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AN ADVENTURE WITH THE APACHES.

BY
GABRIEL FERRY.



NEW YORK, CINCINNATI, CHICAGO:
BENZIGER BROTHERS,

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AN ADVENTURE WITH THE APACHES.

CHAPTER I.

A SCENE ON THE PRAIRIE.

ON that day the silent woodsman emerged from his habitual speechlessness, and related one of the many adventures that had befallen his friend Redwood, the Canadian, in the savannas of Mexico.

Surprised by a band of Apaches, his deadly enemies, Redwood had been obliged to seek shelter for himself and the young Fabian, whom he loved as if he were his son, and Pepe the Spaniard, on a small island in the River Gila.

It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. The wilderness was silent ; the fog was slowly

rising from the river in the midst of which was the island to which the three hunters had retreated.

Large willows and aspens grew on the borders of the river, within musket-shot of this islet, and so close to the water's edge that their roots pierced through the banks and drank their fill in its flood. The intervals between these trees were filled, moreover, by a vigorous growth of osiers or other interlacing shoots. But nearly opposite the islet was a rather large space completely stripped of vegetation. It was the road that had been opened by herds of wild horses or buffaloes in order to reach the river. And through this space it was possible from the islet to get an unobstructed view of the plain.

The islet where the three hunters found themselves had been formed originally by the trunks of trees whose roots had held them fast

to the bottom of the river-bed. Other trees had been wrecked against this obstacle, some still retaining their branches and foliage, others long since withered, and the interlocking of their roots had at length formed a sort of large raft.

All this must have happened a long time ago; many summers and winters must have passed, for the dry plants torn from the banks by the rise of the water and entangled in the branches had filled the interstices of this raft. Then the dust which the winds raise and transport from a distance had covered these plants with a crust of earth and formed a sort of solid ground on this floating island.

Marine plants had sprung up all along the banks. The trunks of the willows had thrown out vigorous shoots which, together with reeds and arrowheads, surrounded the islet with a fringe of greenery that consorted strangely

with the skeleton trees or their great branches stripped of bark.

This sort of raft was perhaps five or six feet in diameter, and a man lying down, or even kneeling, was completely hidden behind the curtain of osiers and willow branches.

The sun was descending toward the horizon, and already a slight shadow cast by the screen of foliage and plants was stretching across the island. Thanks to the freshness proceeding from this nascent shadow and from the emanations of the river, Fabian lay sleeping on the ground. Redwood appeared to be watching this precarious slumber, snatched in haste after the fatigues of a long march and in the midst of incessantly renewed dangers. Pepe was refreshing himself by plunging his legs into the water.

“Certainly,” said he, after a long silence, “the inhabitants of Madrid would pay very

high for such a stream as this in the Manzanares; but, all the same, here is a whole day lost which might have been usefully employed in bringing us near the Valley of Gold, whither we are going, and from which we can not be very far away now."

"I admit it," replied Redwood; "but the child," and by this name he designated the strong young fellow who lay sleeping before him, "is not accustomed, as we are, to long marches a-foot; and while ninety miles in twelve days is no great feat for us, yet on him, who is not accustomed to travel except on horseback, ninety miles begins to tell. But before he is with us a year he will be able to march as long as we do ourselves."

Pepe could not avoid smiling at the Canadian's answer; but the latter did not observe it, and the Spaniard continued to beat the cool water of the river with his feet.

“Look,” he added, pointing at the sleeping Fabian, “how the poor fellow has changed within a few days. I can easily understand it; when I was his age I would have preferred a street in Madrid to all the splendors of the wilderness. Fatigue alone will not account for the alteration in him.”

“Nonsense! As if the wilderness were not preferable to cities! I will undertake to make him prefer a wandering to a sedentary life. Was it not to bestir himself, to fight, to experience the powerful emotions of desert places that man was born?”

“Certainly,” replied Pepe, with gravity; “that is why cities are deserts and deserts so well peopled.”

“Do not jest; I am speaking seriously,” returned the Canadian. “I shall leave Fabian at liberty to follow his inclinations, but at the same time I shall make him love this en-

chanting life of fatigues and perils. Consider for a moment, does not this slumber snatched hastily between two dangers in the wilderness seem preferable to that one obtains after a day of lazy security in cities? Fabian has always lived in solitude, and he would not exchange, I think, the quiet of the desert for the uproar of towns. How silent and solemn is everything around us! Look here," and he pointed to the sleeping youth, "how the child slumbers, softly lulled by the murmur of the stream caressing this little isle, and the breeze stirring the branches of the willows. Look yonder," and he pointed to the horizon, "at those mists which the sun begins to color, at this boundless immensity where man roams in his primeval liberty like the bird that hovers in the regions of air."

The Spaniard shook his head with an air of doubt, although he shared the ideas of the

Canadian willingly enough, and habit had rendered a roving life to him also full of secret charm.

“Look,” continued the old hunter; “that cloud of dust over there on the river bank is a troop of wild horses coming to drink before returning for the night to their distant feeding-grounds. See how they come up in all the haughty beauty that God gives to untamed animals, with their glowing eyes, their wide pink nostrils, their floating manes. Ah! I have a notion to waken Fabian to look at and admire them.”

“Let him sleep, Redwood; possibly his dreams, the dreams one has at his age, are showing him more graceful apparitions than deserts ever afford, and which in our Spanish cities abound on balconies or behind latticed windows.”

The old hunter sighed.

“And yet,” he added, “that is a fine sight yonder! Ah, how those noble beasts bound with joy in the intoxication of their wild liberty!”

“Yes! Up to the moment when the Indians begin to hunt them, and then they bound with terror.”

“There they go, as fast as a cloud driven by the wind,” continued the Canadian, still struggling against his judgment. “Now the scene changes; hold on, do you see that stag which now and then shows its two brilliant eyes and its black muzzle in the space between the trees? He smells the wind, he listens. Ah! there he comes to drink in his turn. He hears a noise; he lifts his head. Look at those streams of water escaping from his mouth; does not the sun make them look like liquid gold? Oh, I must wake up the child at once!”

“Let him sleep, I tell you; perhaps, instead of this fine animal, his dreams are showing him crowded streets and stately edifices.”

The old Canadian sighed again.

“Is not that stag also the emblem of boundless independence?”

“Up to the moment when the wolves come together to pursue and tear him to pieces. Possibly his chances of life would be greater in one of our royal parks. Everything in its own time, Redwood; maturity loves silence, youth sleeps quietly only in the midst of noise.”

In Redwood illusion was still struggling against reality. It was the drop of gall which God distils into every cup of happiness; He wills that there should be no perfect felicity, for then death would be too great a pain; as He also wills that there

should not be too much unmitigated evil, for otherwise it would be too painful to live.

The Canadian dropped his head pensively on his breast and fell into a sad reverie, glancing from time to time at the sleeping Fabian, while Pepe was putting on again his buffalo-skin boots. Suddenly the latter exclaimed:

“Hold on! What did I tell you? Do you not hear that howling, I ought to say that barking, in the distance, for wolves when they are hunting give tongue like dogs? Poor stag! as you say, he is certainly the emblem of life in the wilderness.”

“Shall I waken Fabian this time?” asked the Canadian, with an air of triumph.

“Yes, certainly,” returned the Spaniard, “he will seldom see anything like that.”

“The fact is he will never see anything like it in any city,” exclaimed the enchanted

Canadian; "such scenes will make him love the wilderness."

And the old hunter gently shook the young man, after first warning him by voice, so as not to waken him too suddenly.

CHAPTER II.

PURSUERS AND PURSUED.

ITS horns on its reins, its neck inflated, its head lying back in order to inhale more freely through its nostrils the air needful to its large lungs, the stag fled like an arrow through the air. Behind him a pack of famished wolves, some of them white, but the majority black, galloped after him like bullets ricocheting on a plain.

The stag had an immense advance upon them; but on the sand dunes scattered here and there on the savanna and almost blending with the horizon, the piercing eye of a hunter could discover other wolves acting as sentinels, watching the efforts of their companions to drive the stag toward them.

These the noble animal either did not see or else disdained their presence, for he continued to run in their direction. On arriving at a certain distance from the sentinels who stopped his passage, he halted for an instant.

The stag had, in fact, found himself hemmed in by a circle of enemies constantly contracting around him, and he stopped to recover a little breath. Suddenly he wheeled round, turned upon the wolves who were driving him toward the ambush, and made a last and supreme effort to escape this group of enemies. But he could not spring across the compact mass into which they had formed themselves, and he fell into the midst of them. Some, crushed, rolled beneath his feet; others, tossed by his horns, described a parabola in the air and came down disemboweled. Then, with a wolf

clawing on his legs, his flanks bleeding, his tongue hanging out of his mouth, the poor animal advanced to the edge of the stream just opposite the three spectators of this strange chase.

“It is fine, it is magnificent!” cried Fabian, clapping his hands, and beside himself with that madness of the hunter which stifles humanity in the hearts of nearly all men.

“Isn’t it fine?” shouted the old Canadian, made doubly happy by the joy of Fabian and that which he felt himself. “Come, my child, we shall see many more like it. Here you see only the worst side of these American solitudes; but when you are with Pepe and me on the banks of great rivers, on the shores of the great Northern lakes—”

“The animal has just got rid of his

enemy," interrupted Fabian; "he is going to spring into the river."

The water leaped and boiled under the spring of the stag; after him, it leaped and boiled a dozen times again; then, from amidst the foam, and simultaneously, emerged the head and antlers of the stag and the heads of wolves in furious pursuit, eyes bleeding, howling with hunger and desire, while others, less courageous, ran madly along the river bank, yelping dolefully as they went.

The stag was within a short distance of the islet occupied by the spectators of his agony, when the wolves which had remained on the shore suddenly hushed their cries and fled away in great haste.

"Eh! What does that mean?" exclaimed Pepe. "What has frightened them like this?"

He had no sooner asked the question than a sight which became visible to him all at once supplied the answer.

“Crouch down, crouch down, for God’s sake! behind the bushes,” said he, setting the example; “the Indians are in chase also.”

And in fact other more terrible hunters appeared in their turn on the vast arena, free to all comers in these unowned deserts.

A dozen of those wild horses which the Canadian and Pepe had watched while they were drinking, were galloping madly on the plain. Some Indian horsemen, mounted bareback on their steeds, with their knees almost on a level with their chins, so as to give them greater freedom of action, were bounding after the frightened animals. At first only three Indians were visible; but, one after another, nearly a score emerged above

the horizon. Some were armed with spears, others were whirling their lassos of braided leather, and all were yelling in the fashion by which they express either joy or anger.

Pepe turned a questioning glance on the Canadian, as if to inquire whether he had counted on these terrible adventures to endear their adventurous career to Fabian. For the first time at a similar moment the face of the fearless hunter became deadly pale. A mournful, but eloquent, look was Redwood's silent reply to the mute interrogation of the Spaniard.

“That means,” thought Pepe, “that too fond an affection in the heart of the bravest man makes him tremble for him whom he loves more than his own life, and that adventurers like ourselves ought to have no ties in this world. There is Redwood growing as weak as a woman.”

Still, it was almost certain that not even the trained eyes of the Indians could penetrate the mystery of their retreat. When the first alarm had passed off, the three hunters watched the manoeuvres of the enemy with greater coolness.

For yet a moment the savage riders continued to pursue the flying horses. The numberless obstacles encountered on these plains, which seem so level, the ravines, the hillocks, the sharp-thorned cactus, could not stop them. Without deigning to slacken their speed or go around these impediments, the Indian warriors leaped their horses over them with fearless audacity. Though a bold rider himself, Fabian watched with enthusiasm the astonishing agility of these intrepid horsemen; but the precautions the three friends were obliged to take to keep out of sight of the Indians made them lose

a part of the imposing and terrible spectacle of a chase of which they might themselves become the object.

These vast savannas, lately so deserted, had suddenly become a scene of tumult and confusion. The stag, at bay and forced to go ashore again, was still flying like the wind, while the wolves, animated by their efforts, pursued him howling. The wild horses galloped ahead of the Indians, whose yells were not surpassed by those of the ravenous beasts, describing wide circles in order to escape the lance and lasso. A thousand echoes repeated the screams of the wolves and the confused and fearful yells of the Apaches.

At sight of Fabian, whose glowing eyes were following all these tumultuous manœuvres without seeming to dread the dangers which he was braving for the first time,

Redwood sought in vain for that confidence in himself which had brought him safe and sound out of perils more threatening than the unlikely one of being discovered.

“Ah!” he began, “these are scenes which dwellers in cities will never see; it is only in the wilderness they are met with.”

But his voice trembled in spite of him, and he ceased speaking; for he felt that he would have given a year of his life if Fabian were not there to see them. A more painful subject of apprehension speedily increased his anguish.

Without changing its aspect the scene became more solemn; a new actor, and an actor whose part was to be short but terrible, had just entered it. This was a horseman whose costume caused the three friends to recognize him with a shudder as a white man, a Christian like themselves.

This unfortunate, suddenly discovered in one of the evolutions of the Indian chase, had in his turn become the object of an exclusive pursuit. The wild horses, the wolves, the stag, had vanished in the distant fog. Nothing remained but the score of Indian hunters scattered at all points of the immense circle whose center was occupied by the white horseman. For a moment he was seen to cast a glance of despair and anguish on every side. But, except in the direction of the river, the Indians were everywhere. Then he must fly in that direction, and he quickly turned his horse toward the opening bordered by trees, which was opposite the islet.

But the moment in which he had remained undecided had been long enough for the Indians to come closer together.

“Whatever he does, the poor fellow is

lost," said Redwood; "it is too late now to cross the river."

"Redwood, Pepe!" cried Fabian, "if we can save a Christian, shall we let his throat be cut before our eyes?"

Pepe looked inquiringly at Redwood.

"I am answerable for your life before God," said the Canadian, solemnly; "I could not answer for it if we were discovered; we are but three against twenty. The life of three men, yours especially, Fabian, is more precious than that of one; we must leave this poor fellow to his destiny."

"But intrenched as we are?" persisted Fabian, generously.

"Intrenched as we are!" went on Redwood; "do you call this frail barrier of osiers, arrowheads and reeds an intrenchment? Do you fancy that these leaves could protect us from bullets? And then there are

twenty of these Indians now; if a bullet from one of our rifles should lay out one of those red devils, you would presently see a hundred instead of twenty; may God forgive my hard-heartedness, but it is necessary."

Fabian yielded to this final reasoning. Meanwhile the white horseman was fleeing like a man who has no resource but the swiftness of his steed. He came toward the opening in the trees opposite the floating island. The hiding men could see the agonized expression of his face. He was not more than twenty paces from the river when the lasso of an Indian caught him, and the unhappy man, violently lifted from the saddle, lost his balance and was flung on the sand.

CHAPTER III.

DISCOVERED!

AFTER the yell of triumphant joy which succeeded the capture and fall of the unfortunate white horseman, there was a moment of profound silence. The men on the island exchanged a glance of pity and consternation.

“Thanks be to God!” said Fabian, “they have not killed him.”

The prisoner, in fact, rose to his feet, covered with bruises from his fall, and one of the Apaches removed the lasso, which still confined him. Redwood and Pepe shook their heads.

“So much the worse for him,” said the Spaniard, “for if he suffers no more just

now, the silence maintained by these Indians is a sign that every one of them is considering what sort of torture he will inflict upon him. They prefer the capture of a white man to that of a whole troop of the wild horses they were chasing.”

The Indians, remaining on their horses, surrounded the prisoner, who, casting a desperate glance around him, saw nothing but bronze faces and muscles in repose. Then the Apaches began to deliberate amongst themselves.

Meanwhile the Indian who seemed to be the chief of the band, and whose darker color and the black plumes of his head-dress distinguished him from the other warriors, sprang from his horse as if he disdained this idle deliberation, because a more serious matter demanded attention. Throwing the bridle to one of the band, who re-

ceived it with respect, the chief came straight toward the islet. On reaching the bank he seemed to be looking for traces on the sand.

Redwood's heart began to beat with violence, for this manoeuver of the Indian betrayed some suspicions of their position.

"That dog," said he in an undertone to Pepe, "smells fresh meat, like the ogre in our fairy tales."

"*Quien sabe?*"* replied the Spaniard, in a phrase which in his country answers for everything.

But the sand, trodden a thousand times by the hoofs of the wild horses which had been drinking at the river, betrayed no human traces to the Indian's eyes. Then he went farther up stream, still searching.

"The demon has some suspicion," said Redwood, "and in that case he will find the

* Who knows?

tracks we left behind us half-a-mile from here when we entered the river-bed to reach this islet. I kept telling you, Pepe," continued the Canadian, with a certain bitterness, "that we ought to have entered two miles farther up; but neither you nor Fabian were willing, and, like a fool, I gave way to your advice."

As he said these words the worthy Canadian thumped his breast with an energy which would have broken the walls of the stomach in any ordinary human body.

During this time the deliberation over the fate of the prisoner had doubtless come to an end, for shouts of joy suddenly greeted a proposition made by one of the Indians. But it was necessary to wait for the return and the approval of the chief.

The latter had continued his search along the bank as he went up the River Gila.

When he reached the spot where Redwood and his two companions had quitted the sand to enter the river and gain the islet which served for their retreat, he had no further doubt of the presence of the three white men, and leisurely returned to his band. He listened gravely to the result of the deliberations of the Indians, and made a brief reply, motioning his warriors to wait for him; then, with the same measured tread, he advanced to the bank of the river, after having given a short order to five of his riders, who set off at a gallop to execute it.

The water-plants spread their leaves in the sunshine; the wind ruffled the flexible osiers on the borders of the islet apparently as uninhabited as in the days when the stream flowed merely for the birds of the air and the buffaloes and wild horses of the

prairies. No one but an Indian could have failed to be deceived by this apparent calm.

The chief made a speaking-trumpet of his hand, and shouted in a language half Indian, half Spanish :

“The white warriors of the North may show themselves ; Black Bird is their friend.”

At these words, which the wind brought to the ears of Redwood and his two companions, the Canadian gave the arm of the Spanish hunter a close pressure. Redwood and Pepe had understood the mixed dialect of the Indian.

“What answer shall we make that hound?” said he.

“None,” replied Pepe, laconically.

The breeze which murmured through the river reeds was, in fact, the sole reply which the Indian obtained.

Black Bird spoke again :

“The eagle may conceal his track through the air from the eye of an Apache, the salmon going up the cataracts may not leave a furrow behind him; but a white man who crosses the deserts is neither an eagle nor a salmon.”

“Nor a goose, either,” muttered Pepe the Sluggard, “and only a goose would betray himself by trying to sing.”

The Indian listened once more; but the Spaniard's response was not calculated to reach his ear.

“The white warriors of the North,” resumed Black Bird, without becoming discouraged, “are only *three*,” and he emphasized this word to make his hearers comprehend that he knew their numbers as well as their position; “only three against twenty, and the red warriors pledge their word to treat them as friends and allies.”

“ Ah!” said the Canadian to Pepe, “ for what treachery has the Indian need of us?”

“ Let him tell us and then we shall know,” replied Pepe; “ he has not finished yet, or I am much mistaken.”

“ When the white warriors understand the intentions of Black Bird they will come out of their hiding-place,” continued the Apache chief, “ and they are going to learn them: the white men of the North are the enemies of those of the South; their language and their God are different. The Apaches have a whole camp of Southern warriors in their grasp. If the Northern warriors will join their rifle guns to those of the Indians, they will share with them the scalps, the treasures, the horses of the men of the South, and the Indians and the white men will dance around the corpses of their enemies and the ashes of their camp.”

Redwood and Pepe looked at each other in astonishment. Fabian, thanks to their explanation, also understood that they were being offered an alliance which their consciences condemned; and the lightnings of their eyes, the scornful swelling of their nostrils proved that the noble trio were of one mind on this subject, to perish rather than aid the Indians to triumph even over their deadly enemies.

“Do you understand the miscreant?” said Redwood, carried away by his indignation and using a metaphor proper to the Indian tongue; “he mistakes jaguars for jackals. Ah! if Fabian were not here,” he added in a whisper, “the bullet of a good rifle would carry my reply.”

The Indian, however, remained quite certain of the presence of the hunters in the islet; still, he began to lose patience, for the

orders of the chiefs of the council were peremptory.

“The buffalo of the prairies,” he resumed, “is not easier to follow than the trace of the white man. The trace of the buffalo indicates to an Indian its age, its plumpness or its meagerness, the place it is going to and the time when it passed by. Behind the reeds of the floating islet there is a man as strong as a bison, taller than the longest rifle; he has with him a man of mixed blood, both Northern and Southern, and a young warrior of pure Southern blood; but the alliance of the two last with the first shows that they are the enemies of the Southern whites, for the weaker seek the friendship of those who are stronger and always espouse their cause.”

“The sagacity of those dogs is admirable,” said Redwood to Pepe.

“You think so because it flatters you,” replied Pepe, whose self-love seemed wounded.

“I am waiting for the answer of the whites,” went on Black Bird, and he listened. “I hear nothing,” he resumed, “but the river which murmurs and the wind which says to me for them: The whites imagine a thousand errors; they think that the Indian’s eyes are in the back of his head, that the trace of the bison is invisible, that the reeds are impervious to bullets. Black Bird and his warriors laugh at what the wind says to him.”

“There it is at last!” said Pepe; “the Indian is speaking his real language; he is not very squeamish in seeking allies like us.”

“Ah!” exclaimed the Canadian sorrowfully, “if we had entered two miles further up the river!”

“A friend disdained,” went on the Indian sententiously, “becomes a terrible enemy.”

“We say something like that at home,” added Pepe, in an undertone:

“*Ni pastel recalentado,
Ni amigo reconciliado.*”*

At the same time Black Bird signed the captive to approach him. The latter came forward; the chief pointed out to him with his finger an open space between two clumps of osier on the islet.

“The rifle of the white face,”—this was not an allusion to the livid pallor of the unhappy man’s countenance, but a customary designation of the color of the white man’s skin,—“can it send a bullet into the space separating those two tall plants yonder?”

But the prisoner had comprehended noth-

* “Neither a warmed-over pie,
Nor a reconciled friend.”

ing but the little Spanish mingled with the Indian dialect, and he remained silent and trembling.

Thereupon Black Bird said a few words to one of his warriors, who placed in the hands of the white man the rifle they had seized, and then he succeeded in making the prisoner understand by means of gestures what he expected of him. The poor wretch took aim; but his limbs quaked with terror, and his rifle wavered in his hands from right to left, from top to bottom.

“The poor fellow will not even touch the islet,” said Pepe, unconcernedly; “and if the Indian has no other means of making us speak, not a word will I say until tomorrow.”

The white fired, and, in fact, the bullet from the badly handled rifle sank whistling into the water a few inches away from the

islet. Black Bird made a scornful gesture, then turned and gazed intently on every side.

“Yes,” said Pepe, “look for powder and bullets among the lances and lassos of your warriors.”

As he was ending this consoling reflection, the five riders who had been sent away by the chief returned on their newly caparisoned horses, themselves armed for the combat with rifles or with quivers filled with arrows. They had been to resume the weapons they had laid aside in order to chase the wild horses with greater freedom. Five other warriors immediately departed in their turn.

“That spoils it,” said Redwood, sadly.

“Suppose we should make an attack while there are only fifteen of them,” said Pepe.

“No,” replied the Canadian, “let us re-

main quiet and silent; the Indian is still doubtful whether we are here."

"As you like," and Pepe continued to peer through the trunks of the trees.

The Indian chief had taken up a rifle and once more advanced to the river bank.

"Black Bird's hands do not tremble like a reed shaken by the wind," said the Indian, lifting the rifle and holding its barrel turned toward the islet, motionless and firm in his vigorous hands. "But before firing," he went on, "the Indian will await an answer from the concealed whites and count one hundred."

"Place yourself behind me, Fabian," said Redwood.

"I shall stay here," said Fabian, with a determined look. "I am younger, and I ought to expose myself for you."

"Child," said the Canadian, "do you not

see that my body is bigger than yours by six inches on every side, and that would give the Indian's bullet a double chance."

Without disturbing a single osier of the green fringe which they formed around the islet, the Canadian moved forward and kneeled down in front of Fabian.

"Let him do as he pleases, Fabian," said Pepe, tranquilly. "No man ever had a nobler shield than this giant's heart, which only beats with fear for you."

The Indian chief, the rifle resting on his hand, listened while counting; but, with the exception of the water, murmuring as it bent the reeds at his feet and the breeze sighing above the river, profound silence reigned far and near.

Black Bird fired, and fragments of the arrowheads flew into the air; but, kneeling one behind the other, the three hunters did

not present a very large target, and the bullet whistled by them at some distance.

Black Bird allowed a minute to elapse, then shouted again in a loud voice :

“The Indian was deceived; he admits his mistake. He will go and look elsewhere for the white warriors.”

“Tell that to the marines,” said Pepe; “the hound is surer than ever he was. The tempter is going to let us alone for a while, until he has got through with that poor fellow yonder, which will not take long, for the torture of a white man is a sight which an Indian is always in a hurry to enjoy.”

“But then will it not be time,” exclaimed Fabian, “to make some effort in favor of that wretch who is expecting a frightful death?”

Redwood in his turn interrogated his companion by a glance, then he replied :

“We do not say no; nevertheless, I hope that some unexpected circumstance may come to our assistance. Whatever Pepe may say, this Indian may still doubt, while, if we show ourselves, he will doubt no longer.”

The old man took a thoughtful attitude.

“To accept an alliance with these devils would be an unworthy piece of cowardice.”

“What is to be done? What is to be done?” added the Canadian, sorrowfully.

Still another fear tormented him. He had seen Fabian in danger when his blood boiled with the heat of passion. But did the boy possess the cool courage which faces death unspurred by anger? Had he that stoic resignation of which the Spaniard and himself had given so many proofs? The Canadian resorted to a harsh test.

“Listen, Fabian,” said he; “can I make you understand the language of a man?”

Will not your heart be frozen by the words transmitted to it through your ears?"

"Why should you doubt my courage?" answered Fabian, simply, in a tone of soft reproach. "Whatever you may say I will listen to without blenching; whatever you may do, I will do it also without trembling."

"Fabian is speaking truth, Pepe," cried the Canadian. "See how his eye proudly contradicts the simplicity of his language."

And in the enthusiasm of his joy he clasped Fabian in his arms; then he resumed speaking with a certain solemnity:

"Three men never found themselves in a position more dangerous than ours. Our enemies outnumber us seven to one. Should each of us kill seven warriors, there would still remain as many as ourselves."

"We have done as much before," interrupted Pepe.

“Well! We will do it again,” exclaimed Fabian.

The Canadian’s eyes shone with affectionate pride.

“Now,” said he, “whatever happens, we shall never part again. God will do the rest, and we will try to save that unfortunate man.”

“To work then!” cried Fabian.

“Not yet, not yet, my child; let us first see what those red devils are going to do with their prisoner.”

CHAPTER IV.

RUNNING THE GAUNTLET.

WHILE this dialogue was going on, the Indians had led the captive, though leaving him free use of his limbs. They had formed a straight line within two gunshots of the shore. The white man was some distance in front of this line of tormentors.

“I see what they are going to do,” said Redwood, “as well as if I had assisted at their deliberations. They mean to find out whether that poor fellow’s legs are stronger than his hands. The demons intend to give themselves the pleasure of a chase.”

“How is that?” said Fabian.

“They will give their captive a little advantage in distance, and, at a given signal,

he will make his spring forward. Then the Indians will run after him, lance or tomahawk in hand. If the white man's legs are agile, he will reach the river first, and we will shout to him to swim over to us. A few rifle shots will protect him, and he will reach the islet safe and sound. The rest will be our affair. But if terror paralyzes his legs, as it made his hand tremble just now, the first Indian that catches up to him will either break his head with the blow of a tomahawk or run him through with a lance. In any case, we will do our best."

At this moment the five Indians who had gone away returned, armed from head to foot like those who had preceded them. The newcomers joined these latter.

While clutching his rifle with violence, Fabian looked with profound compassion at the unfortunate white man, who, with hag-

gard eyes and features convulsed with terror, was waiting in horrible anguish for the signal to be given by the Indian chief. It was a fearful moment, for the man-hunt was about to begin.

In the islet as well as on the plain all were watching for this moment with deep anxiety, when Black Bird suddenly made a sign to defer for an instant the opening of this frightful chase. It was a gesture easy to comprehend. With one finger he pointed to the bare feet of his warriors; then he designated in the same way the boots of Cordova leather which protected those of the white. The latter sat down on the sand and took them off, slowly and with hesitation, perhaps to gain a few more seconds.

“The dogs, the devils!” exclaimed Fabian.

But Redwood laid his hand upon the boy's mouth.

“Be quiet,” said he; “do not, by betraying yourself too soon, deprive that poor wretch of his last chance of life—our protection when he comes within gunshot.”

Fabian comprehended, and closed his eyes so as not to see the horrible scene about to be enacted.

At last the white man was erect for the second time, and the Indians, with one bare foot thrust out in front, devoured him with their eyes. Black Bird clapped his hands.

The yells which followed this signal could be compared to nothing but the roaring of a pack of jaguars following a herd of deer. The unhappy captive seemed to have the legs of a stag, but his pursuers appeared to bound after him like tigers on the hunt.

Thanks to the start given him, the captive crossed safely a part of the distance lying between him and the river. But the

stones, which wounded his feet, and the prickly points of the Indian fig, which pierced them, soon made him stagger. Still, he was some distance ahead, when one of the Indians reached him by a bound and thrust furiously at him with his lance. The weapon passed between the body and one arm of the victim, and the Indian, losing his balance by the force of his mistrust, measured his length on the sand. For an instant the white man seemed to hesitate about picking up the lance dropped by the Indian in his fall. Then the instinct of self-preservation made him go on. But that brief hesitation was his ruin.

The three hunters, each with his rifle at his shoulder, anxiously watched the various chances of this contest of a single man against a score of enemies. All of a sudden a hatchet glittered over the head of the vic-

tim, who, in his turn, fell to the ground, and was dragged by the impetus of his fall almost to the river's edge.

The Canadian was on the point of firing; nothing but the fear of killing him whom he wished to defend arrested his hand upon the trigger. For a moment, a single moment, the wind opened a clear space in the cloud of dust. Redwood fired, but too late; the Indian who fell under the hunter's bullet was brandishing in his hand the bloody scalp of the wretched captive who lay mutilated on the bank.

To this unexpected occurrence, followed by a war-cry from both the Canadian and the Spaniard, the yells of the Indians replied in chorus. The Apaches drew back from him who now seemed a mere corpse. Yet, presently, this corpse was seen to rise all bleeding, his skull laid bare, move a step

or two forward, and then fall back exhausted, blinded by his own blood, which flowed in streams.

The Canadian hunter shuddered with indignation.

“Oh!” said he, “if there is a spark of life in him, if he is only scalped, we will save him yet, for one does not die of that! I call God to witness.”

As the Canadian ended this generous oath, wrung from him by indignation, a suppliant voice seemed to reach his ear.

“Is not the poor fellow calling for assistance?” said he. And for the first time his head rose above the fringe of osiers.

At sight of the fox-skin cap which covered the head of the giant, and of the long and heavy rifle which his hand seemed to lift as if it were a willow wand, the Apaches recognized one of their formidable Northern

enemies, and they all fell back in amazement at this sudden apparition. The hunter looked steadily and firmly at the river bank. He saw the unlucky victim, who cried to him for assistance in a feeble voice and stretched out his trembling hands.

The Indian who had scalped him still held in his hands, contracted in death, the hair of the white warrior.

At this terrible sight the Canadian drew up his gigantic figure to its full height:

“File firing now, against those hounds,” said he, “and remember that they must not take you alive.”

While saying these words Redwood resolutely entered the river. Any other man would have been covered by it up to the head; but both shoulders of the Canadian rose above the water level. His rifle held the enemies respectful.

“Don’t fire until I have done so,” said Pepe to Fabian; “my hand is surer than yours, and my Kentucky rifle will carry twice as far as that Liège gun of yours. But, in any case, do as I do, and keep your weapon in position. If one of those dogs makes a movement, leave it to me to prevent him from annoying you.”

The Spaniard kept his brilliant eyes on their enemies, who maintained their distance, threatening each of the Apaches in turn with the barrel of his rifle, ready to fire at the least sign of hostility on their part.

Meanwhile the Canadian was still moving forward, the water gradually growing shallower around him, when an Indian raised his rifle to fire at the intrepid hunter. An explosion prevented him, and the Indian let his weapon fall on the sand, and fell himself upon his face.

“Your turn, Fabian,” said Pepe, throwing himself down on his back, American fashion, to reload his rifle.

Fabian pressed the trigger in his turn; but his aim was less certain, and his gun of shorter range, and, though his bullet forced a cry of rage from the Indian at whom he had fired, it did not bring him down. Several arrows flew circling around the Canadian, but Redwood, with undaunted coolness, bent down to let them pass over or thrust them away with his hand, and, as he stepped ashore, Pepe had reloaded his rifle and was ready to fire a second time. There was a moment of hesitation on the part of the Indians, and the hunter availed himself of it to pick up the body.

The poor wretch, clinging to his shoulders, had the presence of mind to leave his deliverer's arms at liberty, and the Canadian,

laden with his burden, again entered the river, but backwards. Redwood's rifle spoke but once, and an Indian responded to the explosion by a death-cry. In a word, this lion-like retreat daunted the savages, and within a few minutes the victorious Redwood deposited on the sand of the islet the almost fainting man.

“There are three of them out of the running,” said the giant. “We shall have a truce of several minutes. Well, Fabian, do you see the advantage of file firing? The rascals have had enough for a quarter of an hour. This is not bad for your beginning, and I can assure you that when you have a Kentucky rifle like ours you will be a very good marksman.”

The momentary success he had obtained seemed to have made the Canadian forget his gloomy thoughts, and addressing himself

to the scalped man, who was groaning dolefully, he said:

“We arrived too late to save the skin of your head, my lad, but console yourself, it is no great matter. I have many a friend in the same predicament who enjoys very good health notwithstanding; it saves a lot of time in combing one’s hair, and that is all. Your life is safe for the moment, and that is the essential thing, and now we are going to try to keep it so.”

Some rags torn from the clothing of the poor man served to keep in position on his skull a large compress of willow leaves, crushed and thoroughly moistened with water. This first dressing concealed the hideous wound. Afterwards the face of the Mexican, which was all bloody, was well washed.

“You see,” said the Canadian, who con-

stantly cherished the idea of keeping Fabian with him, "it is necessary that you should learn the customs of the wilderness and Indian ways. The scoundrels, who know, at the expense of three of their number, what sort of wood we warm ourselves by, have gone to plan some trick by which they may effect what they were not able to do by force."

The desert had, in fact, resumed its gloomy immobility, the aspens murmured as the evening breeze disturbed them, and beneath the sinking sun the waters of the river began to be tinted with more vivid colors. Beyond the space between the trees, the plain, so noisy a while since, was now merely an immense sheet of sand, where nothing broke the silence and the solitude.

"Well, what do you think of it, Pepe? There are only seventeen of them now," said the Canadian, in a tone of artless triumph.

“If there are only seventeen,” returned Pepe, “I don’t say but what we may manage it; but if they receive reinforcements?”

“It’s a chance to run, a terrible chance, but our lives are in the hands of God,” replied Redwood, brought sadly back to his fears on account of Fabian.

The Canadian once more refreshed the inflamed skull of the wounded man by a fresh application of cool water, and the poor fellow, relieved for the moment and then weakened by his emotions and the loss of blood, fell into an almost lethargic slumber.

“Now,” said the Canadian, “let us think of our own affairs, and try to raise a rampart more bullet or arrow proof than this moving fringe of reeds and leaves. Did you count how many rifles the Indians had?”

“Seven, if I do not mistake,” answered Pepe.

“Then there are ten of them who are not so much to be dreaded. You see, the scoundrels cannot attack us on this raft, neither to right or left, in following the current. All we have to look out for is an attack from the two banks, for they may have gone around to cross the river and take us between two fires.”

That side of the islet which faced the bank on which the Indians had shown themselves was sufficiently protected by enormous roots standing up like *chevaux de frise* or the stakes of an intrenchment; but the side on which the attack would probably be renewed was defended by nothing but a thick screen of rushes and young osiers.

Thanks to the unusual strength of his arms, the Canadian, assisted by Pepe, was able to wrench from the two ends of the islet which faced the current of the stream some

large dry branches and some trunks of trees but recently stranded there. A few minutes sufficed these skilled hunters to strengthen the feeble and most threatened side with a rude but strong intrenchment which might save the defenders of the islet from more than one deadly attack.

“Do you see, Fabian,” said Redwood, “you are as safe behind these tree-trunks as if you were in a stone fortress. You will only be exposed to bullets which may come from the tree-tops on the shore, but I will manage so that not one of those devils shall ever get up so high.”

The Canadian rubbed his hands with satisfaction at having erected a sufficient barrier between Fabian and death, and showed him his station behind the spot which was best intrenched.

CHAPTER V.

THE STRATAGEM.

“HAVE you noticed,” asked Redwood of Pepe, “that the islet trembled to its very base every time we made an effort to break a branch or get out a block of wood?”

“Yes,” said Pepe; “one would have thought it was going to tear itself from its foundations to follow the current of the river.”

But the two hunters felt that the moment of danger was approaching, and that the truce was about to be followed by a long and deadly struggle.

The Canadian advised his two companions to be sparing of their ammunition; he gave Fabian some instructions about taking a

truer aim; he gave the Spaniard's hand a trembling clasp, who silently returned it, and then he pressed Fabian to his breast with anxious affection. This tribute once rendered to human feeling, the three defenders of the island returned each to his post with a stoicism which an Indian could not have surpassed.

Some minutes elapsed, during which the labored breathing of the wounded man and the rippling of the water against the raft which blocked its passage were the only sounds that broke the profound silence of nature at the hour of sunset. The surface of the river, the tops of the aspens on the river bank, the banks themselves and their rushes, nothing escaped the attentive scrutiny of the hunters at the moment when night was quickly falling with its train of ambushes.

“This is the hour when the demons of darkness are about to spread their snares,” said Redwood, gravely; “the hour when these human tigers prowl in search of their prey. It is of them the Scripture speaks.”

No one replied to this remark of the Canadian, which was rather a thought expressed aloud than a warning to them to be watchful.

Meanwhile the shadows gradually deepened. The bushes on the river bank began to assume the fantastic shapes given to objects in a landscape by the uncertain glimmering of twilight.

The green of the trees took on a glaze of dark tones; but habit had given the two hunters, the Canadian and the Spaniard, eyes as piercing as those of the Indians, and the vigilance they exerted allowed nothing to escape their trained senses.

“Pepe,” resumed the hunter, in a much lower tone, as if the expected danger had suddenly presented itself, “does it not seem to you that yonder bush,” and he pointed between the rushes at a clump of osiers, “has changed its shape and become larger?”

“Yes,” replied the Spaniard, “the bush has changed its shape.”

“Look, Fabian,” continued the Canadian, “your eyes are as sharp as mine were at your age. Does it seem to you that there are more leaves on the left extremity of that clump of osiers than are fed by sap from its roots?”

The young man pushed the rushes gently aside and looked attentively at the spot indicated by Redwood.

“I should judge so,” he said, “but—”

He broke off to look at a point some distance from there.

“ Well,” asked the Canadian, “ do you see something else?”

“ I perceive,” said Fabian, “ between that willow and that aspen, ten paces from the clump of osier, a bush which was certainly not there an hour ago.”

“ Ah!” said the Canadian, “ that is what it is to live remote from cities ; the least details of the landscape imprint themselves on the memory and become precious indications ; you were born for a hunter’s life, Fabian.”

Pepe raised his rifle in the direction of the bush.

“ Pepe comprehends at half a word,” said Redwood. “ He knows as I do that the Indians have employed their time in cutting those branches and making portable shelters of them ; but, to tell the truth, they have a trifle too much contempt for white men,

two of whom could teach them tricks they do not know. Leave that bush to Fabian," went on the Canadian, addressing Pepe. "It will be an easy target for him; for your part, fire on those branches where the leaves are beginning to droop. The Indian is behind them. At the center, at the center, Fabian," he abruptly ended.

Two shots parted at the same time from the islet in such a way as to seem but one. The pretended bush sank down, but not without giving the two hunters a glimpse of a red body writhing behind the leaves, and the added branches of the other clump of osiers shook convulsively.

Pepe, Fabian and Redwood had flung themselves down on their backs, the two first in order to reload their rifles, the third ready to make use of his own weapon.

A discharge of bullets whistled over the

heads of the hunters and broke off leaves and small branches, which scattered as they fell upon them, the war-cry of the Indians taken by surprise reaching their ears.

“Unless I mistake, there are only fifteen of them now,” exclaimed the Canadian, as he broke into five pieces a little dry branch and stuck them into the ground; “it is good to keep an account of their dead.”

Redwood rose from his horizontal position to his knees.

“Attention, children,” said he, “I see the leaves of an aspen shaking over yonder, and it is certainly not the wind that moves them. No doubt it is one of those rascals who is climbing or has climbed to the top.”

Just then a bullet came to make a hole in one of the trunks of which the raft was composed and to prove that the hunter had guessed correctly.

“The deuce! we must be tricky and force the Indian to show himself.”

As he said these words he took off his cap and vest and put them in plain sight between the interstices of the branches. Fabian was watching him attentively.

“If I had a white soldier in front of me,” said Redwood, “I would station myself beside my vest, for the soldier would aim at that; dealing with an Indian I would put myself behind it, for the redskin would not make that blunder, but would aim at one side. Lie down, Fabian, and you, too, Pepe, and let me act; within a minute you will hear one of their balls whistle to right or left of the target I have set up for them.”

The Canadian kneeled down behind his vest, and made ready to fire on the aspen. His conjecture proved correct. In less time than he had mentioned, the Indian's bullets

cut off the leaves on both sides of the cap and vest, but without touching either the Canadian or his companions.

“Ah!” cried Redwood, “there are whites who can beat the Indians with their own weapons. Stick another piece of wood in the ground, Fabian, we are going to have an enemy the less.”

The hunter fired at one of the forks of the aspen where he saw a red tint which, to any other eye, would have looked like that of an autumnal leaf, and the explosion was still rumbling when an Indian tumbled from branch to branch like an apple which a hailstone has detached from its stem.

At this clever manoeuver of the Canadian savage yells broke out with such fury that one would have needed muscles of steel not to shudder with fright. Even the wounded man, who had not been awakened by the re-

peated firing, momentarily emerged from his stupor to mutter in a trembling voice :

“ Virgin of the Seven Sorrows ! Does it not sound like a band of tigers roaring in the shadows ? Holy Virgin ! have pity on me ! ”

“ It would be better to thank her,” interrupted the Canadian ; “ the scoundrels may deceive a novice like you by whooping in succession, but not an old woodsman. Did you never hear jackals in the forest roaring and replying to one another as if there were a hundred of them, when often there are not more than three or four ? The Indians imitate the jackals ; I’ll answer for it that there are not now more than a dozen behind those trees. Ah ! if I could induce them to cross the water, not one of them would go back to his village to tell the tale of their disaster.”

As if a sudden idea had crossed his mind, Redwood made his companions lie down on their backs. The raised edges of the island and the tree trunks were protection enough so long as they were level with the ground.

“We are safe while we are down like this,” said he; “the only thing is to keep your eyes on the summit of the trees; it is the only place from which they can reach us. Do not fire except in case we see some of them climb the willows and remain stationary. The rascals do not want to return without our scalps, and they will decide on coming to us.”

This resolve of the hunter seemed to have been inspired by Heaven, for they had scarcely lain down on the ground before a shower of bullets and arrows cut into and tore through the belt of rushes and broke the branches behind which they had been

standing a moment earlier; but the projectiles, having been launched horizontally, could not reach them. The Canadian quickly pulled down his cap and vest, as if he had himself fallen under the blows of his enemies, and profound silence prevailed in the islet after this apparently deadly discharge.

Cries of triumph greeted this silence, disturbed again, however, in another instant by a new discharge. But this time, likewise, the islet remained as silent and gloomy as death.

“Is not that one of the dogs climbing up the willow again?” asked Pepe.

“Yes; but let us stand his fire without budging any more than if we were dead men. It is a chance to run. Then he will go and tell his companions that he counted the corpses of the pale faces on the ground.”

In spite of the danger of this stratagem, Redwood's proposal was accepted, and each remained motionless, but watching with anxiety all the manoeuvres of the Indian. The red warrior hoisted himself from branch to branch with extreme precaution until he was high enough to command a view of the interior of the floating island.

There was still light enough to see every movement of the Indian, who was not completely hidden by the foliage. Attaining at last the height desired, the Indian squatted on a large branch and then carefully put out his head. The sight of the corpses on the ground did not seem to surprise him. Still, he may have suspected some trick, for, with an audacity which the example of one of his companions, killed on that very tree, was not calculated to encourage, the Apache showed himself completely and pointed his rifle in

the direction of the islet. His eye, like that of a snake, seemed trying to fascinate his enemies; suddenly he raised the barrel of his weapon in the air, took aim once more, and then repeated the same manoeuver several times in succession. But the hunters moved no more than if they had really been corpses. Then the Indian gave a yell of triumph.

“The shark is biting at the hook,” said Redwood.

“I shall recognize that son of a dog,” remarked Pepe, in his turn, “and if I do not pay him back the bad turn he has given me, it will be because the bullet he is going to send over here prevents me.”

“It is Black Bird,” returned Redwood; “he is brave and prudent, too, as a chief should be.”

Once more the Indian directed the barrel of his rifle toward the bodies which seemed

already dead; he took aim as calmly as a marksman contesting a prize at a village feast, and finally concluded to fire. At the same instant a splinter detached by the bullet from a tree trunk within two lines from the Spaniard's head, grazed his forehead. Pepe remained as still as the dead wood against which he rested, and contented himself with saying:

“Scoundrelly Black Bird, I'll settle your account before long.”

Drops of blood had sprinkled the Canadian's face.

“Is any one wounded?” he asked, in a trembling voice.

“It's nothing but a scratch,” responded Pepe.

“God be praised!”

The Indian gave another shout of gladness and got down from the tree.

The three hunters breathed again.

Meanwhile their trick was not yet completely successful. Some doubts must still have remained in the minds of the Indians, for a long and solemn silence succeeded the Apache's last fire.

The sun set, a short twilight diffused a dull hue over all the scene, night came, and the moon shone above the river without the red warriors giving any sign of life.

"Our scalps tempt them, but they are still rather doubtful about coming for the day," said Pepe, repressing a yawn.

"Patience," replied the Canadian. "Indians are like vultures, which do not venture to tear the body of a dead man until it has begun to decay, but finally conclude to do so. - The Apaches will act like vultures. Now let us resume our position behind the rushes."

The hunters did so with great caution, keeping one knee to the ground, and began anew to watch the movements of the Apaches. For an instant the opposite bank seemed deserted; then presently an Indian showed himself, but cautiously, to tempt the patience of the enemy in case his inactivity should conceal some ruse; another warrior joined him, and both approached the bank with growing confidence; in the end, the Canadian counted ten of them, their war-paint plainly visible in the moonlight.

“The Indians, if I know anything about them, are going to cross the river one behind the other,” said Redwood; “Fabian, you will take aim at the first one, Pepe in the middle, and I at the next to the last. In that way they can only approach us at a distance from each other, and we shall have a better chance. It will be a hand-to-hand

fight, Fabian, my child; while Pepe and I await them, knife in hand, all you will have to do is to reload our weapons and pass them to us. By the memory of your mother, I forbid you to measure your strength against these dogs with a knife."

As the Canadian was concluding this advice, a tall warrior entered the river, and the moon shone successively upon nine others. All moved forward with such precaution that not a sound betrayed their progress. One might have fancied them ghostly warriors, returning from the land of spirits, and marching silently upon the waters.

To the Indians death seemed to hover above the islet surrounded by silent shadows, for the hunters even held their breath; and yet the Apaches advanced with the utmost precaution. He who marched at the head of the line had reached a spot where the water

began to grow deeper. This was Black Bird, and the last of his band had but just left the opposite bank. The moment had come to execute the orders of the Canadian.

But as Fabian was about to fire on the Indian chief, greatly to the regret of Pepe, who had a score to settle with him, Black Bird, whether foreboding some danger or because a ray of moonlight falling upon the gun-barrel of one of the hunters had warned him, suddenly dived and disappeared beneath the water.

“Fire!” exclaimed Redwood.

At the same moment the Indian who closed the line fell into the river, never to rise again; two others, aimed at by Fabian and the Spaniard almost at their leisure, struggled for a few instants in the middle of the stream, which soon dragged them along motionless.

CHAPTER VI.

THE ENEMY REINFORCED.

PEPE and the Canadian had promptly thrown down their rifles behind them so that Fabian could reload them, as had been agreed on, and now they were standing, knife in hand, on the edge of the islet, awaiting the deadly struggle.

“There are still seven of the Apaches,” shouted the Canadian, in a voice of thunder, anxious to have the thing done with, and feeling all his antipathy for the Indians reviving at sight of them. “Dare they come and take the scalps of the two whites?”

But the disappearance of their chief and the death of three of their fellows had disconcerted the Indians; they did not flee;

they remained undecided and as motionless as the black rocks of the river, half washed by the shining waters.

“Do not the red warriors know how to scalp anything but corpses?” added Pepe, with a burst of scornful laughter. “Are the Apaches like vultures, which pick only at dead bodies? Come on, dogs, vultures, women without courage!” yelled the Spaniard, at seeing his enemies now hastening back to the shore.

Suddenly he caught a glimpse of a body floating on its back at some distance away; its gleaming eyes, however, betrayed that it was not that of a dead man, although the extended arms and the immobility of the body might have made him think so.

“My rifle, Fabian, for God’s sake! There is Black Bird pretending to be dead and letting himself be carried along by the cur-

rent. The dog could not offer me a better revenge.”

Pepe took his rifle, and aimed at the floating body. But with the exception of the warrior's eyes, which looked like live coals in their sockets, not one of his muscles quivered. Pepe lowered his rifle.

“I made a mistake,” said he in a loud voice; “the whites do not waste powder on corpses as the Indians do.”

The body continued to float, the legs extended and the arms stretched out like a cross, and the current made it gently drift. Pepe took up his weapon again and aimed more carefully than at first; then he lowered the muzzle again, and when he thought he paid the Indian chief anguish for anguish, he discharged it, and the body floated no longer.

“Did you kill him?” asked the Canadian.

“No. I only wanted to break his shoulder, so that he might never forget the cold chills he gave me and the trick he was trying to play us. If he were dead he would still be floating.”

“You would have done better to kill him,” returned Redwood. “Ah!” he exclaimed, stamping on the ground, “what is to be done now? I had hoped to finish by ripping up those devils in a hand-to-hand fight, and now everything must begin over again. We can not cross the island to attack them.”

“Nevertheless it is the best thing we can do.”

“With Fabian here I would never decide on it,” returned Redwood in an undertone; “but for that I would already have escaped to the bank opposite that where the Indians are, for you understand that they are hungering for blood there like starving wolves.”

The Spaniard shrugged his shoulders with stoical resignation. He was as well aware as the Canadian of the tenacity with which Indians cling to the idea of revenge.

“Not a doubt of it,” said he; “still we must either run away or stay where we are.”

“Faith! if there were only us two, gaining the other side of the river would not take a minute. The seven who are still living would come up to us, no doubt, but we could manage them; we have done more difficult things already.”

“That would be better than to stay here like foxes which are to be smoked out of their hole.”

“Agreed,” said Redwood, thoughtfully; “but Fabian! and that wretched man they scalped whom we can not abandon to the mercy of the butchers who have mutilated him so cruelly already! At any rate, we

will not attempt flight until the moon goes down."

And the old man bent his head down upon his knees with an air of discouragement, which made a sad and painful impression on the Spaniard. The Canadian never changed his attitude, except to glance anxiously at the sky. But the moon glided as slowly as common across its sheet of starry azure.

"So be it," said Pepe, sitting down beside his companion. "But look here, these five bits of wood sticking in the ground are five dead Apaches; add three more and that will be eight. There should be twelve left, and why did we count only ten in the river? I think I shall make no mistake in supposing that Black Bird sent the two who are absent in search of reinforcements."

"It is possible," returned Redwood.

“Whether we stay here or escape, in either case it a terrible alternative.”

Meanwhile, when the three hunters had finished a frugal meal composed of meat dried in the sun and a little cornmeal, the rays of the moon were already falling more obliquely on the light eddies of the river, and a portion of the trees were plunged in darkness.

More than an hour had elapsed since the Indians made their attempt, and, although no noise disturbed the tranquillity of the night, Pepe, who was less engrossed in his own thoughts than the Canadian, sometimes bent his ear to listen with a feeling akin to anxiety.

“Will that cursed moon never go down?” said he; “I am uneasy; I seem to hear something like water rippling under feet, and it is not the noise made by the river.

Buffaloes do not come to drink at this hour of the night."

As he said this the Spaniard rose and bent forward to watch both the right and the left sides of the stream through all its course; but on either side the columns of mist, turning as they rose, spread an almost impenetrable veil over everything not very near his eyes. The coolness of the nights succeeding the intense heat of the days condenses in this way the exhalations from the earth and the heated waters into thick clouds of fog.

"I see nothing but mist," said Pepe, in vexation.

By degrees, however, these vague noises ceased to reach the ear of the Spanish hunter, and the atmosphere resumed its ordinary stillness. Another long interval elapsed, the moon continuing to sink, the moving constellations retiring from mid-heaven, and

nature was slumbering underneath her canopy of white vapors when the defenders of the islet gave a sudden start and looked at each other in stupefaction.

Yells had risen simultaneously from both banks of the river, in sounds so piercing and prolonged that, even if the mouths which emitted them had been closed, the echoes from either shore would have been yelling still. Flight now was impossible, the Indians encircled the islet on both sides; the two hunters were too experienced not to be certain of it.

“The moon may set now,” cried Pepe, clenching his hands with rage. “Ah! I was right in suspecting the two who were absent and the sounds I heard. Now who knows how many enemies we have around us?”

“What matters it,” replied the Canadian, sorrowfully, “whether there are a hundred

vultures to tear our corpses when we are dead, or whether there are a hundred Indians surrounding us?"

"True, the number does not signify in such circumstances; but if this is to be a day of triumph for the Indians, the vultures, at all events, will lose by it."

"Don't go to singing your death-song like the Indians, who, when they are fastened to the stake, begin to reckon up the scalps they have taken."

"And why not? It is a very good custom; it aids a man to die well to remember that he has lived like a man."

"Better to be thinking of dying like Christians," answered Redwood. Then, drawing Fabian close to him, he said: "I cannot account to myself, my beloved child, for what I dreamed of for you. I am half savage and half civilized, and my dreams are colored

by it. Sometimes I longed to give you earthly greatness; at other times I could think of nothing for you but the splendors of the wilderness, of those majestic harmonies which lull man as he lies down to sleep and caress him at his waking; but what I can say is that the dominant thought of my heart was that of never leaving you. Must it be that we shall find ourselves together in death? So young, so brave, so beautiful, must yours be the same fate as that of a man's who to-morrow will be useless?"

"Who would love me when you were no longer here?" replied Fabian, in a tone which the desperate character of the situation had not deprived of its full sweetness and firmness. "Before I found you the earth had closed above all that I loved, and the only living being who could take its place was you. What have I to regret in this world?"

“The future, my child, the future into which youth longs to plunge like a thirsty deer into the waters of a lake.”

A powerful voice rising from the bank opposite the hunters came to interrupt these melancholy reflections.

“Let the white men open their ears,” said the voice.

“It is that scoundrel of a Black Bird,” said Pepe, who recognized it as that of the chief whom he had wounded. Two warriors, in fact, were giving him the support of their arms.

“What is the good of opening our ears?” he shouted in stentorian tones, and in a medley of Spanish and Apache: “The whites laugh at the threats of Black Bird and despise his promises.”

“That is good!” replied the chief. “The whites are acting like vanquished Indians

who insult their victors. But the eagle laughs at the insults of the mocking-bird which assumes all voices, and it is not to the mocking-bird that the eagle deigns to speak."

"To whom, then?" cried Pepe, who did not find this comparison soothing.

"To the giant, to his brother the eagle of the Snowy Mountains, who disdains the language of other birds."

"What do you want of him?" interrupted the voice of Redwood.

"The Indian would like to hear the Northern warrior ask for his life," replied the chief.

"I have a different request to make," said the Canadian.

"I listen," replied the Indian.

"If you will swear on the honor of a warrior, on the bones of your fathers, that you will spare the lives of my three companions,

I will cross the river alone and unarmed, and bring you my scalp fresh on my head. That will tempt him," concluded poor Redwood in a lower tone.

"But are you mad, Redwood?" cried Pepe, bounding like a wounded tiger.

The Indian had maintained silence, doubtless to consider. A brief instant of silence prevailed; then it was broken by his reply.

"Black Bird wished the Northern white to ask for life, and instead he asks for death. They can not come to an understanding. This is what I desire: let the Northern man leave his companions, and I swear to him on the honor of a warrior, on the bones of my fathers, that his life shall be spared, but only his; the other three must die."

Redwood scorned to reply to this offer, still more insulting than that of joining Black Bird against the Mexicans. The Indian

chief waited in vain for the Canadian either to reject or accept his proposition. At last he went on speaking:

“From now to the hour of torture the whites are listening for the last time to the voice of a chief. My warriors surround the islet, as the river does, on its four sides. Indian blood has been spilled, it must be avenged; the blood of the whites must flow in return. But the Indian does not desire that blood heated by the ardor of the fight; he wants it chilled with terror, impoverished by hunger. He will take the whites alive; and then, when he has them in his clutches, no longer like warriors, but like hungry dogs yelping after a bone of dried buffalo, then the Indian will see what men imbruted by fear and privation have in their entrails; he will make a saddle for his war-horse out of their skin, and each of their scalps will hang

from his crupper and his stirrups as trophies of his vengeance. My warriors will surround the island for fifteen days and as many nights, if necessary, to seize the outcast of the white race."

Then, after these terrible threats, the Indian disappeared behind the trees and ceased speaking. But Pepe was unwilling that he should believe that he had frightened them, and he cried out with as much coolness as the boiling rage within him would permit:

"Dog, who know nothing but how to bark, the whites despise your idle boasting; the sight of their skeletons will trouble nothing but your dreams! Jackal, filthy polecat, I despise you! I—I—"

But rage stifled him, and, in default of words, he took to gestures, and made at Black Bird the most insulting one that he could think of.

A burst of noisy laughter accompanied this response of Pepe, whom this outrageous gesture had quieted a little, and who, content with having had the last word, now sat down satisfied. As to Redwood, all he saw in the Indian's reply was the rejection of his heroic sacrifice.

“ Ah !” said the generous old man, sighing, “ if you had let me alone I would have arranged all that to the general satisfaction. Now it is too late ; let us talk no more about it.”

CHAPTER VII.

THE FIRESHIP.

THE moon had now gone down ; the silence and obscurity which everywhere prevailed made the three friends feel more keenly that, but for this reinforcement of the Indians, it would have been easy for them to gain the opposite bank, even though carrying in their arms the mutilated Mexican. The latter, insensible to all around him, still remained in deep stupor.

“ And so,” said Pepe, breaking first the mournful silence which hung over them, “ we have fifteen days before us. It is true that we have not much food. Faith ! we will fish for our dinner and amuse ourselves.”

But Pepe’s pleasantries were not sufficient

to smooth away the wrinkles from the anxious brow of the Canadian.

“Let us try,” said he, “to employ usefully the few remaining hours before daybreak.”

“To do what?” asked Pepe.

“To make our escape, surely.”

“And how?”

“Ah! that is the puzzle,” replied Redwood.

“I suppose you can swim, Fabian?”

“Like a fish.”

“Well, it might not be difficult to make a hole in the middle of this islet and confide ourselves to the current through that opening. It is dark enough now for the Indians, not seeing us jump into the river, to let us gain a spot at a distance from them. Hold on, I am going to experiment before trying the plan.”

As he said these words the Canadian tore up, but not without several efforts, one of the

willow trunks of the natural raft which served them as a refuge; the knotty end of this trunk imitated pretty well the form of the human head. The old hunter laid the piece of wood cautiously in the river, and presently the black mass was floating gently in the current. For some minutes the three friends watched its silent navigation, and it was not until it had disappeared in the darkness that the Canadian spoke again.

“You see,” said he, “a prudent swimmer could pass as unperceived as that piece of wood. Not an Indian has budged.”

“That is true,” said Pepe, “but who is to assure us that the eye of an Apache cannot distinguish a man from a stick of wood? And there is a man among us who cannot swim.”

“Who is that?”

The Spaniard pointed at the wounded man,

groaning on his bed of pain, as if his guardian angel were warning him that there was a question of abandoning him to his enemies.

“What does it matter?” resumed Redwood, with some hesitation. “Is the life of that man worth as much as ours?”

“No,” replied the Spaniard; “but I, who was just now almost determined to desert this unfortunate, believe now that it would be cowardly.”

“That man,” added Fabian, “has children, perhaps, who would weep for their father as I would weep for mine in such a case.”

“It would not be right; it would bring us bad luck, Redwood,” went on the Spaniard.

The superstitious affection of the Canadian took alarm at these words of his companion, and he ceased to insist on the subject; but he went on:

“Well, Fabian, since you are a good swimmer, take the route which is open to us. Pepe and I will stay here to protect this man, and if we die here it will be as victims of duty and with the joy of knowing that you are safe and sound.”

Fabian shook his head in the negative.

“I tell you again,” said he, “that I do not want life without you two, and shall stay with you.”

“But what is to be done?” asked the Canadian, sorrowfully.

“Let us look,” said Fabian and Pepe at the same time.

This was, unhappily, one of those cases where all human resources are unavailing; one of those desperate situations from which none but a power above that of man could extricate them. In vain did the night become darker under the thickening mist; the

firm resolution not to desert the wounded man opposed an insurmountable obstacle to the escape of the three hunters. Presently the fires lighted on all sides by the Indians on both banks of the river threw a red light on the waters, which illuminated the course of the stream for a considerable distance.

With this light the last plan proposed by the Canadian became impossible, even had they wished to try it; but none of them thought of it any longer. With the exception of the fires, which colored the river, one would have thought, judging from the perfect quiet reigning on either bank, that they were entirely deserted, for no enemy was visible near the fires, and no human voice disturbed the silence of the night.

Meantime the vapors rising from the bosom of the river began gradually to condense and close around the islet. The banks of the

stream seemed more and more distant, then disappeared entirely, and soon the fires showed merely as pale and indistinct gleams beneath the vague and vaporous outline of the trees.

While the impressive silence of night overspread all nature, sleep fled from the three hunters.

If there are frightful moments in life when the bravest men can lose heart, assuredly this was one of them. Besides the fact that the danger was terrible, inevitable, it did not afford even the supreme and final consolation of a chance to sell life as dearly as possible.

Hemmed in by enemies whom the trees on the bank concealed from their view, the three hunters could not even rouse them to fury, as they had done in the evening, by bringing some of them down with their bullets. Moreover, Redwood and the Spaniard knew

too well the stubborn obstinacy of the Indians to hope that, growing weary of a long blockade, Black Bird would permit his warriors to respond to their attacks and make them succumb to a murderous fire.

The death of soldiers on a field of battle would have seemed too gentle for the hatred of the Apache chief. He wanted his enemies alive, with both soul and body weakened by hunger.

Affected by these gloomy thoughts, the hunters ceased talking, but they resigned themselves to their fate rather than think of abandoning the wounded man in order to make a descent on one or the other bank. Fabian was as resolved to die as his companions; his blasted hopes, the profound discouragement which had taken possession of him, robbed death of some of its usual terrors; nevertheless the warmth of his blood

would have made him prefer a speedy death, with arms in his hands, to the slow and ignominious one awaiting him at the stake of the Indians. He resolved to be the first to break the deathlike silence which brooded above the island amidst the nocturnal mist and gloom.

To the experienced eyes of the Canadian and the Spaniard the profound tranquillity of the river and its banks was but another indication of the invincible resolution of their enemies; but to Fabian it seemed a reassuring symptom, a favor from heaven by which they ought to profit.

“Everything sleeps all around us,” said he; “not merely the Indians on the bank, but everything that has life in the woods and deserts; even the current of the river seems more sluggish. See, the reflections of the fires are dying far away from us. Would

not this be the time to effect a descent on one or the other of the two banks?"

"The Indians sleeping!" interrupted Pepe, bitterly; "yes, like this water which seems stagnant, and which all the same pursues its course to the unknown gulfs into which it will be lost. You would not have made three steps in the river before you would see the Indians springing in after you, as you just now saw the wolves do in pursuit of the deer. Haven't you anything better to suggest, Redwood?"

"No," replied the Canadian, briefly, while his hand was seeking that of Fabian; then, with the other he pointed at the wounded man, who was writhing, even though still asleep, on his bed of anguish. This gesture replied to all Fabian's objections.

"But, in default of any other chance," pursued the latter, "we should at least have

that of dying with honor, and side by side, as we wish to die. If we are victors, we could come to the help of this poor fellow, who has no other defenders. If we are overcome, could God Himself reproach us when we appear before Him with having sacrificed the life of the man He had confided to our care when we had exposed our own in the interest of all?"

"No, certainly not," replied Redwood; "but let us still hope in that God who has reunited us by a miracle; what does not happen to-day may happen to-morrow; we have still time to spare between now and the exhaustion of our supply of provisions. To land at any place on the shore would be to go to certain death, since the number of Indians is probably more than tripled. Dying would be nothing. But we would probably be made prisoners, and I tremble at the

thought of the horrible agony to which they mean to subject us. Oh! my beloved Fabian, the intention of these Indians to take us alive, at least prolongs for a few days my happiness in being near you."

Silence reigned once more over the dismayed group. This idea of living near his child a while longer was to the Canadian like the respite granted to the condemned before execution; but presently, as also happens to that unfortunate, who, when he remembers that the fatal moment is merely deferred, shakes the bars of his dungeon in his rage, so Redwood, anticipating in imagination the terrible day of the denouement, shook convulsively one of the tree-trunks against which he was leaning. Under his powerful clasp the islet trembled as if it were about to be wrested from its foundations.

"Ah! the dogs! the devils!" exclaimed

at the same moment the Spaniard, who could not repress a cry of rage. "Look!"

A reddish gleam penetrated insensibly the veil of mist extended above the river, and seemed to advance, growing larger as it came, like the reflection of a fire which is increasing.

And, strange as it may seem, the fire glided on the waters.

In spite of the mist from the river, so thick that it might almost be felt, the mass of fire carried by the stream dispelled it as the sun dispels the clouds.

The three hunters had scarcely time to be surprised by the apparition of this sudden light before they had comprehended its cause.

Long experience in the life of the wilderness and its incessantly repeated dangers had given the Canadian a firmness of muscle which the Spaniard had not yet attained.

Instead of yielding to a transport of rage, as Pepe had done, Redwood preserved his usual calmness.

He knew that a danger which one faces with coolness is already half surmounted, frightful as it may appear, and his presence of mind generally became redoubled in case of peril.

“Yes,” said he, in reply to Pepe’s exclamation, “I see what it is as well as if the Indians had told me beforehand. You spoke just now of foxes smoked out of their hole; well, those rascals mean to burn us in ours.”

Meanwhile the globe of fire floating on the river was increasing with frightful rapidity, and thus confirming the truth of the Canadian’s words. Already, amidst the waters empurpled by the flame, the rushes and young osiers, which formed the cincture of the islet, were becoming distinct.

“It is a fireship,” said Pepe, “with which they mean to ignite our isle.”

“God be thanked!” added Fabian; “it is far better to fight fire than to await death in this way without a struggle.”

“That is true,” said Redwood, “but fire is a terrible adversary, and it fights for those devils.”

In this case the besieged could offer no opposition to the devouring action of the flame, and would have no chance of escaping the fire except by jumping into the water. And then it would be for the Indians to decide whether to finish them at once with their rifles or to take them alive.

CHAPTER VIII.

A BRILLIANT IDEA.

SUCH had been the calculation of the Indian who had directed this manoeuver. By his order the Apaches had cut down a tree still in full leaf; a thick layer of moistened weeds interlaced between its branches formed a sort of floor on which had been piled all it would hold of branches stripped from a resinous pine. After setting fire to this incendiary machine, it had been entrusted to the current of the stream and headed in the direction of the little islet.

The raft advanced, the crackling of the resinous wood already began to be heard, and under a canopy of black smoke, which rose in air and mingled with the fog, shone a

flame which constantly increased. Not far from the bank one caught from time to time a glimpse of the red profile of an Indian sentinel.

Pepe could not resist a sudden temptation.

“Hold on, imp of hell!” said he in an undertone; “you at least will never tell the story in your village of the last moments of the death agony of a Christian.”

As he said these words the rifle barrel of the angry Spaniard gleamed red through the rushes, and they saw the Indian’s war plumes sink down at the same moment that the discharge of the fire-arm disturbed the long-unbroken silence of the night.

“Tardy and mournful vengeance!” said Redwood, solemnly, as he saw the Indian fall.

And, in fact, as if the Apaches despised the blows of a vanquished enemy, the bank still remained in profound silence without a single

yell accompanying, as is usual, the death throes of a warrior.

The flame of the burning fagots, now not far away, and in a direct line with their islet, showed the features of the Spaniard convulsed with helpless fury.

“*Demonio!*” he exclaimed, stamping his foot, “I shall die more easily now that I have sent before me into the other world one of those redskinned devils.” And still clasping his rifle, his eye sought in every direction on either bank another victim to sacrifice to his need of vengeance.

The Canadian, meanwhile, was coolly watching the mass of fire which, on going aground on the islet must enkindle its dry branches.

“Well!” exclaimed Pepe, whose rage blinded his judgment, “it is all very fine to be studying that firebrand, but can you

turn it out of its course before it fastens on the sides of the islet?"

"Perhaps," said the Canadian, briefly, still continuing his examination.

Pepe began whistling through his teeth with an air of indifference, by which he sought to conceal his anger.

"Look here," resumed Redwood; "I perceive something which convinces me that the reasoning of these sons of the forest is not infallible, and if it were not that we shall presently be under a rain of bullets and arrows to force us to lie still, and prevent us from pushing away their torch, I would care as little for that flaming raft as for a firefly floating in the air."

In constructing the sort of flooring of dampened weeds of which we have spoken, the Indians had calculated its thickness so as to ensure that it would be dried by con-

tact with the fire above and become enkindled, along with the branches of the tree supporting it, almost at the moment when the whole mass would run aground against the islet.

But the weeds plunged often into the water, and the moisture in which it was immersed every moment had delayed its combustion; nor had the large branches of the tree had time to take fire, which had acted solely on the smaller branches and the foliage.

This circumstance had not escaped the keen eye of the Canadian, who, taking a long pole in his hand, resolved to scatter the weeds and prevent them from igniting; but at the very moment when he was about to risk this dangerous attempt, what he had foreseen occurred.

Several bullets and arrows whistled

through the narrow space now left vacant between the islet and the firebrand. They seemed intended rather to alarm the hunters than to strike them.

“They are determined,” said Redwood, in an undertone, “not to take us except alive; well, it is a risk to run.”

The burning mass was almost touching the islet; in a few moments more the flame would devour it. A hot vapor already enveloped its inmates when, with the swiftness of lightning, the Canadian slipped into the water and disappeared altogether.

Yells proceeded from the two banks of the river, and the Indians as well as the Spaniard and Fabian, who remained alone, beheld the floating tree rock beneath the powerful pressure exerted on it by the Canadian. The enormous fireplace threw out a more glowing light; then presently the water hissed, and

the mass of fire fell to pieces and was swallowed up in a cloud of foam.

The darkness and the mist once more spread their heavy curtain over all the river.

The tree, with blackened branches, turned out of its course, passed on, rubbing against the rushes of the islet, while amidst the yelling of the stupefied Indians, Redwood rejoined his companions.

The islet was still rocking under the effort made by the Canadian to get a foothold on it.

“Yell away at your ease,” said Redwood, on recovering his breath; “you have not got us yet; but,” he added, in a whisper, “shall we always be as lucky?”

In fact, though this danger was averted, how many more had they not still to conquer? Who could foresee what new stratagems the Indians might yet employ against them?

These reflections soon dispelled the first intoxication of triumph, and gloomy silence succeeded the congratulations offered to Redwood by the two hunters.

All of a sudden Pepe sprang to his feet, stifling a cry, and this time it was a cry of joy.

“Redwood, Fabian,” he exclaimed, “we are saved; I will answer for that myself.”

“Saved!” repeated the Canadian, in a trembling tone. “Oh! speak, Pepe, speak quickly.”

“Did you not notice,” continued the Spaniard, “how the islet trembled under our hands a few hours ago when we pulled out some large branches for our fortification? Do you not remember, Redwood, how you made it shake just now? Well, I had thought of making a raft of the trunks that are beneath our feet, but now I give it up;

there are three of us; we can by main force detach the islet itself and set it afloat. The fog is thick, the night is dark, and to-morrow, when day dawns—”

“We shall be far away from here,” cried Redwood. “To work! to work! The freshening wind indicates the approach of morning; we have not too much time before us. If I have not lost my sailor’s eye, the river will not take us more than three knots an hour.”

“So much the better,” said Pepe, “the displacement will not be so visible.”

The brave Canadian only took time enough to shake hands with his two companions before rising to his feet.

“What are you going to do?” asked Fabian. “Cannot we three root up the islet by our combined efforts, as Pepe proposed?”

“Root it up, without a doubt, Fabian; but

we also run the risk of scattering like a fagot when its rope is broken, and our safety depends on preserving the islet just as nature has made it. There is perhaps some parent branch, or some great root anchored at the bottom of the river which holds it in place. Many years must have elapsed since these trees were wrecked here, to judge from the earth that has formed over them. The water ought, in the long run, to have rotted that branch or that root, and that is what I mean to make sure of."

At this moment the lugubrious voice of a night bird interrupted the Canadian. These plaintive notes, which suddenly disturbed the silence of the night at the very moment when a ray of hope had shone upon the hunters, sounded in the Spaniard's ears as a fatal omen.

"Ah!" said Pepe, in whom danger re-

vived superstitious notions, "the hoot of an owl at such a time means no good."

"It is a perfect imitation, I grant you," replied Redwood; "but you should not allow yourself to be deceived in that way. It is an Indian sentinel who is either warning his companions to keep their eyes open, or else, which is more like their diabolical wickedness, notifying us that we are under inspection. It is a sort of death-song with which they are regaling us."

The Canadian had barely concluded when the same harmony was repeated from the other bank with modulations sometimes derisive, sometimes gloomy, which exactly confirmed the supposition of the old hunter. But these voices were none the less alarming, since they revealed all the perils and ambushes hidden by the darkness of this momentous night.

“I long to shout to them to roar instead, like the tigers that they are,” said Pepe.

“Take good care not to do it, for it would reveal to them just where we are. The rascals know it quite too well already.”

While saying this, Redwood entered the water with the greatest precautions. It was not without anxiety that the two who remained behind followed with their eyes the researches of the Canadian. The latter, sunk down in the water, sometimes disappeared entirely from the surface, like a diver seeking along the sides of a vessel for the leak which threatens to wreck it and bring it to destruction.

“Well,” asked Pepe quickly, when the Canadian came up to take breath, “are we moored on several anchors?”

“Everything is going on well, I think,” replied Redwood; “I see only one at present

which keeps the island in place, but it is the anchor of mercy.”

“Take care above all things not to go too far,” cried Fabian; “you might get entangled under the roots and in the web of branches above the water.”

“Have no fears, my child,” answered the Canadian. “A whale might get stuck on a fishing boat which it could send flying twenty feet into the air more easily than I under this islet which, with one shove of my shoulders, I could scatter into fragments.”

CHAPTER IX.

BETWEEN HOPE AND DESPAIR.

THE river boiled once more over the head of the Canadian. A rather long time elapsed, during which, as if Fabian's fears were about to be realized, the presence of Redwood under the water was made visible by the eddies formed around the islet, which presently began rocking on its base like a vessel in the swell of the sea. One felt that the giant must be making a last and powerful effort. Fabian's heart contracted for an instant in his breast at the thought that Redwood was perhaps struggling against death, and then a heavy crack, like that of the timbers of a vessel going to pieces on a rock, made itself heard beneath his feet.

At the same instant the Canadian came again to the surface, his hair streaming with water and his face inflamed with the blood that had rushed there with violence. With one bound he regained his place on the islet, which began to revolve gently on itself, and then to follow the current gently. An enormous root, sunk deeply in the river-bed, had broken in the vigorous hands of the Colossus to whom despair had given tenfold strength.

“God be praised!” cried he, “the last and only obstacle which detained us is overcome, and we are afloat.”

In fact, while he was speaking, the islet advanced, urged by the current, almost insensibly, it is true, but still it advanced.

“Now,” said Redwood, “our lives are in the hands of God. If the islet stays in the middle of the river, thanks to the fog which

covers its surface, we shall soon be out of sight and reach of the Indians. O my God!" he cried, with fervor, "a few more hours of darkness and Thy creatures are saved!"

The three hunters kept silence. They were watching the movements of the floating islet too anxiously to exchange a single word.

Day would soon break, but the coolness of the night, always increased an hour or two before sunrise, condensed still more heavily the vapors rising from the river.

The fires on the banks now appeared only like the stars which grow pale in the firmament at the approach of dawn. From that quarter the danger was less, and the chance of escaping the notice of the Indian sentinels almost certain; but another peril menaced the three hunters.

The floating island, no matter how gently

it was drawn along by the current, followed the course of the stream, turning as it went, and it was to be feared that in this rotation it might deviate from the straight line and run ashore on one of the banks. The Indians occupied both.

Like the sailor who, with anguished eyes, follows the movements of his vessel disabled by a storm, and contemplates with alarm the reefs on which it may presently be tossed by the waves, so the three hunters, tormented by the most cruel anxiety, observed in gloomy silence the tortuous and uncertain progress of their islet. Sometimes when the fringe of reeds and rushes which encircled it shook under a light breeze coming from one of the shores, it seemed to incline toward the opposite one by describing a large circle; sometimes, also, when seized by one of the currents formed by the inequalities of the river-

bed, and obliged to follow the impulse received, it advanced in a straight line; but, in either case, the efforts of those upon it could not give it a direction. Fortunately, the fog was so heavy that even the trees which shaded the banks ceased to be visible.

“Courage,” said Pepe; “so long as we do not see the trees, it is a sign that we are in the right way. Oh! if God continues to favor us, plenty of yelling will echo along these peaceful shores when day breaks and the Indians find neither the islet nor those whom it sheltered.”

“Yes,” replied the old hunter, “that was a brilliant idea, Pepe; in my trouble it never occurred to me; such a simple idea!”

“Those are always the last that come to the mind; but do you know what that proves, Redwood?” he added in the ear of his companion; “it is that in the wilderness the

fear of death is already a serious preoccupation, and that it is imprudent to run risks there long with those whom one loves better than life; this new risk exposes a man to losing all his resources. I tell you frankly, Redwood, for some time past I scarcely know you."

"True; I scarcely know myself," replied the Canadian, simply, "and yet—"

Redwood did not finish, for a profound reverie took possession of him, during which, like a man whose body is present while his soul is absent, he seemed no longer to observe the movements of the floating island. It was because to the hunter who for twenty years had lived in the boundless liberty of the deserts, to renounce that life was equivalent to death; to give up seeing Fabian every day, and the consolation of feeling his adopted son close his eyes in their last sleep,

was likewise to bid farewell to happiness. Fabian and the desert were the two dominant affections of his life; to abandon either seemed impossible. In the hunter's soul there was going on a struggle between the civilized man and the man whom long habit had rendered almost savage.

It was not long before Pepe interrupted the reverie of the Canadian. For some minutes the former had been looking with greater anxiety in the direction of one of the banks. Through the veil of mist it seemed to him that he caught indistinctly the white and fantastic shapes assumed by trees through the fog. They were like phantoms, vague as yet, covered with a long drapery of vapor, which seemed to be bending in grief above the river.

“We are deviating from our course, Redwood,” said Pepe, in a low tone; “those

waving mists which seem thicker yonder must be the tops of the willows on the bank."

"That is true," answered the Canadian, resting his mind from its meditations; "it is easy to see what little headway we have made for the last half hour by noticing the fires still burning to right and left of us."

At this point the floating islet seemed to receive a more rapid impetus. In a few seconds it described two of the circles which hitherto had occupied a much longer time, and the tops of the distant trees soon became less indistinct. The two hunters exchanged an anxious glance.

The raft was still moving toward the bank. One of the fires which but just now shed only a pale gleam through the mist gradually increased its luster before the eyes of the trembling Redwood.

Already they could see one of the Indian

warriors standing erect and motionless in his frightful war costume. The long mane of a bison covered his head, and above it a tuft of feathers undulated like the crest of a Roman helmet.

The Canadian directed Pepe's attention by a movement of his finger to the warrior resting on his lance. Happily, the fog was too thick for the Apache, whom his fire alone rendered visible, to perceive as yet the dark mass of the islet, floating as softly as a water-bird on the surface of the river.

However, as if instinct warned the savage that the intrepidity and skill of his enemies were about to defeat his vigilance, he raised his head and shook the floating mane with which it was adorned.

"Could he have suspected anything?" said the Canadian to Pepe.

"Ah! if a rifle made no more noise than

an arrow, how quickly I would send that human bison to mount guard in the other world!" replied the Spaniard.

It was not long before the hunters saw the Indian warrior thrust the lance on which he was resting into the ground, lean forward, and arch his two hands above his eyes as if to concentrate their piercing glances.

A dart of anguish transfixed the hearts of the fugitives, who, for an instant, remained breathless at the aspect of the Indian.

The ferocious warrior, bent double, like a wild beast lying in wait for its prey, his face half covered with the long locks of his head-dress, was hideous and terrible to behold. A man of ordinary courage could not see him without a shudder.

But the three fugitives would have scorned this frightful apparition as if it had been that of a child, if, in this critical moment,

a child would not have been as much to be dreaded as an Indian.

In the midst of the heavy fog, the fire near which the savage watched illuminated only a narrow circle.

All of a sudden the Apache, after remaining for some instants in the attitude of a man who seeks to distinguish a distant object in the dark, made two or three steps in the direction of the river and disappeared.

This was a moment of the keenest anxiety, for night now concealed the movements of the Indian.

The fugitives held their breath and continued to glide silently over the surface of the stream.

“Could the demon have seen us?” whispered Pepe in the Canadian’s ear.

“It is to be feared,” replied Redwood.

A mournful cry made the hunters tremble,

and this cry was repeated on both shores; they were the signals sent by the sentinels to each other in imitation of the notes of nocturnal birds. Then all became silent once more.

Redwood at last gave a sigh of relief, and pointed out to Fabian the fire burning on the bank. The Indian had just returned to his post and was leaning on his lance in his former attitude.

This had been a false alarm, but nevertheless the islet was still approaching the river bank.

“If this goes on,” said Redwood, “within ten minutes we shall tumble into the bivouac of that devil of an Indian. Ah! if we could *paddle* a little with the help of this big branch, we should soon get back into the right way again, but the noise of the water would betray us.”

“And yet it is the thing we ought to do; perhaps it would be better to run the risk of betrayal than to deliver ourselves into the hands of our enemies. But first, let us see whether the current we are in really sets toward the shore; if it does, we must hesitate no longer, and, although the branch of a tree makes more noise in the water than an oar wrapped in a cloth, you must do your best to paddle silently.”

As he finished this advice, Pepe softly broke in two a piece of dead wood and flung it into the river. Leaning over the edge, Pepe and Redwood watched the direction the wood might take. There was just there a violent eddy caused by some deep hole in the river-bed.

For an instant the piece of wood whirled round as it were about to be swallowed up, then it suddenly took a direction away from

the bank. The two hunters gave a sigh of satisfaction, then an exclamation of silent joy, very soon succeeded by a glance of consternation. The branch, repelled by some under-current, suddenly floated toward the shore. There was no room for misapprehension; the fate of the islet would be that of the piece of wood, which served it as precursor.

The floating islet seemed, in fact, to remain motionless for an instant; but obeying, nevertheless, the impulsion of the first current, it soon began to move away again from the shore. The curtain of mist, uniformly condensed to right and left, proved to the reassured hunters that the raft had resumed a favorable direction.

CHAPTER X.

SAVED!

ABOUT an hour passed in this way between piercing alternatives of hope and fear; then the Indian fires began to be lost in distance and in mist; the fugitives were almost beyond the reach of danger. Yet they must still assist themselves.

Reassured by the distance gained, the Canadian went to the rear of the islet and paddled vigorously with the branch of a tree.

Like a horse long abandoned to his own caprices, but feeling at last the hand and spur of a skilful rider, the floating islet ceased turning round, and followed the current more rapidly. Kept by the Canadian in the deepest water, it soon traversed a con-

siderable distance. Thenceforward the three friends might consider themselves safer at least, if not altogether safe.

“Day will soon break now,” said Redwood; “we must land on one side or the other, for we shall go twice as fast on foot as on this raft, which moves slower than a Dutch howker, which is saying a great deal.”

“Very well, land where you like, Redwood,” responded Pepe; “then from there we will follow the water course on foot, to conceal our traces from the Indians, carrying, if necessary, the wounded man in our arms; we can make at least two leagues an hour. Do you think, Fabian, that the Valley of Gold is very far from here?”

“Like me,” replied Fabian, “you have seen the sun set behind the Smoky Mountains, which conceal the Valley of Gold; it ought not to take us more than a few hours

to reach it; we shall doubtless arrive there before day."

Assisted by Pepe, Redwood turned the raft obliquely toward the left, and in about a quarter of an hour the islet, reaching the bank, struck it so violently that a large crack appeared in the middle. While Pepe and Fabian sprang ashore on a bank where there were no enemies, the Canadian lifted the still motionless Mexican in his arms and laid him on the grass. The wounded man awoke. At sight of a place altogether different from that where he had gone to sleep, and the change which was evident in spite of the darkness and the mist, he looked about him in amazement.

"Holy Virgin!" he exclaimed, "must I hear again those frightful yells which disturbed my slumber!"

"No, my poor fellow; the Indians are far

away now, and we are in safety. God be blessed for having permitted me to save all I hold most dear, my Fabian and my old comrade in danger!"

As he said these words the Canadian reverently uncovered his gray head and cordially extended his hand to Pepe and Fabian.

After giving the scalped man a few moments to recover his senses, the three hunters made ready to continue their route.

"If you are not able to march with us," said Pepe to the Mexican, "we will make a sort of litter for you. We have no time to lose if we are to escape those marauders, who, as soon as day breaks, will begin the finest chase that people of their sort can ever manage to give Christians."

So great was the desire of the wounded man to escape as fast as possible from a new meeting with the Indians, that he almost

forgot the atrocious pain he was enduring. He declared that he could go as fast as his three liberators themselves, and proposed setting off at once.

“We have some precautions to take first,” said Redwood; “rest a while longer until we have pulled this raft to pieces and delivered it to the current. It is essential that the Indians should find no trace of us.”

All three set to work. Already disjoined by the breaking of the root which had retained it in the river, and by the shock it had just received from its contact with the bank, the floating islet did not offer a long resistance to the arms of the three hunters. The tree-trunks which composed it were successively torn out and pushed into the current, which carried them away, and soon no vestige remained of the raft which nature had taken so many years to build.

When the last branch had disappeared, Redwood, assisted by Pepe, occupied himself in effacing their footprints by setting up again the stems of the wild plants they had trodden down, and then he gave the signal to depart.

As the tallest and strongest of the fugitives; he was the first to enter the water at a sufficient distance from the bank for it to cover their tracks, so that the Indians might suppose they were still continuing their navigation on the islet. The march was too fatiguing to be rapid, and yet, after an hour, at the very moment when, in spite of the foot coverings they had preserved, their painful feet would have forced them to halt, they arrived at the fork of the two rivers which formed the delta in which the Valley of Gold must be situated.

Day was about to break; dawn began to

whiten the horizon toward the east. A gray tint succeeded the obscurity. Happily that branch of the river which they were to cross was not very deep. The greater portion of the waters flowed into the other branch. This was a favorable circumstance, for the wounded man would have caused a long delay if he were to be swam across.

Redwood took him on his shoulders. All three entered the water, which barely rose to their knees, and they soon landed on the farther shore. The chain of the Smoky Mountains was no more than a league from the point of the delta they had reached, and, after a few moments' halt, the march was resumed with fresh ardor. They were safe.

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