costume* and the dominoes. Hopeless enough appeared the prospect of recognising her, but a little hope sustained me in the reflection, that, being myself uncovered, she might recognise *me*.

When a full half-hour had passed away, and my lynx-like surveillance was still unrewarded, this hope died within me; and, what may appear strange, I began to wish she was *not* there.

“If present,” thought I, “she must have seen me ere this, and to have taken no notice – ”

A little pang of chagrin accompanied this reflection.

I flung myself upon a seat, and endeavoured to assume an air of indifference, though I was far from feeling indifferent, and my eyes as before kept eagerly scanning the fair masters. Now and then, the *tournure* of an ankle – I had seen Isolina's – or the elliptical sweep of a fine figure, inspired me with fresh hope: but as the *mascaritas* who owned them were near enough to have seen, and yet took no notice of me, I conjectured – in fact, *hoped* – that none of them was she. Indeed, a well-turned ankle is no distinctive mark among the fair *doncellas* of Mexico.

At length, a pair of unusually neat ones, supporting a figure of such superb outlines, that even the ungraceful domino could not conceal them, came under my eyes, and riveted my attention. My heart beat wildly as I gazed. I could not help the belief that the lady in the yellow domino was Isolina de Vargas.

She was waltzing with a young dragoon officer; and as they passed me I rose from my seat, and approached the orbit of the dance, in order to keep them under my eyes.

As they passed me a second time, I fancied the lady regarded me through her mask: I fancied I saw her start. I was almost sure it was Isolina!

My feeling was now that of jealousy. The young officer was one of the elegant gentlemen of the service – a professed lady killer – a fellow, who, notwithstanding his well-known deficiency of brains, was ever welcome among women. She seemed to press closely to him as they whirled around, while her head rested languishingly upon his shoulder. She appeared to be *contented* with her partner. I could scarcely endure the agony of my fancies. It was a relief to me when the music ceased and the waltz ended.

The circle broke up, and the waltzers scattered in different directions, but my eyes followed only the dragoon officer and his partner. He conducted her to a seat, and then placing himself by her side, the two appeared to engage in an earnest and interesting conversation.

With me politeness was now out of the question. I had grown as jealous as a tiger; and I drew near enough become a listener. The lowness of the tone in which conversed precluded the possibility of my hearing much of what was said, but I could make out that the spark was “coaxing” his partner to remove her mask. The voice that replied was surely Isolina's!

I could myself have torn the silken screen from her face through very vexation; but I was saved that indiscretion, for the request of her cavalier seemed to prevail, and the next instant the mask was removed by the lady's own hand.

Shade of Erebus! what did I see? She was black – a *negress*! Not black as ebony, but nearly so; with thick lips, high cheek-bones, and a row of short “kinky” curls dangling over the arch of her glistening forehead!

My astonishment, though perhaps of a more agreeable kind, was not greater than that of the dragoon lieutenant – who, by the way, was also a full-blooded “Southerner.” At sight of his partner’s face he started, as if a six-pound shot had winded him; and after a few half-muttered excuses, he rose with an air of extreme *gaucherie*, and hurrying off, hid himself behind the crowd!

The “coloured lady,” mortified – as I presumed she must be – hastily readjusted her mask, and rising from her seat, glided away from the scene of her humiliation.

I gazed after her with a mingled feeling of curiosity and pity; I saw her pass out of the door alone, evidently with the intention of leaving the ball.

I fancied she had departed, as her domino, conspicuous by its bright yellow colour, was no more seen among the maskers.

Chapter Thirteen.

The blue domino

Thus disappointed, I gave up all hope of meeting her for whose sake I had come to the ball. She was either *not* there, or did not wish to be recognised, even by *me*. The latter supposition was the more bitter of the two; and goaded by it and one or two other uncongenial thoughts, I paid frequent visits to the “refreshment-room,” where wine flowed freely. A cup or two drove the *one idea* out of my mind; and after a while, I grew more companionable, and determined to enjoy myself like others around me. I had not danced as yet, but the wine soon got to my toes as well as into my head; and I resolved to put myself in motion with the first partner that offered.

I soon found one – a blue domino – that came right in my way, as if the fates had determined we should dance together. The lady was “*not engaged for the next;*” she would be “most happy.”

This, by the way, was said in *French*, which would have taken me by surprise, had I not known that there were many French people living in C – , as in all the large cities of Mexico. They are usually jewellers, dentists, milliners, or rather artisans of that class who drive a lucrative trade among the luxury-loving *Mexicanos*. To know there were French people in the place, was to be certain you would find them at the ball; and there were they, numbers of them, pirouetting about, and comporting themselves with the *gay insouciance* characteristic of their nation. I was not surprised, then, when my blue domino addressed me in French.

“A French *modiste!*” conjectured I, as soon as she spoke.

Milliner or no, it mattered not to me; I wanted a dancing partner; and after another phrase or two in the same sweet tongue, away went she and I in the curving whirl of a waltz.

After sailing once round the room, I had two quite new and distinct impressions upon my mind: the first, that I had a partner *who could waltz*, a thing not to be met with every day. My blue domino seemed to have no feet under her, but floated around me as if borne upon the air! For the moment, I fancied myself in Ranelagh or Mabilles!

My other impression was, that my arm encircled as pretty a waist as ever was clasped by a lover. There was a pleasing rotundity about it, combined with a general symmetry of form and serpentine yieldiness of movement that rendered dancing with such a partner both easy and delightful. My observation at the moment was, that if the face of the *modiste* bore any sort of proportion to her figure, she needed not have come so far from France to push her fortune.

With such a partner I could not otherwise than waltz well; and never better than upon that occasion. We were soon under the observation of the company, and became the cynosure of a circle. This I did not relish, and drawing my blue domino to one side, we waltzed towards a seat, into which I handed her with the usual polite expression of thanks.

This seat was in a little recess or blind window, where two persons might freely converse without fear of an eaves-dropper. I had no desire to run away from a partner who danced so well, though she were a *modiste*. There was room for two upon the bench, and I asked permission to sit beside her.

“Oh, certainly,” was the frank reply.

“And will you permit me to remain with you till the music recommences?”

“If you desire it.”

“And dance with you again?”

“With pleasure, *monsieur*, if it suit your convenience. But is there no other who claims you as a partner? – no other in this assemblage you would prefer?”

“Not one, I assure you. You are the only one present with whom I care to dance.”

As I said this, I thought I perceived a slight movement, that indicated some emotion.

“It was a gallant speech, and the *modiste* is pleased with the compliment,” thought I.

Her reply: —

“It flatters me, sir, that you prefer my company to that of the many splendid beauties who are in this saloon; though it may gratify me still more *if you knew who I am.*”

The last clause was uttered with an emphasis, and followed by a sigh!

“Poor girl!” thought I, “she fancies that I mistake her for some grand dame – that if I knew her real position her humble avocation, I should not longer care to dance with her. In that she is mistaken. I make no distinction between a milliner and a marchioness, especially in a ball-room. There, grace and beauty alone guide to preference.”

After giving way to some such reflections, I replied —

“It is my regret, mam’selle, not to have the happiness of knowing who you are, and it is not possible I ever may, unless you will have the goodness to remove your mask.”

“Ah! monsieur, what you request is impossible.”

“Impossible! and why may I ask?”

“Because, were you to see my face, I should not have you for my partner in the next dance; and to say the truth, I should regret that, since you waltz so admirably.”

“Oh! refusal and flattery in the same breath! No, mam’selle, I am sure *your* face will never be the means of your losing a partner. Come! let me beg of you to remove that envious counterfeit. Let us converse freely face to face. *I* am not masked, as you see.”

“In truth, sir, you have no reason to hide your face, which is more than I can say for many other men in this room.”

“Quick-witted milliner,” thought I. “Bravo, Ranelagh! Vive la Mabelle!”

“Thanks, amiable masker!” I replied. “But you are too generous: you flatter me – ”

“It is worth while,” rejoined she, interrupting me; “it improves your cheek: blushes become you, ha, ha, ha!”

“The deuce!” I ejaculated, half aloud, “this *dame du Boulevard* is laughing at me!”

“But what *are* you?” she continued, suddenly changing her tone. “You are not a Mexican? Are you soldier or civilian?”

“What would you take me for?”

“A poet, from your pale face, but more from the manner in which I have heard you sigh.”

“I have not sighed since we sat down.”

“No – but before we sat down.”

“What! in the dance?”

“No – before the dance.”

“Ha! then you observed me before?”

“O yes, your plain dress rendered you conspicuous among so many uniforms; besides your manner – ”

“What manner?” I asked, with some degree of confusion, fearing that in my search after Isolina I had committed some stupid piece of left-handedness.

“Four abstraction; and, by the way, had you not little *penchant* for a yellow domino?”

“A yellow domino?” repeated I, raising my hand to my head, as though it cost me an effort to remember it – “a yellow domino?”

“Ay, ay – a ye-ll-ow dom-in-o,” rejoined my companion, with sarcastic emphasis – “a yellow domino, who waltzed with a young officer – not bad-looking, by the way.”

“Ah! I think I *do* remember – ”

“Well, I think you *ought*,” rejoined my tormentor, “and well, too: you took sufficient pains to *observe*.”

“Ah – aw – yes,” stammered I.

“I thought you were conning verses to her, and as you had not the advantage of *seeing her face*, were making them to her feet!”

“Ha, ha! – what an idea of yours, mad’m’selle!”

“In the end, she was not ungenerous – she let you see the face.”

“The devil!” exclaimed I, starting; “you saw the *dénouement*, then?”

“Ha, ha, ha!” laughed she; “of course I saw the *dénouement*, ha, ha! —*drôle*, wasn’t it?”

“Very,” replied I, not much relishing the joke, but endeavouring to join my companion in the laugh.

“How silly the spark looked! Ha, ha!”

“Very silly, indeed. Ha, ha, ha!”

“And how disappointed – ”

“Eh?”

“How disappointed *you* looked, monsieur!”

“Oh – ah – I – no – I assure you – I had no interest in the affair. I was not *disappointed*– at least not as you imagine.”

“Ah!”

“The feeling uppermost in my mind was *pity*– pity for the poor girl.”

“And you really *did* pity her?”

This question was put with an earnestness that sounded somewhat strange at the moment.

“I really did. The creature seemed so mortified – ”

“She seemed mortified, did she?”

“Of course. She left the room immediately after, and has not returned since. No doubt she has gone home, poor devil!”

“Poor devil! Is that the extent of your pity?”

“Well, after all, it must be confessed she was a superb deception: a finer dancer I never saw – I beg pardon, I except my present partner – a good foot, an elegant figure, and then to turn out – ”

“What?”

“*Una negrilla!*”

“I fear, monsieur, you Americans are not very gallant towards the ladies of colour. It is different here in Mexico, which you term *despotic*.”

I felt the rebuke.

“To change the subject,” continued she; “are you *not* a poet?”

“I do not deserve the name of poet, yet I will not deny that I have made verses.”

“I thought as much. What an instinct I have! O that I could prevail upon you to write some verses to me!”

“What! without knowing either your name or having looked upon your face. Mam’selle, I must at least set the features I am called upon to praise.”

“Ah, monsieur, you little know: were I to unmask those features, I should stand but a poor chance of getting the verses. My plain face would counteract all your poetic inspirations.”

“Shade of Lucretia! this is no needlewoman, though dealing in weapons quite as sharp. Modiste, indeed! I have been labouring under a mistake. This is some *dame spirituelle*, some grand lady.”

I had now grown more than curious to look upon the face of my companion. Her conversation had won me: a woman who could talk so, I fancied, could not be ill-looking. Such an enchanting spirit could not be hidden behind a plain face; besides, there was the gracefulness of form, the small gloved hand, the dainty foot and ankle demonstrated in the dance, a voice that rang like music, and the flash of a superb eye, which I could perceive even through the mask. Beyond a doubt, she was beautiful.

“Lady!” I said, speaking with more earnestness than ever, “I entreat you to unmask yourself. Were it not in a ball-room, I should beg the favour upon my knees.”

“And were I to grant it, you could hardly rise soon enough, and pronounce your lukewarm leave-taking. Hat monsieur! think of the yellow domino!”

“Mam’selle, you take pleasure in mortifying me. *Do* you deem me capable of such fickleness? Suppose for a moment, you are not what the world calls beautiful, you could not, by removing your mask, also strip yourself of the attractions of your conversation – of that voice that thrills through my heart – of that grace exhibited in your every movement! With such endowments how could a woman appear ill-looking? If your face was even as black as hers of the yellow domino, I verily believe I could not perceive its darkness.”

“Ha, ha, ha! take care what you say, monsieur. I presume you are not more indulgent than the rest of your sex; and well know I that, with you men, ugliness is the greatest crime of a woman.”

“I am different, I swear – ”

“Do not perjure yourself, as you will if I but remove my mask. I tell you, sir, that in spite of all the fine qualities you imagine me to possess, I am a vision that would horrify you to look upon.”

“Impossible! – your form, your grace, your voice. Oh, unmask! I accept every consequence for the favour I ask.”

“Then be it as you wish; but I shall not be the means of punishing you. Receive from your own hands the chastisement of your curiosity.”

“You permit me, then? Thanks, mam’selle, thanks! It is fastened behind: yes, the knot is here – now I have it – so – so – ”

With trembling fingers I undid the string, and pulled off the piece of taffety. Shade of Sheba! what did I see?

The mask fell from my fingers, as though it had been iron at a cherry heat. Astonishment caused me to drop it; rather say horror – horror at beholding the face underneath – the face *of the yellow domino!* Yes, there was the same negress with her thick lips, high cheek-bones, and the little well-oiled kinks hanging like corkscrews over her temples!

I knew not either what to say or do; my gallantry was clean gone; and although I resumed my seat, I remained perfectly dumb. Had I looked in a mirror at that moment, I should certainly have beheld the face of a fool.

My companion, who seemed to have made up her mind to such a result, instead of being mortified, burst into a loud fit of laughter, at the same time crying out in a tone of raillery —

“Now, Monsieur le Poète, does my face inspire you? When may I expect the verses? Tomorrow? Soon? Never? Ah! monsieur, I fear you are not more gallant to us poor ‘ladies ob colour’ than your countryman the lieutenant. Ha, ha, ha!”

I was too much ashamed of my own conduct, and too deeply wounded by her reproach, to make reply. Fortunately her continued laughter offered me an opportunity to mutter some broken phrases, accompanied by very clumsy gestures, and thus take myself off. Certainly, in all my life, I never made a more awkward adieu.

I walked, or rather *stole*, towards the entrance, determined to leave the ball-room, and gallop home.

On reaching the door, my curiosity grew stronger than my shame; and I resolved to take a parting look at this singular Ethiopian. The blue domino, still within the niche, caught my eye at once; but on looking up to the face – gracious Heaven! *it was Isolina’s!*

I stood as if turned into stone. My gaze was fixed upon her face, and I could not take it off. She was looking at me; but, oh! the expression with which those eyes regarded me! That was a glance to be remembered for life. She no longer laughed, but her proud lip seemed to curl with a sarcastic smile, as of scorn!

I hesitated whether to return and apologise. But no; it was too late. I could have fallen upon my knees, and begged forgiveness. It was too late. I should only subject myself to further ridicule from that capricious spirit.

Perhaps my look of remorse had more effect than words. I thought her expression changed; her glance became more tender, as if inviting me back! Perhaps —

At this moment a man approached, and without ceremony seated himself by her side. His face was towards me – I recognised Ijurra!

“They converse. Is it of *me*? Is it of – ? If so, he will laugh. A world to see that man laugh, and know it is at *me*. If he do, I shall soon cast off the load that is crushing my heart!

“He laughs not – not even a smile is traceable on his sombre features. She has not told him, and well for him she has not. Prudence, perchance, restrains her tongue; she might guess the result.”

They are on their feet again; she masks. Ijurra leads her to the dance; they front to each other; they whirl away – away: they are lost among the maskers.

“Some wine, mozo!”

A deep long draught, a few seconds spent in buckling on my sword, a few more in reaching the gate, one spring, and my saddled steed was under me.

I rode with desperate heart and hot head; but the cool night-air, the motion of my horse, and his proud spirit mingling with mine, gave me relief, and I soon felt calmer.

On reaching the rancheria, I found my lieutenants still up, eating their rudely cooked supper. As my appetite was roused, I joined them at their meal; and their friendly converse restored for the time my spirit’s equanimity.

Chapter Fourteen.

Love-thoughts

A dread feeling is jealousy, mortified vanity, or whatever you may designate the disappointment of love. I have experienced the sting of shame, the blight of broken fortune, the fear of death itself; yet none of these ever wrung my heart so rudely as the pang of an unreciprocated passion. The former are but transient trials, and their bitterness soon has an end. Jealousy, like the tooth of the serpent, carries poison in its sting, and long and slow is the healing of its wound. Well knew he this, that master of the human heart: Iago's prayer was not meant for mockery.

To drown my mortification, I had drunk wine freely at the ball; and on returning home, had continued my potations with the more fiery spirit of "Catalan." By this means I gained relief and sleep, but only of short duration. Long before day I was awake – awake to the double bitterness of jealousy and shame – awake to both mental and physical pain, for the fumes of the vile stuff I had drunk wrecked my brain as though they would burst open my skull. An ounce of opium would not have set me to sleep again, and I tossed on my couch like one labouring under delirium.

Of course the incidents of the preceding night were uppermost in my mind. Every scene and action that had occurred were as plainly before me as if I was again witnessing them. Every effort to alienate my thoughts, and fix them upon some other theme, proved vain and idle; they ever returned to the same circle of reflections, in the centre of which was Isolina de Vargas! I thought of all that had passed, of all she had said. I remembered every word. How bitterly I remembered that scornful laugh! – how bitterly that sarcastic smile, when the double mask was removed!

The very remembrance of her beauty pained me! It was now to me as to Tantalus the crystal waters, never to be tasted. Before, I had formed hopes, had indulged in prospective dreams: the masquerade adventure had dissipated them. I no longer hoped, no longer permitted myself to dream of pleasant times to come: I felt that I was scorned.

This feeling produced a momentary revulsion in my thoughts. There were moments when I hated her, and vengeful impulses careered across my soul.

These were fleeting moments: again before me rose that lovely form, that proud grand spirit, in the full entirety of its power, and again my soul became absorbed in admiration, and yielded itself to its hopeless passion. It was far from being my first love. And thus experienced, I could reason upon it. I felt certain it was to be the strongest and stormiest of my life.

I know of three loves distinct in kind and power. First, when the passion is reciprocated – when the heart of the beloved yields back thought for thought, and throb for throb, without one reserved pulsation. This is bliss upon earth – not always long-lived – ending perchance in a species of sublimated friendship. To have is no longer to desire.

The second is love entirely unrequited – love that never knew word or smile of encouragement, no soft whisper to fan it into flame, no ray of hope to feed upon. Such dies of inanition – the sooner that its object is out of the way, and absence in time will conquer it.

The third is the love that "dotes yet doubts," that doubts but never dies – no never. The jealousy that pains, only sustains it; it lives on, now happy in the honeyed conviction of triumph, now smarting under real or fancied scorn – on, on, so long as its object is accessible to sight or hearing! No matter how worthless that object may be or become – no matter how lost or fallen! Love regards not this; it has nought to do with the moral part of our nature. Beauty is the shrine of its worship, and beauty is not morality.

In my own mind I am conscious of three elements or classes of feeling: the *moral*, the *intellectual*, and what I may term the *passional* – the last as distinct from either of the other two as oil from spirits or water. To the last belongs love, which, I repeat again, has no sympathy with the moral

feelings of our nature, but, alas! as one might almost believe, with their opposite. Even a plain but wicked coquette will captivate more hearts than a beautiful saint, and the brilliant murderess ere now has made conquests at the very foot of the scaffold!

It pains me to pronounce these convictions, derived as they are from experience. There is as little gain as pleasure in so doing, but popularity must be sacrificed at the shrine of truth. For the sake of effect, I shall not play false with philosophy.

Rough ranger as I was, I had studied psychology sufficiently to understand these truths; and I endeavoured to analyse my passion for this girl or woman – to discover *why* I loved her. Her physical beauty was of the highest order, and that no doubt was an element; but it was not all. Had I merely looked upon this beauty under ordinary circumstances – that is, without coming in contact with the spirit that animated it – I might have loved her, or I might not. It was the spirit, then, that had won me, though not alone. The same gem in a less brilliant setting might have failed to draw my admiration. I was the captive both of the spirit and the form. Soul and body had co-operated in producing my passion, and this may account for its suddenness and profundity. Why I loved her person, I knew – I was not ignorant of the laws of beauty – but why the spirit, I knew not. Certainly not from any idea I had formed of her high *moral* qualities; I had no evidence of these. Of her courage, even to daring, I had proof; of energy and determined will; of the power of thought, quick and versatile; but these are not *moral* qualities, they are not even *feminine*! True, she wept over her slain steed. Humanity? I have known a hardened *lorette* weep bitter tears for her tortoise-shell cat. She refused to take from me my horse. Generosity? She had a thousand within sight. Alas! in thus reviewing all that had passed between myself and the beautiful Isolina, in search of her moral qualities, I met with but little success!

Mystery of our nature! I loved her not the less! And yet my passion was pure, and I do not believe that my heart was wicked. Mystery of our nature! He who reads all hearts alone can solve thee!

I loved without reason; but I loved now without hope. Hope I had before that night. Her glance through the turrets – her note – its contents – a word, a look at other times, had inspired me with hopes, however faint they were. The incident of the ball-room had crushed them.

Ijorra's dark face kept lowering before me; even in my visions he was always by her side. What was between the two? Perhaps a nearer relationship than that of cousin? Perhaps they were affianced? Married?

The thought maddened me.

I could rest upon my couch no longer. I rose and sought the open air; I climbed to the azotea, and paced it to and fro, as the tiger walks his cage. My thoughts were wild, and my movements without method.

To add to the bitterness of my reflections, I now discovered that I had sustained a loss – not in property, but something that annoyed me still more. I had lost the order and its enclosure – the note of Don Ramon. I had dropped them on the day in which they were received, and I believed in the patio of the hacienda, where they must have been picked up at once. If by Don Ramon himself, then all was well; but if they had fallen into the hands of some of the leather-clad herdsmen, ill affected to Don Ramon, it might be an awkward affair for that gentleman – indeed for myself. Such negligence would scarcely be overlooked at head-quarters; and I had ill forebodings about the result. It was one of my soul's darkest hours.

From its very darkness I might have known that light was near, for the proverb is equally true in the moral as in the material world. Light *was* near.

Chapter Fifteen.

An odd epistle

Breakfast I hardly tasted. A *taso* of chocolate and a small sugared cake – the *desayuna* of every Mexican – were brought, and these served me for breakfast. A glass of cognac and a Havanna were more to the purpose, and helped to stay the wild trembling of my nerves. Fortunately, there was no duty to perform, else I could ill have attended to it.

I remained on the azotea till near mid-day. The storm raging within prevented me from taking note of what was passing around. The scenes in the piazza, the rangers and their steeds, the “greasers” in their striped blankets, the *Indias* squatted on their *petates*, the pretty poblanas, were all unnoticed by me.

At intervals my eyes rested upon the walls of the distant dwelling; it was not so distant but that a human form could have been distinguished upon its roof, had one been there. There was none, and twenty, ay, fifty times, did I turn away my disappointed gaze.

About noon the Serjeant of the guard reported that a Mexican wished to speak with me. Mechanically, I gave orders for the man to be sent up; but it was not until he appeared before me that I thought of what I was doing.

The presence of the Mexican at once aroused me from my unpleasant reverie. I recognised him as one of the vaqueros of Don Ramon de Vargas – the same I had seen on the plain during my first interview with Isolina.

There was something in his manner that betokened him a messenger. A folded note, which he drew from under his jerkin – after having glanced around to see whether he was noticed – confirmed my observation.

I took the note. There was no superscription, nor did I stay to look for one. My fingers trembled as I tore open the seal. As my eye rested on the writing and recognised it, my heart throbbed so as almost to choke my utterance. I muttered some directions to the messenger; and to conceal my emotion from him, I turned away and proceeded to the farthest corner of the azotea before reading the note. I called back to the man to go below, and wait for an answer; and, then relieved of his presence, I read as follows: —

“July 18 – .

“*Gallant* capitan! allow me to bid you a *buenas dias*, for I presume that, after the fatigues of last night, it is but morning with you yet. Do you dream of your sable belle? ‘Poor devil!’ Ha, ha, ha! *Gallant* capitan!”

I was provoked at this mode of address, for the “gallant” was rendered emphatic by underlining. It was a letter to taunt me for my ill behaviour. I felt inclined to fling it down, but my eye wandering over the paper, caught some words that induced me to read on.

“*Gallant* capitan! I had a favourite mare. How fond I was of that creature you may understand, who are afflicted by a similar affection for the noble Moro. In an evil hour, your aim, too true, alas! robbed me of my favourite, but you offered to repay me by *robbing* yourself, for well know I that the black is to you *the dearest object upon earth*. Indeed, were I the lady of your love, I should ill brook such a divided affection! Well, mio capitan, I understood the generous sacrifice you would have made, and forbade it; but I know you are desirous of cancelling your debt. It is in your power to do so. Listen!”

Some *hard* conditions I anticipated would follow; I recked not of that. There was no sacrifice I was not ready to make. I would have dared any deed, however wild, to have won that proud heart – to have inoculated it with the pain that was wringing my own. I read on:

“There is a horse, famed in these parts as the ‘white steed of the prairies’ (*el caballo blanco de los llanos*). He is a wild-horse, of course; snow-white in colour, beautiful in form, swift as the swallow – But why need I describe to you the ‘white steed of the prairies?’ You are a Tejano, and must have heard of him ere this? Well, mio capitan, I have long had a desire – a frantic one, let me add – to possess this horse. I have offered rewards to hunters – to our own vaqueros, for he sometimes appears upon our plains – but to no purpose. Not one of them can capture, though they have often seen and chased him. Some say that he *cannot be taken*, that he is so fleet as to gallop, or rather *glide* out of sight in a glance, and that, too, on the open prairie! There are those who assert that he is a phantom, *un demonio*! Surely so beautiful a creature cannot be the devil? Besides, I have always heard – and, if I recollect aright, some one said so last night – that the devil was *black*. ‘Poor devil!’ Ha, ha, ha!”

I rather welcomed this allusion to my misconduct of the preceding night, for I began to feel easier under the perception that the whole affair was thus treated in jest, instead of the anger and scorn I had anticipated. With pleasanter presentiments I read on: —

“To the point, mio capitan. There are some incredulous people who believe the white steed of the prairies to be a myth, and deny his existence altogether. *Carrambo!* I know that he *does* exist, and what is more to my present purpose, he is – or *was*, but two hours ago – within ten miles of where I am writing this note! One of our vaqueros saw him near the banks of a beautiful arroyo, which I know to be his favourite ground. For reasons known to me, the vaquero did not either chase or molest him; but in breathless haste brought me the news.

“Now, capitan, gallant and grand! there is but one who can capture this famed horse, and that is your puissant self. Ah! *you have made captive what was once at wild and free*. Yes! *you* can do it – you and Moro!

“Bring me the white steed of the prairies! I shall cease to grieve for poor Lola. I shall forgive you that *contratiempo*. I shall forgive all – even your rudeness to my double mask. Ha, ha, ha! Bring me the white steed! the white steed!

“Isolina.”

As I finished reading this singular epistle, a thrill of pleasure ran through my veins. I dwelt not on the oddness of its contents, thoroughly characteristic of the writer. Its meaning was clear enough.

I *had* heard of the white horse of the prairies – what hunter or trapper, trader or traveller, throughout all the wide borders of prairie-land, has not? Many a romantic story of him had I listened to around the blazing campfire – many a tale of German-like *diablerie*, in which the white horse played hero. For nearly a century has he figured in the legends of the prairie “mariner” – a counterpart of the Flying Dutchman – the “phantom-ship” of the forecastle. Like this, too, ubiquitous – seen today scouring the sandy plains of the Platte, to-morrow bounding over the broad llanos of Texas, a thousand miles to the southward!

That there existed a white stallion of great speed and splendid proportions – that there were twenty, perhaps a hundred such – among the countless herds of wild-horses that roam over the great plains, I did not for a moment doubt. I myself had seen and chased more than one that might have been termed “a magnificent animal,” and that no ordinary horse could overtake; but the one known as the “white steed of the prairies” had a peculiar marking, that distinguished him from all the rest —*his ears were black!* – only his ears, and these were of the deep colour of ebony. The rest of his body, mane, and tail, was white as fresh-fallen snow.

It was to this singular and mysterious animal that the letter pointed; it was the black-eared steed I was called upon to capture. The contents of the note were specific and plain.

One expression alone puzzled me —

“*You have made captive what was once as wild and free.*” What? I asked myself. I scarce dared to give credence to the answer that leaped like an exulting echo from out my heart!

There was a postscript, of course: but this contained only “business.” It gave minuter details as to when, how, and where the white horse had been seen, and stated that the bearer of the note – the vaquero who had seen him – would act as my guide.

I pondered not long upon the strange request. Its fulfilment promised to recover me the position, which, but a moment before, I had looked upon as lost for ever. I at once resolved upon the undertaking.

“Yes, lovely Isolina! if horse and man can do it, ere another sun sets, you shall be mistress of the *white steed of the prairies!*”

Chapter Sixteen.

The Manada

In half-an-hour after, with the vaquero for my guide, I rode quietly out of the rancheria. A dozen rangers followed close behind; and, having crossed the river at a ford nearly opposite the village, we struck off into the *chapparal* on the opposite side.

The men whom I had chosen to accompany me were most of them old hunters, fellows who could “trail” and “crease” with accurate aim. I had confidence in their skill, and, aided by them, I had great hopes we should find the game we were in search of.

My hopes, however, would not have been so sanguine but for another circumstance. It was this: Our guide had informed me, that when he saw the white steed, the latter was in company with a large drove of mares – a *manada*— doubtless his harem. He would not be likely to separate from them, and even if these had since left the ground, they could be the more easily “trailed” in consequence of their numbers. Indeed, but for this prospect, our wild-horse hunt would have partaken largely of the character of a “wild-goose chase.” The steed, by all accounts of him, might have been seen upon one arroyo to-day, and by the banks of some other stream, a hundred miles off, on the morrow. The presence of his manada offered some guarantee, that he might still be near the ground where the vaquero had marked him. Once found, I trusted to the swiftness of my horse, and my own skill in the use of the lazo.

As we rode along, I revealed to my following the purpose of the expedition. All of them knew the white steed by fame; one or two averred they had seen him in their prairie wanderings. The whole party were delighted at the idea of such a “scout,” and exhibited as much excitement as if I was leading them to a skirmish with guerilleros.

The country through which we passed was at first a dense chapparal, consisting of the various thorny shrubs and plants for which this part of Mexico is so celebrated. The greater proportion belonged to the family of *leguminosae*—*robinias*, *gleditschias*, and the Texan acacias of more than one species, there known as *mezquite*. Aloes, too, formed part of the under-growth, to the no small annoyance of the traveller – the wild species known as the *lechuguilla*, or pita-plant, whose core is cooked for food, whose fibrous leaves serve for the manufacture of thread, cordage, or cloth – while its sap yields by distillation the fiery *mezcal*. Here and there, a tree yucca grew by the way, its fascicles of rigid leaves reminding one of the plumed heads of Indian warriors. Some I saw with edible fruits growing in clusters, like bunches of bananas. Several species are there of these fruit-bearing yuccas in the region of the Rio Grande, as yet unknown to the scientific botanist. I observed also the *palmilla*, or soap-plant, another yucca whose roots yield an excellent substitute for soap; and various forms of cactus – never out of sight on Mexican soil – grew thickly around, a characteristic feature of the landscape. Plants of humbler stature covered the surface, among which the syngenesists predominated; while the fetid *artemisia*, and the still more disagreeably odorous creosote plant (*Larrea Mexicana*) grew upon spots that were sandy and arid. Pleasanter objects to the eye were the scarlet panicles of the *Fouquiera splendens*, then undescribed by botanists, and yet to become a favourite of the arboretums.

I was in no mood for botanising at the time, but I well remember how I admired this elegant species – its tall culm-like stems, surmounted by panicles of brilliant flowers, rising high above the level of the surrounding thicket, like banners above a host. Not that I possess the refined taste of a lover of flowers, and much less then; but cold must be the heart that could look upon the floral beauty of Mexico, without remembering some portion of its charms. Even the rudest of my followers could not otherwise than admire; and once or twice, as we journeyed along, I could hear them give utterance to that fine epithet of the heart’s desire, “Beautiful!”

As we advanced, the aspect changed. The surface became freer of jungle; a succession of glade and thicket; in short, a “mezquite prairie.” Still advancing, the “openings” became larger, while the timbered surface diminished in extent, and now and then the glades joined each other without interruption.

We had ridden nearly ten miles without drawing bridle, when our guide struck upon the trail of the manada. Several of the old hunters, without dismounting, pronounced the tracks to be those of wild *mares*, which they easily distinguished from *horse* tracks. Their judgment proved correct; for following the trail but a short distance farther, we came full in sight of the drove, which the vaquero confidently pronounced was the manada we were in search of!

So far our success equalled our expectations; but to get sight of a *caballada* of wild-horses, and to capture its swiftest steed, are two things of very unequal difficulty. This fact my anxiously beating heart and quickly throbbing pulse revealed to me at the moment. It would be difficult to describe the mingled feelings of anxious doubt and joyous hope that passed through my mind, as from afar off I gazed upon that shy herd, still unconscious of our approach.

The prairie upon which the mares were browsing was more than a mile in width, and, like those we had been passing through, it was surrounded by the low chapparal forest – although there were avenues that communicated with other openings of a similar kind. Near its centre was the manada. Some of the mares were quietly browsing upon the grass, while others were frisking and playing about, now rearing up as if in combat, now rushing in wild gallop, their tossed manes and full tails flung loosely upon the wind. Even in the distance we could trace the full rounded development of their bodies; and their smooth coats glistening under the sun denoted their fair condition. They were of all colours known to the horse, for in this the race of the Spanish horse is somewhat peculiar. There were bays, and blacks, and whites – the last being most numerous. There were greys, both iron and roan, and duns with white manes and tails, and some of a mole colour, and not a few of the kind known in Mexico as *pintados* (piebalds) – for spotted horses are not uncommon among the mustangs – all of course with full manes and tails, since the mutilating shears of the jockey had never curtailed their flowing glories.

But where was the lord of this splendid harem? – where the steed?

This was the thought that was uppermost in the mind of all – the question upon every tongue.

Our eyes wandered over the herd, now here, now there. White horses there were, numbers of them, but it needed but a glance to tell that the “steed of the prairies” was not there.

We eyed each other with looks of disappointment. Even my companions felt that; but a far more bitter feeling was growing upon me as I gazed upon the leaderless troop. Could I have captured and carried back the whole drove, the present would not have purchased one smile from Isolina. The steed was not among them!

He might still be in the neighbourhood; or had he forsaken the manada altogether, and gone far away over the wide prairie in search of new conquests?

The vaquero believed he was not far off. I had faith in this man’s opinion, who, having passed his life in the observation of wild and half-wild horses, had a perfect knowledge of their habits. There was hope then. The steed might be near; perhaps lying down in the shade of the thicket; perhaps with a portion of the manada or some favourite in one of the adjacent glades. If so, our guide assured us we should soon have him in view. He would soon bring the steed upon the ground.

How?

Simply by startling the mares, whose neigh of alarm would be heard from afar.

The plan seemed feasible enough; but it was advisable that we should surround the manada before attempting to disturb them, else they might gallop off in the opposite direction, before any of us could get near.

Without delay, we proceeded to effect the “surround.”

The chapparal aided us by concealing our movements; and in half-an-hour we had deployed around the prairie.

The drove still browsed and played. They had no suspicion that a cordon of hunters was being formed around them, else they would have long since galloped away.

Of all wild creatures, the shyest is the wild-horse; the deer, the antelope, and buffalo, are far less fearful of the approach of man. The mustang seems to understand the doom that awaits him in captivity. One could almost fancy that the runaways from the settlements – occasionally seen amongst them – had poured into their ears the tale of their hardships and long endurance.

I had myself ridden to the opposite side of the prairie, in order to be certain when the circle was complete. I was now alone, having dropped my companions at intervals along the margin of the timber. I had brought with me the bugle, with a note or two of which I intended to give the alarm to the mares.

I had placed myself in a clump of mezquite trees, and was about raising the horn to my lips, when a shrill scream from behind caused me to bring down the instrument, and turn suddenly in my seat. For a moment, I was in doubt as to what could have produced such a singular utterance, when a second time it fell on my ear, and then I recognised it. It was the neigh of the prairie stallion!

Near me was a break in the thicket, a sort of avenue leading out into another prairie. In this I could hear the hoof-stroke of a horse going at a gallop.

As fast as the underwood would allow, I pressed forward and came out upon the edge of the open ground; but the sun, low down, flashed in my eyes, and I could see no object distinctly.

The tread of the hoofs and the shrill neighing still rang in my ears.

Presently the dazzling light no longer quite blinded me: I shaded my eyes with my hand, and could perceive the form of a noble steed stretching in full gallop down the avenue, and coming in the direction of the manada.

Half-a-dozen springs brought him opposite; the beam was no longer in my eyes; and as he galloped past, I saw before me “the white steed of the prairies.”

There was no mistaking the marks of that splendid creature: there was the snow-white body, the ears of jetty blackness, the blue muzzle, the red projected nostril, the broad oval quarters, the rounded and symmetric limbs – all the points of an incomparable steed!

Like an arrow he shot past. He did not arrest his pace for an instant, but galloped on in a direct line for the drove.

The mares had answered his first signal with a responsive neigh; and tossing up their heads, the whole manada was instantly in motion. In a few seconds, they stood at rest again, *formed in line* – as exact as could have been done by a troop of cavalry – and fronting their leader as he galloped up. Indeed, standing as they were, with their heads high in air, it was easy to fancy them mounted men in the array of battle; and often have wild-horses been mistaken for such by the prairie traveller!

Concealment or stratagem could no longer avail; the chase was fairly up. Speed and the lazo must now decide the result; and, with this conviction, I gave Moro the spur, and bounded into the open plain.

The neighing of the steed had signalled my companions who shot almost simultaneously out of the timber, and spurred towards the drove, yelling as they came.

I had no eyes for aught but the white steed, and after him I directed myself.

On nearing the line of mares, he halted in his wild gallop, twice reared his body upward, as if to reconnoitre the ground; and then, uttering another of his shrill screams, broke off in a direct line towards the edge of the prairie. A wide avenue leading out in that direction seemed to have guided his instincts.

The manada followed, at first galloping in line; but this became broken, as the swifter individuals passed ahead of the others, and the drove were soon strung out upon the prairie.

Through the opening now swept the chase – the pursuers keenly plying the spur – the pursued straining every muscle to escape.

Chapter Seventeen.

The hunt of the wild-horse

My gallant horse soon gave proof of his superior qualities. One after another of my companions was passed; and as we cleared the avenue and entered a second prairie, I found myself mixing with the hindmost of the *wild* mares. Pretty creatures some of them were; and upon any other occasion, I should have been tempted to fling a lazo over one of them, which I might easily have done. Then I only thought of getting them out of the way, as they were hindering my onward gallop.

Before we had quite crossed the second prairie, I had forged into the front rank; and the mares, seeing I had headed them, broke to the right and left, and scattered away.

All were now behind me, all but the white steed; he alone kept the course, at intervals uttering that same shrill neigh, as if to tantalise and lure me on. He was yet far in advance, and apparently running *at his ease!*

The horse I bestrode needed neither spur nor guidance; he saw before him the object of the chase, and he divined the will of his rider. I felt him rising under me like a sea-wave. His hoofs struck the turf without impinging upon it. At each fresh spring, he came up with elastic rebound, while his flanks heaved with the conscious possession of power.

Before the second prairie was crossed, he had gained, considerably upon the white steed; but to my chagrin, I now saw the latter dash right into the thicket.

I found a path and followed. My ear served to guide me, for the branches crackled as the wild-horse broke through. Now and then I caught glimpses of his white body, glancing among the green leaves.

Apprehensive of losing him, I rode recklessly after, now breasting the thicket – now tracing its labyrinthine aisles. I heeded not the thorny mimosas; my horse heeded them not; but large trees of the false acacia (*robinia*) stood thickly in the way, and their horizontal branches hindered me. Often was I obliged to bend flat to the saddle, in order to pass under them. All this was in favour of the pursued, and against the pursuer.

I longed for the open prairie, and to my relief it at length appeared, not yet quite treeless, but studded with timber “islands.” Amid these the white steed was sailing off; but in passing through the thicket, he had gained ground, and was now a long way in advance of me. But he was making for the open plain that lay beyond, and this showed that it was his habit to trust to his heels for safety. Perhaps with such a pursuer, he would have been safer to have kept the chapparal; but that remained to be seen.

In ten minutes’ time, we had passed through the timber islands, and now the prairie – the grand, limitless prairie – stretched before us, far beyond the reach of vision.

On goes the chase over its grassy level – on till the trees are no longer behind us, and the eye sees nought but the green savannah, and the blue canopy arching over it – on, across the centre of that vast circle which has for its boundary the whole horizon!

The rangers, lost in the mazes of the chapparal, have long since fallen off; the mustangs have gone back; on all that wide plain, but two objects appear – the snow-white form of the flying steed, and the dark horseman that follows!

It is a long wild ride, a cruel gallop for my matchless Moro. Ten miles of the prairie have we passed – more than that – and as yet I have neither used whip nor spur. The brave steed needs no such prompting; he, too, has his interest in the chase – the ambition not to be outrun. My motive is different: I think only of the smiles of a woman; but such motive ere now has led to the loss of a crown or the conquest of a world. On, Moro! on! you must overtake him or die!

There is no longer an obstacle. He cannot hide from us here. The plain, with its sward of short grass, is level and smooth as the sleeping ocean; not an object intrudes upon the sight. He cannot conceal himself anywhere. There is still an hour of sunlight; he cannot hide from us in the darkness: ere that comes down, he shall be our captive. On, Moro! on!

On we glide in silence. The steed has ceased to utter his taunting neigh; he has lost confidence in his speed; he now runs in dread. Never before has he been so sorely pressed. He runs in silence, and so, too, his pursuer. Not a sound is heard but the stroke of the galloping hoofs – an impressive silence, that betokens the earnestness of the chase.

Less than two hundred yards separate us; I feel certain of victory. A touch of the spur would now bring Moro within range: it is time to put an end to this desperate ride. Now, brave Moro, another stretch, and you shall have rest!

I look to my lazo; it hangs coiled over the horn of my saddle: one end is fast to a ring and staple firmly riveted in the tree-wood. Is the loop clear and free? It is. The coil – is it straight? Yes; all as it should be.

I lift the coil, and rest it lightly over my bridle arm; I separate the noose, and hold it in my right hand. I am ready – *God of heaven! the steed?*

It was a wild exclamation, but it was drawn from me by no common cause. In arranging my lazo, I had taken my eyes from the chase, only for a moment: when I looked out again, *the horse had disappeared!*

With a mechanical movement I drew bridle, almost wrenching my horse upon his haunches; indeed, the animal had half halted of his own accord, and with a low whimper seemed to express terror. What could it mean? Where was the wild-horse?

I wheeled round, and round again, scanning the prairie on every side – though a single glance might have served. The plain, as already described, was level as a table; the horizon bounded the view: there was neither rock nor tree, nor bush nor weed, nor even long grass. The sward was of the kind known upon the prairies as “buffalo-grass” (*Sesleria dactyloides*), short when full grown, but then rising scarcely two inches above the soil. A serpent could hardly have found concealment under it, but a horse —

Merciful heaven! *where was the steed?*

An indefinable feeling of awe crept over me: I trembled; I felt my horse trembling between my thighs. He was covered with foam and sweat; so was I – the effects of the hard ride: but the cold perspiration of terror was fast breaking upon me. The mystery was heavy and appalling!

Chapter Eighteen. The phantom-horse

I have encountered dangers – not a few – but they were the ordinary perils of flood and field, and I understood them. I have had one limb broken, and its fellow bored with an ounce of lead. I have swum from a sinking ship, and have fallen upon the battle-field. I have looked at the muzzles of a hundred muskets aimed at my person, at less than thirty yards' distance, and felt the certainty of death though the volley was fired, and I still live.

Well, you will no doubt acknowledge these to be perils. Do not mistake me; I am not boasting of having encountered them; I met them with more or less courage – some of them with fear – but if the fears inspired by all were combined into one emotion of terror, it would not equal in intensity that which I experienced at the moment I pulled up my horse upon the prairie.

I have never been given to superstition; perhaps my religion is not strong enough for that; but at that moment I could not help yielding to a full belief in the supernatural. There was no *natural* cause – I could think of none – that would account for the mysterious disappearance of the horse. I had often sneered at the credulous sailor and his phantom-ship; had I lived to look upon a phenomenon equally strange yet true – a phantom-horse?

The hunters and trappers had indeed invested the white steed with this character; their stories recurred to my memory at the moment. I had used to smile at the simple credulity of the narrators. I was now prepared to believe them. They were true!

Or was I dreaming? Was it not all a dream? The search for the white steed – the surround – the chase – the long, long gallop?

For some moments I actually fancied that such *might* be the case; but soon my consciousness became clear again: I was in the saddle, and my panting, smoking steed was under me. That was real and positive. I remembered all the incidents of the chase. They, too, were real of a certainty; the white steed had been there: he was gone. The trappers spoke the truth. The horse was a phantom!

Oppressed with this thought – which had almost become a conviction – I sat in my saddle, bent and silent, my eyes turned upon the earth, but their gaze fixed on vacuity. The lazo had dropped from my fingers, and the bridle-reins trailed untouched over the withers of my horse.

My belief in the supernatural was of short duration, how long I know not, for during its continuance I remained in a state of bewilderment.

My senses at length returned. My eyes had fallen upon a fresh hoof-print on the turf, directly in front of me. I knew it was that made by the white steed, and this awoke me to a process of reasoning. Had the horse been a phantom, he could not have made a track. I had never heard of the track of a ghost; though a *horse-ghost* might be different from the common kind!

My reflections on this head ended in the determination to follow the trail as far as it should lead; of course to the point where the steed must have mounted into the air, or evaporated – the scene of his apotheosis.

With this resolve, I gathered my reins, and rode forward upon the trail, keeping my eyes fixed upon the hoof-prints.

The line was direct, and I had ridden nearly two hundred yards, when my horse came to a sudden stop. I looked out forward to discover the cause of his halting; with that glance vanished my new-born superstitions.

At the distance of some thirty paces, a dark line was seen upon the prairie, running transversely to the course I was following. It appeared to be a narrow crack in the plain; but on spurring nearer, it proved to be a fissure of considerable width – one of those formations known throughout Spanish America as *barrancas*. The earth yawned, as though rent by an earthquake; but water had evidently

something to do with the formation of the chasm. It was of nearly equal width at top and bottom, and its bed was covered with a *débris* of rocks rounded by attrition. Its sides were perfectly vertical, and the stratification, even to the surface-turf, exactly corresponded – thus rendering it invisible at the distance of but a few paces from its brink. It appeared to shallow to the right, and no doubt ended not far off in that direction. Towards the left, on the contrary, I could see that it became deeper and wider. At the point where I had reached it, its bottom was nearly twenty feet from the surface of the prairie.

Of course, the disappearance of the white steed was no longer a mystery. He had made a fearful leap – nearly twenty feet sheer! There was the torn turf on the brink of the chasm, and the displacement of the loose stones, where he had bounded into its bed. He had gone to the left – down the barranca. The abrasion of his hoofs was visible upon the rocks.

I looked down the defile: he was not to be seen. The barranca turned off by an angle at no great distance. He had already passed round the angle, and was out of sight!

It was clear that he had escaped; that to fellow would be of no use; and, with this reflection, I abandoned all thoughts of carrying the chase farther.

After giving way to a pang or two of disappointment, I began to think of the position in which I had placed myself. It is true I was now relieved from the feeling of awe that, but a moment before, had oppressed me; but my situation was far from being a pleasant one. I was at least thirty miles from the rancheria, and I could not tell in what direction it lay. The sun was setting, and therefore I had the points of the compass; but I had not the slightest idea whether we had ridden eastward or westward after leaving the settlements. I might ride back on my own trail; *perhaps* I might: it was a doubtful point. Neither through the timber, nor on the open prairie, had the chase gone in a direct line. Moreover, I noticed in many places, as we glided swiftly along, that the turf was cut up by numerous hoof-tracks: droves of mustangs had passed over the ground. It would be no easy matter for me to retrace the windings of that long gallop.

One thing was evident: it would be useless for me to make the attempt before morning. There was not half-an-hour of sun left, and at night the trail could not be followed. I had no alternative but to remain where I was until another day should break.

But how remain? I was hungry; still worse, I was choking with thirst. Not a drop of water was near; I had seen none for twenty miles. The long hot ride had made me thirsty to an unusual degree, and my poor horse was in a similar condition. The knowledge that no water was near added, as it always does, to the agony, and rendered the physical want more difficult to be endured.

I scanned the bottom of the barranca, and tracked it with my eye as far as I could see: it was waterless as the lain itself. The rocks rested upon dry sand and gravel; not a drop of the wished-for element appeared within its bed, although it was evident that at some time a torrent must have swept along its channel.

After some reflection, it occurred to me that by following the barranca *downward*, I might find water; at least, this was the most likely direction in which to search for it. I rode forward, therefore, directing my horse along the edge of the chasm.

The fissure deepened as I advanced, until, at the distance of a mile from where I first struck it, the gulf yawned full fifty feet into the plain, the sides still preserving their vertical steepness!

The sun had now gone down; the twilight promised to be a short one. I dared not traverse that plain in the darkness; I might ride over the precipitous edge of the barranca. Besides, it was not the only one: I saw there were others – smaller ones – the beds of tributary streams in seasons of rain. These branched off diagonally or at right angles, and were more or less deep and steep.

Night was fast closing over the prairie; I dared not ride farther amid these perilous abysms. I must soon come to a halt, without finding water. I should have to spend the long hours without relief. The prospect of such a night was fearful.

I was still riding slowly onward, mechanically conducting my horse, when a bright object fell under my eyes, causing me to start in my saddle with an exclamation of joy. It was the gleam of water. I saw it in a westerly direction, the direction in which I was going.

It proved to be a small lake, or – in the phraseology of the country – a pond. It was not in the bottom of the ravine, where I had hitherto been looking for water, but up on the high prairie. There was no timber around it, no sedge; its shores were without vegetation of any kind, and its surface appeared to correspond with the level of the plain itself.

I rode towards it with joyful anticipation, yet not without some anxiety. Was it a *mirage*? It might be – often had I been deceived by such appearances. But no: it had not the filmy, gauze-like halo that hangs over the mirage. Its outlines were sharply defined by the prairie turf, and the last lingering rays of the sun glistened upon its surface. It *was* water!

Fully assured of this, I rode forward at a more rapid rate.

I had arrived within about two hundred paces of the spot – still keeping my eyes fixed upon the glistening water – when all at once my horse started, and drew back! I looked ahead to discover the cause. The twilight had nearly passed, but in the obscurity I could still distinguish the surface of the prairie. The barranca again frowned before me, running transversely across my path. To my chagrin, I perceived that the chasm had made a sudden turn, and that the pond was on its *opposite side*!

Chapter Nineteen.

A prairie dream

There was no hope of crossing in the darkness. The barranca was here deeper than at any point above; so deep that I could but indistinctly see the rocky boulders at its bottom. Perhaps with the daylight I might be able to find a crossing-place; but from that doubtful hypothesis I derived little consolation.

It had now grown quite dark, and I had no choice but to pass the night where I was, though I anticipated a night of torture.

I dropped to the ground, and having led my horse a few rods into the prairie – so as to keep him clear of the precipice – I relieved him of his saddle and bridle, and left him to browse to the full length of the lazo.

For myself, I had but few preparations to make: there was no supper to be cooked, but eating was a matter of secondary importance on that occasion. I should have preferred a cup of water to a roast turkey.

I had but few implements to dispose of in my temporary camp – only my rifle and hunting-knife, with horn and pouch, and the double-headed gourd, which served as water-canteen, and which, alas! had been emptied at an early hour of the day. Fortunately, my Mexican blanket was buckled to the croupe. This I unstrapped, and having enveloped myself in its ample folds, and placed my head in the hollow of my saddle, I composed myself as well as I could, in the hope of falling asleep.

For a long time this luxury was denied me. The torture of thirst will rob one of sleep as effectually as the stinging pain of toothache. I turned and turned again, glaring at the moon: she was visible only at intervals, as black clouds were coursing across the canopy; but when she shone out, her light caused the little lake to glisten like a sheet of silver. Oh! how that bright water mocked me with its wavy ripple! I could comprehend the sufferings of Tantalus. I thought at the time that the gods could not have devised a more exquisite torture for the royal Lydian.

After some time, the pain of thirst was less intensely felt. Perhaps the cold damp air of night had the effect of relieving it; but it is more likely that fatigue and long endurance had rendered the sense less acute. Whatever may have been the cause, I suffered less, and felt myself yielding to sleep. There was no sound to keep me awake: perfect stillness reigned around; even the usual howling bark of the prairie-wolf did not reach my ear. The place seemed too lonely for this almost ubiquitous night-prowler. The only sign of life that told me I was not alone was the occasional stroke of my steed's hoof upon the hard turf, and the "crop crop" that told me he was busy with the short buffalo-grass. But these were soothing sounds – as they admonished me that my faithful companion was enjoying himself after his hard gallop – and strengthened my desire for repose.

I slept, but not lightly. No; my sleep was heavy and full of troubled dreams. I have a sort of half belief that the *rôle* we play in these dream-scenes wears the body as much as if we enacted it in reality. I have often awaked from such visions feeble from fatigue. If such be the fact, during that night upon the prairie I went through the toils of the preceding day with considerable additions.

First of all, I was in the presence of a lovely woman: she was dark-eyed, dark-haired – a brunette – a beauty. I traced the features of Isolina. I gazed into her eyes; I was happy in her smiles; I fancied I was beloved. Bright objects were around me. The whole scene was rose-colour.

This was a short episode: it was interrupted. I heard shouts and savage yells. I looked out: the house was surrounded by Indians! They were already within the enclosure; and the moment after, crowds of them entered the house. There was much struggling and confusion, battled with such arms as I could lay hold of; several fell before me; but one – a tall savage, the chief, as I thought – threw his arms around my mistress, and carried her away out of my sight.

I remember not how I got mounted; but I was upon horseback, and galloping over the wide prairie in pursuit of the ravisher. I could see the savage ahead upon a snow-white steed, with Isolina in his arms. I urged my horse with voice and spur, but, as I thought, for long, long hours in vain. The white steed still kept far in advance; and I could get no nearer to him. I thought the savage had changed his form. He was no longer an Indian chief, but the fiend himself: I saw the horns upon his head; his feet were cloven hoofs! I thought he was luring me to the brink of some fell precipice, and I had no longer the power to stay my horse. Ha! The demon and his phantom-horse have gone over the cliff! They have carried her along with them! I must follow – I cannot remain behind. I am on the brink. My steed springs over the chasm. I am falling – falling – falling! —

I reach the rocks at length. I am not killed: how strange it is I have not been crushed! But no; I still live. And yet I suffer. Thirst chokes and tortures me: my heart and brain are aching, and my tongue is on fire. The sound of water is in my ears: a torrent rushes by, near me. If I could only reach it, I might drink and live: but I cannot move; I am chained to the rocks. I grasp one after another, and endeavour to drag myself along: I partially succeed; but oh, what efforts I make! The labour exhausts my strength. I renew my exertions. I am gaining ground: rock after rock is passed. I have neared the rushing water; I feel its cold spray sprinkling me. I am saved!

After such fashion was my dream. It was the shadow of a reality, somewhat disorganised; but the most pleasant reality was that which awoke me. I found myself in the act of being sprinkled, not by the spray of a torrent, but by a plashing shower from the clouds!

Under other circumstances, this might have been less welcome, but now I hailed it with a shout of joy. The thunder was rolling almost continuously; lightning blazed at short intervals; and I could hear the roar of a torrent passing down the barranca.

To assuage thirst was my first thought; and for this purpose, I stretched out my concave palms, and held my mouth wide open, thus drinking from the very fountains of the sky.

Though the drops fell thick and heavy, the process was too slow, and a better plan suggested itself. I knew that my *serape* was water-proof: it was one of the best of Parras fabric, and had cost me a hundred silver dollars. This I spread to its full extent, pressing the central parts into a hollow of the prairie. In five minutes' time, I had forgotten what thirst was, and wondered how such a thing should have caused me so much torture!

Moro drank from the same “trough,” and betook himself to the grass again.

The under side of the blanket was still dry, and the patch of ground which it had sheltered. Along this I stretched myself, drew the serape over me; and after listening a while to the loud lullaby of the thunder, fell fast asleep.

Chapter Twenty. Lost upon the prairie

I slept sweetly and soundly. I had no dreams, or only such as were light, and forgotten with the return of consciousness.

It was late when I awoke. A bright sun was mounting into the blue and cloudless sky. This orb was already many degrees above the horizon.

Hunger was the father of my first thought. I had eaten nothing since an early hour of the preceding day, and then only the light *desayuna* of sweet-cake and chocolate. To one not accustomed to long fasting, a single day without food will give some idea of the pain of hunger; that pain will increase upon a second day, and by the third will have reached its maximum. Upon the fourth and fifth, the body grows weaker, and the brain becomes deranged; the nerve, however, is less acute, and though the suffering is still intense, hunger is never harder to endure than upon the second or third days.

Of course, these remarks apply only to those not habituated to long fasts. I have known men who could endure hunger for six days, and feel less pain than others under a fast of twenty-four hours. Indians or prairie-hunters were those men, and fortunately for them that they are endowed with such powers of endurance, often driven as they are into circumstances of the most dire necessity. Truly, “the Lord tempers the wind to the shorn lamb!”

As I have said, my first thought was of something to eat.

I rose to my feet, and with my eye swept the prairie in every direction: no object living or dead, greeted my sight; beast or bird there was none; my horse alone met my glance, quietly browsing on his trail-rope.

I could not help envying him, as I scanned his well-filled sides. I thought of the bounty of the Creator in thus providing for his less intelligent creatures – giving them the power to live where man would starve. Who does not in this recognise the hand of a Providence?

I walked forward to the edge of the barranca, and looked over. It was a grim abyss, over a hundred feet in depth, and about the same in width. Its sides were less precipitous at this point. The escarpment rocks had fallen in, and formed a sort of shelving bank, by which a man on foot might have descended into its bed, and climbed out on the opposite side; but it was not passable for a horse. Its cliffs were furrowed and uneven; rocks jutted out and hung over; and in the seams grew cactus plants, bramble, and small trees of dwarf cedar (*Juniperus prostrata*).

I looked into its channel. I had heard the torrent rolling down in the night. I saw traces of the water among the rocks. A large body must have passed, and yet not a cupful could now have been lifted from its bed! What remained was fast filtering into the sand, or rising back to the heavens upon the heated atmosphere.

I had brought with me my rifle, in hopes of espying some living creature; but after walking for a considerable distance along the edge, I abandoned the search. No trace of bird or quadruped could be found, and I turned and went back to the place where I had slept.

To draw the picket-pin of my horse and saddle him, was the work of a few minutes; this done, I began to bethink me of *where I was going*. Back to the rancheria, of course!

That was the natural reply to such a question; but there was another far less easily answered: How was I to find the way?

My design of the previous night – to follow back my own trail – was no longer practicable. *The rain had effaced the tracks!* I remembered that I had passed over wide stretches of light dusty soil, where the hoof scarcely impressed itself. I remembered that the rain had been of that character

known as “planet showers,” with large heavy drops, that, in such places, must have blotted out every trace of the trail. To follow the “back-track” was no longer possible.

I had not before thought of this difficulty; and now, that it presented itself to my mind, it was accompanied by a new feeling of dread. I felt that *I was lost!*

As you sit in your easy-chair, you may fancy that this is a mere bagatelle – a little bewilderment that one may easily escape from who has a good horse between his thighs. It is only to strike boldly out, and by riding on *in a straight line*, you must in time arrive *somewhere*.

No doubt, that is your idea; but permit me to inform you that the success of such a course depends very much upon circumstances. It would indeed be trusting to blind chance. You might arrive “somewhere,” and that somewhere might be the very point from which you had started!

Do you fancy you can ride ten miles in a direct line over a prairie, without a single object to guide you?

Be undeceived, then; you cannot!

The best mounted men have perished under such circumstances. It may take days to escape out of a fifty-mile prairie, and days bring death. Hunger and thirst soon gain strength and agony – the sooner that you know you have not the wherewith to satisfy the one, nor quench the other. Besides, there is in your very loneliness a feeling of bewilderment, painful to an extreme degree, and from which only the oldest prairie-men are free. Your senses lose half their power, your energy is diminished, and your resolves become weak and vacillating. You feel doubtful at each step, as to whether you be following the right path, and are ready at every moment to turn into another. Believe me, it is a fearful thing to be alone when lost upon the prairies!

I felt this keenly enough. I had been on the great plains before, but it was the first time I had the misfortune to wander astray on them, and I was the more terrified that I already hungered to no common degree.

There was something singular, too, in the circumstances that had brought me into my present situation. The disappearance of the white steed – although accounted for by perfectly natural causes – had left upon my mind a strange impression. That he should have lured me so far, and then eluded me in such a way! I could not help fancying design in it: and fancying so, I could attribute such design only to a higher intelligence – in fact, to some supernatural cause!

I was again on the edge of superstition. My mind began to give way and yield itself to hideous fancies.

I struggled against such thoughts, and succeeded in rousing myself to reflect upon some active measures for my safety.

I saw that it was of no use to remain where I was. I knew that I could make a straight path for a couple of hours at least – the sun was in the sky, and that would guide me – until near the meridian hours. Then I should have to halt, and wait a while; for in that southern latitude, and just at that time of the year, the sun at noon is so near the zenith that a practised astronomer could not tell north from south.

I reflected that before noon I might reach the timber, though that would not insure my safety. Even the naked plain is not more bewildering than the openings of the mezquite groves and the chapparal that border it. Among these you may travel for days without getting twenty miles from your starting-point, and they are often as destitute of the means of life as the desert itself!

Such were my reflections as I had saddled and bridled my horse, and stood scanning the plain in order to make up my mind as to the direction I should take.

Chapter Twenty One.

A Prairie Repast

In gazing out, my eye was attracted by some objects. They were animals, but of what species I could not tell. There are times upon the prairies when form and size present the most illusory aspects: a wolf seems as large as a horse; and a raven sitting upon a swell of the plain, has been mistaken for a buffalo. A peculiar state of the atmosphere is the magnifying cause, and it is only the experienced eye of the trapper that can reduce the magnified proportions and distorted form to their proper size and shape.

The objects I had noticed were full two miles off; they were in the direction of the lake, and of course on the other side of the barranca. There were several forms – five I counted – moving phantom-like against the rim of the horizon.

Something drew my attention from them for a short while – a period of perhaps three or four minutes' duration.

When I looked out again they were no longer to be seen; but by the edge of the pond, at less than five hundred yards' distance, five beautiful creatures were standing, which I knew to be antelopes. They were so close to the pond, that their graceful forms were shadowed in the water, and their erect attitudes told that they had just halted after a run. Their number corresponded with the objects I had seen but the moment before far out upon the prairie. I was convinced they were the same. The distance was nothing: these creatures travel with the speed of a swallow.

The sight of the prong-horns stimulated my hunger. My first thought was how to get near them. Curiosity had brought them to the pond; they had espied my horse and myself afar off; and had galloped up to reconnoitre us. But they still appeared shy and timid, and were evidently not inclined to approach nearer.

The barranca lay between them and me, but I saw that if I could entice them to its brink, they would be within range of my rifle.

Once more staking down my horse, I tried every plan I could think of. I laid myself along the grass, upon my back, and kicked my heels in the air, but to no purpose: the game would not move from the water's edge.

Remembering that my serape was of very brilliant colours, I bethought me of another plan which, when adroitly practised, rarely fails of success.

Taking the blanket, I lashed one edge to the ramrod of my rifle, having first passed the latter through the upper swivel of the piece. With the thumb of my left hand I was thus enabled to hold the rammer steady and transverse to the barrel. I now dropped upon my knees – holding the gun shoulder-high – and the gay-coloured serape, spread out almost to its full extent, hung to the ground, and formed a complete cover for my person.

Before making these arrangements, I had crept to the very edge of the barranca – in order to be as near as possible should the antelopes approach upon the opposite side.

Of course every manoeuvre was executed with all the silence and caution I could observe. I was in no reckless humour to frighten off the game. Hunger was my monitor. I knew that not my breakfast alone, but my life, might be depending on the successful issue of the experiment.

It was not long before I had the gratification of perceiving that my decoy was likely to prove attractive. The prong-horned antelope, like most animals of its kind, has one strongly developed propensity – that of *curiosity*. Although to a known enemy it is the most timid of creatures, yet in the presence of an object that is new to it, it appears to throw aside its timidity, or rather its curiosity overcomes its sense of fear; and, impelled by the former, it will approach very near to any strange form, and regard it with an air of bewilderment. The prairie-wolf – a creature that surpasses even the

fox in cunning – well knows this weakness of the antelope, and often takes advantage of it. The wolf is less fleet than the antelope, and his pursuit of it in a direct manner would be vain; but with the astute creature, stratagem makes up for the absence of speed. Should a “band” of antelopes chance to be passing, the prairie-wolf lays himself flat upon the grass, clews his body into a round ball, and thus rolls himself over the ground, or goes through a series of contortions, all the while approaching nearer to his victims, until he has them within springing distance! Usually he is assisted in these manoeuvres by several companions – for the prairie-wolf is social, and hunts in packs.

The square of bright colours soon produced its effect. The five prong-horns came trotting around the edge of the lake, halted, gazed upon it a moment, and then dashed off again to a greater distance. Soon, however, they turned and came running back – this time apparently with greater confidence, and a stronger feeling of curiosity. I could hear them uttering their quick “snorts” as they tossed up their tiny muzzles and snuffed the air. Fortunately, the wind was in my favour, blowing directly from the game, and towards me; otherwise, they would have “winded” me, and discovered the cheat – for they both know and fear the scent of the human hunter.

The band consisted of a young buck and four females – his wives; the nucleus, no doubt, of a much larger establishment in prospect – for the antelope is polygamous, and some of the older males have an extensive following. I knew the buck by his greater size and forking horns, which the does want. He appeared to direct the actions of the others, as they all stood in a line behind him, following and imitating his motions.

At the second approach, they came within a hundred yards of me. My rifle was equal to this range, and I prepared to fire. The leader was nearest, and him I selected as the victim.

Taking sight I pulled trigger.

As soon as the smoke cleared off, I had the satisfaction of seeing the buck down upon the prairie, in the act of giving his last kick. To my surprise, none of the others had been frightened off by the report, but stood gazing at their fallen leader, apparently bewildered!

I bethought me of reloading; but I had incautiously risen to my feet, and so revealed my form to the eyes of the antelopes. This produced an effect which neither the crack of the rifle nor the fall of their comrade had done; and the now terrified animals wheeled about and sped away like the wind. In less than two minutes, they were beyond the reach of vision.

The next question that arose was, how I was to get across the barranca. The tempting morsel lay upon the other side, and I therefore set about examining the chasm in order to find a practicable crossing.

This I fortunately discovered. On both sides, the cliff was somewhat broken down, and might be scaled, though not without considerable difficulty.

After once more looking to the security of my horse’s trail-rope, I placed my rifle where I had slept, and set out to cross the barranca, taking only my knife. I could have no use for the gun, and it would hinder me in scaling the cliffs.

I succeeded in reaching to the bottom of the ravine, and commenced ascending on the opposite side where it was steeper; but I was assisted by the branches of the trailing cedar that grew among the rocks. I noticed, and with some surprise, that the path must have been used before, either by men or animals. The soil that laid upon the ledges was “paddled” as by feet, and the rock in some places scratched and discoloured.

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