

Very Truly Yours
Emerson Bennett

THE
OUTLAW'S DAUGHTER;

OR,

ADVENTURES IN THE SOUTH.

BY

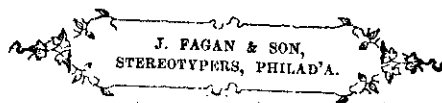
EMERSON BENNETT,

AUTHOR OF "PRAIRIE FLOWER," "CLARA MORELAND," "PHANTOM OF THE
FOREST," "BROTHERHOOD OF DEATH," "CAPTURED BRIDE," ETC., ETC.



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PUBLISHERS' ANNOUNCEMENT.

IT is with great pleasure that the publishers announce the issue, in book form, of a complete and uniform edition of the works of EMERSON BENNETT, of which "THE OUTLAW'S DAUGHTER" is the initial volume.

The writings of Mr. Bennett have been for so many years known to all English-speaking peoples, who have everywhere shown such full and eager appreciation of his vivid description of American frontier life, that comment on our part, further than a mere announcement of the forthcoming series, would seem unnecessary.

Apart from the vivid interest of these novels as works of fiction, they contain, incidentally, a mine of most valuable information, relating to the scenery, people, and customs of Border Life, unapproached in graphic eloquence by any American author since the days of Cooper.

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THE OUTLAW'S DAUGHTER.

CHAPTER I.

THE CYPRESS SWAMP.

I HAD finished my collegiate course, received my diploma as Doctor of Medicine, and the autumn of 18— found me a traveller in the Red River region of Louisiana. From the far waters of the North I had steamed swiftly down the great valley of the Mississippi, to the point where I had disembarked to pursue the rest of my journey by land; and, on the back of a noble beast, I was now, on a clear, fine day, slowly picking my way through one of the most gloomy scenes the Lord ever made.

A cypress swamp of the sunny South!—how shall I describe it? how convey to my reading friend a picture of its awful, death-like gloom?

It is a broad, dead level, of miles on miles in extent, with a muddy, sluggish river flowing through it. At every rise of this river, its waters cover all this level, making an alluvial deposit, and then stagnate there, and remain the greater portion of the year, becoming covered with a thick, green scum. Up through this rich alluvion, stagnant water, and green scum, spring millions of gray, crooked trunks, which branch out thickly and support a dense canopy of short,

dark-green leaves, that even at the best have a scorched and blasted and funereal look. Then these in turn are so draped and interwoven with long, dark Spanish moss, that the brightest sun of the brightest day barely makes a twilight of the sepulchral gloom beneath. No gay-plumed, merry warblers ever sing in these dark, dreary thickets — the air being too heavy with fatal miasma for their delicate throats and lungs; but wild beasts of various kinds, the hoarse-voiced, wallowing alligator, the gaping, deadly moccasin, the screeching owl, the flapping bat, with lizards, toads, and millions on millions of poisonous mosquitoes, here live and flourish like things of higher life in lovely regions.

Through one of these dismal, miasmatic swamps, I was slowly picking my way at the time I have chosen for the opening of my narrative. I could have gone up the Red River by steam; but my object being to cross the country, and visit various localities that could only be reached by land, I had purchased a horse at a small village on the Mississippi, and boldly set off, without either companion or guide. Thus far my overland journey had proved dreary enough. From the very first I had been riding through a swamp, that only at the driest season of the year could be crossed by travellers at all — the soft, alluvial bottom at all other times being under water from the inundations of the Red River and its tributaries and bayous. Properly speaking, there was no regular road through this swamp — only a sort of path made by cutting down trees and clearing away bushes to the width of a few feet, and which was occasionally used by the few scattered inhabitants living on the higher lands of the various water-courses.

It was now about the middle of the afternoon of a very warm day, and I had been riding for at least six hours through the dreary scene I have attempted to describe, and had not yet met a single human being, or seen the least sign of a habitation.

"Surely," thought I, "if I have not missed my way, I must soon strike some of the higher lands and find the cheerful mansion of a hospitable planter!"

I rode on for another hour, and came to a creek, or bayou, that crossed the path I was pursuing; and the first object I saw was a huge alligator wallowing through it, at which my horse became very restive, snorting with fear. The water was low down in this creek, and the bottom I could see was a sticky mud, that would endanger the life of my horse, if not my own, should I attempt to ride him across. How did people get over here? or did no one ever make that venture? Certainly there were no footprints on my whole route, to show that any one had passed here since the last rain. What should I do? The path I had been pursuing plainly continued on the other side, but I dared not ride my horse into such a muddy stream. Perhaps, by following along the bank, I could find a safe place to cross? I acted upon the idea; and the result was, after riding for an hour, I found myself so completely entangled among thick bushes, cane, reeds, coarse grass, and the long Spanish moss, as to be obliged to dismount to extricate myself and horse.

Here was a predicament surely! and I confess that, whatever else I thought, said, or did, I did not bless the hour in which I, a stranger in the country, had set off alone through such a horrid region. I had heard something of the cypress swamps of the South before leaving my native clime, but I now felt I knew a good deal more about one of them than was at all necessary for a healthy understanding of the subject. In the open path I had pursued, I had been annoyed with thousands of mosquitoes ever since setting out, but all I had before seen were as nothing to the black, living cloud I had now got into, and I began to fear they would poison myself and horse to death before I could get back to the place of lesser torment. I was tired and hungry, and so was my poor beast, and the prospect before us was dismal enough,

If I could have possibly retraced my steps to the Mississippi before nightfall, I would have done so, and abandoned my overland journey in this direction altogether; but such a thing was out of the question. Night would soon settle over this dismal scene; and the idea of passing long hours of darkness in such a horrible place filled me with shuddering apprehension. I was about to turn and go back to the road I had quitted, when, on peering into the thicket before me, I fancied I discovered a small opening; and, on pushing forward a rod or two further, I did find something resembling the path I had left, and which, coming down alongside of the bayou to that point, turned abruptly off toward the interior of the swamp. This path, too, on examination, I found had recently been used, for there were several fresh foot-prints of horses, and this discovery cheered me wonderfully. Where they had gone I certainly could go; and with the hope of soon reaching some habitation, I remounted and urged forward my beast, employing my hands meantime to open the black cloud of mosquitoes before my face and eyes.

A mile further on I came to a little wooden bridge over the bayou. It was so light and frail that I did not dare to trust my horse on it till I had dismounted and examined it, and then I led him over with great caution, he snuffing with fear. It struck me at first that this bridge was not a permanent fixture there, and on close inspection I found a rope attached to it, evidently for the purpose of dragging it away, or securing it to a tree during high-water. The path now led along the other bank of the bayou, and I pushed on as fast as I could; but found no improvement in the route — the same gloomy, monotonous, interminable swamp — till after a ride of some three or four miles, when I suddenly came upon harder and higher ground, and, to my great joy, discovered a small clearing among some loblolly pines, and in this clearing a log hut, which to my weary eye seemed to loom up like a princely palace.

"At last," thought I, "I shall find a place to rest for the night."

This, however, was by no means certain; for on riding up to the hut, I saw it had the appearance of being fastened up and untenanted. I hallooed, but received no answer. I dismounted and knocked at the door.

"Who dar?" said a smothered and feeble voice, that articulated with a sort of groan.

"A friendly stranger who has lost his way," I replied.

As there was no rejoinder to this, I ventured to push open the rude slab door. I was met by such an issue of foul air that I instantly sickened and started back involuntarily.

"In the name of Heaven, who are you? and what is the matter within here?" I exclaimed.

"O, marser, I 'spects I 's dying, I does," was the groaning but feeble response, in the unmistakable voice of a negro.

"What is the matter with you?"

"'Spect it am feber, marser."

"Are you alone?"

"Yes, marser."

"How long have you been sick?"

"I 's doesn't know dat, marser. Oh, for de lub of God, marser, jes' please fotch poor old Cato a drink of water!"

"Is there no one to wait on you, Cato?"

"No, marser, I libs alone; and dem as comes and finds old Cato sick goes away, and says dey won't risk dar lives for old nigger. Now, dear marser, please don't you done go 'way 'fore fatching poor old Cato a gourd ob water, and dat 's all I 'll eber want, I 'spect."

Here was a duty to perform that would be attended with the most fearful peril! I could only enter the foul, pestilential atmosphere of that miserable abode at the risk of life; but my profession and humanity both imperatively commanded me to go forward and dare all. Is the soldier to shrink from battle because of the flying bullets? Is the

physician to recoil from the gasping sufferer for fear of malaria? Out upon such cowardice! We have but one life to live, but one death to die, and let us both live and die so that we may not dread the judgment of Him who shall say to the uncharitable: "I was hungry and ye gave me no meat; I was thirsty and ye gave me no drink!"

I tied my horse and went in. I threw open a couple of wooden shutters and let in what light and air I could. I found an old gray-headed negro lying on some filthy straw in one corner, sick almost unto death with a wasting fever. I will not revolt the feelings of the reader with a description of the horrible scene. My thorough collegiate course had fortified my senses against many sights and scents that the uninitiated would shrink from; but what I now encountered was almost too much for me. I did my duty, however. The old negro had been many days sick, and for the last three not a thing had passed his lips. How he had done without food was easily enough understood; but his sufferings for want of water had been terrible; his tongue was swollen and his parched lips cracked; and he now piteously begged for the liquid element as a man about to be murdered might plead for life. It was contrary to the medical rules of that day to give a fever-patient much water; but I felt that the poor fellow could not long survive without it; and as I had only a few simple medicines with me, and probably could not reach his case so as to afford him any relief, I resolved that his last wish should be gratified, and this consolation be his in his exit from a world of pain and trouble. I took up a gourd lying by his side, and he directed me to a spring of clear, cold water, that bubbled up at the foot of a large pine tree. When I returned with the vessel full, he was almost frantic with desire; his eyes fixed on it and glared like a maniac's. I raised his head and held the gourd to his lips. With all his remaining strength he seized it with both hands and drank the whole of its contents.

"God bress you, good marser!—more!" he articulated.

"I am afraid I have allowed you to kill yourself already," I answered.

"No, no—more! more!—God bress you, marser! more!"

I went to the spring and filled the vessel a second time. I judged it held a quart, if not more. On my return the old negro drank the whole of this.

"Dar!" he murmured, with a satisfied air; "de Lor' in Heaven bress you, good marser! Old Cato kin die happy now."

He laid back with a smile, closed his eyes, and seemed to fall asleep. For some time I stood and watched him, expecting every moment would be his last. To my surprise I soon perceived that his breathing was becoming more regular and easy, and that a gentle perspiration was moistening his hitherto parched skin. I felt his pulse, and thought I discovered a decided change for the better.

Could it be that the course we physicians took to cure in certain cases was the very one to kill? Perhaps so; for the so-called science of medicine has always groped in the dark, only getting at the truth through an accident or blunder. This is an honest confession to the reader, though I will not positively assert that I have often made it to my patients.

Leaving the old negro in a gentle sleep, I now went out into the open air, where I could breathe freer while determining what to do. My first intention was to ride on and endeavor to find some hospitable planter with whom I could pass the night, and then send one of the servants to the assistance of old Cato; but on perceiving that the sun was already sunk behind a black cloud that lay heavily along the horizon, threatening a storm, I thought it would be imprudent to start—for, the way being unknown to me, I should probably get lost and be in a worse condition than I was now. If I could manage to get anything to eat here for myself and beast, and pass the night, I should then have a full day

before me. I crossed the clearing to find grazing for my horse, and discovered a long, low structure, pretty well hidden in a thicket. I went into it, and, to my surprise, found it to be a stable for horses, large enough to contain several, and with plenty of hay and grain. What did this stable here? But perhaps Cato was a free negro, richer than I had supposed, and lived by raising horses! At least here were comfortable quarters for my own weary and hungry beast, and I lost no time in making use of them, and putting him where he at least was contented. This done, I next began to look out for my hungry self. I went into the cabin again, and found the negro, not dead, but quietly sleeping. I hunted about the squalid place, and discovered a small bag of rice, a few potatoes, some salt, and an old kettle. I carried these out into the open air, kindled a fire, and cooked a meal that a starving man would have relished much better than an epicure. However, it served to appease the cravings of hunger; and, everything considered, I was thankful for what I received.

By the time I had finished my repast, the shades of evening were rapidly settling over the whole scene. The cloud in the west was gradually stretching up toward the zenith, with occasional flashes of lightning, and low, rumbling thunder. I went into the house and found my patient still asleep. Not wishing to disturb him, nor remain in a place so very unpleasant, I partly closed the door to keep out the coming rain, left the shutters open for ventilation, and then set off toward the stable, intending to camp down there for the night. I had only gone a few steps, however, when I heard voices, and the tramping sound of horses, and I stopped to see who might be approaching. A minute after, a couple of mounted men emerged from the thicket into the clearing, and I heard a voice exclaim, as if in joyful surprise:

"Great ginger! If there ain't a house at last, Peter Reich-

stadt, then my name ain't Caleb Stebbins! I told you that are hoss-track would lead to so'thing, and it has. Jehoshaphat! but I'm tired as all git eout! A log cabing it is; but what could you expect on sich a tarnation route as this 'ere? I snum tu Guinea, I'm glad of any place tu poke my head in, and git a bite, arter the ride I've had in that derved old swamp, 'mong them alligators, snakes, and muskeeters! Jerusalem! how they did bite, consarn 'em! and I would n't wonder, Peter, if I've lost half my blood this blessed day!"

"I dinks dem was dakes more from me as you already!" was the grumbling reply of the second speaker.

"And so they ought tu, Peter, for you 've got twice as much blood tu spare as I have. If I's as big and fat as you be, I would n't mind losing a few pounds of flesh and blood; but you see I ha'int got nothing tu spare."

"No," returned the other, with a kind of chuckle, "you is a goople of dimes more like a rail as me."

"Oh, wal, I'm not so all-fired thin, nuther; but I ain't a hogshead set up on legs, that's a fact!"

"Vat you means by der hogshead mit der legs, eh?" quickly demanded the other, with some spirit.

"Oh, nothing, Peter, only jest a joke, you know! Wal, here we be, right smack up tu the house, and all dark inside, and not a critter stirring. There's where there's ben a fire though, outside, so I guess there's somebody reound. Hello the house!"

The travellers had now stopped in front of the hut; but as it was between them and me, I was not perceived. The conversation I had heard had disclosed to me the names and nationality of the two men. Caleb Stebbins was a downright down-Easter, and Peter Reichstadt was a full-blooded Dutchman. I was glad to know I was about to have such companions in that wild, out-of-the-way place; and being from the North myself, Caleb Stebbins seemed quite near to me—as if he might be an old friend or relation—for such is the

effect, when far away from home, of meeting some one from the same section of country as yourself. As I had not yet been seen by either of the travellers, and as I felt pretty certain I knew my men, I at once resolved upon having a little quiet joke of my own. Coming suddenly around the corner of the hut, just as the Yankee, having tried the second halloo, was in the act of dismounting, I looked at him steadily for a moment, and then ran up to him, seized his hand, and exclaimed:

"Why, as I live, I do believe this is Caleb Stebbins, from away down East! My dear fellow, how do you do? I am delighted to see you here!" And then, before the astonished Yankee could get his open mouth shut for a reply, I turned to his companion, and added: "And here is Peter Reichstadt, too! — this is indeed a double pleasure!"

The gaping astonishment of the two men was to me ludicrous in the extreme, and it was only with the greatest difficulty I could restrain myself from a burst of laughter directly in their faces. They had of course forgotten the fact of their names having been spoken in my hearing; and supposing me to be really acquainted with them, both looked comically puzzled and foolish while trying their best to bring my person to their recollection, and remember where and when they had seen me before.

"Wal, I snum tu Guinea," at length exclaimed the Yankee, doffing his hat and scratching his head, "I'm tarnal glad tu meet an old acquaintance, like you be, down here, that knows me, that's a fact; but if you was tu skin me alive this minute, I could n't call you by name, or jest exactly tell where I'd seen you afore. Say, Peter, how is 't with you now?"

"I dinks it was a good ways back already!" replied the Dutchman.

"What!" said I; "don't you know Walbridge — Leslie Walbridge — who graduated at the University in Philadelphia?"

The Yankee and the Dutchman stared hard at me, and then thoughtfully, inquiringly, and curiously at each other. Evidently they wanted to recognize me, and it amazed them to find they could not.

"It's mighty queer, I snum!" at length replied Mr. Stebbins; "but I can't somehow jest recollect you this minute; though, if I du know you (as I 'spect I du, or else how'd you know me)? I'm right glad tu meet you agin out here, where good folks, or in fact any folks at all, seem tu be rather scass. Be you the owner of this 'ere shanty?"

"No, I am only a traveller, putting up here for the night."

"Yes, wal, I thought you didn't look like a feller that had got down tu ownin' sich a consarn of a house exactly. Why in thunder don't people build frame houses, like we du down East, and not waste good logs in putting up sich humbly things to live in, I'd like tu know? I guess may be you're the traveller, then, whose hoss-tracks we've ben follering for miles?"

"Very likely."

"Yes; wal, who's the owner here? and where is he?"

"An old negro, who is lying sick inside, with a very dangerous fever, is the only person I have been able to find on the premises."

"Great ginger!" cried the Yankee, starting back with a look of alarm; "d' you 'spect the fever's ketching?"

"It may be — I would not like to sleep in the same room with him."

"Guess not! Jehoshaphat! Phew! What'll we du, with night and that are thunder-shower right on us?"

"I think of sleeping in the stable."

"Then there's a stable, hey?"

"A good one, and plenty of fodder."

"Hooray! that's luck! hey, Peter?"

"I dinks yaw!" replied his companion.

The two men now hastened to stable and feed their horses ; and by the time this matter was completed, it had become quite dark, and large drops of rain were beginning to fall. I explained in what manner I had made my own supper ; but though quite hungry themselves, they were obliged to defer following my example while the storm lasted, which was about two hours.

As soon as the rain ceased, they set about collecting sticks, and in a few minutes had a bright, cheerful fire, over which they succeeded in boiling some rice and potatoes. Taking a blazing brand, I went into the hut meantime and examined my patient, whom I was much gratified to find still sleeping as gently as an infant, and I left him for the night.

In personal appearance there was quite a contrast between my new acquaintances, though each was about the same age, say five-and-twenty, and some three years my senior. The Yankee was of the medium size and rather thin, with a keen eye, and sharp, shrewd features ; while the Dutchman was short and stout, with a broad, full face, and a dull, phlegmatic expression. I may also state here that they had first met on the Ohio as travellers, had discovered through conversation that each was bound southward on a tour of observation and possible speculation, and had since kept company and become very warm friends. They had purchased their horses in Tennessee, and had ridden them down through the State of Mississippi, and had finally entered upon the same journey up the Red River as myself, and on the same day, but at a later hour. They had followed my horse's tracks, and thus overtaken me at the negro's hut. For a considerable time they were much puzzled to know where and when they had met me before ; but at length I explained the joke to them, and we all had a hearty laugh together.

As soon as they had finished their supper, we put out the

fire, retired to the stable, threw ourselves down on some hay, and congratulated ourselves that we were so comfortably fixed for passing the night in peace and safety. We hoped for undisturbed and refreshing repose, and so fell asleep, but only to be awakened in a manner not the most congenial to travellers in a strange place.

CHAPTER II.

THE KIDNAPPERS.

I WAS dreaming of standing at the altar with a young and lovely bride, when suddenly some dark body, surmounted by a death's head, passed between us. I seemed to start back in horror, and fancied the warning word, "Beware!" was uttered in my ear. I awoke with a shudder, and heard the voice of Stebbins, in a cautious whisper:

"I say, yeou, Doctor Walbridge—be you awake?"

"Yes, what is it?" I replied, in the same cautious manner.

"There's so' thing going on that I don't exactly like."

"Where? what?"

"There! hark! don't you hear them voices?"

I did now hear strange voices, as of several men conversing together in low tones, and also the stamping of horses' feet.

"Belated travellers, perhaps," suggested I.

"They ain't strangers like us, any how, or they'd never found out this 'ere place in the dark!" said Stebbins. "I tell you I don't like it, that's a fact."

"What do you apprehend?"

"Wal, I don't know ; but when a feller's away from home—a stranger, in a strange place, in a strange country—he's like tu be afeard of 'most everything. I've hearn say

that there's some putty rough chaps down in these 'ere parts, that would n't much stop at cutting a man's throat if they could make anything by duing on 't."

"Are you armed?"

"Wal, yes, I've got a couple of pistols; but the flints ain't none of the best, I guess. I bought 'em 'fore I started, and loaded 'em; but, I snum tu Jerusalem, I never expected tu use 'em!"

"You had better reprime them," said I; "and, if necessary, I can lend you a couple of flints. I also have a brace of pistols, which I know to be in good order — for, ever since setting out from home, I have made it a point to be prepared for the worst. How is it with your friend Peter?"

"Oh, he's well armed tew. But I say, yeou — d' you expect we're a-going tu git into a muss now? Great ginger! It's what I don't like a bit."

"I hope we shall have no trouble, of course, but I know no more what may happen than yourself. If we should have trouble, I suppose you will stand your ground?"

"If there ain't no way tu git off, I suppose I'll have tu," replied the cautious Yankee; "but fighting's a thing I don't like, I tell you!"

"Is your friend Peter awake?"

"Yaw, I was woke up already der fust ones," replied Peter himself. "I was shoost sleeping away a good deal, ven I hears der horses and der mens, and I shakes mine friend here, and dells him."

"You will fight, Peter, if necessary?"

"Yaw, I dinks yes."

"Well, now, let us prepare ourselves for the worst, and keep perfectly quiet till we find out something definite. These men may be only neighboring planters, who are out for a night-hunt, or are returning home from some gathering, in which case their arrival here may be rather fortunate for us than otherwise. Let us keep quiet now, and listen, and

perhaps we may gather from their conversation what we are so anxious to know. Hark! they are coming this way. Don't let them even hear us breathe!"

The tramp of the horses and the voices of the speakers drew nearer as I spoke, and immediately after we were able to distinguish the words:

"You know, Blake, the captain said we should only stop here long enough to feed, if we did at all, and he'd much rather we'd push through to Lake Dismal at once and make the thing sure. We don't know what minute the country may be up; and some of these planters are devils on a trail after either horse or nigger; and this business is even worse, you know. If they catch us, good-by to this world."

"Oh, you are always scared at your shadow, Joe. How in blue blazes are they going to catch us, even if we do stay here all night? Have n't we ridden twenty miles to-night at least, and been ferried over one broad bayou, so that even a bloodhound couldn't follow?"

"Still, you know, the captain —"

"Fiddlesticks!" interrupted the other; "pure, downright — nonsense! Of course, the captain wants us to be cautious, and who's a-going to be anything else? We can stay here in safety, and go on all the better at daylight. In fact, it's my opinion we can't go on *till* daylight; for nothing but a jack-o'-lantern could ever get safely through that infernal swamp on such a night as this, and more especially after the rain we've had! We shall be all the better for this rest, the horses will be the better for it, and so will the girl. Come, boys, what do you say?"

"Jest you does the fixing on't for us, and we'll do what you says," repeated the voice of a coarse, illiterate fellow.

"Yes, them's 'em — that's what we'll do," observed another.

"Then, if you leave it to me," rejoined the voice of Blake, "I shall decide on staying here till daylight."

"And of course you will take the responsibility?" said the voice of him who had been addressed as Joe.

"Yes, I'll take the responsibility!" answered Blake.

"Enough said, then! Shall we stable our horses, or feed them outside?"

"Where's old Cato? He'll know best. Let him arrange and attend to them while we're stretching our limbs."

"Thar's whar I 'spect he's got us," put in one of the coarser ruffians—for ruffians I now felt certain they were; "that nigger I reckon's gone dead!"

"Dead, Jim!"

"Would n't wonder ef his carcass was rotting inside the shanty, that I would n't!"

"Why do you think so?"

"Cause, when I's this here way a few days ago, he war going it rough with a——swamp fever, and I don't b'lieve the cussed thing let up on him. Anybody as wants to kin put thar nose in the door, and take a whiff and ax the question; but if I does may I be blamed!"

"Well, then, we must attend to our horses ourselves," said the voice of Blake; "and I think we may as well stable them, for they'll eat their grain better from the mangers. Somebody pass the lantern here."

"Now is our time!" whispered I to my companions; "we must leave the stable before they enter here, or we shall be caught."

"But where'll we go tu?" inquired Stebbins, in evident alarm.

"Anywhere that will afford us concealment."

"Great ginger! and how'll we git our horses out?"

"We can't—we must leave them where they are."

"Maybe these 'ere scamps'll run off with 'em?"

"Well, do you want to lose your life by staying here to guard them?"

"Not by a great hokey sight, I snum!"

"Then you have no time to lose. Follow me, and don't make the slightest noise."

I hurried to the principal door, opened it softly, and slipped out, my companions being close at my heels. I saw, by the dim light of a lantern which one of the party held up before him, a group of some half-a-dozen men and as many horses, surrounding a female figure, who appeared to have a handkerchief bound over her mouth, which she was making signs to have removed.

"What's the use of keeping her gagged, Joe?" said the voice of Blake. "She'll be quiet here, I dare say; and if she's so foolish as to set up a cry, we can gag her again. That handkerchief must be hurting her delicate mouth, and you know we were not to use any more force than necessary. I'm for removing it at once. What do you say?"

"I'm willing," answered Joe, "if she'll agree not to scream."

"There, she nods her head in reply," rejoined Blake, "and so off with it."

The stable being, as I have said, in the centre of a thicket, probably placed there for a nefarious purpose, and intended to be concealed from the casual eye, it was an easy matter for us to secrete ourselves in a position where we could watch the ruffians and overhear their conversation, and at the same time run but little risk of discovery. That there was some foul scheme afoot was very evident, and I was anxious to find out what it was, with a determination, so far as lay in my power, to frustrate villainy and right the wronged. That some female had been kidnapped, and borne hither with speed from a distant locality, was clearly to be inferred from the conversation we had overheard; but whether she was white or black, young or old, handsome or homely, we had yet to learn. The first words she spoke, however, after the gag was removed from her mouth, convinced me that she was intelligent, refined, and educated; and to say that from

that moment I became most deeply interested in her welfare, is only to admit that I was not callous to all feelings of humanity.

"O, mer!" she exclaimed, as soon as she could speak, "to what strange, wild place have you brought me? and what are you going to do with me?"

"Don't be alarmed, Miss Brandon," replied the voice of Blake, in a tone of some deference; "we're not a-going to do you any bodily harm, and only put that gag in your mouth from the necessity of the case; for it would n't have done, you see, to have had any more shrieking from you at the start."

"You know me, then, it seems?" she said.

"Of course I do," answered the other.

"I do not remember your face," she pursued.

"Probably not, for I reckon you never saw it before."

"Do you know my father, Colonel Brandon?"

"Well, we all know something of him, I'm thinking — eh, boys?" replied the other, in a tone that seemed to indicate some secret enmity.

To this there came a growling response from the other ruffians, interlarded with several coarse, wicked oaths.

"Better not say much about him!" put in the voice of Joe.

"Horset's right!" said Blake; "your father's name, Miss, don't bring up the best feelings in this party."

"Horset!" repeated the lady; "is this person named Horset?"

"Joe Horset, at your service," replied the man himself.

"Do you know me?"

"Not personally, sir — though your name sounds familiarly."

"You've heard it before, then?"

"I am almost certain I have."

"Was it connected with a public whipping?" inquired the other, in a stiller, angry tone.

"My father is rich," said the lady quickly, as if seeking to avoid a reply to the question of the other; "and if you will put me to ransom, I will insure you all a handsome sum and no questions asked."

"We're obeying orders, and have nothing to do with your ransom," said Blake.

"Who is your chief, then?"

"That we don't tell."

"Nor what you are going to do with me?"

"No, nor that neither. Come, boys," he pursued, in a commanding tone, "put up these horses now at once, and then let us see about passing the night in the most comfortable way. Please dismount, miss — I'll help you down. There you are, now, and probably feel rather disagreeable from being soaked. Shall we kindle a fire for you to dry yourself by? or will you camp down in the stable, and try to get some sleep? for we must be off again at daylight. I would offer you the hut there; but if the old nigger inside is either sick or dead, I suppose it would n't suit you."

"I am your prisoner," replied the lady, "and will do what you advise, thanking you for all the kindness you may be pleased to show me."

"That's a sensible way to talk, at all events; and if you don't feel too disagreeable in your wet clothes, I think you had better camp down in the stable at once. You may rest without fear; for we've got our orders, and none of us will disturb you."

"And why am I kidnapped? and where are you going to take me? and when shall I see the man you call your captain or chief?" inquired the lady, in a tone of self-possession that to my mind indicated a rather remarkable personage.

"Please don't ask me any troublesome questions, Miss Brandon," said Blake, "but decide at once whether we shall kindle a fire for you or not."

"No, sir!" replied the lady, in a haughty, offended tone;

"don't trouble yourself any more about my welfare than your *orders* absolutely require!"

"Very well, miss — I take you at your word!" rejoined Blake; "and so please move on to the stable."

At this moment there came an exclamation from one of the men who were putting up the horses.

"Hello!" called out the fellow; "here's somebody ahead of us; here's horses already!"

The rest of the party hurried to the stable with the lantern, and great was the surprise of all at finding our horses there. At first they seemed disposed to think that the animals had been put there by some of their own gang; but on discovering our bridles, saddles, and saddle-bags, they decided they belonged to travellers; and the next natural question was concerning the whereabouts of the owners.

"They're in the shanty, I reckon," said one; "and if we want to take 'em by surprise, we'd better not make too much noise."

"That's a fact," returned Blake; "and so, whist, boys — be quiet! Open the saddle-bags there," he added, "and let us see what is in them!"

"Great ginger! they'll git all my things!" whined Caleb Stebbins, almost loud enough to be overheard.

"You had better keep your mouth shut, or they will get you too!" said I, in a stern whisper.

"Consarn 'em! How mad it makes me tu stand here duing nothing and have sich thieves fumbling over my things!" returned the Yankee, in a cautious whisper.

"What have you got in your saddle-bags of value? money?"

"No, but lots of notions and things."

"Hello! here's a Bible!" said one of the ruffians.

"That's mine!" whispered Caleb.

"And here's a hymn-book!"

"That's mine, tew!" groaned the anxious Stebbins.

"And here's a fine-tooth comb, a lot of tracts, a shaving-brush, soap, razor, a thimble, some needles, thread, two shirts, a pair of dirty stockings, a —"

"There, that will do, Joe," interrupted the voice of Blake; "we don't want to waste our time here over such trash, which I suppose belongs to some canting, snivelling abolition preacher, whom we'll hang on the first tree as soon as we catch him!"

"Great ginger! Only hear 'em now!" gasped the frightened Yankee.

"Any money there, Horset?"

"Don't find any."

"Pitch the things to the dogs, then, and let us hunt for the owners. Somebody take the lantern, and look through the stable — up on the mow — all around."

While this was going on, we took the precaution to silently withdraw ourselves further back into the thicket, though not entirely beyond earshot. Presently we heard one of the fellows say:

"Thar's nobody here now, though I've seed a place here as looks like they mought have camped down."

"Well, Welsh, do you and Ditson stay here and keep a sharp look-out, while the rest of us slip down to the hut and see what we can find there!" said the voice of Blake, in a guarded tone. "If we have got strangers here among us, it is very important that we find them as soon as possible. Miss Brandon, you will please to remain here till we come back. Boys, the lady stays with you: sharp's the word, you know! Come, pass along the lantern — for you don't need it, and we do: I'm not going into that nigger kennel in the dark."

A minute after, we knew, from what we had heard and by the movement of the light, that all but two of the ruffians had set off to search for us at the dwelling of the old negro; and it then occurred to me that we might perform a very

worthy exploit, in their absence, by stealing up and mastering the two fellows at the stable, getting out our horses, and dashing away with the young lady—or, at least, that this would be a very worthy exploit if we *could* accomplish it. But the question was, could this be done? and would it be prudent to attempt it? In a hurried whisper I threw out the suggestion to my companions, and the cautious Yankee replied:

"It 'd be a tarnal slick trick if we could du it, doctor—but I'm afeard we could n't. S'pose we'd fail—would n't we be a tarnal sight wuss off than we be now?"

"We should not be any better off, that is certain," I replied. "We have some things in our favor for the attempt. We are three to two against these fellows at the stable, and could easily master and manage them; but then, if they were to give the alarm to their companions, and so bring them upon us before we could get our horses ready for mounting, it would be an unpleasant business for us, to say the least."

"Don't let's run any risks, then!" said the cautious Caleb; "for, consarn it all, I don't want tu git into any more trouble!"

"But our horses, Mr. Stebbins—how are we ever to get possession of them again, unless we embrace the present opportunity?"

"And all my things, tew!" groaned the Yankee. "I snum tu Jerusalem! it's tew bad, that's a fact! D'you think we could venter and git off safe now? come!"

"I think perhaps it might be a fair risk," I replied. "In the first place, I believe we could steal up so as to take these fellows completely by surprise, and at least secure them, if not prevent them giving an alarm; that done, we should be three to four against the others (for I only counted six), masters of the stable, and as well armed, probably, as themselves, with all the horses at our command. In the second place, the hut is distant from twenty to thirty rods, and,

unless a very loud alarm were to be raised, the main party might not hear anything to draw them back here in a hurry, in which case I think we should have ample time to bridle and saddle our horses and get off."

"Great ginger! and where 'd we go tu?"

"Ah, that indeed! I know no more of the country than yourself."

"And them fellers coming right arter us tew!"

"For our own safety, it would be best to either kill their horses, hamstring them, or turn them loose."

"How 'd it du tu take 'em along, hey?—kind o' seize 'em like, hey?" queried the Yankee, with an eagerness that showed he was by no means indifferent to gathering an honest penny by the spoils of war.

"Before we attempt to seize their horses, I think we had better make sure of our own," replied I. "And that reminds me that time is passing, that the others may soon return, and that, if we are to do anything, we must set about it forthwith."

"I snum tu Guinea! I don't know what tu say now—I don't, really!" rejoined Caleb, in a very nervous, fidgety manner. "If I's only sartin we'd come out all right, I would n't mind the risk. I ain't afeard, you see—but I don't like tu fail, you know. What du you think, Peter? Come now!"

"I dinks what you dinks!" replied the Dutchman. "I don't dinks not'ing minezself. I shoost does how you wants me."

"In other words, you are ready to stand, run, or fight?" said I.

"Yaw, dat's it."

Stebbins, however, could not exactly make up his mind what was *best* for us to do.

"If I only knowed we'd succeed, you know," he explained, at considerable length, "I'd be your man afore you

could say 'Jack Robinson'; but I'd hate tu fail in this 'ere business, most tarnally. It ain't cause I'm afeard — for that ain't the natur' of the Stebbinses; my gran'ther fit in the Revolution, and I guess I should n't run very fur if I's in battle myself — though I'll allow I don't hanker arter that are kind of glory; but I don't jest want tu put myself in them fellers' power, that's a fact — specially sence, as you heerd 'em say, they'd hang me tu the fust tree."

"In short, to make an end of the whole matter," said I, "if I go, I must either go alone, or with only Peter for a companion."

In reply to this, the Yankee was proceeding with another lengthy explanation, when suddenly his voice was checked by the shout of one of the men at the stable.

"Hello!" cried the fellow, at the top of his lungs; "fetch back the lantern, quick! The gal's gi'n us the slip!"

The next moment I heard the rustling of the bushes and a lady's dress quite near us; and making a few hurried steps forward, I encountered her so suddenly as literally to find her in my very arms.

CHAPTER III.

PLANNING ESCAPE.

HIST, lady!" said I, in a low, impressive tone; "we are your friends. Do not be alarmed; keep perfectly quiet, and we may save you!"

Her breath came quick, and I could feel her heart beat during the brief period she leaned against my breast.

"Are you one of the travellers these villains are looking for?" she inquired, in a manner that showed her possessed of great presence of mind.

"Yes, Miss Brandon," I answered; "and we have been near enough to your captors, since they took the gag from your mouth, to hear nearly all of their conversation. Thus, you see, among other things, I have already learned your name."

"And where are your friends?"

"Right here — close at hand."

"I'm one on 'em, miss, at your sarvice!" said Caleb Stebbins, coming forward; "and, great ginger! if I ain't glad you've got away from them are fellers, you can pizen me. I only wish you'd brung our hosses with you; but that, of course, you could n't du, and I'm only joking 'bout that. How'd you du it, any how?"

"The ruffians in charge of me were not holding me," replied the lady; "and, while they were busily engaged in conversation, I slipped off. But we are not safe here!" she hurriedly and anxiously added; "we must get further off! for they will soon beat up this thicket."

"This way," said I, taking hold of her hand and setting forward, I knew not whither, except that it was deeper into the wood and further from the stable.

Meantime the loud calls of the two men at the stable had been heard and answered by the party who had gone to the hut, and we could now and then catch a glimmer of the light of the lantern through the trees, as they came running back to begin the search for the lady who was escaping with us.

"Oh, gentlemen, if you can succeed in delivering me from these ruffians and restoring me to my father, you shall all be handsomely rewarded!" said the lady, as we hurried back deeper into the wood.

"For myself, I want no reward beyond the satisfaction I shall feel in my heart in rescuing a dove from the talons of vultures!" returned I.

"Nor I nother," cried Caleb Stebbins, "'cept, if I lose my

hoss and things, I would n't much mind having about that are amount made up to me, 'cause it 'ud go putty hard with me, in the present state of my puss, tu have tu buy another critter and the rest."

"And how is it with you, Peter?" I inquired.

"Vell, I don't says not'ing," answered the Dutchman, "'cause I not much don't speak English already."

"These two persons," I explained to Miss Brandon, "are almost as much strangers to me as to yourself—we never having met till this evening; but I believe I can safely promise that, reward or no reward, they will do everything in their power to save you."

"Great ginger! yes, I guess so!" responded Caleb.

"Yaw, dat's it!" added the Dutchman.

"Well, gentlemen, I assure you your kindness shall not be overlooked," rejoined Miss Brandon, "and your horses shall be replaced by as many as you may choose to name."

"Ph-e-e-w!" was the surprised and delighted half-whistle of the Yankee. "I snum tu Guinea! I guess you're putty rich, miss?"

"My father is, sir."

"How much du you calculate he's wo'th now?"

"I have no idea of the amount, sir; but he owns a large cotton plantation near the Red River, worked by a great many field hands, and a large sugar plantation in one of the lower counties."

"Du tell! I snum! Jerusalem! Be you an only child, now, or might there be others?"

"I have one brother older, and one brother and sister younger than myself."

"And how old be you, if it's a fair question?" pursued the inquisitive Yankee.

"Come, come, Mr. Stebbins, I think you are getting rather too personal!" I interposed. "Because we are doing a common act of humanity, in trying to save the lady from the

hands of robbers and murderers, we have no right to catechise her as if she were on the witness-stand."

"Nay," rejoined the lady, "let him question to his heart's content, and then he will be better satisfied. If I am not mistaken, he is a native of one of the New England States?"

"Jest as sure's you live, miss—Connecticut; but how'd you come tu guess?"

"Because I spent three years at a female seminary in Massachusetts, and know something of the peculiar idioms of the people of that section."

"Sho! you don't say so! Wal, I like you all the better for that now; and I'll see you safe home ag'in, or die trying on't—I snum I will!"

"Thank you kindly, sir! You asked about my age: I am just turned of nineteen."

"Ain't married, I guess, be you?"

"I should hardly be called *Miss* Brandon if I were."

"That's a fact, I snum! I 'spect I'm kind of forgitting myself. Wal, I don't want tu question you tew much now; but I'd jest like tu know how them scamps come tu git hold of you, and carry you off from home, and what they was going to du with you?"

"What they intended to do with me, I know no more than yourself, sir!" replied Miss Brandon. "I had been riding out alone—as has often been my custom during the past year—and was returning through a belt of wood, near sunset, about a quarter of a mile from my father's dwelling, when suddenly three men sprung into the path before me. One instantly seized my horse by the bit, and the other two dragged me from his back and proceeded to gag me, though not before I had uttered two or three loud screams, and had the satisfaction of knowing they were heard by the overseer and some of the negroes in the adjoining field. Ere they could come to my rescue, however, one of the ruffians sprung upon my beast, secured me in front of him, and rode swiftly

away, the other two men following him. A few hundred yards from where I was seized, the man in charge of me stopped in a thicket, where there were six horses and three other men. As soon as the two on foot reached this place, they all mounted separate animals and dashed away together, one riding on each side of me and guiding my horse, and the four others leading and following, so that I had no means of getting away. It soon grew dark, and a heavy shower overtook us, but they did not halt. They forded one or two streams on their route, and, about an hour before reaching this place, they crossed a broad bayou, or pond, in a large, clumsy boat, that they poled over. This is pretty much all I know of the matter, except what I suppose you have overheard of our conversation since our arrival here."

"Permit me to say, Miss Brandon," I now joined in, "that I think you a remarkably courageous young lady — one out of a thousand, if not a million — to appear so cool and collected under such fearful circumstances!"

"Perhaps I am not so cool and collected as you suppose," she replied; "but I feel that my liberty, if not my life, or something worse, is at stake, and I have nerved myself to speak and act as I have. There is certainly no use of dying more than once; and if kind Providence will give me one chance of escape, I will try not to miss it through timidity or hesitation."

"I hope that chance is now yours; and, though a stranger to you, I am resolved to stake my life on the issue."

"Oh, sir, believe me, I feel more gratitude than words can express!" she rejoined, in a tone that betrayed considerable emotion.

All this time we were steadily pushing forward through the thicket, but speaking in low, guarded tones, and making as little noise as possible. Occasionally we heard the ruffians calling to each other, cursing and swearing; but their voices seemed growing more distant, as if we were gradually get-

ting further and further from them. I had no fear of their finding us during the night; but unless we should be far away from them by daylight, the case might be different. I mentioned this fact to Miss Brandon, and inquired if she had any idea of our present locality, and if she thought she could readily find her way back to her father's plantation.

"I regret to say I do not believe I could," she answered. "I was never here before; and, my ride having mostly been made in the night, I do not even know in what direction to look for my home."

"You mentioned crossing a broad bayou, or pond, in a boat."

"Yes; but there are so many such in this region that I can form no conjecture from that fact whether our route was either east, west, or south from our starting-point. I am only certain that we are on the southern side of Red River."

"This is a perplexing predicament," said I, "and I am really at a loss what to advise or do. If we were to get upon the route over which you came, and hurry on in the proper direction, we should soon be stopped by the pond."

"But I say you, Doctor Walbridge," now quickly put in the Yankee, "if there's a boat on 't, on this side, that are'd be all in our favor, would n't it? Hey, Peter! what d' you say?"

"Yaw, I dinks so already," replied the Dutchman.

"True," returned I, catching at the idea as the first ray of hope I had seen, "the boat and pond would be in our favor indeed, for by that means we might cut off pursuit from these ruffians long enough to make our escape a safe success. But how to find the pond in the dark — that is the point!"

We halted where we were, and discussed the matter for half an hour, each one suggesting whatever struck him or her at the moment as the most feasible for the accomplish-

ment of our purpose. At last it was decided that we should return to the stable, or at least as near to it as our safety would permit, and endeavor to get into the road or path by which the ruffians had come hither, believing if we could once find that, and get started in the right direction, we could easily keep it to the water and the boat.

"By-the-by, Miss Brandon," said I, "another thought has just struck me. Had this boat a ferryman in attendance when you reached it, or did the kidnappers themselves row it over?"

"Two or three of them dismounted and poled or rowed it over," she replied; "but I am not so certain there was not a man there in waiting for them. It seems, now I think of it, as if there might have been another among them while they were crossing; but it was very dark — the lantern, which had been lighted and carried by the foremost, was at no time very near me during the passage across the water — and, being a good deal excited under the circumstances, I did not notice whether the number of the ruffians was increased or not."

"If there was no one in charge of the boat, it will probably be where they left it," said I, "otherwise it may be on the other side. It also struck me that if one or more of their party should be in possession, we might have some trouble with him or them; but time enough to think of that when we get there, perhaps. The first thing is to find the road leading thither, and this we must set about at once."

Accordingly, we began to cautiously pick our way back to the stable; and so slowly, stealthily, and uncertainly did we work to this purpose, that it was a full half hour before we reached the opening near which it stood. On our way thither we heard nothing of the villains, and, as we now paused to listen, all around us remained as silent as if no such dread beings were abroad on a dark mission. Had they given up the search and gone to rest, or were they out seeking us in the dark wood?

In a cautious whisper I warned my companions to tread more stealthily than ever, and not to make a sound above a breath; and in this manner we moved out from the thicket in single file, and advanced to the spot where I had first seen the ruffians halted. The night was still, and so dark that we could only see each other in the opening as so many shadows. How were we to find the path through the forest even now?

"As well as you can remember," I whispered to Miss Brandon, "lead on in the direction from which you first came hither."

"I will do my best," she replied.

In less than a quarter of an hour more we found what we believed to be the path by which the kidnappers had approached the hut. I got down on my knees and felt the ground carefully.

"We are right," I whispered, "for here are the prints of horses' hoofs coming from a direction opposite to ours."

With this we all took hold of each other, and began to move forward on the trace, or trail, in a slow and noiseless manner.

In a few minutes we found ourselves passing through a thicket on a travelled path, and were satisfied we had discovered the right way to escape.

And all this time we had heard nothing more of the ruffians.

After getting back in this way some half a mile from the stable, and still feeling satisfied that we were right, we all began to breathe more freely, and became more sanguine of success.

"Consarn it all, if we only had our hosses now!" said Caleb Stebbins.

"And may we not have?" said I, as a new idea occurred to me.

"Why, how'll we git 'em?"

"By a bold *ruse*, if you have the courage to venture it, Mr. Stebbins."

"I'd ventur' so'thing, I snum, rather than lose that are critter of mine, and them saddle-bags and things, for all Miss Brandon here says she'll see it made up tu me."

"Oh, gentlemen, I beg of you think not of your property as property, if you can aid me to escape without it!" said the lady. "If it is the value of your horses, rather than their present use, you are considering, let all go as nothing, and I promise that you shall be repaid tenfold."

"With me," I answered, "it is not so much the value of the beast as the means of escape. If we had our horses at the ferry, and could once get over the water you mention, we should have little to fear from these ruffians; but on foot the journey for you would, at the best, be slow and tedious, and we might be overtaken."

"There is truth in what you say, sir," replied the lady. "But how, may I ask, can you get your horses from the possession of these villains?"

"I do not know that it can be done, Miss Brandon; but my idea was this: we have all escaped from these fellows, and they may, or may not, at this moment be searching for us; at all events we know they would be glad to find us; and it struck me that if I were to return to the thicket we left, and begin a loud conversation, as if with my companions, they might all be drawn off in pursuit of me, and leave the stable unguarded, during which time Mr. Stebbins and his friend here could manage to remove the horses and set off for the ferry, where it would be my hope to join you."

"Certainly a bold and dangerous proceeding!" said Miss Brandon.

"Ticklish as all git-out, I tell you!" chimed in the Yankee.

"Do you all think the plan too hazardous?" I asked.

"Is it reasonable to suppose that *all* the ruffians would at once be drawn off in pursuit of you?" inquired the lady.

"I should endeavor, by changing my voice," I replied, "to make them believe us all to be in the thicket together; and it seems probable to me, that if they were to so believe, they would all attempt our capture together, fearing a part might fail."

"And you really think there is a possibility of your plan succeeding?"

"I do."

"Well, I am but a woman, and it is perhaps not proper for me to have a voice in the matter."

"As one whose life is equally concerned, I think differently," said I. "Speak out frankly, Miss Brandon, and rest assured your counsel shall have due consideration."

"Yes, miss, I'll agree tu all that!" coincided Caleb.

"Frankly, then," said Miss Brandon, "I think the scheme one of peril, but having the promise of success. Under the peculiar circumstances, if I were a man, I should try the venture."

"There, Stebbins, what do you say to that?"

"Wal, I don' know, I snum! It's mighty ticklish, I tell you—that's a fact! If them fellers should all put out arter you, and stay away long enough, Peter and I could git out the hosses; but if they should n't all leave, you know, or if they'd happen tu come back afore we'd got off, it would n't be so nice, I calculate."

"You are very *cautious*, sir!" said Miss Brandon, in a way that would not have flattered me in the least.

"Yes, it runs in the hull Stebbins family!" replied Caleb.

"Then I suppose you are not descended from a very long line of heroes?"

"You mean fighting men—soldiers and them?"

"Courageous men, of course!"

"Wal, I don' know how many, 'cause I can't trace 'em back very fur; but my gran'ther he fit in the Revolution,

and I guess was about as brave as anybody; and there's no one since him, not even me, that'd back down from the right thing when it comes to the pinch!"

"Then I suppose we can count on you to assist in carrying out the plan just proposed?"

"Wal, yes, if you all decide on't, I calculate you can!" replied Caleb, in a rather hesitating manner. "But what'll *you* du, miss, while we're away?"

"I will go with you, and endeavor to be of some service."

"Nay, Miss Brandon," said I, "do not run any unnecessary risk yourself!"

"I do not think the risk unnecessary," she replied, "and I am not certain the danger to myself would be increased by my taking an active part. At all events, it is not my nature to shrink from what others dare, especially when I know I am not overstepping the limits of propriety or the line of duty."

I did not annoy her with further objections. I already understood enough of her character to be certain she had a courageous heart and a will and mind of her own; and so, after some further conversation, by which we arranged our present action and future meeting, as well as could be done under the circumstances, I withdrew from the party to begin the execution of my perilous plan.

CHAPTER IV.

THE RUSE SUCCEEDS.

I WAS successful in deceiving the ruffians. It took me about half an hour to find the exact spot to suit my fancy; and then I opened a conversation with my imaginary friends, changing my voice in replying to myself. My very words were calculated to deceive the villains, and lead them to suppose we had unconsciously run into a trap. I began by congratulating my companions on our escape from the stable, and declared myself highly gratified at the fact of the young lady having fallen in with us.

"Great ginger! did n't we have a run for 't?" said imaginary traveller number one, in a voice so like Caleb Stebbins that the Yankee himself would have been surprised, if not startled, had he been within hearing.

"I dinks it was more as dree mile already," said imaginary traveller number two, in the very tone and accent of the Dutchman.

"Yes," rejoined I, in my own natural voice, "we have all been successful in making our escape so far, and now we can safely remain here till morning, and take daylight for the rest of our flight. Miss Brandon here must be a good deal fatigued in pushing through the thickets so rapidly on foot, and must refresh herself with rest before we set off again."

Now as all this was said within a stone's throw of the stable, and in rather loud, careless, confident tones, I felt very certain, if the ruffians were there, they would immediately set out to surround the supposed party, doubtless smiling to themselves at the idea of our having returned to our starting-point, and consequently into their power, while believing ourselves putting miles between them and us.

As it was no part of my design to be captured myself, but

only to draw the ruffians off on a long, midnight chase, and thus give my companions time to get possession of our horses and effect their escape, I now, of course, listened intently to detect the slightest sound of danger. I was not long kept in suspense; my voice had been heard exactly as I intended; and soon there was a gentle rustling of the bushes, and one or two slight snapping sounds, as of something breaking under cautious feet.

"Hollo!" I now suddenly shouted, as if surprised and alarmed; "here is new trouble!—some of the rascals have followed us, and are now close upon us!—we must be off again! Run, boys, run! Here, Miss Brandon, give me your hand, and now let us fly together!"

With the last word I began to thrash through the bushes, making as much noise as I could, and at the same time running as fast as my limbs would carry me in the same direction I had taken before.

And I had good reason for running now, for the devils were really at my heels. With loud shouts the ruffians now threw off all attempts at concealment and came bounding after me. It was a race for life on my part; for I knew, if taken, my earthly adventures would come to a sudden termination, and I did my best to keep myself from their angry clutches. I drew one of my pistols, and held it in my hand, determined to lodge its contents in the breast or head of the first man who should lay hold of me. Fortunately I was not required to use it, though so close was one of my pursuers at one time that I could hear him pant just behind me.

On the whole, I made a narrow escape. I ran for half an hour, drawing off all the villains in pursuit; and then, it being dark, and in a thick wood, I easily eluded the whole of them, and returned almost upon my very tracks to the stable. I approached it with great caution, and, finding nobody there, ventured in, and discovered that my horse and those belonging to my companions were gone. This

satisfied me that Caleb and Peter had been successful in getting possession of the animals; and I lost no time in setting off for the ferry, where we were to meet in the event of everything succeeding as I had planned.

On once more finding the travelled path by which the kidnappers had reached the place, I examined the ground with my hands, and, to my great joy, discovered prints of shod horses going from the stable. This was proof enough that my plan had been successfully carried out in all its parts, and I set off on the new trail as fast as the darkness would permit.

But I did not yet feel at ease. The first danger was past, but there was no calculating how long myself and friends might be free from new perils. The kidnappers might return to the stable at any minute, discover the loss of our horses and the way they had gone, and set off on a fierce pursuit. For myself individually I had little fear, except so far as I felt in honor bound to jeopardize my life to save the young lady from their clutches and see her safely restored to her family; and as it was by no means certain they might not overtake her at the ferry, I was fully determined, in case of being present at such a juncture, to make her cause my own, and fight to the death if necessary.

And here I may be pardoned if I take credit to myself, and say this was done purely in a spirit of gallantry, such as often led the knights of the good old days of chivalry to espouse the cause and do battle in defence of an unprotected woman. This girl was a stranger to me; I had not yet so much as even seen her face in a light strong enough to distinguish it from a thousand others of her sex; all I knew of her was from what I had overheard of the conversation between herself and her captors, and the statement she had subsequently made to myself and companions; but I felt she was one in need of a strong arm, and, so far as my humble power could go, I was resolved she should have it.

It is not easy to make rapid progress upon a strange path, through a thick wood, in a dark night; and, though I did the best I could, it was at least an hour and a half from the time of setting out on the trail of my companions before I reached the water, where it had been my hope to find them and the boat in waiting. They were there, on the low, swampy beach of a wide bayou that I could not see across in the darkness. I shouted to them as I ran up, and was received with warm words of congratulation and welcome. Each was mounted on a separate beast, and Peter held the bridle of my own.

"Thank God, my dear friend, that you have escaped and joined us! I was so fearful you had fallen into the hands of the ruffians!" said Miss Brandon, in a tone that betrayed considerable emotion.

"But the boat?" I exclaimed, feeling the peril of a moment's delay; "the boat—where is it?"

"Great ginger! there's the trouble!" replied Caleb, in a tone of anxiety and alarm. "Somebody—one of them are tarnal thieves, I 'spect—has took it over t' other side."

"How do you know?"

"'Cause 't ain't here, and I've hollered over and got an answer."

"What answer did you get?"

"Somebody axed who we was and what we wanted!"

"Well?"

"I told him we wanted the boat in tarnal quick time."

"And what did he say to that?"

"Not a dern thing; and I ha'int ben able tu git nothing out of him sence, consarn him! At last I got mad and tired, and concluded I'd wait till you come, and see if you could make out any better. I begun to think, though, you wa'n't a-going tu come, and I got sca'irt, I tell you! I'm drea'ful glad tu see you safe here now—I snum tu Guinea I am—that's a fact!"

"This delay is full of peril," said I, hurriedly; "and we

must get away from here soon, either across this water or in some other direction."

I then briefly narrated all that had occurred to me, and my fears that the villains might return to the stable, find the horses gone, suspect the *ruse*, trace out the direction of flight, and set off in pursuit.

"Oh, it is terrible to think of falling into their hands again!" said Miss Brandon, with a shudder.

"And you shall not, if in my power to save you!" returned I.

"Brave sir, I hope I may live to reward you and your companions for this noble devotion to the welfare of a helpless girl!" she warmly rejoined.

"To see you safe among your friends will be reward enough for me," I replied.

"And if I git off safe with my hoss, I sha'n't ax nothing nother, I guess!" chimed in the Yankee; "though," he immediately added, "I've lost some things by them are thieves, that's a fact; but that wa'n't your fault, miss, you know; and 't would n't hardly be right tu 'spect you tu pay for 'em, I calculate, without you tuk the notion to du it yourself now."

"How long have you been here?" I inquired.

"More'n an hour, I guess. You see, jest arter you drewed off all them are fellers a-hollerin' arter you, we went up tu the stable plaguy careful, and, not finding nobody there, we fetched out the hosses putty quick, you know; and jest as soon as we could git bridles and saddles on tu 'em, we put out like blazes, and come here as quick as we could, and have ben here ever sence."

"And how long since you called to the ferryman and got an answer?"

"Wal, I hollered over jest as soon's I found there wa'n't no boat here; and he yelled back in less than tew minutes, I should say."

"And only replied once?"

"That's all, consarn him!"

"And what, from the sound of his voice, do you judge the distance to be across the water here?"

"I would n't be astonished if it's half a mile! What do you think, Peter?"

"I dinks yes," replied the Dutchman.

"If this ferryman belongs to this gang of villains, as I suspect," said I, "he would hardly come over for a strange voice, and especially one he would be so certain of as yours. I will try what I can do. You all recollect the voice of the man called Blake! Now, take notice, and tell me how near I come to imitating it!"

I made the trial.

"That's it, I snum! hey, Peter?"

"Yaw, more like him as himzelf already!"

"Perfect!" exclaimed Miss Brandon.

"I think this man Blake is the leader of this party," I said, in explanation; "and if so, and I can deceive the man on the other side of the water, I may be able to get him over."

I now made the trial in sailor fashion, shouting in the voice of Blake:

"Boat ahoy!"

I repeated the call three times before I got an answer, and then it came in the shape of a query:

"Who dar?"

"Don't you know Blake, stupid? Come, hurry over! I've no time to waste here!"

I said this at a venture, not knowing of course that the man even knew the name of the leader of the kidnappers. I was rejoiced the next minute, however, to find that I had made a happy hit.

"Ay! ay!" was the cheering answer, followed by a splashing of the water, which we could hear very distinctly, the night being still.

In a few minutes we fancied we could see a dark object on the water, in the faint line of light between the two shores. I now became very impatient, for at the same time I fancied I heard the distant sound of horses' feet. Nothing more likely than that the villains had got back to the stable, discovered the trick played upon them, and set off in pursuit. If so, our lives might depend upon the slow-moving boat reaching the beach before them.

"Come! come! hurry over!" I shouted.

"Yes, marser, I's doing my best, I is!" was the reply, in a voice there was no mistaking for other than that of a negro.

Never had motion seemed so slow to me as that of that snail-moving craft. For what to my impatience was a long time, it appeared to be at perfect rest on the water. I was fearful it was aground. I bent down, put my ear to the earth, and became thoroughly convinced that the ruffians were in pursuit. I stated the fact to my companions, and told them to be prepared for the worst.

"Jehoshaphat!" exclaimed Caleb in alarm; "can't we streak it off somewhere else, and git out of the way, if that are nigger don't git here in time with his derved old mud-scow?"

"Where can we go?" said I. "For all I know we may be on an island; and it may be necessary to cross this water, or some other, to get among honest settlers. Whatever we do, we should certainly be prepared to defend ourselves in case the worst comes to the worst!"

"Consarn the nigger!" whined the valiant Mr. Stebbins; "I only wish I had a rope around his tarnal neck! I guess I'd fetch him over about the quickest!"

"Have you plenty of weapons, gentlemen?" asked Miss Brandon.

"A brace of pistols apiece," I answered.

"If you will trust me with one, I will show you at the proper time that I know how to use it!" she firmly rejoined.

"Indeed, then," said I, "you shall have one of mine for your own protection!" and I put it in her hand.

"You may think it rather strange," she explained; "but I am not altogether like young ladies in general, and have practiced a little of almost every manly sport in my own quiet way. If I had had any suspicion of being assaulted, I should have gone out armed, for I have weapons of my own at home, and then the ruffians might not have had quite so pleasant a time in carrying me off!"

"They must have had some strong motive for kidnapping you," said I, "and unquestionably it was a part of some dark and wicked plot."

"It is all a mystery to me," she replied.

"Perhaps it was done to revenge them on your father, toward whom, if I may judge from the few remarks I overheard, they bear no good will."

"It may have been," she rejoined, "for my father is at the head of a band of 'regulators,' composed of our best citizens, and organized for mutual protection against all gangs and combinations of gamblers, horse thieves, negro stealers, and outlaws generally, with which this Southern country has been cursed for years. Several of the bold villains have been caught and punished at different times—some by hanging, some by whipping, and some by branding and being ordered out of the State, never to return except on pain of death."

"Was the man called Joe Horset one of these?"

"He was publicly whipped last spring for conniving at the escape of some negroes from a plantation on which he was employed as an overseer. He might have fared worse; but the evidence against him was circumstantial rather than positive, and his employer, Mr. La Grange, did not wish him too harshly dealt with."

"La Grange?" exclaimed I; "that is the name of a planter I intended to visit—perhaps it is the same. Has he a son named Ernest, who recently graduated at a medical college in Philadelphia?"

"He has," replied Miss Brandon, in a tone of surprise. "Do you know him?"

"Yes, he was my class-mate and friend; and, when we parted last, I received a very pressing invitation from him to come and make him a long visit. Business having led me into this region, I had thought of putting his hospitality to the test."

"Oh, sir, I am delighted to know you are the friend of Ernest La Grange, who is also a friend of mine!" said Miss Brandon, in a quick, animated tone. "Our estates join, and our families are very intimate. Ha!" she added, as a new idea seemed to strike her suddenly; "I have heard you called Doctor Walbridge by our Yankee friend here, and I have more than once heard Ernest speak of a friend of his by the name of Leslie Walbridge."

"That is my name, Miss Brandon."

"Then, Heaven be praised! you are no longer a stranger to one to whom you have already proved yourself so true and noble a friend!" she exclaimed, extending her hand, which in turn I warmly seized and pressed.

"And now I think of it," said I, "I am sure I have heard Ernest La Grange speak of a certain Miss Alice Brandon."

"Have you indeed?" she answered, turning her face aside, as if she were blushing, though it was too dark for me to see. "I hope he said nothing very bad of her!"

"May I trust it will not displease you to be assured she was little less than an angel in his estimation?"

"Will that boat never reach here?" she said quickly, looking off on the water.

That was indeed the all-important point now; and could I have hastened its progress by any act of mine, I should not have stood idly there, conversing on matters so foreign to the great interests at stake.

"It gits nearer, I 'spect, but that are nigger's drea'ful slow!" said Caleb. "There, hark! ain't them hosses I hear?"

A light breeze certainly brought very distinctly to our ears a low, rumbling, pattering sound, and I did not doubt for a moment that the villains were in hot pursuit. Would they reach the beach here before the boat? That was the main peril. I looked eagerly off on the water, and fancied the boat was much nearer. Ten minutes I thought would decide the question one way or the other.

All conversation now ceased, and we stood in almost breathless silence, listening to the creaking and splashing on the water, and the low, dull, pattering sound that came to us over the route we had travelled, occasionally swelling out quite distinctly, and then dying away, so as only faintly to be heard.

Five minutes thus passed, and the clattering of horses' hoofs was quite distinct; but the boat was clearly visible and drawing near the shore.

"Come! hurry, boy, hurry!" I said, in the voice of Blake.

"Yes, marser, old nigger Sam's a doin' his best, he am!"

We all moved down to the point where the boat would touch the shore, so as to be ready to hasten aboard. I did not mount my horse, for I intended to leap upon the craft the first one and secure the negro.

But was he alone? This was an important thing to know, and I asked the question.

"Yes, Marser Blake," he replied, puffing and panting; "and dar's der difikuality dis chile has in fotchin' over de boat more faster."

At last the large, flat-bottomed scow touched the shore, and I instantly leaped on board, giving directions for the others to follow, which were hurriedly obeyed. There was no time to spare, for the clattering of horses' feet was now loud and heavy, and probably not more than an eighth of a mile divided us from our pursuers.

"Now push off, Sam!" I exclaimed, in the voice of Blake; "push off as quick as you can!"

The negro now discovered there was something wrong. He heard the approaching horses, and suspected some trick. Instead of using his pole as I directed, he came close up to me and looked full in my face. I drew my pistol and thrust the muzzle against his cheek.

"Push off the boat, Sam, this moment!" I said, in a low, determined tone, "or I will blow your brains out!"

"Yes, marser, I does it," he answered, shrinking back, and using his pole with such dexterity that instantly the end of the scow, which had touched the shore, swung around and put us fairly afloat.

I stumbled upon another pole, and immediately began to use it; and at the same time both Caleb and Peter dismounted and hurried to my assistance.

We had scarcely got twenty feet from the shore, when two of the foremost ruffians came dashing up to the water's edge, and we could hear the others clattering close behind.

"Ho, Sam, what — fool work is this?" shouted the voice of the genuine Blake. "Put back with that boat here, this minute, or I'll have your black heart out of you!"

"So please you, good Mr. Blake, he will do nothing of the kind," I replied, "for I am master here now!"

"And who in thunder are you?" shouted Blake.

"One of the gentlemen who had the felicity to outwit you to-night!"

The others now came dashing up, one after the other; and pretty soon there was some fearful cursing and swearing, as the villains found they were foiled. Then came a rapid discharge of pistols, and bullets flew in among us too close for safety. One of them struck the Yankee's horse, and both wounded and frightened him. He began to rear and pitch, and, before his owner could seize the bridle, over he went,

careening the boat, and giving it a momentum that sent it further from the shore.

"Darn it all tu darnation!" cried Caleb Stebbins, now furious with rage at the loss of his beast. "Take that are, and that are, you gallus scamps, you!" and, as he spoke, he discharged his pistols at the ruffians, and with such good effect that a yell and a groan followed.

"Give it to them, Peter!" I exclaimed, at the same time discharging my own weapon.

Three more shots succeeded mine, and subsequently Miss Brandon handed me back an empty pistol.

The ruffians now seemed to find their position anything but agreeable, and, uttering bitter curses, galloped away.

"Great ginger! only think of my having tu lose that are critter arter all; and my saddle, bridle, saddle-bags, and all my things tew!" groaned Caleb Stebbins, wringing his hands.

"Never mind, my friend, I will see you doubly repaid if we escape," returned Miss Brandon.

The Yankee's horse was apparently more scared than hurt, for we could see that he managed to swim ashore; and had it not been for the danger of the venture, we might have turned the boat back and caught him. We felt the risk was too great for the reward, however, and continued to work the boat away from the shore. When we had got far enough out to feel safe against pistol shots, I called the parties together for consultation.

"My friends," I said, "assisted by a kind Providence, we have done wonders to-night in escaping from this band of cut-throats, and I am strong in the hope that we shall now keep clear of them, though I am by no means certain. What we may find on the other side of this bayou is beyond our present knowledge; but it is my opinion we had better remain on the water till daylight, believing we shall be safer here than in groping our way in the dark over an unknown

country. As to these fellows we have left behind, there is no knowing what they may attempt or be capable of accomplishing. Perhaps they will swim their horses over, perhaps there is another ferry-boat, or perhaps there is a roundabout way of reaching the other side. On these points I must question the negro."

I called the black to me, and began to reload my pistol.

"Sam," said I, in that calm, quiet, determined tone which rarely fails to impress the party interested with the idea of a fixed resolution—"Sam, do you know what I have in my hand?"

"I'se—I'se—sort o' 'spects it—am—am—a pistol, marser," replied the black, in a hesitating, tremulous voice.

"You are right, Sam—it is a pistol. Now do you know what I am doing to it?"

"I'se—'spects—you am—loadin' it."

"Right, Sam—I am loading it with powder and ball; and if you don't truly answer me every question I ask you, to the best of your knowledge and belief, I intend to blow your brains out! Do you understand me, boy?"*

"Ye-ye-yes, marser," answered Sam, trembling with fear.

"To begin, then—are you a free negro or a slave?"

"I'se a slave, marser."

"Who is your master, and where does he live?"

"I'se does n't know, marser."

"Don't know?"

"No, marser."

"Does nobody claim you?"

"Yes, marser—mos' everybody."

"Do you have charge of this boat?"

"Yes, marser."

"How long have you been employed here as a ferryman?"

* A male negro in the South is always termed a "boy," without regard to age.

"I'se does n't know dat, marser—a hundred years, I 'spects."

I saw at once the poor fellow knew nothing about time, and I was about proceeding with the next question, when the Yankee suddenly exclaimed, in great indignation:

"See here, you black nigger, now none of them are lies of your 'n! 'cause we ain't no greenhorns tu put up with any sich derved nonsense! Why, I'll jest bet a cow, you ain't fifty years old yourself—now come—and so how could you h' ben a-ferrying here a hundred years, hey? Git eout!"

I heard Miss Brandon laugh, and I explained to Mr. Stebbins that Sam probably answered thus through ignorance, and with no design of deceiving us. Caleb grumbled out that he "had n't no opinion of sich ignoramus."

"Is there any way of getting across this water except in this boat, Sam?" was my next query.

"Dar's two small boats, marser."

"Where are they?"

"One dar, and t' other dar," he replied, pointing to each side of the bayou.

This was not agreeable information, for the ruffians might cross over ahead of us.

I next inquired who they were and what was their business; but the negro declared that he knew nothing about them, except that they and many others often crossed in his boat, sometimes with horses and sometimes with negroes. I put a great many questions with my utmost ingenuity, but failed to elicit anything satisfactory. The black was either really ignorant of all I wished to know, or else was too shrewd to let me get the facts from him. I suspected the latter.

The night was now pretty well advanced, and we remained on the water till daylight—waiting, watching, hoping, dreading, fearing.

CHAPTER V.

FROM ONE TROUBLE TO ANOTHER.

IT does not often happen, I think, that a gentleman passes as many hours as I did in the presence of a young, interesting, and wealthy heiress, without having some better idea of her personal appearance than I had of Miss Brandon's before the gray light of morn had begun to lift the heavy shadows from stream and forest, and I remember having almost as much curiosity to examine her features as the shores of the bayou on which we had remained for safety. As it began to grow light, we found ourselves glancing at each other, and she said, with a smile:

"When one is so fortunate as to meet with a true friend, it is very natural one should like to know how he looks!"

"Very natural indeed!" I replied; "and in this case I have more to gain than you."

"How so?"

"Because I am favored with by far the more interesting view."

"More gallantly than truthfully said!" she rejoined, with a laugh and a blush.

As her features first dimly came out of the darkness, I thought them quite pretty and interesting; but when they became clearly revealed in the full light of day, I could not but acknowledge their classic beauty.

Alice Brandon was tall, finely formed, and had a lofty, independent, and queen-like air which was quite imposing. Her forehead was high and broad, and her nose just sufficiently aquiline to give character to her face. Her eyes were full, dark, and very expressive, with arched brows and long lashes, and her handsome mouth and chin conveyed the idea of decision and firmness. Though there was nothing

approaching to the masculine in her appearance — though the lineaments were all soft and delicate, partaking much of feminine gentleness and sweetness — yet there was no mistaking the fact that hers was a spirit to lead rather than to be led — to dare and bear rather than to shrink and bend. Her passions were unquestionably strong, and in either her love or her hate you might look for something positive, if not extreme. It will be remembered, that while in the hands of her captors — when she believed herself surrounded only by ruffians, and could have had little or no hope of escaping from them — her language and conduct had been such as to lead me to pronounce her a remarkable lady; and now I fancied I could see all those traits of character in her bright, intelligent countenance. Her features were pale, and marked with a look of care and anxiety — for it had been a night of fearful trial to her — but there was nothing of that shrinking, tremulous fear which scarcely one lady in a thousand would have failed to exhibit under such trying circumstances. She was neatly dressed, in a dark-green riding habit with gold buttons; and under her jaunty cap, with its gay feather, her long, lustrous black hair was arranged in a most becoming manner. Upon her fingers glittered two diamond rings of great value, which the ruffians had not touched. Her age, as she had already stated, was just turned of nineteen; but she would probably have been taken for two or three-and-twenty, so mature was her look.

Perhaps, while I am on the subject of age and personal appearance, somebody would like to have some idea of my own; but then, am I just the sort of individual to give an impartial description? Nearly every one finds something to admire when he or she stands before a glass; and in this respect I cannot say that I was an exception at the age of twenty-two. I always saw there, at that period, what to me was quite an interesting face; and as I seldom looked at it

except when I was in an amiable mood, it generally looked back at me in a rather pleasant and agreeable sort of way, and not unfrequently smiled, if only to show a very white and even set of teeth. I saw black eyes and black hair, features pretty regular and not very ugly, and with just beard enough, neatly trimmed, to suit *my* idea of dignified manhood. In height I was just five feet and ten inches, of a slender but muscular build; and being of a quick, active temperament, and blessed with a fair share of self-conceit, I flattered myself I was just about as good as anybody, either mentally, morally, or physically. At that period I had never seen anybody that I liked any *better* than myself, and so it may readily be inferred that I had never been in love.

I am not certain I shall interest anybody by saying anything more about myself at this particular time — in fact, I can fancy some impatient individual already finding fault with my egotism — but, for all that, I think a few words more may not here be out of place. As stated at the beginning of my narrative, I was already a legal doctor; but only a fresh graduate, without practice; and I had come South for several reasons. In the first place, my father was connected with a large commercial house, which had extensive dealings throughout the South; and there were some debts to be collected, and some lands to be disposed of, in Louisiana, which had been intrusted to me. In the second place, I had been a close, hard student for several years, and I was eager to rest myself by travel, and at the same time discover, if possible, some pleasant locality where I should be contented to settle down to the labors of my profession. In the third place, I wanted to visit the home of my friend, Ernest La Grange, to which I had been repeatedly invited in a manner there was no mistaking. In the fourth place, how did I know but some rich planter's daughter — young, lovely, intelligent, and accomplished — might take a — might fall in — a — ahem! In short, I was human, and not the worst-

looking man in the world, and — why should n't she? If these are not reasons enough, according to your idea, reader, for my journey to the place where you and I first made our acquaintance, you will please to wait till I furnish you with some other and better ones.

"Considering that we have been so long known to each other through a common friend," said I to Miss Brandon, "it seems very remarkable that we should have first met in a manner savoring so much more of romance than reality; and I only hope that the same Providence which brought us together so mysteriously, and in the only way and time perhaps in which I could have effectually aided in your liberation from your captors, will continue to favor, guard, and guide us till I can see you in the hands of your friends!"

"And we may perhaps find them sooner than you anticipate," she rejoined.

"How so?"

"I flatter myself there will be a search for the daughter of Colonel Brandon," she answered, with a becoming air of pride; "and if some of my father's dogs are put on the trail of my captors, they may be guided hither in time to save us any unnecessary wandering through a region of country with which none of us are acquainted."

"That is certainly an inspiring hope," said I; "and perhaps we shall do well to remain on the water here for the present."

"I would suggest the prudence of such a course," she answered.

"But if your surmise be a correct one, would they not have reached yonder shore by this time?"

"There are many things to be considered before arriving at such a conclusion," she replied. "In the first place, you must bear in mind it was near dark when I was captured; the overseer, who heard my cries, would have to go to the house and give the alarm; messengers might have to be dispatched for miles, to collect a sufficient number of 'regu-

lators' to make the pursuit justifiable; then the dogs would have to be put on the scent, and followed, in the dark, over a wide stretch of country, with the trail broken twice at least by two separate streams; all this would take a good deal of time, and might well account, I think, for their not yet having made their appearance."

"True," returned I, "you are right, and we still have the right to hope."

While conversing with Miss Brandon, my eyes were not idle; and, with the gradually increasing light of day, I was eagerly scanning everything — on the boat, on the water, and on the shore.

The boat was a large, flat-bottomed scow, wide, shallow, and turned up at either end, having neither bow nor stern, evidently intended for the ferrying of horses and cattle, and was worked by poles and long oars. The ferryman was a short, stout, very black negro, about thirty years of age, ignorant, if not brutal, with a sullen, hang-dog look. The bayou was nearly half a mile wide in some places, shallow, with a muddy bottom, its shores lined with a swampy growth of bushes and trees, and stretched away to the east and west as far as we could see. With the exception of up and down the bayou, which appeared to have little or no current, the view was bounded by the swampy shores, which spread away on a dead level, with not even a hill in the distance for the eye to rest on. The morning rose fair, with the sun glancing brightly across the still waters; a few birds could be seen flitting here and there, and occasionally a silvery carol reached us: these were all we found cheering in the scene. Our three horses drooped their heads, and appeared to be hungry and tired, the Dutchman looked dull and sullen, and the Yankee seemed worried and anxious.

"Consarn it all," whined the latter, "this 'ere's a putty fix for a feller tu be in the fust time he puts his foot in the derned country!"

"You have indeed put your foot in it, and no mistake!" returned I, scarcely able to keep from laughing in his face.

"I say, doctor — you be a doctor, ain't you?"

"Certainly."

"Yes? Wal, I understood you so, anyhow, and I've ben calling you that all along. It's a good thing tu be with a doctor, you know, in case you git took sick. But I say, yeou — what be we a-going to du next?"

He had not heard the conversation between Miss Brandon and myself, and so I explained that she was in hopes her friends would at least trace her to the other shore, in which case we should have nothing more to fear.

"Wal, s'pose they don't?"

"Then, after waiting a reasonable time, we shall probably have to try the venture through the swamp by ourselves."

"And you've all got hosses 'cept me, and I 'spect I'll have tu foot it. Jest my dern luck! Of course my hoss had tu up and git hit, and then jump overboard like a derned fool."

This was said in such a whining tone, with such a lugubrious air, compounded of sorrow, anger, and contempt, that both Miss Brandon and myself laughed outright. Instantly the sharp, freckled face of the Yankee reddened with anger, and his little eyes flashed, as he exclaimed:

"You can laugh, if you want tu, doctor — if you see any fun in 't; but if it had ben your hoss, 'stead of mine, you'd a sung a different tune, I guess!"

"Well, it is certainly no laughing matter," returned I, with a serious air, "and I am really sorry you lost your beast. And as a proof how sorry I am, I promise you, if we have to take to the woods by ourselves, you shall ride with me, a part of the way at least."

"I say," said Caleb, appearing a good deal mollified, and seeming to be struck with a new idea, "what was that are nigger doing over t' other side with the boat, arter taking them are scamps across?"

"Sure enough!" said I; "he must have gone back for some purpose — perhaps to bring over another party."

"That's it, I snum! Now see 'f it ain't!" he rejoined,

Then turning to the black, who was standing apart, in a sulky mood, he called out, in an authoritative tone:

"Come here, you nigger, and tell us the truth, or I'll let daylight right through ye!"

The black came shuffling forward, with a sullen scowl, and his eyes cast down.

"See here, you, now — look up and answer me!" pursued Stebbins. "You ferried them are derned scamps over ths 'ere river, did n't you?"

The negro raised his eyes with an angry gleam, and answered with a dogged air:

"I 'se 'spects dem ain't no scamps, marser, no more dan dis yar ain't no riber!"

"Wal, come now, we don't want none of your lip, and none of your opinions, but a straightforward answer tu what we ax you!" said Caleb, drawing up his slender person with what he intended for a dignified air. "You ferried over them are scamps, did n't you? I say scamps, because they 're jest as big scamps as ever stretched hemp."

The negro darted a glance of angry contempt at the speaker, and then turned to me, and said respectfully, touching his woolly hair:

"I 'se 'spects der cap'en yere am de gemman to ax dis chile what he wants to know."

"Well, then, Sam, answer me, and truly, as you value your life!" said I. "Did you ferry over Blake and his party last night?"

"Yes, marser."

"Well, for what purpose?"

"'Case I's told to do 'um."

"Did Blake expect some more of his friends to come over before morning?"

"Speets he did, marser."

"Did he tell you so?"

"Yes, marser."

"Well, when I called you over, you thought it was Blake, did you?"

"Yes, marser, I 'se 'speets I hears Marsers Blake call me to come ober dar."

"Up to that time, the party expected had not arrived, had they?"

"No, marser."

"But you were looking for them every minute?"

"Yes, marser."

"How many did you expect?"

"Don't know, marser."

"Do you think they came after you left that side again?"

"Don't know, marser."

"Have you heard anything of them since?"

"No, marser."

"Have you seen any of them, or any of your other friends, this morning?"

"No, marser."

"How far are we from the nearest village or plantation?"

"Don't know, marser."

"How far do you think?"

"Speets about a hundred mile!"

"Great ginger! what a lie!" cried Caleb.

"The boy evidently has no idea of numbers," I explained.

"D'you call him a *boy* now, doctor?" returned Caleb.

"A putty *boy* he is, I snum! Why he's older'n I be!"

Now, as on the previous occasion when I questioned the negro, I could get nothing from him at all satisfactory. Either he did not know, or he was determined not to tell.

We remained where we were till the sun was more than an hour high, and during all this time we saw no human being on either shore. What had become of our last night's

foes? Were they watching us from the side of the bayou where we had left them? or had they gone off and found the means of getting across, so as to intercept us in case we should land on the other bank? And then again, what of the party expected by Blake? Had they arrived at a time when our loud words and pistol-shots had given them ample notification of what was taking place? and had they quietly secreted themselves to assail us the moment we should land? In the most hopeful light I could view the matter, there was the shadow of danger; and the thought of landing was accompanied by a feeling of uneasiness, not to say apprehension.

But we could not remain all day on the boat; to stay there, in open view from either shore, was perhaps to invite the danger we feared; it seemed important that we should soon be on the move.

"I hope this delay, in waiting for your friends, may not work more evil to us than good?" I at length said to Miss Brandon.

"Do you think, then, we had better land now, and endeavor to find our way through the swamp?" she inquired.

"Sooner or later we may have to do so," I replied, "and of course the more daylight we have before us the better."

"Then do what you think best, my friend? I will be guided, as I have been, by your judgment and advice," she rejoined.

I consulted with Caleb and Peter, and the result was that we decided to land forthwith.

It did not take us long to work the boat to the shore; and there we saw a travelled path, leading into and probably through the swamp. We had all our pistols carefully loaded, and, as we slowly rode from the boat, we scanned every object with the keenest care. According to promise, I allowed the unfortunate Yankee to mount behind me; but he was still full of grumbling at the loss of his "hoss, saddle-bags, and things."

"You ought to be thankful your life has been spared!" said I.

"So I be, doctor," he replied; "but I don't see why I might n't jest as wal have had my hoss tew, consarn it!"

At this moment a thought struck me. Perhaps the negro would at once row back to the other side, and, if the villains were still there, allow them an opportunity to follow us. Our safety seemed to demand that this should be prevented, for some hours at least, and so I resolved that the black should keep us company for a while. Explaining this to the others, I requested Stebbins to mount behind his friend Peter, and allow me to take up the black.

"Great ginger! be you a-going tu ride with a nigger?" he exclaimed, with an astonished look.

"No," I replied, "I intend Sam shall ride with me."

"Jest the same thing, doctor."

"With a slight difference, Mr. Stebbins! I trust, however, you will duly appreciate the sacrifice I make for your safety!"

As soon as the Yankee had dismounted, I called Sam to me, and bade him get up in front.

"Is you gwine to tote me off, marser?" he inquired, not looking over-much pleased.

"I am not going to carry you off very far, Sam; and, if you behave yourself, I shall soon set you at liberty; but if you attempt to get away before I give you leave, I shall shoot you like a dog! Do you understand me?"

"'Spects I does, marser!" he muttered in reply, as he mounted to the place I had assigned him.

"Now then," said I, "we are ready to try our fortune anew."

"If I only had a big doll-baby to hold!" returned Miss Brandon, with a merry laugh at our rather ludicrous appearance.

"Perhaps you will have a live robber yet—who knows? though you seem to have less fear than any of us!" said I.

"Certainly, Doctor Walbridge, this is no time for jesting!" she rejoined, with a sober air; "but if I reach home safely, look out for a full-length portrait of horse, rider, and—*baggage!*"

"Ah, laugh then, as much as you please, Miss Brandon, and I will keep you company!"

We now rode forward into the swamp, which was in some respects like the one I had passed through the preceding day. About fifty yards from the boat-landing, was a poor, miserable looking hut, half buried among the trees and bushes.

"Who lives there, Sam?" I asked.

"I does, marser."

"Who else?"

"Nobody, marser."

"What do you get to eat?"

"Rice, and corn, and 'taters, and meat."

"You don't raise these things?"

"No, marser, dey brungs 'em."

"They? Who?"

"De gemmens what comes to de ferry."

"Do they come often, and many of them?"

"'Spects dey does, marser."

"How often?"

"'Spects a t'ousand times, marser."

"How many of them?"

"Reckons 'bout a million, marser!"

"Which is the most, Sam, a hundred, a thousand, or a million?"

"I 'se does n't know, marser—I 'se nebber heerd—but I 'spects a hundred am."

I saw it was useless to try to get any important information out of Sam, and so I stopped putting questions to him.

We had ridden for an hour, over a broad, smooth path, that had been recently used, when we came to a thicket that stretched across it like a wall. It appeared as if the path

had been thus far cut into the swamp from the bayou, and had been much used by travellers, and that this was the whole of it. When I looked to see it turn off, to the right or left, I was surprised to find no continuation, and yet the ground was well trodden up to the very point where it ceased.

"What is the meaning of this?" I queried; but no one was able to give me an answer.

On looking at the bushes, to the right and left of the path, I saw here and there places where they were bent and broken, as if here the horsemen had been in the habit of separating and each taking a course to suit himself. Perhaps they united here when coming from the other direction, and the design was to baffle pursuit? At all events, from all I had seen and heard, I was led to believe we were upon the secret route of a formidable band of freebooters, who probably had their headquarters far beyond where I had first fallen in with them.

"Well," said I to my companions, "as the path stops here, we must push into the thicket without it."

I took the lead, and rode through a tangled mass of bushes, reeds, moss and vines, for something like half a mile, when we struck an open pine wood and higher ground. Shortly after this we came upon another travelled path; and we could see that this, like the other, had often been entered and left at different places within the distance of the first half mile.

"Fortunately," said I, "we have hit the right course — at least I think so — for I believe this path is a continuation of the other, and that the different turn-outs here are merely for the purpose of misleading whoever may attempt to follow the villains."

"It would seem so," replied Miss Brandon; "and undoubtedly we have only seen a very small portion of a formidable band."

"That is just what I think."

"It is strange," she added, with a proud curl of her lip, "that none of my people have yet made their appearance! I had thought I was of more consequence!"

"There has been some important cause for the delay, Miss Brandon, rest assured," said I. "You are not one to be missed without being searched for! In the first place, have they had time to reach here if they set out at daylight?"

"Fast riding would have brought them here before this time, I think!"

"But remember, they have only a blind, uncertain trail to follow!"

"Yes, but they have dogs!"

"And do not dogs get at fault on a trail crossed by others than the pursued? You know, Miss Brandon, that Sam here says another party was expected to cross the bayou; and as that party did not appear, it seems to me no unreasonable conjecture that they have in some way delayed our friends."

"Perhaps so," she replied; "but if they keep on being delayed, and we meet with no further misfortune, I may soon reach home without their assistance."

"God grant it!"

We rode on, at a good, lively pace, for half an hour, when I thought it about time to give Sam his liberty, as we had nothing now to fear from his taking his boat over to the other side when he could get back to it. At this juncture my horse gave a loud snort, and shied so suddenly that I lost my balance and fell to the ground, dragging the negro with me. I was up in a moment; but I had lost my hold of the bridle rein, and my frightened beast was already running away.

"Hollo, there! great ginger! there goes the doctor's hoss!" was the exclamation of Caleb, who was mounted with Peter and riding a little behind me.

"I will try to catch him!" cried Miss Brandon, instantly dashing after the flying beast, before I had time to put in a remonstrance.

"Follow, Peter, as fast as you can, and don't let the young lady be without a protector in this wild country!" cried I to the Dutchman. "Here, Stebbins, jump down and keep me company, for the beast is not fit to carry two on a race!"

"Yaw, shoost you gits down avile, and den I cans run so fast as her already!" cried Peter, almost pitching Caleb off, in his haste to get rid of him, and instantly spurring his horse over the rough road in hot pursuit.

"Wal, if that are ain't cool, then I don't know — pitching a feller down as if he was a bag of sand!" grumbled Caleb Stebbins. "I say, you, 'pears tu me good hosses is gitting rather scass! Fust that fool of mine goes, and now your 'n!"

"I hope, if they don't succeed in catching mine soon, they will let him go, and turn back," said I, "otherwise they may lose their way, and not be able to find us again!"

"Jehoshaphat!" exclaimed Caleb, fairly turning pale at the thought; "if we lose that are gal, Miss Brandon, I sha'n't git paid for my critter, and them are saddle-bags and things of mine, shall I?"

"Hardly, I think."

"Consarn it all, we ought n't tu have let her go," he whined.

"Then I should have lost *my* horse, perhaps!"

"Wal, you wouldn't a minded that, I guess — a rich feller like you be!"

"Why do you suppose I am rich?"

"'Cause you look as if you was."

While we were thus conversing, we heard the deep baying of distant hounds.

"Ha!" cried I, "Miss Brandon's friends are coming at last!"

"Is dem blood-hounds, marser?" inquired Sam in alarm.

"I think so."

"Den whar 'll we go, marser? for dey 'll chawr us up."

"By Jove," exclaimed I, "that may be true! We must get out of the way of these furious brutes! Here are trees — let each of us climb one for himself."

I had scarcely made the suggestion, when the frightened Yankee began to carry out his part of it in the quickest possible time; Sam, too, was not slow in following his example; and, if truth must be told, I hardly think I was more than a thousand years behind either. There was nothing so pleasant in the idea of being torn to death by blood-hounds, that a man fond of life would care to sit on the ground and whistle them up.

From my secure position, up among the thick branches of a tree, I heard their baying, every minute growing louder. As they drew near, they were evidently perplexed for a while; and then a portion came toward us, and the rest seemed to turn off in pursuit of Miss Brandon and Peter. I heard human voices; and, shortly after, some half-a-dozen dogs began to yelp under our trees, and at least a dozen horsemen dashed up, with yells of rage and satisfaction.

CHAPTER VI.

ALMOST A MURDER.

HOLLO, you scoundrels! so we have you at last, have we?" exclaimed a tall, dark, handsome man, in a foreign accent, as he reigned up his horse, almost under me, and looked up with a scowl. "Come, down with you, before we fire and bring you down!"

"Don't be quite so fast, my friend," said I, "for you are evidently laboring under a mistake!"

"And you 'll be laboring under a halter before you are many hours older!" was his fierce reply; and I could see his brows knit, his eyes flash, and his lips compress.

"Who do you take us for?" demanded I.

"Kidnappers, horse-thieves, negro-stealers, robbers, cut-throats, ruffians — the devil knows what!" said he.

"I hope we have titles enough!" laughed I; for though the words and looks of this man and the others were savage almost to ferocity, I had no fear of injury, believing all would be right as soon as I could convince them of their mistake in taking us for the captors of Miss Brandon.

"Shoot him down!" cried the leader in a rage.

The whole party was armed with pistols and carbines, and a couple of the latter were immediately raised and pointed toward me. The affair now began to look pretty serious. I might be shot first, and the matter of guilt or innocence be inquired into afterward.

"Hold, rash men," cried I, "if you be not murderers yourselves! Before you put me to death, let me at least have a trial, and know of what I am accused."

"Consarn it all, yes!" put in the Yankee, who felt himself to be in the same peril as myself; "jest let us know what we've ben duing that you don't like, afore you shoot us down like wild beasts! Thunderation tu Jerusalem! Can't a gentleman come out into this derned country and du the decent thing without being shot for 't?"

"Don't shoot!" cried several voices; "these men are certainly entitled to a trial before execution!"

"I tell you," cried the one who had so savagely addressed me, "we are only wasting time when we allow these scoundrels to live a minute! We shall never rid the country of them unless we put to death all we find and as fast as we find them!"

"But putting them to death in cold blood, without a fair trial, would be murder, Captain Sebastian!" said one of the party.

"Gentlemen," said I, "if you will call off your dogs, I will come down among you, and prove to you how greatly

you are mistaken in the individual who now has the honor of addressing you."

"No doubt of it!" cried the fierce captain; "that is just what I fear! With some devil's trick you will make yourself out a saint, and get off, to plot and execute more wicked schemes! I'll not hear you!" he concluded, unslinging his carbine and bringing the piece to his eye.

It was a critical moment for me! One click in that second, and this story might never have been told! At that instant one of the men nearest to the furious captain caught hold of the weapon just as he was pulling the trigger. It went off, and the ball whistled past my head.

"For shame! for shame!" cried several voices; and then there succeeded much confusion, loud talking, and some angry words.

At last quiet was restored, the dogs were called off and put in leash, and we were all ordered down. As we came together, and the dismounted men formed around us, I saw that Stebbins was very pale and nervous, and that Sam fairly quaked with fear. The party surrounding us, some ten or twelve in number, were pretty rough, stern-looking fellows, with the exception of four, who appeared to be Southern gentlemen of education, feeling, and refinement, and to whom I was really indebted for the preservation of my life.

Captain Sebastian, who was so eager to take our lives without trial — for what reason I did not know till long afterward — was a man about five-and-forty years of age — a Spanish creole, born in Mexico — tall, finely-formed, and handsome, with dark, expressive features, a nose slightly aquiline, and an eye black and piercing as an eagle's. He looked wicked enough, when I first saw him, to make a very unfavorable impression on me — though I was subsequently led, through a change of circumstances, to think him quite agreeable in many respects. I may add, however, that he never had my entire confidence — that I never felt entirely

at ease in his company — for it always seemed to me as if there was something hidden in his nature — something dark and sinister that I could not fathom. His temper was quick and fiery, but under such complete control of his iron will that he could at any time be outwardly calm and stoical. His smile, when he sought to win your regard, or was really pleased with you, was quite fascinating; yet I always felt somehow as if there was something wrong — perhaps a want of sincerity — perhaps a concealed design — I could not tell what. He had, it was said, been involved in a Mexican revolt, and had been obliged to leave the country to save his life. He had come to the — parish of Louisiana, with his wife and daughter, some ten years before the date of my story, had purchased and stocked a fine plantation, and was regarded as a wealthy, high-toned, honorable gentleman. He had been one among the first in organizing the band of “regulators” previously spoken of, and was the second officer in command. His zeal in the cause, even though carried to rashness, made him quite popular among the honest part of the community. It was generally believed that he hated villainy, and desired the complete extermination of the outlaws infesting that region; and if he sometimes allowed his passion to get the better of his judgment, as in my case, it was easily pardoned by those who believed it meant for the good of society. Much of this of course I learned afterward; but I have stated it here, because I wish to direct special attention to one who will figure prominently in my narrative.

“Well, sir,” said Captain Sebastian, still scowling fiercely at me, “now, that your villainous life is spared a little longer, what have you to say for yourself?”

“This,” said I, with compressed lips, slowly and sternly, giving him back glance for glance, “that if *you* are a gentleman, I am your peer, and now stand ready, if these good gentlemen will see fair play, to cram every vile epithet you have applied to me down your own throat!”

He started, with a kind of smothered yell, and sprung forward to strike me; but the blow was arrested by some of his own friends, who seized and held him back.

“You forget yourself, Captain Sebastian!” said one of the four gentlemen referred to; “this man is a prisoner, and it is sufficient for the present that we put him on trial for his life. If we find him guilty, we shall punish him enough; and if not, it will be time enough for you to call him to a personal reckoning afterward!”

“And if you do not find me guilty,” said I, “I have a right to be considered a gentleman, and, as such, your passionate friend here must either recall his words or take the consequences. Gentlemen,” I pursued, “I come from the North, where duelling is looked upon with abhorrence; but notwithstanding that, I have been intimate with too many Southern gentlemen not to know that here it is a custom of which I may be permitted to avail myself, and I warn you that I shall either have an apology or demand satisfaction!”

“You will probably have a halter before either!” sneered the captain.

“Why do you insult me in this manner?” demanded I.

“Because I believe you to be a villain!” he replied.

“You should not judge everybody by yourself, captain!”

“Come, come,” said one of the others, a mild, venerable-looking man, “cease this bickering, and let us get on with the business we have in hand! Young men,” he pursued, addressing both Caleb and myself, “a very heinous crime was last evening committed in the parish of —, nothing less than the kidnapping and carrying off of the daughter of —”

“Colonel Brandon!” interrupted Stebbins. “Yes, wal, we know all about that are, and can tell *you* all about it tew, in putty quick time. She was here herself only a bit ago, and ought tu be back here now. You see, we got her away from the villains what had her, and was a-going on

home with her, when the doctor's hoss here — But, hold on! I'll go back to the starting-p'int, and tell you the hull story."

"Suppose you let me relate it, Mr. Stebbins?" said I.

"Wal, du it, doctor — du it — I don't care a dern how it's told; you can du it as well 's I can, I guess; only I want these 'ere gentlemen tu see that they hain't been using us right, arter all we done for the gal! No, sir! I snum! that's a fact!"

"If you had asked me a few straightforward questions in the first place, gentlemen," said I, "or had even permitted me to tell what I know, much harsh language, and many unkind feelings, might have been avoided. I supposed in the first place you were seeking Miss Brandon, but I could enter into no explanations while my life was being threatened. Had you come up a few minutes sooner, you would have found us together; but unfortunately my horse shied and threw me and ran away; and she, being mounted, went in pursuit of it. I am surprised you did not meet her, for she went toward the point from which you came. Perhaps the horse turned off from the path into the swamp. Your dogs appeared to find that something had crossed the trail they were following — so I judged, at least — and I fancied a part of them and your company separated from you before you came in sight of us. Am I right?"

"Yes — go on — tell your whole story."

"Before I proceed, let me make one remark, that must convince you we are not the kidnappers of Miss Brandon. If we had been carrying her off, with all last night for a start, you would hardly have found us here, such a little distance from her home, without horses, and concealed in the branches of the trees."

"We did not suppose you were the kidnappers yourselves, but only a portion of the same gang," said the gray-haired gentleman.

"Ah, that indeed! But why not take us for honest men, as well as rogues, till you could know something more about us?"

"Is it likely that two honest men would be hiding in the tree-tops with a negro in their company?"

"Yes, with blood-hounds coming down on them."

"But do innocent men think every dog they hear a blood-hound?"

"At least, in this case, Miss Brandon was expecting her father's hounds to precede the party coming in quest of her, and she was much disappointed at not seeing you at an earlier hour!"

"Is it possible, gentlemen, you can have the patience to hear this fellow any further? Don't you see it is all a trumped-up, bungling lie?" exclaimed Captain Sebastian, with scornful malignity, beginning to pace to and fro.

"All — fudge! that's my opinion!" said one of the coarser fellows.

"Shucks!" growled another.

"Tie him up, and give him fifty — that'll fetch the truth out of him!" put in a third.

"Let's let the nigger speak!" cried a fourth.

"He can't give evidence ag'in a white man, you know!"

"Cuss the evidence! We don't want any more'n we've got! Speak, boy! what's your name?"

"Sam, marser!" replied the black, who appeared very much frightened, and had scarcely ceased trembling for a moment since we had been put on what our captors had been pleased to term our trial.

"Sam what? Who does yer belong to?"

"Don't know, marser."

"You don't know, you scoundrel! That's a likely story! Who'd you run away from, along o' this feller?" pointing to me. "Tell the truth, now, you black rascal, or I'll cut your — black tongue out!"

"'Fore God, marser," cried Sam, dropping down on his knees, and clasping his hands, "I'se doesn't know who my marser am, I does n't! I works der ferry, down yar in de swamp, and dis gemman catches me yar last night, and totes me off dis mornin'!"

"Oho! so he did run away with you, hey? I thought as much."

"Gentlemen," said I, "permit me to ask the boy a few questions."

"Oh, you want to give him hints, hey?"

"No, I want you to learn the truth from my questions. Put him in peril of his life, if you like, and compel him to tell the truth only. Sam," I pursued, addressing the black, "now tell all you know, and you will not be harmed; but if you lie in the least, something dreadful will happen to you! When did you first see me?"

"Las' night, marser."

"Where was I?"

"Tudder side de bayou?"

"Who was with me?"

"Dis gemman (pointing to Caleb,) and nudder one, and young lady."

"Where were you when you first saw us?"

"I'se jes' come ober wid de boat. I'se heerd some pusson holler ober, and I'se t'ink it Marsen Blake, and goes ober yar."

"And who is this Blake? Is he really your master?"

"I'se does n't know nuffin' who my marser am what owns me."

"Gentlemen, are we here to listen to a nigger?" interposed Captain Sebastian with angry impatience.

"Will you, or will you not, let me put the truth before you, gentlemen?" demanded I. "What does this treatment mean? You accuse me of a heinous crime, and, when I attempt a defence, you refuse to hear. Do you want to

murder me? Are you thirsting for the blood of an innocent man?"

"We can't take nigger evidence!" growled one of the coarser fellows, with a furtive glance at Captain Sebastian, as if seeking his approval.

"All — fudge!" joined in another.

"Shucks!" said a third.

"Gentlemen," observed the mild-looking, gray-haired man, whose age might have been fifty, "I do not like this! I am inclined to believe this young man is telling us the truth, and we should certainly hear him out. If he tells us what is false, we can easily discover it, and it will only be so much the worse for him. He says Miss Brandon was here a few minutes ago — that she has gone after his horse — that she and some person with her is the party that drew off a portion of our dogs and the rest of our company. This is your statement, is it, sir?"

"It is," I replied.

"This, then," pursued the gentleman, "being this young man's statement, we are in duty bound to see that it is false before we condemn him; and we shall soon know, for our friends will soon be here."

"More likely they will be drawn off into an ambuscade and murdered!" said Captain Sebastian, with a look that almost made my blood curdle.

The men started, exchanged significant glances, and then looked fiercely and menacingly at me. Why was this Captain Sebastian so eager to disprove my words, make me out a villain, and take my life? I was a stranger to him. Did he really believe me guilty? or did he assume it for a wicked purpose? It appeared to me as if there was some mystery about it, which I could not fathom. I felt my case to be critical — my very life, as it were, hanging on a thread! Though these men were in the main perhaps honest and good citizens, and some of them truly Southern gentlemen,

yet they might be moved by their passions and prejudices to do a deed they would repent of when too late. Unquestionably they had been sorely tried by the bad acts of a gang of lawless men, and, being now banded together, as "lynchers, or regulators," they were too much disposed to see guilt in strangers found under such suspicious circumstances as Stebbins and myself. And the circumstances were suspicious; I was obliged to confess to myself—to be discovered where we were, in the tops of the trees, and accounting for a position there by a story that looked improbable at the best. I now felt most anxious for the return of Miss Brandon to prove that all was right. Should she, in following my horse, get strayed off and lost, and not be overtaken by those in pursuit—good heavens! what fearful consequences might follow to her, to me, to all concerned! The bare thought of this sent the blood to my heart, and I felt my courage being put to the severest test.

"Look! how pale he turns!" said one.

"Because he sees his ——— lies won't save him!" growled another.

"I am for hanging these fellows up here, where they will be an example to their vile companions!" rejoined the captain. "There is no use wasting time here; and you know, gentlemen, we are banded together for the purpose of exterminating these outlaws, and have sworn to do it! As for mercy, that is out of the question; the only point with us is *guilt*, and I for one believe these men guilty!"

"And I!"

"And I!"

"And I!"

There were half-a-dozen affirmative responses.

"Fetch on the ropes, Jim!" said one.

The man addressed, turned to his horse, and took a couple of strong ropes from the cantel of the saddle.

"Good God!" said I; "I had better have fallen into the

hands of the kidnappers from whom I rescued the young lady!"

"See here, you, now — look here now!" cried Caleb Stebbins, who was by these fearful preparations placed in a state of great excitement and alarm, with the perspiration fairly streaming down his pale, freckled face. "See here now — you ain't a-going tu hang us in 'arnest, be you?"

"You'll find it 'arnest enough when you stretches the rope!" growled one of the brutal fellows.

"Great ginger! thunderation! don't you du it now! or you'll be sorry for it, I tell you — that's a fact! I tell you there ain't no law on this eternal 'arth for hanging a feller on suspicion! and you'll be liable tu be tried for murder, every durn one o' ye, I snum!"

"Maybe you'll prosecute us?" sneered one.

"This 'ere's a Christian country — a part of these United States of America — and you hain't no right to du things agin law!" cried Stebbins, shaking his fists with angry vehemence.

Had matters been less serious, I should have laughed. Some of the men did as it was.

"We make the laws here, and execute them too!" sternly said one of the four gentlemen, who was evidently beginning to side against us.

"See here, you!" cried Caleb, turning to him; "I'm clean away from down East, State of Connecticut, and my name's Stebbins — Caleb Stebbins. I never was in this derned country afore, and never will be agin, if I ever git out on 't, I tell you! I come down here, with a little money, tu buy me some land, if I found any tu suit; and that's my business here, you know; and I want tu be allowed tu go about it, and not be pestered in this way! I've lost my hoss, that I gin fifty dollars for up in Tennessee, and lots of notions and things besides, and that are's enough, I calculate, for one go, without having my life took into the bargain. Joshua

Stebbins, my grand'ther, that I'm descended from, fit in the Revolution, tu gain the liberties of the Colonies and independence of the United States of America; and now you're jest using me as if I's some thief — or, wuss still, a murderer — when I hain't done a dern thing but what's right; and I won't stand it — so there now — I snum tu Guinea, I won't! — and if you're a-going tu murder me — for 't ain't nothing short of that — I'm a-going tu fight for it!"

With the last words, out came Caleb's two pistols, and were put forward in such a dangerous way that two or three nearest to him took a step or two back. Instantly two strong men seized him from behind, and he was thrown heavily to the ground, his arms pinioned, and his weapons taken away from him.

"The rope there!" cried the captain, fiercely; "and let us make short work with him and his fellow scoundrel! After this attempt upon our lives, there can no longer be any doubt of their guilt!"

"Hold!" exclaimed the gray-haired gentleman, as it became terribly evident that we were both about to be lynched; "I forbid any harm being done to these men till we have further evidence of their guilt!"

"By what right do you forbid it?" demanded Captain Sebastian.

"By the right of humanity, sir! You may keep them close prisoners if you choose; but you shall not hang them till Colonel Brandon, our acknowledged commander, joins us."

"And he is always for mercy, and so they will escape, to steal more girls, more horses, more negroes, burn down our houses, rob us in every way, and murder us afterward!" rejoined the captain, chafing like a caged tiger. "You will rue this chicken-hearted philanthropy, Mr. La Grange!"

"La Grange!" cried I; "the father of Ernest La Grange?"

"Yes. Do you know him?"

"He was my classmate at college! My name is Leslie Walbridge, of Philadelphia!"

"Good heavens! I have heard him speak of you often!"

"Hark!" cried one of the others; "there sounds the bugle! Our friends are coming. Sound our bugle, Barker, and let them know where to find us!"

We were saved.

CHAPTER VII.

A CONSULTATION.

HAVE you never in a dream had a sensation of falling from some fearful height — of going down, down, into some dark and awful abyss — and, just at the moment when you were expecting to be crushed out of existence, suddenly found yourself awaking, with a start and a thrill of joyful relief, in your own comfortable bed? Sensations not unlike these were mine, as I stood one moment in peril of my life, and the next felt I was saved.

I glanced at Captain Sebastian. His brow was still dark, and there was still deadly malice in his eye. He looked like a wicked man baffled in some dark design, but who still had hope of revenge.

"Ernest La Grange is with these gentlemen who are now approaching, and will soon be here!" he said, fixing his eye sternly upon mine.

"Thank God for that!" I ejaculated; "for I shall soon have the satisfaction of proving to you all how much I have been wronged by your suspicions."

"You still persist, then, in your innocence?" he rejoined, in a modified tone, and with a partial clearing up of his

countenance, as if he were beginning to believe my statement might be true after all.

"My dear Mr. Walbridge," exclaimed the kind-hearted Mr. La Grange, as he stepped forward and grasped my hand, "I am more grieved at this than I can find words to express. I hope you will forgive us, and allow us some chance to atone for it."

"To you, my noble friend," I replied, with tears in my eyes, "I have nothing to forgive, but rather do I owe my life to you."

"That we should have been on the point of putting to death for a villain the dear friend of my son!" he pursued. "I shudder to think of it!"

"Nay, blame not yourself, Mr. La Grange—nor you, gentlemen," said I; "for I admit that appearances were much against me; and had I been circumstanced as you were, I believe I might have thought and acted as you did."

Several of the party now stepped forward, shook my hand warmly, said they were sorry for what had occurred, and hoped I would not think all Southern gentlemen wild beasts, as I had some right to do, considering the reception I had met with on my first appearance in that region.

But the most marked change was in Captain Sebastian. Suddenly his face cleared up with a smile that was really fascinating, and his voice became soft and musical, as he stepped forward, and, with hearty frankness, said, as he proffered his hand:

"Sir, I owe you a very humble apology! You said, you remember, you would either have an apology or satisfaction, and it now affords me great satisfaction to tender the apology."

"Which proves you a gentleman of whom I need no longer be in deadly fear," I smiled in return.

"Wal, now this ere's so'thing like, I snum tu Guinea!" I heard Caleb say, in reply to something that had been ad-

dressed to him, as the men released him from his painful situation and assisted him to his feet. "I thought you was a-going to du it though one time, I tell you; but you'd ha' missed it plaguily, and no mistake! You see, we're gentlemen, as much as any of you be. The doctor here, he's college-edicated, and his father's a rich merchant in the big city of Philadelphia; and I've got good common skule l'arning, have teachd one winter, and my gran'ther, as I told you afore, fit in the Revolution."

The bugles sounded, the tramp of horses was heard, and presently the other party came dashing up. Among them I saw Miss Brandon, and my friend Ernest riding by her side; and just behind them was the stolid, matter-of-fact Dutchman, mounted on his own beast and leading mine.

The moment my friend caught sight of me, he sprung from his horse, bounded forward, flung his arms around me, and gave me a warm, earnest, French embrace. It was not feigned—it was real.

"Oh, I am so, so glad to see you, Leslie!" he exclaimed, with all the ardor of a warm-hearted, enthusiastic school-boy; "and we all owe you so much for rescuing Al—Miss Brandon—from the hands of those villains! She has told me the whole story. And how do you do, and how have you been? Oh, it is such a pleasure to see you here, so near my home, to which you are now going, and I have so much to ask and tell you! Here, Colonel Brandon," he continued, without giving me time to speak, turning to a tall, dark-complexioned, noble-looking man, who had dismounted, and was now approaching us, "let me make known to you my dear friend, Leslie Walbridge, the savior of your daughter, as you have heard her relate, and as noble a gentleman as we can boast in Louisiana, which is saying a great deal."

"Sir," returned the colonel, grasping my hand, looking me full in the eye, and speaking in that peculiar tone which always assures us of sincerity, "I am both proud and happy

to know one to whom I owe so much, and I hope I shall some time be blessed with the opportunity of convincing you of my gratitude."

"And to think how near we have been to putting him and his companion here to death—mistaking them for a part of the gang that kidnapped Miss Brandon!" exclaimed Mr. La Grange.

"Do not mention it, I pray you," said I; "it was only a mistake."

"What!" cried Ernest, lifting his hands with horror. "What do I hear? Good heavens! Do you not know a gentleman from a ruffian when you see him?"

Several of the party hung their heads.

"I was determined to save him till you rejoined us, at all events," said Mr. La Grange; "but had he not discovered, through hearing my name, that I was your father, Ernest, and had not the sound of your bugle at that moment reached us, I fear I might have had some trouble in keeping my zealous friend here, Captain Sebastian, from putting the rope around his neck."

Ernest cast an indignant glance at the captain, and Colonel Brandon at once took the matter up.

"How is this?" he demanded, turning to Sebastian.

"Yes, blame the affair on me," replied the latter, compressing his lips, and evidently struggling to keep down a naturally fiery temper that seldom brooked blame or opposition. "I found him, and the other man, and the boy, in the trees, and I believed I had got hold of two outlaws."

"But surely you would not have punished them without trial?" said the colonel.

"We did try them to my satisfaction," answered the captain.

"And would you have presumed to execute them in the absence of these gentlemen and myself, and we so near?" pursued the colonel.

"Perhaps I should," said Captain Sebastian, "for my anger was in the ascendant, and I feared your mercy."

"I trust I am merciful," returned Colonel Brandon, slowly and deliberately, as if weighing his words; "but if you had carried matters to such an extreme, you might have had cause perhaps to fear my *justice* more. I am glad, however, that no harm has been done."

Captain Sebastian, as he turned away without a rejoinder, gave the other a look which I did not soon forget, and subsequently had good cause to remember. It was a wicked look of malignant hate and scorn, but I do not believe any one else perceived it. There was a strange, fiery gleam in the black and piercing eye, and for a moment I fancied I saw a devil in the place of a man. In an instant it was gone, and not long after I saw the colonel and captain talking and laughing together as if they were the best of friends and boon companions.

"The captain is hot-tempered and rash, but does not hold malice without just cause," was my mental comment, as I dismissed the subject from my thoughts.

The party which had come up with my friends, numbered fifteen, twelve of whom at least were high-toned Southern gentlemen, mostly planters, whose estates were in one sense contiguous. They had been summoned together during the night, and at daylight had set off with the dogs in quest of the captors of the young lady. Some unavoidable delays, such as the hounds getting at fault, had kept them from meeting us sooner. To these I was presented individually, and the reception I met with was in the highest degree satisfactory. They were mostly gentlemen of French and Spanish descent, crossed, some of them, with the Anglo-Saxon, and so positive in their characters as to be the warmest of friends or the most bitter of enemies. They were naturally aristocratic, reserved, and exclusive; and a stranger in the country, without a proper introduction, might never get the

entrée of their society. Once received with favor, however, and everything at their command was literally placed at his, and in their mansions he was then as much master as the owners themselves.

I have in my time had many a warm friend and received many a hearty welcome, but I do not think my presence ever afforded more real, heartfelt pleasure to any human being than it now did to Ernest La Grange. His was a warm, earnest, confiding, enthusiastic, generous nature, with the artless *naïveté* of a child, and as little deceit as I ever found in man. Though a little too effeminate in appearance perhaps to please some, to me he was always handsome; for there was something so bright and noble in his face, it was so full of intelligence and *soul*, that I never seemed to weary of looking at it. He was just my age—two-and-twenty—but he was so very youthful that I appeared to be several years his senior. Though of French descent, he had a pure Saxon complexion—a light, fair skin, light curly hair, and deep blue eyes. There was a classic beauty in his clearly-defined and finely-cut features—in his high, noble brow, straight chiselled nose, full, firm mouth, and well-rounded chin. With the exception of a light, silken moustache and imperial, his face was almost as smooth and beardless as a woman's. He was about medium in height, slender and compactly built, and with a natural grace of carriage and ease of manner that conveyed the idea of conscious, manly dignity, and the refinement of a polished gentleman. Though there was the unmistakable pride of birth, breeding, and character in his every look and action, yet there was never anything haughty or supercilious, except when brought in contact with such qualities in another, and then he was almost unapproachable. To me he was always kind, sincere, and confiding. From the very first we had been drawn to each other, our acquaintance had rapidly ripened into the most intimate friendship, and from that time forward there

had never been so much as a shadow of distrust or ill-feeling between us; and this, as the world goes, was saying a great deal, more especially as we were both proud, quick, fiery-tempered men.

"Oh, my dear friend," he said to me, in a low tone of earnest simplicity, as he drew me aside, "you do not know how intensely glad I am to see you here, and especially as the deliverer of my dear Alice; for, between you and me (and you know I have no secrets from you), we are already engaged."

"I congratulate you, my friend," said I, warmly, grasping his hand; "for she is a brave, noble girl, and worthy to be the wife of the best man that ever lived."

"And we both owe you a debt of gratitude we can never repay."

"Pshaw, Ernest! you know I did but my duty, and what any other humane man would have done under the circumstances, and so I pray you say no more about it. Why, I was not even aware I was serving my best friend till, with the help of my fellow travellers, I had freed the lady, and they at least deserve as much praise as myself."

"Rest assured they shall not be overlooked nor unrewarded, for you all together have given me back life. Oh, Leslie, imagine what I suffered last night, after the news reached me that she had been carried off by a gang of ruffians, and I found pursuit could not be commenced until this morning. Heaven of mercy! I shudder at the bare thought of it now, and it seems as if I had just been awakened from a horrible dream."

"But for what purpose do you suppose she was kidnapped?"

"Heaven knows!—revenge, perhaps—revenge on her father, who is the commander of the 'regulators'—themselves the sworn enemies of the banded villains who infest our Southern States and Texas."

"But if purely for revenge, Ernest," said I, "would they not have murdered her? As it was, I heard them say they had orders not to treat her more harshly than might be necessary to retain her a prisoner, and that they were to take her to a place called Lake Dismal. Do you know where that is?"

"No, I never heard of it before. Ah! the villains! What could they have designed? We must sweep the country of them. We have got a new trace of them now, and we must follow it up. Gracious Providence! only to think how near you, my friend, came to suffering in their stead."

"Captain Sebastian would have it that the Yankee and I were of the gang, and so justly enraged were all your friends that we had a very narrow escape indeed."

"I trust he will display the same zeal in bringing the guilty to justice that he did in endeavoring to destroy the innocent," said Ernest.

"Circumstances were against us, it is true," said I; "but still I think he was too precipitate in reaching his conclusions; and I certainly am not flattered by the fact of being mistaken for a common cutthroat."

"Hardly, I should say."

"However," I continued, "as he atoned for his mistake by a proper apology, perhaps I should say no more about it."

While Ernest and I were conversing apart, most of the others were holding a consultation, or council of war. At length I was called upon for my statement as to what I had seen, and my advice as to the expediency of immediately pursuing the kidnappers into the swamp. I told them all I had seen, heard, and discovered, from first to last, but declined to add an opinion concerning what they could best decide for themselves.

"If you wish to go, gentlemen," I said, "I am at your service as a guide, or in any other capacity."

"I think we had better push on at once, then, captain,"

said Colonel Brandon, addressing Sebastian, and evidently alluding to a previous conversation.

"We shall certainly gain nothing by pursuing too soon," replied the other. "Your daughter you have regained, and can therefore afford to wait; and by delaying the affair a few days, the rascals may think we have given up the idea of further pursuit, and so be thrown off their guard. With the warning they have had, it is hardly probable we should catch them now, and the attempt might seriously injure our future operations."

There seemed to be a good deal of sound argument in what the captain said, and quite a number sided with him at once.

"But if we cannot catch the villains, we can at least explore some of their haunts," rejoined the colonel, "and will thus know better what to do the next time; and if we should happily frighten them out of the country, all the better still. I thank God my dear child is restored to me; and in my heart I do not seek revenge—only security. If they will leave us in peace, now and forever, in Heaven's name, let them go! Remember, we are together now, a formidable party, and have the dogs with us, and it seems like losing an opportunity to turn back at this point."

"The dogs at least will be of no further use," still objected the captain, "for the scent has been too much crossed; and, besides, what will you do with your daughter? You would hardly wish to take her with you, I think."

"She can return home, accompanied by two or three of the gentlemen for protection."

"And suppose she should be assailed on the way by a prowling gang of ruffians, and you should lose her again? From the statement just made by Mr. Walbridge, it appears that another party of the outlaws was expected to cross the bayou last night; and the fact that they did not cross, leaves us to infer they are still on this side; and, for what we know,

may even now be watching our movements, and may be strong enough to overpower the small guard you would send with her."

"There may be something in that," said the colonel, reflectively.

"Too much in it, I fear."

"But it is so unusual to hear so many words of caution from you, Captain Sebastian, that I confess myself not a little surprised," observed Mr. La Grange.

"It is true," answered the captain, "I am generally rash enough — too rash, in fact; but since I have so narrowly escaped doing a deed that would have left me a miserable wretch for life, I think it high time to mend my ways and exhibit a little common sense."

The matter was argued some time longer; but the counsel of the captain at length prevailed; and the whole party turned homeward, without even paying a visit to the bayou, taking the negro Sam with them, for it was not thought judicious to set him at liberty.

"Now, my friend," said Ernest to me, "I am happy in knowing I am going to take you home with me, and detain you a prisoner a long time."

"A happy prisoner for the time I remain, my dear fellow," said I; "but the business affairs of life may require me to leave much sooner than inclination."

"Nay, I must hunt you up a wife, and see you settled among us," he gaily rejoined.

"Ah! that would be making me a prisoner indeed! Shall I say bound in silken fetters, or by the Hymeneal noose?"

"No matter, so you find yourself a happy and willing captive."

CHAPTER VIII.

MY SECRET DISCOVERED.

THE homes of Ernest La Grange and Alice Brandon, with many others in that region, possessed all the peculiarities and best attractions of rich Southern plantations. The dwellings of the proprietors were really country mansions, combining taste, elegance, and comfort. They were mostly two stories in height, painted white, with delightful verandas, shaded with vines and trees, and with green lawns stretching away in picturesque beauty. The negro quarters, standing back, but in plain view, generally formed each a considerable village of two rows of small, comfortable, white-washed cabins. The land was a level, rich alluvion, mostly devoted to immense fields of cotton, but often shaded around the dwellings with enchanting groves of the orange, fig, magnolia, catalpa, and many other beautiful trees; while all the flowers indigenous to that soft clime, delighted the senses with their bright colors and sweet perfumes. Everything betokened comfort, extended to rural luxury; and although it was then the cotton-picking season, I was pleased to observe that even the slaves were lightly tasked, and always treated with considerate humanity.

Had I been a prince, travelling among my subjects, the hospitalities extended to me could not have been warmer, scarcely more royal. I was the bosom friend of Ernest La Grange, the deliverer of Alice Brandon, the gentleman who had been nearly murdered in mistake, and everything that friendship, gratitude, and the desire for atonement could suggest, was done to honor and make me contented and happy. And what was more, nobody seemed able to do enough to satisfy himself, though far more than sufficient to satisfy me. Though the guest of Ernest La Grange, I was

allowed no quiet peace in his delightful home. Invitations poured in constantly; something new was continually being arranged. It was a dinner with this one, that one, and the other—a ball here, there, and yonder—a picnic, a riding party, a hunt by daylight, a hunt by firelight, a horse race, and so forth and so on. There seemed to be no end to the round of amusements or the desire for them. The people were all life and animation, and lived almost wholly in the world of excitement. They were fond of all kinds of games, and generally played for stakes—sometimes betting large sums—and mostly winning or losing with the *nonchalance* of experienced gamblers.

While I was being thus highly feasted and honored, it pleased me to observe that my fellow travellers were not forgotten. Caleb and Peter were the guests of Colonel Brandon; and, though not dragged everywhere like myself, they received sufficient attention to satisfy them.

"Hollo, doctor, how d'ye du? how d'ye come on?" was the salutation I received from Mr. Stebbins the first time we met alone after our separation. "I tell you this 'ere's the place, and these 'ere's the people, to make a feller feel tu home!" he went on. "We had a putty narrer dodge on't when they fust got hold of us, but they've made it up sence, I snum! You know the hoss I lost?"

"Yes."

"Wal, the colonel's gin me another, that'd jest knock spots all out of him—wo'th a hundred and fifty, if not tew hundred dollars, by ginger! Ain't that duing on't, hey?"

"I am glad to see you have been so liberally rewarded."

"Yes, it takes these 'ere Southern chaps to du up the thing, and no mistake!"

"They are generally men of strong prejudices and passions," said I, "and either warm friends or bitter enemies. If we had been what they first supposed us to be, nothing could have saved us; and now it seems they cannot do enough to atone for their mistake."

"'Pears tu me, though, they ought tu knowed better 'n tu take us for gal-catchers, hoss-thieves, nigger-stealers, and them kind of scamps—don't you think so?"

"I was not flattered by the mistake."

"I guess not. It looked tu me as if it was the captain's work, though—that are Mexican feller, you know—and I did n't like his looks, I tell you."

"He was excited and angry, and, being one of those men who are too much controlled by a fiery temper, he did not stop to consider. He made ample apologies as soon as he found out his mistake, you remember, and has acted the gentleman in every way since."

"I hain't seen him sence."

"I have, more than once."

"And you like him, hey?"

"I have seen others I liked quite as well."

"Y-es, I guess so. I would n't like him, I know. I'm drea'ful queer about some things, and so 's our hull Stebbins family—from my gran'ther, that fit in the Revolution, down. If I don't like a chap, I don't, and there's an end on't; and, what's more, there ain't nothing can make me, nother."

"I suppose you don't forget how near you came to being shot or hung by his orders?"

"Jerusalem! I guess not. Great ginger! wa'n't that a go? Ph-e-e-w!"

"Does your antipathy extend far down through posterity?" queried I, being in rather a quizzical mood.

"Does my what du what?" exclaimed Caleb, opening his mouth.

"In other words, would you let your direst animosity descend to and through the living and unborn progeny of your fancied adversary down to the last generation of unrecorded time?" explained I, with a serious air.

"Wal, see here—I say yeou—I hain't got the fust idee

o' what you 're driving at—I snum I hain't—that's a fact!" returned Caleb, with a look of helpless perplexity.

"Well, then, to bring the matter within your comprehension, let me ask you if you are disposed to carry your feelings of repugnance to his possible children and all their descendants? In short, Captain Sebastian has a child—a daughter—young, lovely, and wealthy—and I want to know if your dislike of the father does or will extend to her also?"

"Wal, I guess not," replied Caleb, his small eyes twinkling; "I ain't much apt tu dislike good-looking gals."

"Especially when they are wealthy?"

"Jes' so! jes' so!" returned Caleb, his sharp features beginning to take on an expression of shrewd calculation. "How much now d' you s'pose she might be wo'th, doctor?"

"Her father is reputed rich, and she an only child."

"A good many thousands, I calculate?"

"His negroes alone are worth that."

"Du tell! Hum! Yeas. How old d' you 'spect she is now?"

"Well, perhaps sixteen or seventeen."

"Most old enough tu marry, I snum!"

"Quite old enough in this region. Girls here sometimes marry at thirteen and fourteen."

"Sho! you don't say so! D' you think she's got any feller now?"

"What do you mean by that?—a beau—a lover?"

"Wal, I guess likely."

"I am sure I don't know. And if not, what then? Are you thinking of trying to dazzle her with your accomplishments?"

"'Spect 't would n't be of no use, would it?"

"You might try—'faint heart never won fair lady.'"

"The fact is," said Caleb, confidentially, "a feller might du wuss than git some rich gal round here for a wife—don't you think so?"

"Yes, I think he might do a good deal worse."

"Tell you what, doctor—a big cotton plantation, with plenty of niggers to du all the work, ain't nothin' tu be sneezed at—hey?" pursued Caleb, swelling with importance at the bare idea.

"You could name many worse things."

"I guess so," grinned Mr. Stebbins—one of those shrewd, cunning grins that express so much. "Sence I've got down here, and got a kind of foothold, as one may say, I kind o' calculate I'll try it on—hitch on tu one of these 'ere gals that's got a plantation hitched on tu her like!" and the Yankee ended with a self-satisfied laugh.

"Well, there is the young and pretty Cora Brandon—the sister of Miss Alice. I suppose you will begin, or have already begun, to test your lady-killing qualities with her."

"T ain't no use for me tu try there," said Caleb, positively.

"How do you know?"

"'Cause she's got her eye on you."

"On me?" exclaimed I, with affected surprise, though I felt the hot blood flush my face, under the keen, half-quizical glance of the Yankee. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, git eout, doctor—don't you know?"

"I know she is a very interesting and lovely girl."

"I guess so; and she knows you're a putty interesting and handsome feller, or else my name ain't Caleb Stebbins!"

"Why do you think so?" queried I, assuming, as much as I could, a tone and air of indifference.

"Oh, go along now!—d' you think I can't see nothing?"

"But she is only a girl of sixteen."

"Oh, she's tew young, is she? T' other one was old enough for me, but this ere one's tew young for you! Y-e-e-s—jes' so. Oh, git eout!"

I changed the conversation. Perhaps there was nothing

else in the world the Yankee could have told me at that time that would have afforded me so much internal satisfaction; and yet I changed the subject to one in which I had little or no interest; for thus do we often seek to conceal what is nearest and dearest to our hearts, feeling that what we so prize is too sacred to be lightly touched on by those whose natures are not in harmony with ours.

I believe in love at first sight. Not that I mean to say that all persons who fall in love do so at first sight, but only that some do. I am one of the latter class. I could no more fall in love after the first hour than I can tell why I ever did in the first minute. I only know that such is the fact. I may learn to respect, esteem, and even feel a warm affection for a person through the discovery of certain high and noble qualities; but that love which is beyond all else in sacrifice and power—which knows no self, and is above life and death—is not with me a passion of growth, but immediate and involuntary.

I had met Cora Brandon on several occasions; but from the first moment my eyes rested on hers, I felt a strange sensation, something different from anything I had before experienced. I felt drawn to her in a manner I could not account for; it seemed as if she in some way belonged to me; that our destinies were connected by an unknown power. And yet with this attraction there was a strange embarrassment and confusion. I could not act as I would; I could not even speak in a natural manner. I, who had been much in society, and had always been at my ease in the presence of the most beautiful of her sex, was now constrained, bashful, and awkward. I bowed like a country clown; the hot blood rushed to my temples; I knew I was blushing scarlet; I lost command of language, hesitated, stammered, and ended at length with the conviction that I was acting like a fool, and she knew it. As for Cora herself, whether my manner affected her, or whether she was influenced by feelings similar

to mine, I could not say; but she too seemed confused and embarrassed to such a degree that, had we then been left alone together, I incline to believe we might have separated without exchanging a dozen words. We had met subsequently on several occasions; but up to the time when the conversation occurred between the Yankee and myself, as above recorded, we had said little to each other beyond the ordinary greetings and commonplaces of the day. I would have given anything to have been able to talk to her with the same ease and freedom that I did to her sister Alice; but, for the life of me, I could not. I had flattered myself, however, that my secret was safe; that my embarrassment, if noticed by others, had been attributed to indifference, dislike, or anything except the real cause; but the remarks of Stebbins had now undeceived me in this respect, and I wondered if it was owing to his shrewdness or to the fact of its being patent to all observers. It was a great deal, though, to be assured, even from his lips, that she was not indifferent to me; and in my heart of hearts I treasured and prized his words far more than such a nature as his could have possibly conceived.

"With this idea to give me hope, I shall not be contented till I know more," I said to myself.

And what was this fair being that had awakened in my breast such strange emotions? In personal appearance Cora Brandon did not resemble her sister Alice in the least. In fact they were as unlike as any two sisters I ever saw. Alice was a queen-like brunette, and Cora a pretty, lovely blonde, with a fair skin, soft blue eyes, sunny curls, and one of the sweetest, rosiest little mouths that ever tempted an anchorite. She was naturally lively, loving, and confiding, sufficiently intelligent to be companionable, with a heart full of gentleness and kindness. In look and manner she somewhat reminded me of my friend Ernest; and I fancied, as in his case, I could never weary of gazing upon her bright, sunny

face, with its radiant smile and dimpled cheeks. Her form was slight, symmetrical, and full of grace. With all except myself, she seemed gay, happy, and at ease; modest, without being bashful; but with me alone, even from the first, there appeared to be a painful constraint. Was I to feel complimented or otherwise by this? The shrewd Yankee seemed to think the former, and I only hoped he might be right.

It may be proper to remark here that no further attempt had been made to punish the gang of villains that had carried off Miss Brandon. It was thought by many that too much time had elapsed to render the pursuit effectual, and that, after all, no great harm had been done; by which was meant that the crime committed had not been sufficiently aggravated in its consequences to keep alive that vindictive feeling which could be appeased only by blood. The lady had not been badly treated, and was now safe at home; and this had gone far to calm down the fierce storm of rage which her seizure had raised. One thing struck me as a little curious; which was, that Captain Sebastian, who had been so eager to take my life at first, should subsequently have been one of the foremost in counselling delay in the pursuit of the ruffians; and that, as much by his advice as any other, the idea of hunting them down should have been abandoned for the time. His reasons were — that the villains, having escaped in the first instance, would either be on the watch, and foil any attempts to capture them, or else, by having already scattered, or gone to some other locality, would render such an attempt useless. There was plausibility in this reasoning: the only wonder was that it should have been deliberately put forth by so fiery and hot-tempered a man.

But there were more curious and wonderful things to be developed, and I was destined to be a witness of some strange and fearful events:

CHAPTER IX.

SOMETHING ABOUT LOVE.

THERE was one thing in Southern hospitality I liked — the sense of freedom and home-feeling imparted to the guest. You could go when you liked, come when you pleased, retire when it suited you, and get up when you chose. The master said to you, in effect:

"You must forget to be a stranger, and believe yourself one of the family. All things are at your command. My servants will wait on you. I have horses in the stable, dogs in the kennel, and firearms in the shooting gallery. There are billiards, tenpins, quoits, cards, chess, backgammon; choose your favorite sport and a good antagonist. Even I will do myself the honor to contend with you if you can find no other adversary. Order your meals to suit your pleasure, and don't let my lazy butler forget that I have some very excellent old wine in the cellar. To see you feel at home will make me happy."

Such, at least, was my experience in the region of Louisiana where I was now located.

The direct family of Mr. La Grange consisted of himself, wife, son, and a maiden sister. Mrs. La Grange was a pale, delicate, retiring lady, who showed herself in company only when absolutely necessary, and never had much to say at any time. I think she loved her husband and son as much as it was in her nature to love any human being, and next to them her poodle. Miss La Grange, the maiden sister, was tall, thin, old and scrawny, with squint eyes and gray curls. She doted on novels, affected juvenility, and believed she would yet be the heroine of a happy romance. She had a good voice, was a fine musician, and used to play the piano, harp and guitar by the hour.

The La Grange mansion was large and roomy, and all of it comfortably, and some portions of it elegantly, furnished. In a building standing a little back, though connected with it by a covered walk, were a billiard room, bowling alley, and shooting gallery. Everything was planned for pleasant amusement; and, except when we had company, Ernest and I had pretty much the whole range to ourselves—the father being a very quiet man, fond of his books, and seldom coming near us. My friend and I were much away together on different invitations, generally got to bed late, and often rose the next day, or rather the same day, with the sun passed meridian.

"Heigh-ho! another call on our good-nature," yawned Ernest, as we met to break our fast in company about two o'clock in the afternoon of a warm, lazy day.

"There seems to be no end to such calls in this region," said I. "Where is it now?"

"At Captain Sebastian's."

"When?"

"Next week."

"What is it?"

"A social gathering—a party, I suppose—with cards for those who like a quiet game, and a dance for such as prefer the light, fantastic toe."

"I am fond of a social game of cards," I replied; "but as I am opposed to playing for money, I am obliged to amuse myself in some other way. That is the worst feature of your social sports here, Ernest," I continued; "you all bet, even to the ladies."

"Yes, it is the custom of the country," returned my friend, "though our bets are frequently only nominal sums—just sufficient to excite a little interest in the game. It is so stupid to play with nothing at stake."

"But do you not think the custom itself is a wrong one?—that the social game, thus begun, leads directly to gambling on a larger scale?"

"It doubtless has that effect on some," said Ernest, with a yawn. "But what of that? Most of the planters in this vicinity have more money and time than they know what to do with; and if they get rid of a portion of one while killing the other, I see no great harm in it. And then, what one loses another gains, and in the end probably the two about balance each other."

"Perhaps so, while they play at home; but how is it when they go abroad, and fall among gamblers and sharpers?"

"Oh, they must look out for that!" replied Ernest, with an indifferent shrug of his shoulders. "I see no reason why a social pleasure should be lost for fear some one may abuse it. Besides, does it follow, because a man plays for a small stake at home, that he will suffer himself to be ruined by sharpers abroad? Who are the victims of the gambler? My experience of life at the North leads me to believe they are quite as often men who are not in the habit of playing for money as those who are. But, come! who are you going to take to this party? for of course you must escort a lady. Heavens! how you are blushing, Leslie! You have some one in view, I see. Have you then lost your heart among us, after all? That is glorious, my dear fellow! Who is she?"

"Well, you take a surmise and jump to a conclusion about as quick as anybody I know of," returned I, feeling that my heated face was telling the tale against me in spite of myself.

I had not yet made Ernest my confidant, and, until my conversation with Caleb Stebbins, did not dream that any one had any suspicion of the truth.

"Ah, you are caught!" laughed Ernest. "I can see it. Come! who is she?"

"If you are so penetrating, why not guess the rest?" said I.

"So I will. Now hold on! Let me see! I must think

back. Plague on it! You have been with so many young ladies, and talked, romped, and flirted with so many, that I find it more difficult than I first supposed. Let me see, though," he continued, fixing his bright, merry eyes on me, to watch every shade of my countenance. "There is Lucy Templeton. No, it is not her; her name does not excite an emotion. Poor Lucy! Ellen Supplee? No, wrong again. Marie Duponcier? No, not right yet. Clemence Duval? No. Now hold on! I am working round to the fortunate being—angel I should say—for, of course, she is an angel to you. Lucille St. Albans? Sabina Orlando? Flora Sebastian? No, no, no—still wrong. Confound it, man, is she of American, Spanish, or French descent? You are bound to tell me that, you know."

"I believe I have not admitted that she is of either," said I. "Why not suppose her a creature of your imagination only?"

"Because no creature of my imagination could possibly paint your face of that fiery hue."

My friend now ran over some half-a-dozen more names, watching me closely all the while.

"Pshaw!" he exclaimed, pettishly; "I am running ashore, and am more puzzled than ever. I have named over about all I can think of, except Cora Brandon, and. Ha! I have hit you at last, have I? Oho! jumps the cat that way? Bless my soul! Pretty little, dear little Cora Brandon, eh? Well, well, well; who would have thought it! And such deceivers you are too—so sly! Why, 'pon my honor, I thought you could scarcely bear the sight of each other, for you always seemed glad to separate when together, and I never heard either of you speak ten words to the other. Ah! wonders will never cease."

"Not as you make them out," said I. "Have I said I cared any more for Cora Brandon than for any other young lady in her teens?"

"Yes, you are saying so now, with your whole glowing face, if not with your tongue. Ah! the dear little angel! Who would have thought of her hooking you clear through the gills at once? I must tell this to Alice."

"Suppose you put it in the papers at once, and contradict it the next issue afterward," returned I, affecting a careless laugh.

"Come, Leslie, none of that now with your old friend. Own up, man—own up, and make a clean breast of it. You know I have long made you my confidant, and I certainly deserve something in return."

"So you do, Ernest," rejoined I frankly; "and for fear you will make matters all the worse if I try to blind you, I will confess that I fear she has bewitched me."

"Bravo!" cried my friend, clapping his hands; "bravo, for our dear little, blue-eyed, darling Cora! Does she know of her conquest?"

"No, nor no one else, Ernest, though the shrewd Yankee rather suspects it, and has told me as much; and so, on your life, my friend, do not betray my secret to a living soul!"

"Well, since you have been frank with me, fear nothing."

"I own I am caught," I pursued, "though I had nothing to do in the matter, and neither had she. It was a look and a blush, that is all—a case of love at first sight—and so embarrassing that I have acted the fool whenever I have met her. I have tried to talk to her, and got choked for my pains; and if she don't think me egregiously stupid, she must be either very unobservant, or else very charitable."

"This is too good," laughed my friend, "and you must let me tell Alice."

"Oh, no—not yet, at least," cried I; "it is enough to have one to laugh at me at present. Now tell me, Ernest, candidly, what do you think of the matter?"

"In what way?"

"What would her father say?"

"Colonel Brandon would say—if he should happen to think to quote Scripture, that is—'Well done, thou good and faithful servant, enter thou into the joy of my family.'"

"You think he would not object to me, then?"

"I am sure of it. Why should he?"

"He is wealthy."

"And so are you."

"Perhaps not. My father is, as you know, connected with a large commercial house; but I am not now prepared to say that, in respect to wealth, he is anything like the equal of Colonel Brandon."

"No matter; you are a gentleman, and the deliverer of his eldest daughter."

"I would not like to draw on his gratitude; I am too proud for that."

"Never mind, Leslie—I will answer for him. If you can succeed in winning the heart of Cora, I will answer for all the rest."

"If it be not already won, I do not want it, Ernest."

"Ha! what do you mean?"

"This—neither more nor less: I acknowledge I fell in love with her at first sight; but if the passion be not mutual, I would not attempt to make it so."

"Why, this is rather strange!" said Ernest, in a tone of surprise. "Do you intend to say that if the girl be not already in love with you, whom she has hardly seen near enough to know how you look, that you will make no attempt to win her affections?"

"That is pretty much what I mean, Ernest."

"And do you suppose any girl of sixteen knows her own heart?"

"Perhaps not; but I have my peculiar views about reciprocity of affection."

"Peculiar, indeed," said Ernest, "if you expect a maiden to fall in love with you the moment she puts eyes on you."

"I ask no more than I give."

"But I fear you ask more than you will get."

"Then I must remain as I am."

"Are you fixed in this peculiar whim? for I can call it nothing less."

"Unalterably."

"Then write yourself down an old bachelor that is to be."

"Better that than a regretful Benedict, Ernest."

"But, seriously, what has put such a queer notion into your head?"

"I have always had it since I can remember."

"And do you really suppose any young lady, of that refined delicacy of sentiment and action which we most admire in women, is a-going to tell you, plump out and point-blank, that she is in love with you, even if true? and that she pitched in all over the very first instant her eyes lighted on your most noble face and commanding form? Pshaw! Leslie—pschaw!"

"I would hardly expect her to tell me before being asked," I replied; "and even then she might be tempted to keep the truth back, for fear of being misunderstood; but the fact itself would have to be there as a foundation, or I should build no castles."

"But suppose, my dear fellow, in making your inquiries into this matter, you should happen to discover that the lady was now in love with you, but had not been so from the very first. How then? Would you accept the love as found, or reject it because it did not spring into being earlier?"

"My dear sir, you must bear in mind that your question can only refer to the lady with whom I had myself fallen in love at first sight; and I think in that case, if I discovered she loved me on my first asking the question, I should be vain enough to believe she never could have helped it from 'the very first instant her eyes lighted on my most noble face and commanding form.'"

"Well, a truce to this discussion. I only hope you will find little Cora all you desire; and that we shall get you so entangled round here, in a silken net, that you will never be able to escape from us. We will finish our breakfast; and then, if you like, a dash over to Colonel Brandon's, to secure our partners for to-morrow night."

"Ernest, my dear fellow, you must not laugh at me; and mind you say nothing to Alice, or any one else, about this affair. Just watch Cora, and tell me what you think. If she make as big a fool of herself as I shall, it will be proof conclusive that I am destined to be a happy man."

"So that is the effect of bringing two fools together, is it?" laughed Ernest. "Well, well—I only hope you will be righteously mated at last."

The distance between the dwellings of La Grange and Brandon was about three miles, along a smooth, level road, through two or three narrow belts of woods, and past great fields of cotton, now white as banks of snow, and in which some hundreds of negroes of both sexes were at work, under charge of a few white overseers with black assistants. It was a pleasant ride, and there was much that was beautiful and picturesque to arrest and fix the attention of one not occupied with such weighty matters as myself; but I saw little of what was around me, and saw that little in an abstracted sort of way; for I was thinking of Cora Brandon, and wondering if I should be able to approach and solicit her company for the following night, without acting like a bashful blockhead. Pshaw! Why, in the name of good common sense, could I not treat her with the same polite and dignified ease as her sister? who was quite as beautiful, and seemingly far less approachable. Cora was a sweet little girl, nothing more—at least in the terrifying way—but I was already trembling as if I were advancing upon a battery. A battery, do I say? Faith! I would like to see the battery that could affect my nerves one-half as much as she did.

As we came suddenly upon the house, through a fine grove

of trees, I beheld Cora playing with a large Newfoundland dog upon the veranda, and heard her talking and laughing gaily, addressing her remarks in part to the brute and in part to Peter Reichstadt, who stood leaning against the railing, quietly smoking his pipe. As she caught sight of me, she suddenly disappeared into the house, while both the Dutchman and the dog came forward to greet me.

"Well, Peter, how goes it?" said I, as I gave his hard, honest hand a hearty shake.

"Pooty good, I dinks. How it was all along mit yourself already?"

"I see the colonel has not consented to spare you yet."

"Vell, yaw, he keeps say sday; but I dinks it was dime I begins for go look around already—yaw."

"Do you think of leaving, then, soon?"

"I dinks yes."

"I shall certainly be sorry, for one, to lose sight of you. Will your friend, Caleb Stebbins, go with you?"

"I dinks yes—maybe so."

"Where is he now?"

"Here I be, doctor; how d'ye du?" said that worthy individual himself, issuing from a kind of shed, near which I had stopped my horse. "Going tu have a little confab with her?" jerking his thumb over his shoulder toward the house, and giving me a knowing wink. "Queer critter, I snum! skittish as a two-year old when you're around. I've been plaguing her 'bout you, and got her as mad and sassy's all git eout—though she liked it, I tell you, for all that."

"How do you know she liked it?" laughed Ernest, while I was wishing I had the power to choke the meddlesome Yankee for about five minutes.

"Hollo, Mr. La Grange! how d'ye du? Glad tu see ye. How'd I know it? 'Cause she all the time kept telling me tu stop, and mind my own business, and not make a fool of myself."

"She certainly set you a pretty hard task," said I, rallying, with a laugh.

"You are a sharp reader of human nature, Mr. Stebbins," said Ernest, greatly amused.

"Yes, wal, I calculate I know so'thing about it. I did n't peddle tin three year for nothing, I tell you."

"Have you managed to find the lady you were looking for the other day?" inquired I; "that sweet, interesting creature, who must be blessed with two qualifications—plenty of money and a liking for a certain down-East Stebbins?"

"Wal, maybe not; but I'll get ahead of you, for all that, if you don't buck up a little faster."

"You are ahead of me now in impudence," said I, a good deal vexed in spite of myself.

Throwing my bridle to a servant, I dismounted and hurried into the dwelling. It was a good thing for me I had got vexed; for I no longer feared to meet Cora, or any one else. I encountered Alice, who greeted me most warmly; but, after an interchange of a few words, I went directly to the point.

"Where is your sister Cora?"

"She was here a minute ago," replied Alice. And then to a servant: "Hannah, go and call Miss Cora, and tell her Doctor Walbridge desires to see her."

In a minute the black girl returned, and said:

"Miss Cora say she am sick wid a drefful headache."

"So is Pompey, the dog she was playing with as I rode up; tell her I said so; and that if she be not better shortly, and able to come to me, I, as a physician, will have to go to her, and perhaps prescribe something she will not like."

It was wonderful how my courage had come up within the last five minutes. I could hardly credit the fact myself.

Hannah came back the second time, grinning prodigiously, and brought the message that Miss Cora would make her appearance in a very short time.

The very short time, however, proved to be nearly half an hour; and I was beginning to lose my patience, when she glided timidly into the room, evidently laboring under a painful embarrassment. I was alone—for I had requested to be so—and Alice was conversing with her lover on the veranda. I advanced to meet the blushing girl, with all the resolution I could muster, and said quickly, for fear I should otherwise not be able to say it at all:

"Pardon me, Miss Cora, for my persisting to see you to-day; but I have come to ask a great favor. There is to be a party at Captain Sebastian's next week, and I beg to know if you will honor me with your company? Now do not say no, or you will deprive me of the pleasure of going; for I have resolved not to go unless I can escort a lady, and I will escort no lady except yourself. There, brief though it be, I believe this is the only sensible speech I ever made to you in my life."

"I am much obliged to you," said Cora, in a timid, hesitating manner, as I stood waiting her reply; but whether obliged for the invitation or the speech I was not so sure.

"You will go, then?" I ventured.

"I think so."

"Bravo!" said I to myself; "bravo, Leslie Walbridge, M. D.; you are coming on bravely!"

And I continued to come on bravely, all things considered; and before I left that evening, Cora and I were able to talk to each other quite rationally. A wonderful feat—was it not? I thought so then.

I rode back with Ernest, with a light heart, and we even jested on our relationship that was to be.

Ah! could we have lifted the veil of the future!

CHAPTER X.

A TRAGEDY.

THE mansion of Captain Sebastian was ablaze with lights, and well filled with guests, who had come from miles around—gallant gentlemen and ladies fair—Southern chivalry and beauty—with servants at every turn. There were many present whom I had met before, and a few among the gentlemen whom I now beheld for the first time. The host and hostess, and their beautiful daughter, were all smiles and suavity.

"Ah, my dear friend," said the captain, as he shook my hand warmly, "I am glad to see you here to-night; glad to see you always; and yet I never do see you but I remember, with a shudder, how near I came to having your blood on my soul. I was so rash then, that, as a sort of atonement, I fear I have been over-prudent ever since."

"You must forget it, captain, as I have."

"You are very kind to forget it, doctor."

"I never remember anything against a gentleman after an honorable apology."

"By the way, I believe the villains may thank my sad mistake that day for getting off scot free; but let them beware of rousing the lion again! It is my opinion, however, that they have left this part of the country, for the present at least."

"I suppose no one has been able to conjecture what they intended to do with Miss Brandon?" said I.

"No, I believe it is as much of a mystery as ever. I am inclined to think, though, the capture was made partly to revenge them on her father, as the commander of the 'regulators,' and with the view of holding her at a high ransom, knowing his great wealth."

"He is very wealthy, then?"

"A perfect Cræsus."

Would this great wealth ever be a bar to my happiness? I mused.

Mrs. Sebastian, or la señora, as she was more generally termed, was a Spanish lady, with black eyes and raven hair, who had been a belle in her youth, and still retained many traces of beauty. To those who could converse with her in Spanish, and there were several such present, she made herself very agreeable and sociable; but she spoke English so imperfectly, and with so much difficulty, that she avoided using it as much as possible.

"I much please see señor," was her friendly salutation, as she offered me her hand. "Me no good speak Englees; so can't tell no'ting."

Miss Flora Sebastian resembled her mother, but I think she was more beautiful than her mother ever was. She had something of her father's look, too, about the mouth and chin. She was a brunette; I might also say a very dark brunette; but her skin was as clear as alabaster, and at times softly tinted with the rich blood that flowed beneath. Her forehead was high and broad, and her face oval. Her eyes were dark and lustrous, and so shaded by long, drooping lashes as to give them at will a very soft and languishing look, very dangerous to certain hearts. And yet there was a something in those soft eyes and that pretty face, seen only when the owner was evidently not on her guard, that produced an unpleasant impression, and led you to wonder if the heart was as single as you had supposed. She was indeed a creature of strong, fiery passions; but, through her almost indomitable will, she kept them so under control that they were rarely perceived by the casual observer. I had met her several times before; and though at first only struck with her beauty, I had come to regard her as a character worth studying; and the more I saw of her, the more I was

puzzled, and, truth to say, the less I was pleased. The impression gained and strengthened that there was something sinister in her nature. And yet there were times when she seemed so gay and merry that I was almost led to believe I had previously mistaken some unamiable mood for a bad heart. She was well calculated to prove very attractive to the sterner sex, for she had a beautiful form as well as face, was just in the full bloom of sweet, romantic seventeen, and understood, as if by instinct, all the most bewitching arts of woman—arts that were in fact so concealed by art as to appear but as the simple acts of an unsophisticated, girlish nature. Among other discoveries which I made, soon after I began my study of this girl, was the fact that she had conceived a violent passion for my friend, Ernest La Grange, and that she hated Alice Brandon, as her successful rival, most intensely. And yet who but myself believed a word of this? for all was so artfully veiled that no one perceived it—not even the lovers themselves. I mentioned it in confidence to Ernest, and he laughed at me; and in a conversation with Alice, about the same time, she assured me that Flora Sebastian was one of her warmest friends.

Was I mistaken? If so, well.

Flora Sebastian could talk English if her mother could not, and she came up to me that evening with one of her warmest greetings and sweetest smiles; and as we soon fell into an animated conversation, probably no one, to have seen us, would have fancied that we were both playing a part.

"Ah, doctor," with a sweet sigh, and one of her most soft, bewitching looks, "now tell me what you think of our Southern ladies by this time?"

"That none are more beautiful than are here to-night."

"Nay, I mean how will they compare with your Northern belles?"

"As a halo to a shadow."

"Traitor!"

"How? because I utter truth?"

"Because, even if truth, you should be the last to speak it."

"Would you then have me falsify?"

"You should proclaim your native clime before all."

"Then withdraw me from such dazzling attractions, and let me have a sober light to reflect in."

"Your dazzling attractions fill but a very small space."

"What kind of space?"

"Human space."

"You are aware, then, how deeply I am in love with your beauty?"

"Oh, yes, to a fraction; and I know you must be aware just to what extent I am aware of just such a thing. How dear little Cora blushed to-night, when I asked her if you made love to her on the way; and, dear me, how you are blushing now! Tell me—all in confidence, you know, Doctor Walbridge—when is the double wedding coming off?"

"I do not understand you."

"Beware, sir! you do."

"Nay, now you give me too much credit for penetration."

She fixed her dark eyes on me, and once or twice a strange, curious light came into them, as if against her will, as a certain name floated through her mind and was almost thrown off from her tongue. At length, as if she feared I should guess her secret, she turned her head aside, and, while pretending to be wholly occupied with the clasp of her diamond bracelet, she said, in as careless a tone as it was possible for her to assume under the circumstances:

"I expected to have heard of Ernest La Grange's marriage before this."

"Is he, then, going to be married?" said I, with an air of simplicity.

She looked up quickly, and fixed her eyes on me with a keen, searching gaze; and then, as if suddenly remembering herself, burst into a merry laugh, and exclaimed:

"What an innocent, artless, unsophisticated young man! Why, do you pretend to tell me that you, who are his bosom friend and confidant, do not know that he is engaged to Alice Brandon?"

"I confess!" said I, thinking it might be as well for her to have her hope, however faint, destroyed by the truth; "I believe you are right. I have no doubt that they intend to unite their fortunes sooner or later; but this is confidentially between ourselves, to go no further."

"Oh, never fear that I shall prove a town crier," she rejoined, with what was intended to appear as the careless laugh of indifference, though I could see that she felt chagrined in her very soul. "When is it to be?"

"Nay, that I do not know."

"Perhaps they will wait for you?"

"Who can say?"

At this moment a stranger to me sauntered up to us, and, much to my relief, I saw our *tête-à-tête* was at an end.

"Doctor Walbridge," said Miss Sebastian, "allow me the pleasure of making known to you a friend of my father—the Señor Don Diego Gomez de Calantra y Sombrez."

I bowed stiffly and coldly, and so did Don Diego. I think the first searching glance of either must have convinced him that in the other he beheld, if not his foe, at least one he could never hope, never wish, to call his friend. Between certain animals there is a natural antipathy, and sometimes I am inclined to believe we find it between human beings.

Don Diego was a tall, slender, swarthy man of thirty, with a countenance I did not like. The face was thin, with hollow cheeks and temples, and black, piercing eyes, set near together and under shaggy brows. The nose was long and pointed, and the lower part of the face concealed by a black, heavy beard. The look was sharp and heartless, and the whole expression sinister. If not intended for a villain, nature had belied him.

So, he was a *friend* of Captain Sebastian, eh? Some Spanish relation or acquaintance probably, whom the daughter had so designated, in the careless, thoughtless manner we often use the term.

A few commonplace words passed between us, as a mere matter of formal politeness; but we entered into no regular conversation, and soon separated, each knowing where to look for an antagonist in case he should be disposed to quarrel.

An hour later I saw Don Diego, with a couple of swarthy fellows beside him, who looked villanous enough to be his friends, playing cards with a couple of rich young planters. I drew near enough, and looked at the contest long enough, to satisfy myself that the unsuspecting planters were the victims of designing gamblers and sharpers, if nothing worse. I was tempted to warn them, at the risk of insulting our host; but fearing I should be taking too much upon myself as a stranger, I walked away and left them for the time.

Captain Sebastian and his family seemed to be very well calculated to entertain a large company in the most agreeable manner, by doing what hosts always should do, providing sufficient amusements for their guests. Nothing, that falls short of disgust, is more tedious and wearisome, than for a miscellaneous party of ladies and gentlemen, in the absence of all kinds of amusement, to be left to the impossible task of pleasing and delighting one another with such little, silly nothings as the circumstances force from them. Strangers are often brought together, who have no congeniality and nothing in common; and having, in a bold, dashing attempt at sociability, exhausted the much-abused topic of the weather, and perhaps, if in extra luck, the last sad accident or horrid murder, they are obliged to go back into themselves, like turtles into their shells, and look, and simper, and yawn, and wish themselves anywhere else and in any other company in the world. For Heaven's sake, reader,

when you act the host or hostess to an invited company, give your guests something to do, if it be only to jump over a rope and guess a dozen stale conundrums.

There was no lack of amusements at the mansion of Captain Sebastian on the night of which I speak. There was a hall for dancing, a drawing-room for singing or flirtation, a card room, a billiard room, and pleasant walks for a promenade; and the company, taken collectively, seemed to enjoy themselves exceedingly, especially after the wine had begun to circulate pretty freely. As for myself, I was here, there, and yonder—sometimes dancing—sometimes listening to sweet music—sometimes (shall I confess it?) chatting with the beauties of the hour, and anon trying my hand at billiards and my luck at cards.

Of Cora Brandon I saw little that evening. It was not the wish of either of us to be seen too much together, and so perhaps we went to the other extreme. I danced with her once; as I also did with her sister Alice, and Miss Sebastian; but after that we never met to exchange a word till a late hour. Once I saw her on the floor with Don Diego; and the fact excited such strange, wild emotions, that I immediately left the hall, for fear I might do or say something to attract attention to myself. The Spanish sharper, as I had already mentally named him, had found time to leave his cheating craft and exercise his limbs with innocence and beauty. It was the loathsome vulture dancing with the dove.

In passing through one of the rooms soon after, I met one of the young planters who had been playing with Don Diego and his cutthroat friends. His name was Edward Mason, and he had lately come into possession of a large estate, left him by a maternal uncle, who had been as a father to him. He was a handsome young man of five-and-twenty, and generally wore an air of smiling benevolence. Now he was very pale, and I observed that his lips were compressed, as if with some mental resolve. We had met on two or three previous

occasions, and I had been introduced to him by Ernest La Grange.

He greeted me with a bow, and a smile, and a cordial grasp of the hand.

"Ah, doctor," he said, "how is it I find you wandering about alone, with so much beauty near you?"

"How would it do for me to reply by asking you the same question?" returned I.

"Oh, but I make no pretensions to gallantry."

"And do I?"

"You are evidently more fond of a flirting belle than I am. I confess I prefer a game of cards to the chit-chatty nothings one is doomed to hear in the drawing-room."

"I like cards myself, but I am opposed to playing for money."

"Bah! without a stake the game is stupid. I could not get up interest enough to care whether I won or lost."

"You had interest enough to-night then, I think."

"What do you mean?"

"You bet heavily, did you not?"

"So-so."

"And lost?"

"Yes."

"I am not surprised at that."

"Why? Do you think I am not skillful at the game?"

"I believe you play an *honest* game."

"Ha! you think, then, my Spanish opponents were not honest?"

"It would be a bold thing in me to say so; but, if you play again, you would do well to have them watched."

"Thank you, doctor; I have had my suspicions, and your words confirm them. If I play again! Why, I am just now on my way to find Don Diego, and challenge him to another contest. Will you stand by me? Will you do me the favor to watch, and if possible detect, the fellow in his cheating?"

"To oblige you, I will. How will you play?"

"I will try him single-handed at the single game of euchre."

"He may not have enough interest in that game to cheat."

"I will make him have interest enough then. I will play him for from one thousand to ten thousand dollars. He cannot very well refuse me, since he is already over ten thousand dollars the winner."

"Indeed! so much?" exclaimed I. "Well, Mr. Mason, though I do not believe in gaming at all, I will, since you are resolved to seek your revenge, do my best to see you have fair play."

"That is all I ask, Doctor Walbridge. If any man can win my money fairly, he is welcome to it; but the first scoundrel I catch at cheating, let him look out for the consequences! Who is this Don Diego, and where does he come from? Of course he and his companions are friends of our host and his family; but I have seen no one else who knows them; and, between you and me, neither one of them has got a face I should fall in love with."

"Did Beranger lose as much as you to-night?" I inquired, naming the other gentleman I had seen playing with the sharpers.

"No, he only lost a few hundreds, and withdrew from the contest," replied Mason. "Like a fool I continued to play with the three Spaniards till I found myself eleven thousand six hundred dollars loser, and then I acknowledged myself beaten, and went out to take a walk in the open air and indulge in a little sober reflection. That reflection brought me to the conclusion that my opponents either had a most extraordinary run of good luck, or else that they had been using unfair means; and I was on my way back to challenge this Don Diego to a single-handed contest at a different game, when I so fortunately met with you. Now do you go into the card room, and I will bring my Spanish gentleman quietly in to a quiet game."

"You will find him among the dancers," said I, as we separated.

I repaired to the card room, where several gentlemen were playing, and took a seat near a vacant table. In a few minutes Mason and the Spaniard came quietly in, arm-in-arm, and sat down to what I knew was going to be an important, if not a desperate, contest.

"Euchre is a game I am not much acquainted with," said Don Diego, with a kind of devilish smile and in a foreign accent; "but, of course, after what I was so fortunate as to win to-night, I am in honor bound to give you a chance at satisfaction at any game you choose, whether I understand it or not."

This was said with apparent friendly politeness; but there was a covert sting in the words, which the sensitive Mason felt to the quick. His face flushed, and there was a peculiar light in his eyes as he said, with slightly-compressed lips, looking steadily at the other, and modulating his voice by a strong effort of the will:

"Nay, sir, if you think for a moment I wish to take any advantage of your *ignorance*, you have entirely mistaken my character. I had merely assumed that a person who can play so *well* as yourself at the *gambling* game of brag, would be perfectly *au fait* of one so universal among us as euchre; but if you will give me your word of honor that you think me your *superior* at it, I will consent to change it for any game you *can* play."

There was, I was happy to see, quite as much sting in the words of Mason as in those of the Spaniard; and now the swarthy features of the latter reddened in turn, and his black, snaky eyes gathered a cold, deadly light, as he rejoined, in a pointed manner:

"You are a very obliging gentleman, sir; but just at present I am not exactly disposed to admit that you are my *superior* in anything. We will go on with the game of

euchre. How many points shall we say, and how much a side?"

"Five points, and a thousand dollars to begin with," returned Mason.

The money was immediately staked, and the game commenced. I was now the only spectator, the other gentlemen in the room being interested in the games at the other tables.

My friend won the first game, also the second, third, fourth, fifth. Don Diego seemed to get vexed.

"This is too slow," he said. "Suppose we make it five thousand a side?"

"As you please," returned Mason.

I drew nearer, and took a position where I could watch the Spaniard closely. Now would be the time to bring his craft into play, for to fail now must soon leave him a heavy loser. The game proceeded quietly to the close; the Spaniard won, and I detected nothing wrong. The second game for five thousand resulted like the first. Mason was now a loser of five thousand dollars at this last sitting, and over sixteen thousand dollars on the night. He glanced at me, and I shook my head. Luck, if not skill, was evidently against him, and I would have counselled him not to play any more. The money I had seen him bet was in thousand dollar bills, which he had produced in a careless manner; but he now thrust his hand into his bosom, and drew forth a large pocket-book, which he deliberately opened, and disclosed bills to the amount of fifty thousand dollars.

"Gentlemen," he said, "it is not usual for me to carry so much money on my person, or, in fact, anything like the amount; but fortunately, or unfortunately, I do not yet know which, I brought this with me to-night for a special purpose—that purpose, by the way, not being to bet it on cards. However, that is neither here nor there. I have the money with me, as you see; and I now propose, with your

consent, Señor Don Diego, to play you, for ten thousand dollars a game, till you either win all, or I at least win back what I have lost."

There was a triumphant gleam in the wicked eyes of the Spaniard, as he replied:

"It is my duty and also my pleasure to accede to your wish."

The play began again, and Mason won the first game. I saw that Don Diego looked anxious. Two games won in succession would now put my friend more than three thousand dollars ahead, and would perhaps break the other, for he seemed to make up the second ten thousand with difficulty.

Now then, Don Diego, for all your skill—all your craft!

At the close of the fourth hand the score stood—Mason four, Don Diego two. It was Mason's deal. He turned an ace and held both bowers. It was a natural point and made him safe. Don Diego passed. Mason discarded, threw down the two bowers, and claimed game.

"Hold!" said the Spaniard; "a misdeal! I have six cards;" and he laid them out on the table.

"Strange!" said Mason; "I am not in the habit of making a misdeal. But, no matter—the cards are yours, sir."

The Spaniard took the deck, and shuffled long and well. He finally dealt, and turned the ace of spades. My friend took up his hand, and found he held the right bower, king and queen of trumps, with ace of hearts and ace of diamonds. Of course he ordered up the trump, feeling certain of his point, and led the ace of hearts to make sure. The Spaniard trumped it with a small card, and led the left bower. This was taken by the right, and the ace of diamonds led. Don Diego trumped with another small card, and then won the third trick with the ace of trumps, euchering Mason and adding two to his own score. This, of course, might be all accidental, but at least I began to feel very much interested,

and to have my eyes very sharply on him I believed to be a sharper. Mason dealt again; and the Spaniard, as he picked up his hand and spread out six cards, remarked:

"Another misdeal, you see."

"By heavens! I never did that twice in succession before in my life!" exclaimed Mason, excitedly.

Don Diego smiled grimly, took the deck, shuffled and dealt, and finally won the game. As he reached out his hand for the money, I suddenly grasped his arm, and held it as if in a vice.

"Have the kindness to put your hand up this *honest* man's sleeve, Mr. Mason," said I, "and you will find one of the cards that so conveniently drop down for a misdeal."

I had detected the trick just in time to expose the sharper.

Like lightning Mason sprung to his feet, seized the card, drew it forth, and, with the back of his other hand, struck the Spaniard across the mouth, exclaiming:

"Villain! swindler! cheat!"

The words startled every man in the room to silence, and fixed every eye upon the speaker. With a fierce oath and the look of a demon, the Spaniard grasped the stakes, bounded up, and glanced quickly and fiercely around him, as if intending sudden flight. In a moment he was surrounded by a dozen excited men, mostly the friends of Mason.

"Scoundrel! down with that money, or you shall never quit this house alive!" cried Mason, at the same time fiercely grasping the arm of the Spaniard.

Instantly Don Diego threw off the hold of the other, thrust his hand with the money in it into his bosom, whipped out a glittering stiletto, and struck.

The next moment the Spaniard had burst through the gathering crowd, and was making good his escape, and Mason was sinking back in my arms, with the fearful exclamation:

"Oh, my God! I am killed!"

CHAPTER XI.

FOES AND FRIENDS.

A WILD scene of excitement and confusion followed the death-blow, with loud cries, shouts, and even shrieks, a rushing of numbers to the scene of the tragedy, and a filling of the little, close apartment with horror-struck persons of both sexes. As the unfortunate Mason uttered the words recorded at the close of the preceding chapter, he sunk lifeless into my arms. Instantly I laid him down on a settee, and called to the spectators to stand back and give him air. As I bent over him, I saw a red stain upon his white vest, over the region of the heart, and a thrill of pity and horror shot through my breast. So young, so rich, so promising, and such an end! I tore away his dress, the bosom of his shirt, and found my worst fears confirmed. The steel had pierced his heart, and all was over. There was no motion there now—the pulse was still—the breath had ceased—the soul had fled—the man was dead.

Ah! serious, solemn thought: in how much had I contributed to bring about this awful result! My conscience did not accuse me of a wrong, for I had meant none; I had simply endeavored to save an honorable gentleman from being swindled by a sharper; and yet I could but reflect that if I had not been there, the terrible tragedy might not have happened. We are forced to tremble sometimes at finding ourselves the dread instruments of a Higher Power!

"Edward Mason is dead!" said I to the excited spectators.

"Where is the murderer?" was the almost universal cry.

He had escaped, but there were fierce men in pursuit of him. His Spanish companions were now looked for, but

could not be found. In the midst of the excitement, Captain Sebastian came in in haste.

"Let me pass!" he cried, almost fiercely; and, as the crowd parted, he came striding up to me. The expression of his face was something as I had seen it at the time when he had been so eager to take my life. "Well," he said, addressing me, as though he held me responsible for what had occurred, "what is this I hear?"

I silently pointed to the corpse. Perhaps, under the exciting circumstances, his harsh manner of address ought to be excused.

"Dead?"

"Quite, sir!"

"How did it happen? the truth now!" he demanded, looking fiercely at me.

My proud blood began to grow heated. I was not in the habit of being addressed in so imperious a way.

"I beg your pardon, Captain Sebastian! but your request for the particulars sounds very much like a command!"

"And suppose it does, sir? is this a time to stand on ceremony?"

"This is a time for one gentleman to be respectful to another."

"Will you answer my question?"

"If put in a proper manner."

He looked at me, as if meditating an angry rejoinder; but finally said, in a somewhat modulated tone:

"I wish to know the particulars of this young man's death!"

I gave him a brief statement of the whole affair; while the crowd around us became very dense, all eagerly looking and listening.

"You say, then," he pursued, after reflecting a moment upon what I had said, "that Edward Mason first struck Don Diego, and afterward seized him and threatened his life

in case he should attempt to carry off the money he had won?"

"The money he had not *honestly* won."

"How do you know, sir?"

"Because I detected him at cheating."

"Not if your first statement is correct!" he boldly contradicted, with a sweeping glance around upon the bystanders. "By your own showing, sir, you debased yourself so far as to play the spy upon Don Diego; but the fact of *your* finding a card, at the last moment, in a place where it is so evident you *desired* to find it, is no proof that *he* either put it there or knew it to be there."

"For shame! for shame!" cried several voices; but whether intended for him or me, I was not altogether certain — though, as to the design of the captain himself, there could be no mistake.

"Sir," said I, drawing myself haughtily up, and speaking with all the dignified scorn and bitterness I could command, "you clearly intend to insult and stigmatize me for the purpose of screening a base gambler, cheat, and murderer, whom you had the effrontery to introduce among gentlemen as your friend; but, sir, that villain must not escape! the blood of his victim here at our feet is a loud cry for vengeance! Nay, no threatening looks and gestures! I *will* speak now, and I *will* be heard! Who is this base villain you have brought among gentlemen to swindle and murder? and why are you so anxious to cover up his iniquities by foully aspersing my character? This is the second time you have insulted me without cause; and your eagerness on the former occasion to take my life as one of an organized band of cutthroats, but poorly accorded with your cautious counsel and actions when the real bandits were to be pursued and hunted down. What is the meaning of all this? If you can justify one cutthroat, perhaps you can another! If one villain is your *friend*, perhaps they *all* are! Who knows but that you have

an understanding with these men? but that you are one of them? but that you are yourself a chief among them?"

My words increased the excitement to a fearful degree. The captain at first full of furious rage, with the blood of passion rushing into his fierce eyes, would undoubtedly have struck me, only that, his intention being perceived, he was seized and held by some of the by-standers till I had concluded, and then he was pale enough, and looked like a man who had received a startling shock.

"Good God!" he gasped, looking wildly around upon the spectators; "you do not believe the ravings of this man?"

"No! no!" cried several voices; but many were silent, and others muttered words I did not hear.

"I will have his heart's blood now!" shouted Sebastian, making another frantic effort to break away from the men that held him.

"No! no! there has been blood enough shed here to-night!" said a stern voice; and the next moment the struggling captain was forced back into the crowd, which closed in around him.

"Ah, Leslie, my friend, what a terrible scene is this!" cried Ernest La Grange, struggling forward and seizing my hand. "Oh, merciful God," he continued, looking down at the corpse, "what a doom! what a fate! Poor fellow! poor fellow! Are you sure he is dead?"

"You are a doctor as well as myself, Ernest," said I; "pray decide the question for yourself."

He bent over the body for a brief time, and then said, with tearful eyes:

"Alas! alas! all is over! Come, Leslie, you must leave the house at once. After what has passed between you and Captain Sebastian, it will not do for you to meet again to-night; and (he added in a lower tone) I hope and pray you may never meet again. Gentlemen," he pursued, addressing the spectators, "I suppose a coroner's inquest will be neces-

sary in this case, and therefore it will be as well to let the corpse remain where it is. Ha! Duval, he was your friend, and we will leave the body in your charge. We have ladies with us, and are compelled to go now. Come, Leslie, come with me — I must not lose sight of you again."

He took my arm, and we worked our way through the crowd, several gentlemen speaking words of approval to me, saying I had only justly retorted on my insulter, and that they were my friends. We entered another apartment, where a dozen frightened servants stood huddled together, and where were also two or three groups of ladies, earnestly conversing in those low, solemn, mysterious tones so generally used when discussing some startling fact or calamity. The moment we appeared, the ladies all hurried forward and surrounded us; and I beheld my little Cora shrinking and trembling among them, flushing and paling alternately, and altogether seeming a good deal agitated. Alice was there, too; but proud, erect, calm and firm. There were also several others present that I knew, and among them Flora Sebastian, looking stern and haughty, as if aware, as she probably was, of my quarrel with her father. I was asked for the particulars of the tragedy, and I gave the leading facts in as concise a manner as possible, which were generally received with expressions of pity and horror.

"It is quite evident, sir," said the angry and haughty Flora, "that, if you had not been present, the terrible affair would not have occurred."

"And it is quite as evident, Miss Sebastian, that if I had not been born, I should not have been present," returned I, with a studied bow. "The fact of my being present, however, did not make your father's friend a *sharper* — it only exposed him."

"Sir," cried the angry lady, with flashing eyes, "this is not the proper place to insult the family of Sebastian!"

Before I had time to reply, Alice Brandon exclaimed, with haughty dignity:

"It seems to be the chosen place, though, for the family of Sebastian to insult their guests!"

"I was not addressing you, Miss Brandon!" said Miss Sebastian, with a look of mortal hate.

"But you were addressing my friend — an honorable gentleman, to whom I am indebted for my life — and therefore it is quite proper I should let him see I am his *friend*, and against all his *enemies*."

"Indeed!" rejoined Flora, with a haughty toss of her head, and turning abruptly away. "Doctor La Grange," she said, addressing Ernest, "I would like a word with you."

As they drew apart from all the rest, the trembling Cora timidly exclaimed:

"Oh, Alice, let us leave here at once and go home!"

"With all my heart!" was the response.

Turning to me, she requested me to order the horses, which I did immediately, though such was the excited state of the negro servants that it was some quarter of an hour before I succeeded in getting them to the door.

We finally left the mansion of Captain Sebastian as quietly as possible, without any parting words with the family. The scene, within doors and without, was still one of considerable excitement, and many of the other guests were also leaving in haste. The negroes had left their quarters and gathered around the dwelling, eager to pick up further news, and we encountered groups and rows of bright eyes and black, anxious faces. The men who had gone in pursuit of the murderer had nearly all returned, with the report that he had succeeded in gaining the nearest wood and escaping in the darkness.

The distance between Captain Sebastian's and Colonel Brandon's was something like five miles, with a good road,

leading through here and there a belt of wood, but mostly between open cotton fields. I looked at my watch just before starting, and saw it was nearly one o'clock in the morning. It was a clear, beautiful night in October, and a late moon was just lifting its ragged disk above the eastern horizon, and sending a broad stream of pale, silvery light across a level, romantic scene, giving to here and there an object a kind of mysterious relief, and seemingly burying others in deeper shadows than before. Under different circumstances, with the girl of my heart by my side, I should have felt all the poetical and romantic beauties of the time and place; but now my mind was in a whirl of contending emotions, and my soul heavy with the awful tragedy of which I had been a witness, and in which to some extent I had been an actor. I had not only seen a young and promising man sent out of existence by the blow of a villain, but I had been most grossly insulted by having his meanest villany imputed to myself. And what must follow this? I could see but one way to settle the affair according to Southern ideas of honor. We would have to meet as deadly foes, and put life against life; and then I might either find a bloody grave myself, or have the blood of a fellow-being on my soul. It was not a pleasant contemplation, but I was sternly resolved to advance upon my fate and abide the issue.

For the first quarter or half a mile from the mansion of Captain Sebastian, we rode forward in silence — Ernest La Grange by the side of Alice Brandon, and myself by the side of Cora. We had come hither in gay spirits, and we were going homeward in gloom, each of us busy with sad thoughts. Was it a sigh — a gentle, timid sigh — that broke in upon my painful meditations? I rode closer to the side of my fair companion, and laid one hand lightly upon her arm.

"Cora," said I, "I fear I have unintentionally been the cause of great trouble and sorrow to-night!"

She turned her head aside, and seemed to be struggling with her emotions, and I could see that her whole frame was agitated.

"You have heard me relate my story," pursued I, "and do *you* think me to blame?"

"Oh, would to God we had not come!" she feebly replied, in a choking voice, and with a gush of tears that she evidently could no longer repress.

For five or ten minutes she now wept and sobbed as if her heart would break; and during all that time I remained silent, thinking it best to let nature have its way. Besides, what could I say or do in the way of consolation? Whether I was in the right or wrong, the deed was done, and the consequences must follow.

At length she dried her eyes, and in a calmer, but still low and tremulous voice, said:

"You ask me if I think you to blame! I cannot say I do—for I believe you acted with a clear conscience—but, oh! it is so terrible to think how you are involved! You have had a quarrel with Captain Sebastian—what will be the result of that?"

"I cannot say."

"You men are so fiery, so determined, so desperate, that your quarrels can seldom be settled except by blood. It is this I fear now!"

"You fear, Cora?"

"Oh, yes, I tremble to think of it! Tell me—tell me, doctor—"

"Nay, Cora, have I not more than once requested you to drop that cold title in addressing me?"

She hesitated for a moment or two, and then resumed, in a low, tremulous tone, and my name never sounded sweeter to my ears than when it fell from her sweet lips.

"Tell me, Leslie, if a challenge has passed between you and Captain Sebastian?"

"Not yet."

"Not yet, you say—then you expect there will?"

"Do not let us talk of these things, Cora."

"Oh, yes! yes! I must talk of them! Oh, Heaven! you will meet, and they say he is the best swordsman in the country and a dead shot."

"What then? He has already had one shot at me, and missed."

"But in that case you know his aim was disturbed!"

"And may it not be again. God rules: the same Providence still exists."

"Oh, no, Leslie, you will be killed!"

"Not unless God wills."

"Oh, you must not meet!"

"How can it be avoided and my honor maintained?"

"You must quit the country—for a time at least!"

"Would that save my honor?"

"It might your life!"

"But what is life without honor?" returned I, gloomily. "Who would care for me then?"

She suddenly turned her face toward me; and at that moment the moon shone clear and bright upon it, and disclosed every lineament so full of tenderness and love, with the soft blue eyes swimming in tears, that I could have clasped her to my heart, and welcomed the shaft of death that could then and there have pierced our human hearts and made us immortal. She did not speak, and soon turned aside her lovely face to weep.

As yet I had not disclosed my passion. I had, in the brief time we had been alone together and conversed together, endeavored to make her see, and feel, and understand that she was more to me than all others I had ever known; but I had not said so in words; nor did I ever intend to have said so till I had first asked her father's consent to my suit; and yet, circumstances had so placed me—so forced me

forward beyond my design — there was already so much passing between us in that silent and secret language of the soul — there was here too such time and opportunity, amid the pressure of great events, as might never again be mine — that I felt, as it were, compelled to speak.

"Cora," I said, pressing close to her side, while our horses walked on quietly, over a smooth road, across a beautiful plain, all bathed in the silver flood of the ascending moon, "it is natural for all living things to cling to life; and now, in the very pride and strength of early manhood, with a hopeful future, so to speak, stretching before me, I confess that life would have its charms, were it even to be as before we met — before these eyes beheld that which could change this cold earth into a glowing heaven — for where the soul finds happiness, there Heaven is indeed. Before I saw you, dear Cora, I say, life had for me its charms; but since then it has become a thousand fold more sweet and attractive; for in you I fancy I have seen all that was wanting to fill the void of my heart, satisfy the cravings of my soul, perfect the measure of my earthly bliss; and yet I would not have ventured to tell you this now, on our comparatively brief acquaintance, only that the sudden crowding together of startling and uncertain events seems to render it necessary if I would speak at all. What is to come, God only knows; but let come what may, of this, dear Cora, be assured, that while this heart beats it will ever beat for you! Do not be startled, dear girl, at my bold speech; do not fear that I am about to try you with any question that you may not feel prepared to answer; I ask nothing beyond what I have received. If your looks, your words, your tones, your tears, have not told me a grateful truth, let me for the time rest in a happy delusion!"

When I ceased speaking, I discovered that Cora was weeping; but she made no reply, and for some distance we rode on in silence. Ernest and Alice were before us, but no longer

in sight; though we could not see far, owing to the slight undulations of the ground and the uncertain light of the moon.

"Had we not better ride faster," said I, at length, "and endeavor to keep company with our friends?"

Cora started, as if with surprise, looked quickly around, and then urged forward her palfrey at a fast gallop.

For nearly two miles we kept on at the same pace, and then we came up with the others, who were waiting for us near a small belt of wood.

"We were beginning to fear you had missed your way, or that some accident had happened to you!" said Ernest, as we rode up.

"We might have come faster than we did, though I think you two must have been running a race!" returned I, in as light and careless a tone as I could assume.

"Here, Cora," said Ernest, "ride on and talk with Alice for a few minutes, as I would like to have a few private words with my friend."

We fell behind the ladies; and when we found ourselves alone, Ernest grasped my hand, and held it for some time without speaking.

"Leslie," he said at length, in a choked and tremulous voice, "God bless you!"

"My dear fellow," returned I, in an off-hand way — though I could have clasped him to my heart and cried like a child, so affected was I with various contending emotions — "do not speak as if you were taking your eternal leave of me!"

"If it had been any one else!"

"Yourself, for instance?"

"Yes, even myself, rather than you!"

"Pshaw!" said I; "this is sheer nonsense, Ernest! Let us look the affair boldly in the face! I am deeply sorry to have been in any way connected with the death of that noble young fellow, Edward Mason; but I do not blame myself

for what I did, as I acted at his request and for the best—though I am now prepared to give you a more serious homily on the evils of gaming than I did yesterday. Let that pass, however. As to the insult I received, I flatter myself I retorted in a becoming spirit; and it is just possible I spoke more truth and hit home harder than most of the listeners were aware. Well, the summing up of all this is a duel, of course."

"But a duel with whom, Leslie?"

"He must be a gentleman, or at least pass for one."

"Captain Sebastian passes for such, and as such I suppose you will have to meet him—but I tremble for the result!"

"Do not, my dear friend! leave the result to fate!"

"He is the best swordman in the country."

"That is nothing in case he challenges me, for I shall choose pistols."

"But he is a dead shot."

"So am I."

"Then you may both be killed!"

"God only knows."

"My feelings at first tempted me to advise you to leave the country for a time."

"But your sense of propriety overcame the temptation?"

"With the advice of Alice."

"Ha! she thinks I must fight?"

"She says your honor must be maintained, and, if challenged, you must meet your foe."

"She is right, Ernest."

"Unfortunately she is. But she thinks you are not compelled to challenge—that the onus is on him."

"We will consider that if he fails in his duty. My dear little Cora has not the strength of mind of her noble sister, but I love her none the less for that. Poor girl! she would have had me fly to save my life."

"Then you already know her heart, Leslie?"

"I am satisfied, my friend."

"Ah! for all our sakes, may God send you a safe deliverance from the gathering perils!"

At this moment we heard the distant baying of hounds, and, mingled with these familiar sounds, the faint, mellow notes of a bugle. Looking away to the left, far in the distance, we saw the sparkle of fire-lights.

"Some party out on a fire-hunt," remarked Ernest; "but the moon must be spoiling their sport."

"It is just possible there may be other than honest hunters in this region to-night!" said I.

He looked at me a few moments, as if struck or startled at the idea, and then replied:

"You may be right—we have had warning enough to teach us caution. Let us ride on and rejoin the ladies, and at least be on our guard! All things considered, it would perhaps have been more prudent to have brought some armed servants with us!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE SPANISH VILLAIN.

BUT little more was said during the rest of our way back to Colonel Brandon's. We passed two dwellings—one of which was dark, and in the other burned a light—but we did not stop at either. The party we had seen away to the left gave us some uneasiness, for the line of their course was such as to intersect ours, and, as we both advanced, we gradually drew nearer to each other.

"After what has happened in this region, it is well enough to be cautious," said Ernest, as he found we were really

coming together; "but I think we shall find these men to be some of our neighbors, who have been out on a deer-hunt, or perhaps after a stray bear. And that reminds me that Judge Templeton had two of his bee-hives upset the other night by these impudent, honey-loving beasts."

"At all events," returned I, "if they are marauders, they are very foolish and careless ones, to move so openly and make so much noise while passing over Colonel Brandon's plantation in the direct line of his dwelling! Hark! as I live, I do believe I hear the voice of the Yankee, Caleb Stebbins."

"Then we may be pretty sure there is no danger, if he is there by his own free choice," remarked Alice.

"But he comes of fighting stock, please recollect! His grandfather, you know —"

"Oh, yes, I know," interrupted Alice, "for I have heard about him often enough — at least as often as once a day ever since he has been with us. But, no matter: he is, I believe, an honest fellow in the main, and certainly once did me good service, which I have not forgotten."

Now it so chanced that both parties of us reached the dwelling about the same time, we just sufficiently in advance to get the ladies into the house before the others rode up. It was, as we had surmised, a hunting-party, consisting of Caleb Stebbins, Peter Reichstadt, two of Colonel Brandon's overseers, and four negroes, two of the latter carrying something resembling iron baskets (in which to burn pine knots), with long handles attached, and swung over their shoulders.

"Hollo!" cried Caleb, riding forward as soon as he discovered us; "so you've got back, hey? Wal, I'm glad on 't, for you're jest the chaps I want tu see. We've ben out on a hunt, and catched so'thing we did n't go for, I snum! Come and look, and tell us what to du, for we're in a kind of a quand'ry. Here, you Jim and Jerry, fetch him along here, and let these 'ere gentlemen see what they can make

of him! He's either crazy, or some dern rascal or other, or so'thing else, or else I don't know. Anyhow, he's wounded, and I want the doctors tu look at him."

As may be supposed, our curiosity was a good deal excited by these remarks, which we could not understand at all; and we were not a little surprised to see a couple of the negroes come forward with a horse, on which there appeared to be a man strapped down along the back of the beast.

"Good heavens! what have we got here?" exclaimed Ernest.

"I hopes, gentlem, you won't blame us arter you've heerd all about it!" said one of the overseers, in a deprecating tone. "You see, we did n't know what sort o' critter it war when the dogs had him up in the tree, and I shot and brung him down, and arter that he tried to stab me and git away, and so we concluded to fix him safe, and fotch him home, and let the kurnyel hev a look onto him."

While the man was speaking, I went up to the wounded prisoner, and started as I fancied I recognized his dress. His face was away from me, in the shadow.

"Quick!" cried I; "turn the horse around!"

The negroes did so, and the moon shone full upon his dark, wicked features.

"Gracious Heaven!" I exclaimed, as soon as I saw that countenance; "the Providence of God is at work here! This is the villain, Don Diego — the murderer of Edward Mason!"

"You lie!" cried the wretch, gnashing his teeth; "I am no murderer; I struck only to save my life!"

"The law will settle that point when you come to your trial," was my answer.

"I am all amazement!" exclaimed Ernest.

"Great ginger!" cried Caleb, with uplifted hands; "you don't go for tu say he's a murderer now? a rale, downright murderer, du you, doctor? hey? hey?"

"At least I say we are just from the house of death — just from the corpse of a gentleman that he stabbed to the heart!" returned I.

"I wish it had been you!" gnashed the Spaniard.

"Tell us how this occurred? how and where you found this man?" said Ernest.

"Wall, you see, gentlem —"

"Guess mebbe I'd better tell the story, had n't I neow?" interrupted Caleb. "You might be wanted for so'thing — tu tend tu the niggers, or so'thing afore you'd done — and I've got lots of time."

"Go ahead, then, schoolmaster!" grumbled the overseer.

"He calls me skule-master, 'cause I told him I teached one winter in the district skule," exclaimed Mr. Stebbins; "but, of course, I don't calculate I'm edicated like you doctors be, for all that — though I would n't knock under tu you, nor no man, at peddling tin — no, sir — that's a fact!"

"But get on with your story! or else let somebody else tell it!" cried I, impatiently.

"Jerusalem! yes, I guess so! Wal, you see, arter you'n' the gals — the young ladies, I mean — 'cause they're all ladies down South here, you know — leastways the white ones be —"

"Confound it, fellow," interrupted Ernest, stamping with anger, "if you are going to tell us how and where you found this man, do so at once, for we have something to do besides standing here all night listening to nonsense!"

"P-h-e-w!" whistled Caleb; "he's gitting as mad as all git eout! Wal, Doctor La Grange, jest you tell me what you want tu know now, and I'm right there, I snum tu Guinea! Ax your questions now — or, as we used to say down in Connecticut, fetch on your taters if you want 'em dug!"

"Go to the d—l!" cried Ernest, turning his back on the Yankee. Then addressing the other speaker: "Here, Brace,"

he said, "make short work of this, and answer my questions as briefly as possible! Where did you first find or see this man on the horse?"

"Up a tree, your honor!"

"Well, go on, tell the story, but make it as short as possible!"

"Wall, then, your honor, it war this here way. You see, we war out in the woods, over yon, 'long the Teche bayou, nigh the Marling Swamp, follering up a deer, when the hounds changed thar tune, and foted up sudden under a big tree, barking and yelping as ef a b'ar war treed. Says I, 'It ar' a b'ar.' We comed up and looked, the boys holding up thar torchlights, and I seed so'thing black. 'Wait,' says I, 'but look out for a jump!' and I ups and fires. Down comes the critter, ker-whop; and jest as the dogs bounded on to him, I seed it war a man. I yelled and drew the brutes back, and went up, kind o' skeered, to hope I had n't killed him, when up the scamp jumps, makes a blow at me with his dagger, which he stuck through my coat here, and started to run. 'No you don't!' says I — for I knowed then he war some — hound as war arter no good; and so I gathered on to him, and foted him under, and said we'd jest strap him to a hoss and fotch him home, ef the rest 'ud agree, which they done to onet. And the short on 't is now, thar he ar', your honor, with his left arm broke by my rifle-ball, which let him down ker-sug."

It was a fact — an almost startling fact — a fact for the deepest reflection — that, by a strange, though perfectly natural combination of circumstances, the murderer, who had escaped through an excited crowd, had thus been brought home to us and placed in our possession; and we could not but feel in full force the words of the great poet,

"There is a destiny which shapes our ends."

"It will be best, I think," said I, "to call up Colonel Brandon and take his advice."

"By all means!" replied Ernest.

Alice and Cora were of course all astonishment when we explained to them what had happened.

"It almost seems," said the former to me, "as if you and your travelling companions were sent here to foil villany!"

"As long as I can find myself of use to my friends, I shall be contented to remain," returned I.

"Then I am sure it will be long before you leave us," was the pleasant rejoinder.

I glanced at Cora, and felt that her gentle heart echoed the words of her sister; and but for the fearful scene of the night, and the dread uncertainty, which rose cloud-like between me and the bright future of hope, I should then have believed myself one of the happiest of mortals.

While Alice went to call her father, and acquaint him with the strange events of the last few hours, I suggested to Ernest that we had better have the Spaniard brought into the house, and give proper attention to his wound, to which he agreed.

"We must disarm before we unbind him, and then keep a strong guard around him, for he is a desperate fellow," said I.

This was done—the Spaniard all the time cursing us in a most furious way. When he was finally placed on his feet, with three negroes holding and pushing him forward, he suddenly gathered his force, and struck one of them, with his unwounded arm, such a powerful blow, that the black staggered back, and finally fell to the ground. This so astonished and frightened the others, that instinctively they let go their hold and retreated a pace; and taking advantage of the opportunity, the villain made a bound forward, and would undoubtedly have got clear of all of us, and made his escape from our very hands, had not the Dutchman fortunately stood directly in his path. He came against the latter

with a force that would have upset most men; but Peter, like the rock he was called, stood firm; and catching the Spaniard in his brawny arms, he closed around him with the hug of a bear, and, actually lifting him from his feet, bore him, kicking and struggling, into the house, where he threw him down on his back in no light manner, saying, as he spread himself over him, with one hand now closed upon his throat, actually choking him into quiet submission:

"Dare, shoost you makes yourzelf pelief you was one leedle childs now, or, py cot, I chokes more tieful out of you den ever was live mit the brimstone already!"

"Bravo, Peter!" cried I.

"Great ginger! you're a hull team and a hoss tu let now, Peter, you be, I snum!" exclaimed the excited Mr. Stebbins, who had taken good care to give the Spaniard a wide berth while there was danger in him.

"Ha! what is this?" said Colonel Brandon, who at this juncture made his appearance.

Ernest explained all in a few words.

"Let his feet and his unwounded arm be fast bound, and then place him in that arm-chair, and, if he resist, bind him down to it!" was the stern order of Colonel Brandon.

This was soon accomplished.

"Now then, my young surgeons," pursued the colonel, "see what you can do for his wound!"

The scene was now a most striking and impressive one, and, had I been an artist, I should certainly have preserved it on canvas. In an arm-chair, in the centre of a large, square apartment—his feet tied together, one arm fastened close to his side, and the other hanging loose and dangling—with blood on the sleeve and hand and on the white bosom of his shirt—his hat off, his long black hair dishevelled, his swarthy, sinister face now wearing the expression of a baffled fiend, his teeth grinding hard together, and his small, piercing black orbs glittering like an enraged ser-

pent's—with the lights of three or four lamps, held in as many hands, shining full upon him, and the stern and curious looks of some fifteen or twenty persons, white and black, of both sexes, concentrated upon his wicked and vindictive countenance—in this condition, I say, sat the villainous sharper and murderer, the friend of Captain Sebastian, the Señor Don Diego Gomez de Calantra y Sombrez.

"Now, gentlemen, look after his wound, and then we will look after his person!" said Colonel Brandon.

"I don't want any of your — boy surgeons about me!" cried Don Diego; "and, least of all, such a bungling fool as you," he added, looking fiercely at me, "whose heart's blood I will live to have yet!"

"Have a care, sir!" said Colonel Brandon; "men have been hung in this part of the country before now for going a little too far!"

"Hang and be — to you!" persisted the Spaniard: "I may as well be murdered one way as another."

"Proceed with your work, gentlemen," said the colonel; "never mind what he says; I am inclined to think he is about half fool and the rest villain!"

We ripped up the sleeve of the fellow's coat, and dressed his wound in spite of him; but if he could, he would have struck us. It was a serious affair. A ball had passed through the fleshy portion of his arm, above the elbow, just missing the artery, but shattering the bone. He had bled some, but hardly enough to weaken him. It was our opinion that the arm would have to be amputated; but we preferred leaving the matter to the decision of some more experienced and skilful surgeon. We dressed the wound as well as we could, and bound it up with some temporary splints.

"Now then, sir," said Colonel Brandon, addressing the Spaniard when we had done, "I would like to know something more about you."

"Find it out then!" growled the prisoner.

"See here, sir," returned the colonel, sternly, "such language and such bravado can do you no good, and may do you much harm. You have nothing to lose, and perhaps something to gain, by giving respectful answers to such questions as may be put to you."

"Well, set me free, and I will talk in any way you like," rejoined the other.

"You are taking a very wrong course to gain your liberty," said the colonel, who had a motive of his own for drawing the fellow into conversation; "you cannot expect us to set you free till we know you deserve to be free!"

"Well, I do deserve to be free," returned the other boldly, but in a less fierce and defiant tone, "for I have done nothing but what can be justified before God and man."

"If that is the case, then let us talk the matter over calmly, and see if we all can come to the same conclusion. Remember, you are a stranger to me, and I believe to all present—that is, I understand that no one here has ever met you until to-night."

"And it would have been a good deal better for all concerned if one of your party here had never met me at all!" returned the prisoner, with a wicked glance at me.

"That may be, sir, but that is not to the point. What I now wish to get at is, to know something more about you—where you were born? where you reside? what is your occupation? and so forth."

"Sir," replied the other, with an air of arrogant pride, "I am a Spanish nobleman!"

"But you speak our language almost as well as a native."

"I hope I speak it better than some of your natives!" returned the other, grimly glancing at one of the overseers, who was standing a little back. "But that is nothing!" he added, with a supercilious air. "I speak several languages quite as well."

"Dutch, among others?"

"Yes."

"Will you say something to Peter Reichstadt here in his own tongue?"

Don Diego fixed his eye on his late antagonist, and spoke a few words. The Dutchman started, clinched his hand, and took a step or two forward, as if intending to strike the Spaniard. I was certain the latter had insulted him; but I interposed, and told Peter he must not touch the prisoner now.

"What did he say to you?" inquired the colonel.

The Dutchman scratched his head, and looked rather foolish, as he answered, slowly and reluctantly:

"I don't much speaks English good already, gurnel; but I dinks it was dranslate for to zay, I is one —— big fool!"

A general roar of laughter followed this announcement, in which every one joined except the Spaniard and the Dutchman, who remained looking daggers at each other. It was not a time and place and occasion for merriment, and we all knew and felt it, and yet, for the life of us, we could not help it. It was not so much the words, as the sheepish, comical look of Peter as he drawled them out. Even the colonel laughed, though he tried his best to keep a serious face, and several of the blacks had to leave the room.

"I am now satisfied you can speak Dutch," at length resumed the colonel, biting his lips; "but I am surprised that, under the circumstances, you should wish to insult every one around you, and make them all your enemies."

"I don't ask any favors of anybody!" returned Don Diego, haughtily: "all I want is justice."

"Very well, sir—that we intend you shall have."

"If I can bear the pain of this shattered arm without wincing," pursued the other, boastfully, "I hardly think I shall shrink into nothing before the frowns of a few country clod-hoppers."

"But to go back to the subject in hand!" said Colonel Brandon. "You say you are a Spanish nobleman?"

"I am, sir."

"How long have you been in this country?"

"I decline to answer."

"What is your occupation?"

"I am a nobleman, sir, and live on my means."

"Do you reside in this State?"

"When I am in it."

"Pray do not be insolent to *me*!" said the colonel, quietly, but with such a peculiar gleam of his clear, gray eyes, that, for the first time, the gaze of the haughty-bearing Spaniard fell before it.

I may remark here that Colonel Brandon was a man well calculated to command respect, and there were few men would care to brave his anger, which was the more to be feared that it was seldom excited, and never without just cause. He possessed one of those calm and even and dignified natures which always weigh and calculate and balance everything before coming to a decision—never hasty, never rash—ever honest, ever just—as firm, when resolved and settled, as a mountain rock—swerving neither to the right nor the left—going straightforward to the purposed end though the heavens should fall. Tall, robust, and athletic, with kind but sedate features, on every lineament of which was written justice—with a bold, clear, penetrating gray eye—a forehead broad, high, and slightly bald, with hair a little frosted—he was a man to remind you of a Roman father in Rome's proudest days; and you would have felt certain of a righteous decision, if he were judge, even though it were to be against himself. Without resembling our great and noble Washington in feature, there was something, when I looked at him, that always brought to mind the Father of his country, and with most persons excited the same feeling of love and veneration. I will merely add, that among honest men he had no enemies: rogues feared him, his family almost idolized him, and his negroes fairly worshipped him.

"I will repeat my question in another form," pursued the colonel: "Are you a resident of this State?"

"Not at present," replied the Spaniard, with some hesitation.

"Were you ever?"

"Never, sir."

"Then why not have said so at once? You have become involved in an unpleasant business, I am told, and I wish to see you have justice."

"Then set me at liberty," said Don Diego; "for if ever a man was unrighteously and unlawfully detained, that man is myself! I may have killed my assailant, but I did it in self-defence, to prevent the robbery and murder with which I was threatened, as this man will testify (nodding toward me) if you can get him to tell the truth."

"I know nothing about that — I have nothing to do with that," said the colonel. "This is not a court of justice; I am not now trying your case; I am only seeking to get at certain facts, that I may know how best to act to do justice to all parties. Have you any friend to whom you would like to send a message?"

Don Diego did not immediately reply: he seemed to ponder — to hesitate. At length he said:

"I should like to see Captain Sebastian."

"He is a friend of yours then? When I say *friend*, please understand me to mean something more than a mere gentlemanly acquaintance! Of course I am aware that he knows you — that you were at his house to-night."

"If you will pardon my interposition, Colonel Brandon," said I, "I will merely state here, that when I was introduced to this person —"

"Gentleman, sir! Where are your manners?" interrupted the fiery Spaniard.

"When I was introduced to this person this evening," I quietly persisted, "by Miss Flora Sebastian, she particularly mentioned him as the *friend* of her father."

"And so he is my *friend*, and a gentleman and a scholar!" said Don Diego, sharply.

"That is the point I wished to ascertain," remarked the colonel. "You have known him for some time? perhaps some years?"

"Yes, sir, for a good many years; and he can tell you all about me — all about my character."

"You have been in this part of the country before perhaps?"

"Why do you think so?" asked the other, bending his eyes keenly upon his interrogator.

"I thought it quite likely that this was not your first visit to your friend Captain Sebastian."

"I have been to his house before, certainly."

"Some years ago?"

"How, sir? why do you say some years ago?" queried the Spaniard, with an uneasy, anxious look, and growing, I fancied, a little pale.

"Say between seven and eight years ago?" pursued the colonel, fixing his clear, searching gray eyes steadily upon the wining prisoner.

"I don't remember how long ago," he answered, with assumed indifference.

"Do you remember ever hearing him mention one Urbano Velando?"

The Spaniard started, turned deadly pale, and, in spite of himself, trembled in every limb.

"Ah! you seem moved, disturbed, excited!" quietly remarked Colonel Brandon, keeping his eyes steadily fixed upon the other.

"Yes," said the Spaniard, "my arm is very painful."

"You should have an experienced surgeon to attend to it," rejoined the colonel: "I will send for one."

"Never mind, sir!" returned Don Diego; "only set me at liberty, and I will find one myself."

"It is folly for you to ask for your liberty after what has

occurred!" rejoined Colonel Brandon. "You have killed a gentleman in this vicinity, and cannot be set free till the verdict of the coroner's jury shall be known."

"And what then?"

"That we must wait and see."

"But between this time and then?"

"You must remain a prisoner."

"You have no right to hold me, sir! Where is your warrant? where is your authority?"

"As for the warrant, that shall be forthcoming soon enough; and as for present authority, I assume it."

"But, sir, the law does not justify you!"

"What do you know about law — especially our laws — you, by your own showing, a foreigner and a stranger in this region?" said the colonel, rather sharply. "Do you wish to confess? do you wish to say your present name is assumed? that you have been here before and tried our laws, in various ways, till the people rose above statutes and took justice into their own hands? Just now I asked you a question, to which I have received no answer. I will repeat it. Did you ever hear Captain Sebastian mention one Urbano Velando?"

The Spaniard could not altogether control his features when this name was mentioned; but there was not the start and deadly pallor as at first, and he answered quite calmly:

"It occurs to me that I have — at least I am certain I have heard the name mentioned before by some one."

"And did you hear what became of that notorious villain?"

"Who?"

"Urbano Velando."

"It was said he was murdered by the Regulators."

"Executed, you mean?"

"Put to death, at all events."

"Did you believe the statement?"

"Why should I have doubted it?"

"You know best. Had he a brother?"

"I do not know."

"Have a care, sir — state the truth!"

"And if he had, or had not, what of it?" demanded the Spaniard, in a sulky tone.

"This: that if he had a brother, and was put to death himself, that brother must have resembled him wonderfully! and, what is more, must have been almost the exact image of yourself!"

Don Diego was now apparently quite calm and collected, and he answered coolly and quietly:

"This may be so — I do not know — but I am certainly not responsible for my resemblance to anybody."

For nearly a minute Colonel Brandon said nothing further, but remained looking steadily at the face of the other, as if he were seeking to read his very soul.

"This is all for the present," he at length remarked. "Señor Gomez, as I understand you are called, you will remain in this house a prisoner till after the inquest, because our jail is some distance off and not in the best condition for retaining experienced felons."

"What do you mean by that, sir? an insult?" demanded Don Diego, with a wicked frown.

"Never mind what I mean," rejoined the colonel, "but take matters as you find them and say as little as possible! You will remain here under guard, I say, till we know better what disposition to make of you! Meantime I will dispatch a trusty messenger for both a warrant and a surgeon."

"And am I to remain bound in this painful and ignominious manner?"

"That will rest with yourself to determine. If you will pledge yourself to be quiet, and make no attempt at escape, you shall be released — otherwise not."

The Spaniard finally gave his solemn promise to this effect, and a small room was selected and made ready for him. Wooden bars were nailed across its single window,

and one of the overseers, armed with a brace of pistols and a large hunting-knife, (revolvers and Bowie knives were then unknown,) was stationed inside, to keep strict watch over the desperate fellow.

True to his word, Colonel Brandon soon dispatched one man to the nearest magistrate for a warrant—for in this case he desired to proceed strictly according to law—and sent another messenger to bring a well-known surgeon.

At the request of the colonel, Ernest and I passed the remainder of the night at his mansion. By daylight in the morning, a messenger reached me, with a challenge from Captain Sebastian. He had been to the La Grange mansion in search of me, and from there had come here. I referred him to Ernest, who, before giving an answer, consulted Colonel Brandon. The message finally sent back was, that there could be no meeting till after the coroner's inquest.

Early in the morning an officer appeared with a warrant and took Diego Gomez into legal custody. It was decided, however, not to remove him from the house for the present. An hour later came the surgeon—a venerable practitioner. He examined the arm, and at once decided upon amputation, requesting the assistance of Ernest and myself.

Don Diego was a villain—a man, as it was subsequently proved, black with crime—but, for all that, he possessed a kind of physical heroism, which to a certain degree commanded our admiration. Those were not the days of anæsthetic agents—of chloroform, ether, or nitrous oxide gas—to destroy the sense of feeling, and give the patient a delightful dream while the body was being tortured and mutilated; then pain was something to be borne with what fortitude could be summoned, and the surgeon's fearful instruments sent their unspeakable thrills of anguish through every quivering nerve. With all this in view, the heroism displayed by Don Diego, I say, commanded a certain degree of admiration. During the time his arm was being severed,

he never shrieked or cried aloud—though once or twice nature forced from him a moan, and big drops of agony stood all over his pallid face. When all was finished, the surgeon told Colonel Brandon that, for humanity's sake, he ought not to be removed for several days, and so he was retained a prisoner in the dwelling.

Finding myself at last a good deal prostrated with the fatigues and excitements of the night, I threw myself upon a bed and fell asleep; but was shortly awakened with a summons to attend the inquest of the coroner, where my evidence was necessary to determine the verdict of the jury.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE TIGER FAWNS.

A FEW hours had served to spread the dire intelligence of the murder of Edward Mason far and wide, and, as he was a young man generally known and greatly respected and beloved, the excitement created throughout the community was so intense and threatening that it began to be feared by the more judicious that the gambler himself would become a sudden victim to the vengeance of the people. When I again appeared upon the scene, I found that quite a large party had already collected before the dwelling, having heard of the homicide and the capture and whereabouts of the assassin, and several had begun to clamor for his death. This summary mode of dealing with the prisoner did not suit the present views of Colonel Brandon, who now appeared before the excited crowd, and told them that in this case he saw no reason why the law should not be allowed to take its

course, and he did not wish to have any violence done to the man in his charge.

"When legal justice can be meted out to the offender," he said, "it is wrong for us to assume the power of life and death. We should aid the law when we can, and not seek to rise above it—only where there is no hope of proper redress for bold wicked acts should we take upon ourselves the fearful responsibility of judgment and execution."

He spoke some time to the same effect, and his counsel at length prevailed. He next established a strong guard on the premises, both to prevent the escape of the prisoner and violence being done to him; and then, accompanied by Ernest and myself and several other gentlemen, all well armed, set out for Captain Sebastian's. On the way, he drew me aside for some private conversation.

"Ernest," he said, "has told me something of what passed between you and the fiery captain over the very corpse of the murdered Mason, but I should like to have a full statement from your own lips."

I repeated all that had been said, to the best of my recollection, word for word.

Colonel Brandon seemed to ponder the matter for some time before he made a reply.

"I do not see," he at length observed, with slow deliberation, "how he could have been more insulting, or what you could have said to have raised a more terrible suspicion."

"Do you think I was too intemperate in my language, colonel?"

"You certainly had such provocation as was calculated to excite a bitter retort," he answered, somewhat evasively. "This challenge must be duly weighed and considered," he pursued reflectively. "I am sorry to see you involved in such a perilous quarrel, for he is certainly a dangerous man to encounter. No less than five individuals have already fallen by his hand. However, this matter shall be thoroughly

looked into, and I will advise Ernest what to do. It is quite possible that the next communication you receive from the fighting captain will be an apology."

"An apology, colonel?"

"You look astonished—but strange things as that have happened before now. It would not be the first one from him, you know."

"But I can hardly hope for another now, under such different circumstances."

"Wait and see!" was the quiet rejoinder.

We now rode on some distance in silence, the colonel deeply musing. At length he gathered up his reins, with the remark:

"I believe this is all I wished to say privately to you at present, and now we will join the others."

"One minute, Colonel Brandon!" said I, in a rather tremulous tone, with the hot blood flushing my face and temples.

He turned his calm gray eyes upon me, and I somehow felt as if I was choking. He seemed surprised at my disturbed manner and confusion, but for the life of me I could not speak for nearly half a minute.

"I—have—a favor—to ask!" at length I rather jerked out than said.

"I am glad of it," he smiled, reassuringly, "for I am sure nothing will afford me more pleasure than to grant it to the savior of my daughter."

The words filled my heart with hope, and yet I trembled still, for he evidently had no idea what I sought. That he would grant me anything in his power, except what I was about to ask, I felt almost sure. And yet why suppose he would hesitate at this? Ah! how we quake before shadows when the hopes of the heart are concerned!

I hesitated, grew more embarrassed, till at length I felt as if I could not speak, even were my life depending on it.

"My friend," he said encouragingly, after waiting some time on my silence, "you attach more weight to this request, whatever it be, than it deserves, I am sure."

"No," I faltered, "that is impossible!"

"Speak out then! and if in my power to prove my gratitude—"

"Colonel Brandon," interrupted I quickly, catching at a word that seemed to loosen my tongue, "I do not want this favor on the score of gratitude; that must be set aside; you must regard me as if I had never done anything, however trifling, for you or yours; you must consider it only in the moral sense of right."

"Pray, Doctor Walbridge, speak out, and do not keep me in this suspense!" returned the colonel, with an encouraging smile: "my curiosity is almost as much excited as a school-girl's!"

"Colonel Brandon," I rejoined, nerving myself up to the awful point of disclosure, and feeling as if my emotions were stifling me, but resolved to go through now, come life or death, "I—I—love your daughter!"

The terrible words were out; and, though my head swam, I still lived. He looked at me for a short time in a sort of curious surprise. My eyes sought the ground, and I felt my whole frame tremble.

"Which one?" he at length inquired.

"Cora."

"I think you might do worse!" was his quiet remark.

At these simple words I felt as if a weight was lifted from my heart, and I ventured to raise my eyes to his. His noble countenance was as placid as a summer's day, with no trace of anger there. Had I then really nothing to fear, but all to hope?

"Is she aware of this?" he asked.

"I regret to say she is."

"You regret! why?"

"Because, under the wild excitement of last night, while conversing with her alone, and fearing no such opportunity might ever again occur, I spoke words that should have been kept back till your consent to speak them had first been obtained."

"And how was your suit received?"

"I may be wrong, sir, but I fancied she did not regard me with indifference."

"You think you could win her?"

"With your consent."

He rode up close alongside of me and took my hand.

"Leslie Walbridge," he said, "I have reason to believe you to be worthy of the best woman that ever lived; and if you can win, or have won, the heart of my gentle Cora, take her, in God's name, and make her happy, and the blessing of her father shall be upon you both!"

I was overpowered. I confess it, simple as it may make me appear in the eyes of the reader, I was so overcome by this hearty response that I shed tears.

I pass over the inquest of the coroner, because nothing new was developed. I gave in my evidence, as I have before stated it, and of course the verdict was in accordance with the facts: "That Edward Mason came to his death from a wound in the left breast, inflicted by a stiletto, in the hands of Diego Gomez de Calantra y Sombrez."

Quite a large crowd was collected at the house of death, and great excitement prevailed.

As soon as the verdict was rendered, the remains of the ill-fated young man were removed by his friends.

Colonel Brandon took occasion to obtain a private interview with Captain Sebastian; and soon after my friend Ernest brought me a note, the body of which read as follows:

"DEAR SIR: From some facts I have just learned, I hasten to withdraw my challenge of this date, and beg you will

accept my most humble apology for the hasty and insulting words uttered in the heat of anger last night.

"Your most obedient servant,

"FELIPE GUIDO SEBASTIAN."

"What magic is this?" exclaimed I, after reading it aloud to Ernest.

"I do not understand it myself," he answered.

"Colonel Brandon hinted at such a thing on our way hither, but I am none the less surprised to find it a fact."

"Depend upon it, it is because of some communication he has made in relation to that villanous Spaniard. If I am not mistaken, he has discovered him to be other than he represents—some scoundrel perhaps that has before been in the hands of the Regulators and escaped his just deserts!"

"His words this morning lead to such a conjecture," said I.

"At all events, my dear friend, I congratulate you upon your honorable escape from what I am almost certain would have been a fearful doom!" rejoined Ernest, warmly grasping my hand.

"Since he has seen proper to make me a written apology, perhaps it is no more than right that I should do the same to him," said I, reflectively. "I certainly made use of some very harsh language."

"Perhaps, under the circumstances, it would be as well to do so," replied my friend.

I requested a servant to get me writing materials, and I wrote the note in accordance with the idea stated. This was sent in to the captain while still closeted with the colonel. As yet I had only seen him in the room during the inquest, and we had not exchanged a word. Soon after he came forward, looking pale and troubled, and offered me his hand.

"It seems we both made a mistake last night, Doctor Walbridge," he said, "and the best we can both do now is to remember only what is pleasant in the past."

"I am with you in that desire with all my heart!" I frankly responded.

"The statement you have made and sworn to, being true of course, (though I was too blinded by a partial friendship for Señor Gomez to believe it last night, and too much excited to consider my words and acts,) I am both pained and grieved at the thought that I unconsciously introduced a sharper among gentlemen. Believe me, I have been most grossly deceived in that man, whom I have known for some years; and a conversation with our friend, Colonel Brandon, has convinced me of this, even against my will. Curiously enough, this Señor Gomez very strongly resembles a villain, one Urbano Velando, who figured in this region some seven or eight years ago; and who, being caught in the act of running off some negroes, was adjudged to death by the Regulators, and actually executed, as I positively know, being present myself and seeing the sentence carried into effect. It is a painful thing to be so deceived in one we have regarded as an honorable friend; but of course I shall now cast him off and let the law take its course. I do not believe, however, that he can be convicted of murder in the first degree, because he was being held and his life threatened at the time the fatal blow was given; but his crime is undoubtedly sufficient to put him where he can do no more mischief for many a long year to come."

"I am glad to see, Captain Sebastian, that at last you view this fellow in the true light!" returned I. "It was a very remarkable circumstance that he should have been captured in the manner he was!"

"Very remarkable indeed, and looks like a Providence! That he should have escaped through a crowd of Mason's friends, have got clear of the dwelling, have eluded his pursuers, and then have been treed by Colonel Brandon's dogs, shot by one of his overseers, captured and brought home just in time for you to recognize him, is strange and wonderful enough."

"And his associates, who disappeared at the same time, what of them?" said I.

"I know nothing about them," replied the captain. "I never saw them till yesterday, when they came with Señor Gomez, who introduced them to me as his particular friends. He had just come from Texas, he said, had come out of his way to visit me, proposed to remain some three or four days, and then go from here to Alexandria and take a boat for New Orleans. I can see now, what I did not dream of before, that this Diego Gomez, being a sharper, had these fellows along as assistants, and I am greatly vexed and mortified that I was made a tool of to get them into society where they did not belong!"

"We are all liable to be mistaken, Captain Sebastian," remarked Ernest, "and I hope you will not let this unfortunate affair depress you too much! It is a painfully sad thing to lose from our community such a high-minded, noble young gentleman as Edward Mason, by the hand of a miserable cheat, to call him nothing worse; but I cannot see that you are to blame—nor will our friends or his, when they come to hear all the facts."

"Thank you, Ernest La Grange!" said the captain, turning to the speaker and warmly grasping his hand; "thank you kindly; your words take a weight from my breast; and I humbly trust you will do what you can to cause others to think as you do!"

"I certainly shall!" was the cordial answer.

"And you can do so much—your voice has so much weight in this community!" said the captain.

At this moment Miss Flora Sebastian entered the apartment, where we were conversing, through an open door. She looked pale, but very beautiful, and came forward with a sweet, sad smile, holding out her hand to me, and saying, in her most bewitching tone and manner:

"Doctor Walbridge, I most humbly crave your pardon for my rudeness to you last night! But I was laboring under great excitement, and angry words had just passed between

you and my father. I know now how much I wronged you, for I have been just outside the door here and have overheard your present conversation. May I trust that I am forgiven?"

All this was said so frankly, so earnestly, and to all appearance so sincerely, that I had but one reply to make; which was to regret the sad cause of any unpleasant words and feelings, to take what blame I could upon myself, and to hope that nothing would ever again occur to disturb the harmonious relations now re-established between us.

After some further general conversation, Miss Flora drew Ernest aside, and they talked apart for several minutes. When Ernest again rejoined me, he seemed a little embarrassed; but presently said, in his frank, straightforward manner:

"Leslie, I must beg you to excuse me for not returning with you immediately! The fact is, there is a poor old woman, living back here, in the edge of a small pine wood, some three or four miles distant, who is down with a fever and has no physician; and Miss Flora has not only appealed to my charity to go and see her, but has even offered herself to accompany me as a guide. Of course, under the circumstances, my gallantry, if nothing else, would compel me to see the patient!"

"Of course!" returned I, with a meaning glance.

"I know what you are thinking of," he pursued, with a blush, "but there is nothing in it, I assure you! If Alice is not jealous, you have no reason to be for her, my friend!"

"I hope not."

"The question is now about yourself," he pursued, somewhat hurriedly. "Will you await my return here? will you go back with Colonel Brandon and party? or will you ride over home by yourself and acquaint my father with all that has occurred?"

"I will choose the last," I replied, after a short reflection.

Soon after this I found myself alone on the road which led to the plantation of Mr. La Grange, distant about four miles, but in a direction to form an angle with the route to Colonel Brandon's.

That separation and lonely ride led to some very important results, as I shall proceed to show.

CHAPTER XIV.

IMPORTANT CAPTURE AND DISCOVERY.

IT was a lovely day in October; and the air of that Southern clime was soft and balmy, and just calculated to throw one into a kind of dreamy languor, well suited to gentle meditations. There had been events enough in the last few hours to keep my mind busy with recollection; but two things stood out more prominently than all the rest—the unmistakable love of Cora Brandon, and her father's cordial assent that I should win and take her to my heart, to call her mine forever. This thought was enough to sweep away the darker scenes, and make me happy in my solitary musings; and I rode on slowly, overleaping the past, forgetting the present, and rolling up golden hopes for the future.

The road I was travelling had been passed over by me some two or three times in company with my friend, and, as it was a clear and open one, winding down along a little stream, crossing it by a rustic bridge, and running through a level country, with here and there a narrow belt of wood, the idea of getting upon a wrong course never once occurred to me till long after it had happened. Where it happened, I never could exactly tell; but as there were several paths

crossing the one I intended to pursue, I suppose I somewhere turned off on one of these.

At all events, after riding for some three hours, as I found on looking at my watch, and seeing nothing around me that I recognized, it for the first time occurred to me that I had made a mistake, more especially as I found myself approaching a great swamp, not unlike the one in which I had met with the adventures recorded in the opening pages of my narrative.

"Surely," thought I, reining up my horse, "I have missed my way!"

I looked around for a habitation, but not one was in sight, not even a cotton-field, and already the declining sun was casting long shadows to the eastward. That my quickest way out of the difficulty would be to retrace my steps in the light of day, was so clearly evident that I lost no time in conjecture and speculation, but at once turned my horse's head in a contrary direction. As I did so, I glanced away to the right, and fancied I caught sight of a human figure, moving cautiously among some trees and bushes, at a distance of some two hundred yards. Being well armed, I felt no fear at the idea of encountering a single person, even though an enemy, and I at once rode down toward the object I had discovered. As I neared the bushes, I saw them move, as if some one was parting them to look through, and I hailed at once. To this there was no response; but, as I drew nearer, I saw a negro strike off toward the swamp. At this I put spurs to my horse and dashed after him, at the same time shouting:

"Stop, boy, or I shall fire and shoot you down!"

As the only heed he gave to this was to increase his speed, I instantly drew one of my pistols and discharged it toward him, intending merely to frighten, not to wound, him.

It had the desired effect—for, as if fearing he could not escape both horse and bullet, he suddenly faced round and

stood still, and I could see he was quaking with terror as I rode up. He was roughly and shabbily dressed, with an old slouched hat pulled well down over his eyes, so as nearly to conceal his face, which, from the little I could see of it, appeared thin and sunken, as if he were, or had been recently, suffering from some wasting disease. In his hand he held a long bow and some arrows, which looked formidable enough to render him a dangerous antagonist.

"Don't be alarmed, boy!" I said, in a kindly tone; "I don't wish to hurt you, or even capture you, provided you are not intending anything wrong."

"I's jest out hunting a little bit, marser," he replied, slightly touching the flapping rim of his slouched hat.

"Who do you belong to?"

"I's a free nigger, marser—I is!" he answered; and then, to my surprise, he turned up the flapping rim of his shabby hat and stared hard at me, as if he fancied he had seen me before.

"Do you know me?" I asked, thinking he might possibly recognize me as the stranger who had been riding a good deal about the country with Ernest and others.

He stared hard at me for some time longer; and then, to my astonishment, dropped down on his knees, clasped his hands, and ejaculated:

"God bress you, marser! God bress you!"

"Why do you speak thus to me? what does it mean? what did I ever do for you?" said I, beginning to fancy I had seen his face before—though when and where, and under what circumstances, I could not tell.

"Marser one time sabe ole nigger Cato's life!" said the grateful black.

"Cato?" cried I, at once remembering the name. "Are you really the poor fellow I found sick in an old hut in the swamp?"

"God bress you, marser! I's dat same ole nigger what

yous brung de gourd of water for when I's choking to deafh!"

Here was a meeting and discovery indeed that might be of the greatest importance.

"Then you are connected with a band of ruffians, that nearly murdered me, after all I did for you!" said I, rather sternly.

"Marser, I's not 'sponsible for all dem bad mens does!" returned the black, in a deprecating tone.

"Then you admit it all, eh?"

"Hush, marser! don't speak so loud!" he rejoined, glancing uneasily and suspiciously around.

"What," said I, "are any of those villains about here?"

"Ise doesn't know dat, marser," he answered; "but dey's round of'en, when folks ain't looking for 'em, dey is."

"And why are you connected with them? Are you a villain too, as bad as the rest?"

"What's old Cato agwine to do?" he said. "I's dar slave; and ef I don't does what dey says, dis nigger gits his t'roat cut!"

"But you just now said you were free and not a slave!"

"I lies den, marser, case I's skeered a heap."

"Well, Cato," pursued I, "I think you must come with me!"

"Oh, no, marser, I's feared to do dat!"

"I will not hurt you," said I, "and I want you for two reasons: I want you to show me the way to the nearest plantation, and then I want you to answer some important questions concerning the villains with whom you have been connected."

"Oh, den dis old nigger 'll be killed for sartin!"

"No, you shall have ample protection! If you will tell the truth, and all the truth, I will put you where you will have a good home, and no one shall harm you."

"Whar's dat, marser?"

"What say you to Colonel Brandon? Did you ever hear of him?"

"Lor' golly!" he exclaimed, holding up his hands in horror; "he's der cap'en ob dem Regulators, and him'd jes' skeer der life out o' ole nigger in no time, and den bile um up arterwards!"

"Who told you so?"

"All der gemmens."

"The rascals you serve, you mean?"

"Spects dem is."

"Well, Cato, he will do nothing of the kind. He is my friend, and you know what a friend I was to you when all the rest had left you to die."

"Yes, God bress you, marser! yous war good friend to dis yar ole nigger jes' when I's spects I's done gone fur dis yar worl'!"

"Well, come with me then, and I will take care of you, and see that nobody shall hurt or abuse you! You do not seem to love bad men—you seem to have a good heart—and you certainly cannot want to stay with those wicked fellows?"

I spoke in a kind, persuasive tone, hoping to carry my point in this way; but I had already resolved to take the black with me by force, sooner than let him go free.

That there was still a regularly organized band of scoundrels in the vicinity, I believed; and if I could be the means of ferreting these fellows out and bringing them to justice, I felt I should be doing a service to my friends and the community in general.

Some curious thoughts now passed through my brain, and unconsciously I fell into a reverie. Why had Captain Sebastian been so eager to put myself and travelling companions to death, on the slightest suspicion, before the return of Colonel Brandon, the commander of the Regulators? and then been so anxious, immediately after, that the real villains

should not be followed? Why, after apologizing to me, admitting me to be a gentleman, and claiming me for a friend, had he been so ready, on the night of the murder, to disprove my word in favor of so villanous-looking a man as the Spaniard? and why had he turned so pale at my retort, when I raised the suspicion that he himself had some connection with the bandits? Then the strong resemblance between Diego Gomez and a well-known outlaw that had been left in his charge for punishment, with only his word that the latter had been executed! Then his challenge to me, and his subsequent apology after the Spaniard had been secured, and his admission that he believed my oath, and of course that his friend was a sharper, a cheat, to say nothing worse! Then too his ignorance, or pretended ignorance, of who were Don Diego's companions and what had become of them! All these things now began to excite a strange, unpleasant suspicion in my mind, that he might possibly be one, perhaps a leader, among these outlaws; and if such were the case, I saw how well his own respectable position might work for their interest. What better spy and friend could they have than an officer of the Regulators? who would be sure to know everything planned against them, and would have power in various ways to thwart the honest ends of justice. This suspicion, I confess, was a startling one, and I at once put it to every test I could think of. First, was Sebastian a man morally degraded enough for the purpose? I could see nothing elevating in his character, and all the dark, concealed, sinister points began to stand out boldly, before a close, careful, mental inspection. Had he a motive? The desire for power, revenge, wealth, or any other selfish consideration, would be motive enough for a man without generous feelings or moral standard. He had been a revolutionist in Mexico, and had come and settled in a section of country where bad principles, concealed under an honest mask, could further bad designs. And then the kid-

napping of Alice Brandon — could there be a motive for that with him or his? I could not but recollect that Flora in some respects resembled him — that there was something, as I have elsewhere mentioned, dark and hidden in her nature — and the motive might be hers, and she be in her father's secret. She was passionately in love with Ernest La Grange — that I could see, though my friend could not — and of course she hated Alice as a more fortunate rival. Suppose Alice could be got out of the way for a time — or, if necessary, for *all time* — might not the lonely, solitary lover find another on whom to fix his affections? and more especially should he often be brought in contact with a young and beautiful girl, full of sympathy for him in his bereavement? Like things had happened before, and would again, and on this she *might* have built her hopes, and the whole matter have been planned and executed by her father and herself! All this now gathered and whirled through my brain with a force of conviction that almost startled me; and I stood staring, in an abstracted mood, at Cato, hearing not his reply to my request.

Suddenly I put a question to the black.

"Cato," I said, "I want you to answer me truly! Since you admit you have heard of Colonel Brandon, I want you to tell me if you have also heard of Captain Sebastian?"

"Spects I neber did, marser," he answered, after a little reflection.

"That is strange too! since he is one of the Regulators, and has almost as much power as the one you fear."

"Reckon dis yar chile does n't know him."

"Who is the leader, the captain, of the men you serve?"

"Ef I tells you dat, Ise gits my head blowed off!" he replied, looking quickly and timidly around him.

"No, Cato, I will protect you — you can trust me!"

It was some time before I could get from him a direct answer, and not until I had used some threats. At last I

reluctantly drew from him that it was Captain Guido. I started, with a thrill of suspicion, for that was one of the names of Sebastian? Could it be, after all, that I had the right clue to the mystery?

"What kind of a looking man is he?" I demanded.

The negro described him in his own peculiar way, and I felt more than ever convinced that I was right. At all events this was a matter worthy of the most serious investigation, and I was resolved to see Colonel Brandon as soon as possible and lay all the facts before him. Some other questions now occurred to me, and I continued to interrogate the black.

"Do you know a negro named Sam, that used to be ferryman at the bayou?" I asked.

"Oh, yes, marser, I knowed him well; but he's one ob dem yar runaways now!"

"No, Cato, he was carried off by some gentlemen, and is now in good hands, and much better treated than he was before, as you shall also be if you come with me. But how did you cross that bayou? who is the ferryman there now?"

"Spects dar's a white gemman dar now; but Ise jes' rowed myself ober in a small boat."

"And why did you come here?"

"To hunt, marser."

"No, Cato — no lying now — you never came this far from home merely to hunt! Now you know I was a good friend to you, and gave you water when no one would come near you, and so saved your life, and in return you ought to tell me the whole truth. I can be a good friend to you still, or I can do you a great deal of harm."

The black looked troubled and uneasy. He glanced quickly and anxiously around, on every side, as if he thought it possible there might be a listener, and then said, in a low, hurried tone:

"Yes, marser, you's good frien' to dis yar chile, and Ise

does n't want to see no harm whatsoever come agins you; and darfore Ise jes' takes it 'pon myself to say as dat dar am odder places whar you mought be more safer den yere!"

"I think I understand you!" said I, looking sharply around myself; "you fear some of the villains may be near us now?"

"Dey's of'en close round when nobody ain't specting 'em."

"Then we had better leave here as soon as possible!"

"Well, dar, Ise hope God bless you — but I can't go wid you now."

"Why?"

"Case you see, ef I's missed whar I's wanted, dar 'll be a nigger's t'roat cut 'fore der worl's much older."

"But if you come with me, I will protect you."

"Can't do it, marser, nohow. Ise like to 'blige good geman like you, but you mus n't ax me to do dat yar now."

I proceeded to load the pistol I had discharged, and the black stood and watched me. When done, I said, in a very determined tone:

"Cato, I saved your life, and you owe me a service. I have lost my way, and I want you to guide me to Colonel Brandon's, or the nearest plantation."

"Den you let Ise go, marser?"

"I will not promise positively."

"Den Ise does n't stir a step!"

"What! not with this at your head?" said I, pointing the loaded pistol at him.

"D-d-d-dar," he stammered out, holding up his hands before his face, "d-d-dats nuff o' dat yar, case it mought go off!"

"It does such things sometimes, Cato, and sends a very swift ball — a ball that would go right through you."

"S-s-spects it does, marser."

"Now get up in front here, and guide me to the nearest plantation, or it will go right through you before you know

it!" I said, in a tone that made him believe me in fearful earnest.

"Lor' golly," he groaned, looking all around and evidently speaking to himself, "'pears as ef dis yar old nigger was n't neber out of danger. Feber one side, pistol todder, and t'roat cut all round, or else hunged up to fat buzzards on!"

There was an old log not far off, and I rode over to that, and he got up in front of me.

"Now you see where the sun is," said I, not caring to question him on time and distance, "and I want to know if you can guide me to a planter's dwelling before dark."

"Dat yar lays wid der hoss, marser."

"Well, the beast seems tired, and with this load he will not be able to go much faster than a walk."

The direction now pointed out by the black, led into a wood, and next into a swamp. I asked my guide if he was sure he was right, and he declared it was the nearest way to the plantation of Colonel Brandon.

"Be sure and do not deceive me," I said, "for both my pistols are loaded; and if I find you playing me false, it will be a sorry work for you!"

Cato positively asserted, in his rude way, that he was acting in good faith, and that if any harm should come to us the fault would not be his.

We rode on slowly, picking our way through the bushes as best we could, till the sun went down and it began to grow dark. At last we came to an open field, and far in the distance I saw the sparkle of a light.

"Dat yar's der house," he said.

"Colonel Brandon's?"

"Yes, marser."

"You are sure?"

"Yes, marser."

"Well, it will not take us long to reach it now."

"But Ise spect Ise quit yere, marser."

"Oh, no, Cato — you must come with me and get your supper: it is too late for you to hunt any more to-day, and you are tired and hungry."

He made various excuses to get away, and at last declared that there was a certain person he must see before morning. I felt quite suspicious that he was connected with some plot of the freebooters, and was fully resolved to take him with me.

"If you will come with me," I said, "and tell all you know, I promise you shall have kind treatment, be protected against all harm, and afterward shall have your liberty and be no longer a slave to the villains you have served."

"But dey 'll kill me, marser!" he replied, in a hesitating way.

"No, they will never have you again in their power. If you will come with me to Colonel Brandon's, who is my friend and the commander of the Regulators, and tell him all, he will defeat the villains, and either hang them or drive them from the country, and then you will have nothing more to fear. If you go back to them, you will soon be caught and hung with the rest."

"I's feared dey cotch me 'fore Ise gits dar."

"What! are they then about here now?"

Before he could reply, we heard a peculiar whistle, sounding off to the right.

"Dar, marser!" he whispered, grasping my arm.

"Cato, what does this mean?" I said, in the same cautious way, feeling not a little alarmed. "There is some terrible plot afoot; and you know of some mischief that is to be done soon — perhaps to-night! Oh, for God's sake, if you do know of any, tell me at once and save your best friend!"

"I reckon dar's some of dem bad fellers about yere," he still whispered, "and we'd best git off purty still!"

I started the horse through the open field, and we rode on quietly, making as little noise as possible. Presently we heard the whistle again, from the same quarter as at first; and then

another from a different direction, as if in answer to it. I now became very anxious — not so much on my own account as that of my friends. I remembered that Alice Brandon had once been seized near home and borne away; and perhaps the same gang of villains were gathering here on this night for some further wicked design against her or her family — or it might be to liberate the Spaniard, who was possibly one of their band, and who, as it was generally known, was still held a prisoner at the dwelling. To reach the colonel's house and make known my suspicions as soon as possible, and be there to help defend the inmates in case of attack, now seemed a matter of pressing necessity; and yet I was obliged to move slowly and with caution, for fear of being discovered by some of the prowling banditti. The distance from where I left the bushy covering, to the dwelling of Colonel Brandon, was nearly a mile; but I passed over it slowly, without any disturbance, and without hearing anything more of the dark spirits I supposed to be gathering there for a wicked purpose — the negro still accompanying me and no longer asking to be released. I gave my horse to a servant and entered the dwelling, taking Cato with me. I found the colonel at home, and at supper with his family and some three or four gentlemen. I was glad to perceive this, for in every man of course I counted one able defender. They all looked surprised at seeing me, and the shabby negro following close at my heels, but the greeting was very cordial.

"This is certainly quite an unexpected pleasure, Doctor Walbridge," said Colonel Brandon, "and I only hope you are in a condition to join us at our evening meal."

"If a long, wearisome ride, ever since I left you, colonel, without a morsel to eat meantime, can put a man in a proper condition for doing justice to a good supper, I happen to be that individual."

"You don't mean to say you have been riding ever since, doctor? Why, I thought you started for La Grange's?"

"So I did, but lost my way, rode down to a big swamp, and captured this prisoner, who has guided me hither."

"Who does the boy belong to? or is he free?"

"Before I tell you anything more, colonel, will you favor me with a private interview?"

"Certainly," he said, with a look of curious inquiry, which was likewise manifested by the others. "After supper I suppose will do?"

"I should rather it were now, as I consider the matter very important."

He rose quickly from the table, and all present looked surprised, if not startled. On my first appearance, Cora had blushed crimson; but her features now turned pale, as did those of her mother beside her, whom she much resembled. Alice, however, I noticed did not change color. The colonel led the way to a small room, a sort of library and study, and I followed, taking Cato with me. As soon as the door was closed, I said to the black:

"This is the great commander of the Regulators, Cato, whom you have been taught to look upon with terror; but if you will tell the truth, and all the truth, keeping nothing from him, he will be your friend, as he is mine, and see that you are well taken care of, and kept from being harmed by bad men."

"Certainly I will?" said Colonel Brandon, though at a loss to conjecture what was coming. "What is it, doctor?"

I proceeded to state where I had first seen Cato, the way in which I had the second time discovered him, what I had gathered from him, and my own fears and suspicions.

"This matter looks serious!" said the colonel, thoughtfully.

"Can you trust all your friends here? the gentlemen at your table?" asked I. "It may seem a strange question to put to you," I pursued, as the colonel looked at me with an air of surprise; "but if my suspicion should prove well founded, that Captain Sebastian, who has long been regarded

as an honorable gentleman, is in league with these bandits and outlaws, it must go far to create a feeling of distrust throughout the community, and almost justify every man in being suspicious of every other that he does not positively know to be honest and true."

"These gentlemen are above suspicion," he replied, in a positive, confident tone.

"I am glad to hear you say so!"

"Why do you suspect Captain Sebastian?" he inquired, looking me steadily and earnestly in the eye.

I gave my reasons, such as are already known to the reader.

"I have myself suspected him for a long time," he rejoined; "and have been waiting and watching, and gradually picking up evidence, till I am almost sure. You say the name of the chief of these desperadoes is Captain Guido—that the description of him, which Cato here gives, will answer for Sebastian—that one of his names is Guido, and so forth and so on. Well, now, what will you say, when I tell you that, a few days ago, when near Sebastian's dwelling, one of my dogs snapped up a bit of white paper, which I found to be part of a letter, addressed to F. Guido? and though the writing was mostly torn off, I read in three places: '*We must not fail next*'—'*I will be with you on*'—'*Velando has made all safe below!*' I think it would not have made any impression on me—that I should not in fact have remembered a word of it—only for the name of Velando: that struck me as rather strange, as I had never heard the name applied to but one individual, who had, as I supposed, been executed by Sebastian and his men some years ago. When I saw that Spaniard we have in charge, I was almost startled at the resemblance he bore to the villain I believed to be dead; and I purposely drew him out into a long conversation, to see if he might not be the same. When he started and turned pale at the mention of his name, I knew the man himself was before me; but it was not my policy to have him suppose I

was certain of his identity — only that I saw a strong resemblance to the outlaw. I fancied I had then the beginning of what might prove a long chain of circumstantial evidence against Sebastian; and when I told you it was possible he might apologize, I had in view the idea of calling his attention to the fact of the Spaniard looking so much like the outlaw as at least to render him a too suspicious character for the captain to claim him as his friend and insult an honorable gentleman on his account. Sebastian, when I laid the facts before him, was glad enough to catch at this and throw the villain overboard to screen himself. Now if he is a member of these desperadoes, it is easy to see the motive he had for sacrificing you and your companions at first, knowing you were strangers in the country, and also his desire not to have the real villains followed."

"And why not go a step further, Colonel Brandon," said I, "and suppose him the prime instigator of the kidnapping of your daughter?"

"Ha! do you suspect him of that foul crime too?"

"I do."

"On what grounds? for what purpose? what motive?"

"His daughter is in love with Ernest La Grange."

"What! Flora?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"And of course she looks upon your daughter Alice as a rival — a very formidable rival indeed at that."

"Well?"

"Might she not argue, that if Alice were out of the way, Ernest would see attractions in herself?"

"This is your surmise?"

"It is."

"But you have no proof?"

"I know she is in love with Ernest and hates Alice."

"You *know* this, you say?"

"I am so certain of it that it would take a great deal of evidence to change my belief."

"And you think she was the cause of Alice being kidnapped?"

"I do."

"If the father be the villain we suspect, would he not endeavor to keep the fact concealed from his family?"

"I think he would trust so true a daughter as Flora, lest her shrewdness might work against him."

"You think Flora then has a good deal of her father's nature?"

"I do."

"Well, perhaps you are right," mused the colonel. "But now we come back to the danger that threatens us here. If this Sebastian is leagued with the desperadoes, nothing more likely than that he should be anxious for the liberation of the prisoner, lest his own secret should be discovered by the latter's informing on him, or in some other way, and we must secretly prepare for the worst. Cato, I now come to you, and you must tell me all you know!"

"Ise does n't knows not'ing funder, marser."

"We will see. Now, Cato, I want you to understand that I am the captain of the Regulators, and that I can hand you out and have you hung or shot in less than ten minutes."

"Don't you does it now, good marser!" cried the frightened black, sinking down on his knees.

"If you tell me the truth I will not; but if you lie to me, then Heaven have mercy on your soul!"

Of course this was said to frighten the negro — the colonel having no intention of punishing him with death in any case.

"I-I-Ise'll tell all I knows!" stammered the frightened black.

"That is all we want of you, Cato. Do that, and help

us to defeat these bad men, and I will see that you shall have your liberty, if I even have to buy you to set you free. Now, in the first place, what were you doing so far from home when Doctor Walbridge found you?"

Cato hesitated and hung his head.

"You must tell!" pursued the colonel, sternly; "you have no choice!"

"And ef Ise tell, marser, will you keep Ise from dem bad mens?"

"Yes."

"Well, den, marser, I's sent wid dis yar letter, to gib um to Marser Horset, when dey was git together down dar whar dis yar gemman hear 'em whistle."

As he spoke, Cato drew forth a letter from his bosom and handed it to Colonel Brandon, who lost no time in opening and perusing it. It read as follows:

"Wait for the signal — we're not quite ready yet. Kingston tells me he can't get here with his men under two days; and besides, our great chief can't well act with us until this murder business simmers down. The country is excited now, and failure might be death to us, as the Regulators would have their forces out in double quick. Reconnoitre, but do nothing to attract notice till you hear from me or Guido. Velando will keep, for they're agoing to law it, and so no danger there. And even if he were to be hung, I should n't much care, for he's made a — fool of himself, by getting into a scrape just in time to spoil our plans. We must have a little more delay now, and get all our men well on hand for the big blow; and then of course for Texas, with every horse and nigger we can raise. I send this by Cato, and you know you can trust him with any message back. I'd come myself, but I'm going to see Guido, and every man's busy in different ways, getting ready for the big strike. Our captain's party did us harm as it turned out; but it can't be helped now. I hear the colonel suspects Velando; but that's

all; all the rest is good and dark; and if anything takes wind, and the Regulators get roused, who'll hear of it sooner than our chief, whom nobody suspects? Be at the ferry to-morrow night, and I'll try to meet you."

This letter was only signed with a B. As he finished reading it, the colonel looked at me, and observed, with lips compressed:

"Doctor, our suspicions are certainties!"

"It seems so."

"The villain! To think he has so long been playing the gentleman among us!"

"You mean Sebastian?"

"Yes, him whom nobody suspects!" he answered through his grinding teeth. "Ah! he little knows how much we know! He must be arrested before he does any further mischief."

"By a warrant?"

"By the Regulators, my friend. I will send for him to come here."

"Will he not suspect?"

"I will invent some plausible reason for his presence. Meantime we must get our men secretly together. If you were not so much fatigued, I would ask you to ride over to La Grange's to-night and start out Ernest."

"Never fear for me, colonel — I am good for twenty-four hours yet."

"Your leaving here for your present home will look so natural, that any reconnoitering party, knowing all about us, would not be likely to suspect any design, as they might if I were to send any one else."

"I will go, colonel — consider that settled!"

"You need be in no haste — an hour or two hence will do. You must have some supper and a chat with the ladies. Upon my word, you blush easily, doctor! But mark you, my friend — not a word of this affair to any of my family

to-night! Not a word of Cato either, beyond the fact that you found him in the woods, and don't know but he may be a runaway—at least you took the liberty of bringing him here and handing him over to me. I suppose you will have to say this much, because he has been seen, though I could wish he had not. Cato," he pursued, addressing the black, "I shall have to lock you up to-night, and let nobody question you; but I will see that you have a good supper, and, just as soon as it can be done with safety, you shall have your freedom and be sent beyond the reach of the villains who would kill you. Do you know anything more than you have told?"

"Spects 'dem is all."

"Who gave you this letter?"

"Marser Blake."

"Ha!" cried I; "the very leader of the party who captured Miss Alice! Depend upon it, colonel, Guido is Sebastian; and Sebastian, or his daughter, is the author of that outrage! These men claimed to be acting under the orders of their chief, but refused to name him; and so he who cried thief the loudest, was himself the thief!"

"If so, there may soon be a day of fearful reckoning for him!" was the stern rejoinder.

After some further conversation, which need not be related here, the colonel put Cato in charge of a trusty servant, with strict orders not to let him escape or hold communication with any one; and then we together repaired to the supper room, talking in a light and easy strain, as if nothing had ever gone wrong.

CHAPTER XV.

WARNINGS AND PRECAUTIONS.

THEN you really do assure me that all is settled?" said Cora, as we somehow found ourselves conversing alone together, on that eventful evening, near the hour at which I was to take my departure.

"Yes, I really do assure you, my dear Cora, that we exchanged apologies, and finally parted seeming friends."

"And were you not friends in *truth* as well as *seeming*?"

"Now, my little pet, you ask a question that is so hard to answer. If it were given me to look into the heart of every one I meet, I could tell better whether their professions were true or false."

"But you at least know what your own feelings were, Leslie?"

"Well, then, I felt no unkindness toward Captain Sebastian or his daughter when I left them."

"And still feel none, Leslie?"

"Why, how inquisitive you are on this subject, dear Cora?"

"Too much so, perhaps," she blushed; "but somehow I cannot get it out of my mind that there will be trouble between you and Captain Sebastian yet."

"Why should you think so?"

"I do not know—a kind of presentiment perhaps."

"Oh, you must not let your fancies run away with your good common sense! You have no more reason to suppose I shall again quarrel with Sebastian, than with your father, or Ernest, or any one else."

"I hope you are right," she sighed, "but I cannot help my fears."

"Do you then *fear* for me?" I asked, in a low, tender tone,

looking fondly upon her sweet face and averted eyes. "Am I then so dear to you, Cora, that you tremble for my safety?"

She colored deeply, and turned her head aside, but did not reply in words. I need not have asked the question, for I felt sure of her heart; and yet I could not resist the temptation of trying to get an answer from her sweet lips.

"Dear Cora," I pursued, gently taking her trembling hand, "I have a right to speak to you now that I did not last night possess, for I have told your father all, and it is with his consent I now address you."

"Where did you leave Ernest?" she inquired, with a kind of nervous embarrassment.

"He was going to take a ride with Miss Flora."

"A ride with Miss Flora?" she repeated, in a tone of surprise, looking as if she thought I might be in jest.

"Yes, Flora wanted him to go some three or four miles, to visit an old woman in his professional capacity, and she offered to be his companion and guide."

"I do not like her!" said Cora, with a very pretty pout of her very pretty lips.

"Why?"

"I do not know; she has always treated me well; but somehow there is a something, I cannot tell what, that makes me dislike her."

"I know!" said I.

"What is it then?"

"It is that your soul is pure and truthful, and when it comes in contact with hers —"

"Nay, Leslie, you must not praise me at her expense. Though I may dislike, I must do her justice. I have no reason to think that in her soul she is not quite as pure and truthful —"

"I beg your pardon, dear Cora," I interrupted in turn; "but if you start with false premises, you cannot draw correct conclusions! If you hold so exalted an opinion of Miss

Flora Sebastian as to think her pure and truthful, you and I will not agree on that subject at all."

"Have you good and sufficient reason for thinking otherwise of her?" inquired Cora, with an air of surprise.

"I have; but let that suffice; do not ask me for an explanation. Enough that your dislike is the instinctive antipathy of the lamb to the wolf!"

"Oh, Leslie, what a comparison! I am sure that Flora —"

"We are sure of nothing in this world, Cora!" I again interrupted; "and so, if you please, we will let that point rest. May I trust you with some secret advice?"

She looked at me with an air of wondering inquiry.

"With the exception of Alice," I pursued, "whom it concerns equally with yourself, you must not speak of it! For the next few days, neither you nor she must ride out by yourselves — in fact I would advise you not to leave the house at all — and should either Flora or her father chance to come over here, just treat them as you always have done, as if nothing had happened, but do not communicate a single fact concerning yourselves, your family, or your private affairs, and make no mention of having seen me!"

"What does all this mean, Leslie?" exclaimed Cora, in surprise.

"You must not question — only promise me, dear Cora — will you not?"

"You mystify me!"

"I cannot explain anything to you now, my little pet; and if you will not promise otherwise, I am at your mercy."

"Ah! here comes Alice; and as you want her promise, as well as mine, you can repeat your request and she answer for herself. This way, Alice!" she pursued, as the latter, seeing us conversing together, was about to quit the apartment she had just entered. "Doctor Walbridge has something special to say to you."

"I thought it a case where two might be company and

three none!" she replied, with a smile, as she came forward and joined us.

"That state of things can never be where Miss Alice Brandon makes the third!" said I.

"Oh, you flatterer! it is no wonder you have turned the head of my poor little sister here!" she rejoined.

"Perhaps my head is no more turned than your own, or Miss Flora's!" defensively retorted Cora, with an animated blush that quite became her.

"Why do you say Miss Flora's? who or what has turned hers?" asked Alice, changing color.

"Ernest La Grange perhaps, since she has run off with him!" said Cora, quite pleased at the idea of shifting the jest from herself to her sister.

"Will you say what you mean, Miss Cora?" said Alice, with a serious air.

"Well, then, I simply mean what I say, Miss Alice!" answered Cora. "For further particulars inquire of Doctor Walbridge."

Alice turned to me with a grave look.

"Cora alludes to the fact, which I mentioned to her in answer to a question, that my friend Ernest had this afternoon taken a ride with Miss Flora Sebastian," I explained.

Alice suddenly grew pale, and her breathing quickened. I had never seen her so much moved before.

"A ride for mere pleasure?" she asked, with an effort to appear calm and indifferent.

"By no means," I answered, now glad that I could say anything to palliate the seeming offence of my friend. "His charity was first appealed to, to go in his professional capacity and see a sick woman; and next his gallantry, by the offer of Miss Flora to be his companion and guide."

"Ernest is not a practicing physician," said Alice, "and so why should he have been selected in lieu of their own family doctor? The charity part of it is all nonsense — for

the amount to be paid the man of science would not have had a moment's consideration with Flora!"

"But it may have been a sudden case, and no other physician to be immediately procured!" I suggested.

"And no other guide than herself perhaps!" rejoined Alice, with a curl of her haughty lip. "Perhaps you may mistake me, Doctor Walbridge, and think I am now moved by that meanest of all the passions, petty jealousy," she pursued; "but, if I know myself, I can assert that such is not the case. I am vexed and annoyed at this occurrence, because it appears to have been deliberately planned for that purpose by one who, whatever the past may have been, I no longer regard as my friend. You know how matters stand between Ernest and myself, and therefore I speak freely. As my *friend*, Flora Sebastian might have gone with him to the ends of the earth and had my approval; but regarding her as I now do, after the events of last night, it is quite a different matter. As to jealousy, that, as I said before, is simply out of the question. Though the affianced of Ernest La Grange, as you both know, I would give him up, without a murmur, were I to be certain he preferred any human being to myself; but this affair, I confess, vexes and annoys me, even against my will."

"I have not yet told you what I intended, nor got your promise of silence and secrecy," said I, wishing both to change the subject and finish my communication, as the time had now arrived for me to take my leave, according to the instructions of the colonel.

"I am ready to hear you," she said.

I repeated what I had said to Cora. She reflected for a short time before making any reply.

"Do you think you have sufficient cause for requesting us to remain at home, unless accompanied by a strong escort?" she asked, looking me straight in the eye.

"I do."

"And you are not at liberty to tell us more?"

"I am not at present."

"Oh, then there is danger around us?" exclaimed Cora, beginning to grow alarmed.

"I will not say there is danger to you here — I trust there is not; but you know, Cora, there has been danger before this — that Alice was herself suddenly spirited away once — and to guard against the possibility of such a thing being repeated, is the object of my present caution."

"It is enough, my little sister," said Alice, "that Doctor Walbridge has sufficient cause for his request, and we should put faith enough in him to promise what he requires without attempting to penetrate his secret."

"I will do what you advise, Alice."

"Then consider the matter settled, doctor!"

"I thank you both," returned I; "and at the earliest moment that I find myself at liberty, I will give you good reasons for all I have said."

At this moment a servant appeared, to say that Colonel Brandon wished to see me in the library for a minute, and I took leave of the ladies at once and repaired thither.

"I do not like to hurry your departure, doctor," said the colonel, whom I found in company with his guests, slowly pacing up and down the room; "but, under the circumstances, I feel that every minute's delay may tend to jeopardize our cause."

"I am ready to leave, sir, and will at once order my horse."

"I have already ordered one of mine for you," replied the colonel, "for yours is too much fatigued, and it is possible you may want speed for your own safety, since that letter did not reach the persons for whom it was intended, and the villains may, in consequence of first orders, be gathered about us."

"Do these gentlemen know all?" I queried, glancing at the others.

"Yes," replied the colonel, "you can speak before them as if you were alone with me."

"Then may I ask if you are already prepared for an attack on your dwelling?"

"Why, you do not imagine that they are numerous enough and bold enough for such a design, do you?" said he, in a tone of surprise.

"I do not know — I have my fears. Remember your prisoner, whom they may wish to release; and remember yourself, who, as the captain of the Regulators, it may be most important to have in their power. I certainly think, knowing what we do, it would be very imprudent to attempt to pass the night unprepared for just such an event."

"You are right!" said the colonel; "you are right! and I will lose no time in acting upon your suggestion. Let me see what white force we can muster to-night! There are five of us here, without counting yourself, who of course are about to leave us; two sheriff's officers, who take turns in guarding the prisoner; my two overseers, and Stebbins and Reichstadt; eleven in all; a pretty strong garrison for a private dwelling, not to mention ten or fifteen negroes that I can trust with firearms. I thank you for the hint, doctor, and will have this matter attended to forthwith."

After some further conversation, I took my leave. The colonel accompanied me to the door, and purposely said, in a loud tone, as I mounted my horse:

"I hope you will give us another call before you leave the country!"

"Thank you — if I have time — good-bye!"

As I spurred my horse and dashed away, I heard the voice of Stebbins:

"Great ginger, doctor, you ain't agoing for good, be you?"

I did not stop to answer.

CHAPTER XVI.

NEW ADVENTURES.

THE night had become cloudy, with an east wind, threatening a storm, and in consequence was very dark. About half a mile from Colonel Brandon's, was a second narrow belt of wood; and while passing slowly through this, unable to see an inch before me, I felt the bridle rein suddenly grasped by a strong hand, and the horse borne backward, while a gruff voice exclaimed:

"Speak! and say who, and what, and whar from?"

It was a critical moment for me—undoubtedly I was already surrounded by outlaws—and if I would escape, there seemed but one way to do it. I acted upon the first instinctive idea of preservation, and slid quietly to the ground.

"Where's the lantern, Jim? Show a light here!" said another voice, that I had certainly heard before, and which I had every reason to suppose was Horset's.

The speaker was on the other side of the horse, and every thing depended upon my getting away before my absence should be discovered. I began to move away—I knew not in what direction—and in less than three paces ran against a man, who mistook me for his companion and called out:

"Look yere, Pete, what in blazes yer doing, running over a feller that way?"

"What's you a blowing about, Andy, when I arn't no whar anigh you?" responded a voice, that I supposed to belong to the first party named.

"Then it war you, Jake, hey?"

"No, I'm here."

"Who in——was it then?"

At this moment another voice called out:

"The stranger's got down and gone!"

"It war him then!" cried the one I had stumbled against: "and so foteh the light this yere way, quick!"

Meantime I had quietly pushed on into the wood and slipped past the whole of the gang, which I judged might number some ten or twelve. I now saw the glimmer of the light moving in the direction I had taken, with a figure or two flitting before it; but I already had so much the start as to be in little fear of capture. In fact they did not attempt to follow far, and I soon had the satisfaction of hearing them blaming one another for my escape.

But what was now to be done? I had of course lost my horse; and whether I were to go forward or back, it would have to be afoot. This in itself did not trouble me—for I could soon pass over the space of three miles to the La Grange mansion—but what would be done by these desperadoes meantime, or during the coming night? Ought I not to return to Colonel Brandon and tell of my adventure? He had half expected I might be seen by a reconnoitering party, and for that reason had fixed upon me to bear the message, instead of an overseer or negro, who he thought would be more likely to excite suspicion, as to their purpose; but notwithstanding this and the warning I had given him, would he be prepared for these ruffians, should they proceed at once to make an attack? The letter we had intercepted contained an order to wait for the signal of the leaders; but this they had not received, and of course could not be governed by it; while the very fact of the order itself, was pretty conclusive proof that an assault upon somebody had been in contemplation. Should I go forward or return, was now the question? Inclination would have led me back to the spot where my heart was; but duty seemed rather to urge me forward, to gather the power that would crush out these prowling ruffians. Colonel Brandon, with his white and black force, should, after so much warning, be prepared to defend himself, and, being a prudent, active, determined man, I had no

right to suppose he would neglect any precaution that my return could prompt him to. This being the case, I could best serve him by rousing up the country as soon as possible; and so I decided to push on to La Grange's with what speed I could.

Owing to the darkness of the night and the necessity for caution, it took me the best part of an hour to get clear of the wood and the ruffians and find my way into the road running between the two plantations; but after that I went forward with such celerity that in less than three-quarters of an hour I was at the mansion. All was dark and still — every one was abed. One door, however, was never locked when Ernest and myself were out, and through this I entered and went straight to his room. He was not there. I struck a light and looked around. From all appearances he had not yet returned. What did this mean? Had he found his patient too sick for him to leave her? or his guide too fascinating?

Suddenly there sprung up a dark suspicion! If I had been right in my late conjectures concerning Sebastian and his daughter, that he was a leader among the outlaws, and she an accomplice — that through his orders Alice Brandon had been captured for the benefit of Flora Sebastian — that both father and daughter were now preparing for some terrible blow — then the fact of the absence of Ernest La Grange at such a time and in such company might have a fearful meaning; and if anything was to be done to save him, and in fact the whole honest community, no time was to be lost.

The first thing I did, was to wake up an old and faithful servant, who gloried in the name of Pompey.

"Has not your young Master Ernest yet returned?" I asked.

"No, bress der Lord!" returned the old negro, who was quite a character in his way, claimed to be something of a preacher, and seldom failed to bless the Lord for everything,

good or bad; and even as he spoke he rubbed open his eyes and fetched a heavy yawn.

"You are sure he has not been home this evening, Pompey?"

"Jes' as sure as we am of anyt'ing in dis yere subnuluary worl', sar, bress de Lord!" replied the black. "If he'd er come, I'd er seed um; and ef I'd seed um, I'd er knowed um was yere, bress der Lord! But didn't him come with you'sef?"

"No, he is not with me, and I am afraid something has happened to him!"

"Bress der Lord!" cried Pompey, starting to his feet in alarm; "what you 'spects got him, sar? a painter, or iny kine o' beasts?"

"No, you do not understand me," pursued I, fearing I had been a little too imprudent in my remark. "I mean to say I fear something has happened to detain him at Captain Sebastian's, where I left him. Is your master, Mr. La Grange, asleep?"

"'Spects he am, sar!"

"I wish you would wake him then, and tell him I have something important to communicate to him immediately."

"Yes, sar!" returned Pompey, with a hesitating air, and looking inquiringly at me; "'spects as how I wouldn't do, sar?"

"No, I must see Mr. La Grange himself at once."

"Bress der Lord! den he's be call right now, sar!" and slipping on an old garment, he hurried away to do his errand.

A few minutes later I was closeted with Mr. La Grange in his library. He had heard of the murder of Edward Mason, the capture of the Spaniard, and the verdict of the coroner's jury, but he had not seen Ernest since he and I left home together the evening before. I then related what I had since discovered, together with the suspicions of Colonel Brandon and myself, and he began to grow excited.

"A new light breaks in on me," he exclaimed, "and I begin to see more clearly. Looking back over the past years, I think I can, in this view, see the explanation of some mysterious things—see how, among others, certain notorious desperadoes were made to elude us when we believed we had them completely in our power. Yes! yes! yes! no wonder Sebastian was so eager for your life, if all these suspicions be correct! Where did you say you left Ernest?"

"Miss Flora Sebastian took him away, ostensibly to visit an old sick woman; but the fact that he has not returned home, begins to awaken my fears that something has gone wrong."

"It is an alarming state of affairs at all events!" said Mr. La Grange, becoming much agitated. "Brandon's house surrounded! you seized upon and robbed of your horse, and yourself escaping almost by a miracle! They may be here next—we do not know where! Joe Horset is one of them, and he may forget that I was a better friend to him than others, and seek to destroy me and my family! There is no time to be lost; the country must be roused at once; the Regulators must be got together as soon as possible! Oh, that my son were here! I tremble for fear he has already met with foul play!"

"I think nothing so bad as that," said I. "Flora is in love with him, and her design would hardly extend beyond making him a captive—if possible, a willing captive."

"But he may have set out for home, and fallen into the hands of the cutthroats!"

"At least I will go and seek him!" said I.

"Oh, will you?" he cried, grasping my hand.

"I will at once—only furnish me with a horse."

"I will give orders to have three got ready forthwith, and you shall take a couple of armed servants with you."

"But some one must start off to rouse up the country, Mr. La Grange!"

"I will myself go in one direction, and my two overseers shall each take another."

"But can they be trusted?" said I, placing my hand on his arm to detain him as he was about to hurry out of the library.

"Ha! what do you mean, Doctor Walbridge? do you know anything against them?"

"No, not I—except that they are not educated gentlemen of known probity, and may be tools of the enemy, and this is a time to distrust everybody but our bosom friends."

"So it is! so it is!" he assented, with a gloomy shake of the head. "They may be false, the same as Horset was—I will not trust them. Oh, this is a sad state of affairs!" he went on; "a sad state indeed! to find ourselves surrounded by ruffians ready to cut our throats, and afraid to call upon our dependents for protection, and at the same time suspicious of our neighbors! It was bad enough before, when, as I believed, we were all working together for one object—the extermination of the banded villains; but how much worse now, since we have discovered treachery in our own camp and know not whom to suspect or put faith in! Perhaps our negroes have been tampered with—Heaven knows—and may be intending to rise with the signal and murder their masters, as has been done elsewhere before this! Would to God Ernest were here!"

"I will go and seek him at once."

"You may not find him, and be entrapped yourself, and then there will be another friend gone!" almost groaned Mr. La Grange. "Well! well! perhaps it is the best that can be done! It may excite less suspicion for you to go than for me."

"It undoubtedly will," I replied.

"Then I will set off myself to alarm the country!" he pursued. "I can do much between this and to-morrow morning, even alone."

He turned and went to the door, and then suddenly came back and took hold of my arm.

"Doctor Walbridge," he said, with a shudder, "it is a fearful thought that my own negroes may even now be prepared to rise upon me! and how do I know, if I go away, that I shall ever return? or that I shall find my house standing and family alive if I do?"

"I do not apprehend a rise of the negroes," said I; "I think all our trouble will come from white men."

"Stop! let me call in Pompey! If there is any plot afoot among the blacks, he will know it; and if he knows it, I will frighten it out of him!"

"It may be prudent to try the experiment," said I.

He went to the door and called the black. As the latter came in, we both fixed our eyes searchingly upon him; but I failed to detect any sign indicating a suspicion of our purpose, or secret knowledge of guilt.

"Pompey," said his master, in a stern tone, looking the black straight in the eye, "we know all."

"Bress der Lord for dat yar!" returned the negro, with an innocent stare.

"Now if you want to live to see the sun rise to-morrow, you must confess all at once!"

"What Ise 'fess, marser?" inquired the black, in evident astonishment.

"All that those white rascals told you about murdering your master's family, and getting your liberty!"

"Bress der Lord, marser," cried Pompey, rolling up his eyes, and looking from one to the other in perfect amazement, "Ise does n't know not nuffin whatsoever!"

"Have a care now! for if I catch you in a lie, I shall kill you as I would a mad dog!" pursued Mr. La Grange, in a stern, determined tone, and with a look of savage fierceness, such as the black had probably never seen before. "Confess now, I say, while you have time! tell me all before it be too late!"

He unlocked a closet and took out a rifle; and Pompey fell down on his knees, held up his hands imploringly, and in terror begged for his life.

"Bress der Lord A'mighty," he groaned, in conclusion, "I doesn't know not nuffin so much as one ob dem yar two y'ar ole calfs!"

"You remember Joe Horset, Pompey?"

"Yes, sar, I does — bress der Lord!"

"You know he tampered with the negroes, and got some of them to run away, and was afterward tried by the Regulators and publicly whipped for it?"

"Yes, sar, I knows dem."

"Well, he has been about here again, trying to do the same thing over again."

"Bress der Lord, sar! you 'stonish dis yar chile amazin'!"

"Do I indeed?" said La Grange, looking him searchingly in the eye.

"You does, sar!" returned Pompey, with a very earnest, innocent look.

"Do you pretend to tell me you have not seen him?"

"Neber, sar!"

"Nor heard of his being among the field-hands?"

"Neber, sar!"

"Nor any other white man?"

"Declar' I hasn't, on der Bible what I's preach from, bress der Lord, sar!"

Mr. La Grange looked at the frightened black steadily for some half a minute, and then turned to me and asked me what I thought.

"That Pompey has told you the truth!" I promptly replied.

"I think so too!" he rejoined. "Now, Pompey, you can go; but hark you, boy! not a word of this to a living soul!"

"Bress der Lord, sar, it am all forgot now!" returned the black, as he rose from his kneeling posture, with an expres-

sion of happy relief, and shuffled out of the room with unusual haste.

Mr. La Grange now appeared to be satisfied that he had nothing to fear from his negroes, and we proceeded to discuss the main question and decide upon our line of action. It was finally settled, as before suggested, that I should take two armed servants and ride over to Captain Sebastian's in quest of Ernest, and that with two more Mr. La Grange himself should proceed to the village of —, about five miles distant in another direction, where he would be able to get twenty men to horse in less than an hour after his arrival, and with their exertions it was hoped that some fifty at least might be collected at Colonel Brandon's by daylight on the following morning.

As soon as possible after settling upon our line of action, I was on my way to what I believed to be the lion's den. The night was so very dark, as I have said before, that under the trees nothing whatever could be seen, and upon the open road it was but little better. The negroes sent with me, were a couple of trusty fellows, employed about the house and garden, who had frequently been out on night-hunts, and had been taught to use firearms, though only permitted to use them at certain times and under certain restrictions. Each was now armed with a carbine and a large knife; and I reflected that, if they had been tampered with by the plotting villains, I might perhaps have as much to risk from them as from any of the parties I was trying to guard against. I knew them well, however, had become much attached to them during my sojourn at the mansion, and, to say the truth, did not fear them in the least. I had reason to believe they liked me and almost worshipped their young master. They had been called from their beds and told to go with me to Captain Sebastian's, without any explanation being given for so singular an order at such a time of night, and they had obediently started, without a moment's

hesitation or a word of grumbling. That it was necessary to keep them in ignorance of everything, I did not believe; and so I proceeded to state, that, as their young master had not come home, it was feared he had met with some accident, and we were now going to Captain Sebastian's to see if we could get any news of him. At this they both expressed much alarm and grief. I further told them that I had heard there were bad men abroad, with the design of murdering the whites, and carrying off the blacks to sell them to cruel masters, and so they must keep themselves very quiet and be constantly on the watch for danger. This they promised, and without showing any of that craven fear which so many persons have unjustly declared to be a prominent trait of the colored race. Since then I have seen both whites and blacks in some very trying situations, and have seen heroes and cowards among both races.

Some quarter of a mile from the dwelling of Captain Sebastian, was a small grove of trees; and here I halted my colored guides, telling them I would go forward alone.

"Remain here, boys," I said, "till I return, and keep yourselves so quiet as not to attract the attention of any one abroad! If I meet with no trouble, I shall be back here before daylight; but if you should not see me by that time, ride home as fast as your horses can take you, and tell your master that something alarming has happened to me. If, in the meantime, however, you hear this peculiar whistle (and I made the sound in a low tone), then come to my assistance as quick as you can!"

"I shouldn't 'spect dar 'ud be much danger at Captain Sebastian's house!" said one of the blacks, called Tom.

"There ought not to be, of course, and probably will not be; but I thought it just as well to tell you and Pete what to do in case of accident."

"Yes, sar — much obleeged, Marsar Walbridge — we 'll does jes' what you says, sar!"

"I have half a notion to leave my horse here with you."

"Maybe as somebody 'd t'ink dat was strange, sar!" suggested Pete.

"You are right—I will ride. Remember my instructions! Now then to find the rest of my way in this worse than Egyptian darkness!" I muttered, as I started my horse forward, though with something of fear that I might get lost in the little distance I had to go to reach the dwelling I was seeking.

I have once or twice before mentioned the darkness of the night. After getting out of the wood where I had lost Colonel Brandon's horse to the desperadoes, I had succeeded, being afoot, in finding my way to Mr. La Grange's without much difficulty; and from Mr. La Grange's, thus far, the negroes had been my guides, and had gone steadily forward, much to my surprise and satisfaction; for I do not believe that, on horseback and alone, I could have found my way that night, more especially since I had missed it in the broad light of day. I do not know that they could see any better than myself; but they were certainly more familiar with the route, and their instinct, so to speak, was superior to mine in getting correctly over ground of which I could not perceive a single trace.

The wind had been blowing from the east, and becoming more damp every hour, and now a fine, mist-like rain was just beginning to set in, and I felt certain it was the commencement of a long, disagreeable storm. It was not cold, however, and I was fain to fancy it might be for our benefit, by preventing the desperadoes from carrying out their designs as soon as they otherwise would.

I had not ridden a dozen paces by myself, before I found it would be impossible for me to guide my beast and continue on his back; and not being sure that he would keep the road if I were to give him the rein, I dismounted and led him, actually feeling my way forward.

As I drew near the mansion, several dogs began to bark; and the sounds, while they satisfied me that I was upon the right course, also assisted me in keeping it.

Shortly after this I saw the glimmer of a light, which, though at first I felt to be quite cheering, soon began to make me feel quite uneasy. It was past midnight; and why, if all were as I could wish, should any one be astir at that hour? True, there might be a thousand harmless reasons for it—but I was just in a condition to imagine the worst. That my friend had been taken sick was one fear; but that Sebastian was closeted with some one or more of the freebooters, was another and greater. The intercepted letter, which had been written by Blake, stated that he was going to consult with Guido; and if Guido and Sebastian were one, as I had reason to believe, then Blake might already be here; and if here, it might not be the safest and most agreeable thing in the world for me to meet him. I had never seen him, to know him; but he had a peculiar voice, and that voice I was certain I should recognize whenever I should hear it again. Perhaps he would know me and perhaps not; but if Captain Sebastian were his friend, he would be certain to tell him that I was the man who had thwarted his plot against Miss Brandon, and then the chances were that I should find myself in trouble.

With these things passing through my mind, I secured my horse to a tree and went forward to the house, which I could barely see, when close upon it, as a darker shadow. I groped around and found the door, and then hesitated about knocking.

While standing thus for a minute undecided, with the wind blowing sharply and the rain beginning to make me feel uncomfortable, I was startled by the touch of a hand. Instinctively I shrunk back and drew one of my pistols; but was greatly relieved the next moment, though a good deal surprised, at hearing the well known voice of Caleb

Stebbins, who demanded, in a tone of some considerable trepidation:

"I say you, who be you?"

"Doctor Walbridge," I answered, in a low, guarded tone. "But hush! not another word here! Let me speak with you aside! Give me your hand!"

We felt out each other, and then walked away some distance from the dwelling.

"Now then," resumed I, "tell me what you are doing here? but guard your voice as much as possible."

"Why, what you afeard on, doctor?"

"There may be listeners."

"Guess not—for who in thunder'd want tu stand out in this 'ere rain tu hear us, even if they knowed we was here? And what 'ud they hear if they did? We aint thieves, I guess. But I say you—you haint left us for good, have you, now? I didn't know you was a-going so soon, till I heerd the colonel hope as how you might call agin afore you left the country. 'Twa'nt right, doctor, for you tu put off that are way from an old friend like me, without saying good-bye—I snum tu Guinea, it wa'n't—that's a fact."

"Of course I intended to see you and Peter again before quitting the country."

"And somebody else, tew, I guess, doctor—hey?—somebody whose fust letter of her name begins with Cora—hey?" laughed Caleb.

"Well, perhaps so. But now tell me why you have come here to-night?"

"Why, the colonel sent me; and it's ben jest the derndest, disagreeablest job I ever done in my life. I've come all the way alone tew. I wanted tu bring Peter along; but the colonel he wouldn't agree; he said he wanted me tu come alone; and when I kicked agin it, he up and axed me if I's afeard. That are fetched up the Stebbins blood, I tell you; and then I'd a come alone, if I'd a died for it! But, I say—how'd you git here? Did he send you tew?"

"No; I came over from Mr. La Grange's, to see about my friend, who, from some cause, had not returned. I suppose no attack had been made on Colonel Brandon's house when you left?"

"Attack?" exclaimed Caleb; "great ginger! what d' you mean?"

I understood at once, by his tone of surprise, that, for his own reasons, the colonel had not told him anything, and I now turned the matter off with a laugh, as a mere joke of my own. If he knew nothing, of course he could tell nothing, and in that respect would be just the messenger to send to Captain Sebastian, who, if suspicious of being entrapped, would probably be sharp and shrewd enough to get out of Caleb all he knew.

"How did you find your way here on so dark a night?" I asked.

"Wal, I took along a lantern; but the candle gin out about half a mile back here, and arter that I had the derndest time ever you see! I'll bet I've ben nigh tew hours sence then finding this 'ere house!"

"Are you afoot?"

"No, I've got a hoss out here, hitched tu so'thing, somewhere."

"Well, why did the colonel send you at this time of night? Your business here must be very important!"

"I don' know what it is. I've got a letter for Captain Sebastian—so'thing about that are Spaniard, I guess. I wouldn't wonder if he's agoing tu make a die on't, from what I've hearn tell."

"Then you have no personal message to Sebastian? only a letter?"

"That's all."

"Now, as a great favor, Mr. Stebbins, will you please not to mention having seen me since the coroner's inquest, say nothing of my having been back to Colonel Brandon's, and,

when we meet again in the house here, just speak to me as if for the first time for the last day or two! I have a purpose in this, which concerns us both, and as soon as I can I will tell you all about it. Do you understand?"

"All right — I'm your man — mum's the word!"

"Now, then, go in and do your business — perhaps you will find the captain up — and I will soon follow. Not a word of me though, remember!"

We groped our way back to the door, and Caleb rapped loudly.

CHAPTER XVII.

IN THE LION'S DEN.

A LOUD knock, or ring, in the dead hours of night, is always a startling thing to a sleeping household, for it may mean danger, sickness, or death, and seldom fails to be for something pressing and important.

All were not asleep, however, on that eventful night, in the dwelling of Captain Sebastian — for scarcely had the echoes of Caleb's thundering knocks ceased sounding, when a window was suddenly thrown up, and the sharp voice of the captain himself demanded:

"Who is there?"

"It's me," replied Caleb, with a kind of innocent simplicity.

"And who in — is me?" was again the sharp demand.

"Why, Caleb Stebbins, of course."

"I am no wiser now than I was before."

"Great ginger! why, don't you know me? Jehoshaphat! Wal, I snum! Why, I'm one of them are chaps that you — if you're Captain Sebastian, and I 'spect you be,

from the sound of your voice, for I can a'most al'ays tell a feller by his voice — I'm one of them are chaps, I say, you was once a-going tu put tu death, and who's ben a living at Colonel Brandon's ever sence."

"Oh, yes, the Yankee — I know you now. Well, sir, as this is a rather unseasonable hour and night to be abroad in, on a mere friendly visit or pleasure excursion, will you do me the favor to state your business?"

"I've got a letter for you, that's all; and if I stand out here much longer, in this 'ere rain, I guess it'll get wet all through — leastways I know I shall."

"Certainly a pretty good hint to be asked inside!" returned the captain, in a tone which seemed to indicate that he was more amused than angry. "All in due order, my friend. These are times when we have to be cautious — for I understand there are a great many bad men prowling about, and one scarcely knows whom to trust."

"Jerusalem!" exclaimed Caleb; "d'you 'spect there's any about here neow?"

"There may be, for all I know to the contrary."

"You don't 'spect I'm one, du you?"

"Hardly. But who is your letter from?"

"Guess mebbe if you 'd read it you 'd be able tu tell."

"Who sent it?"

"Colonel Brandon sent me with it; but I don't know whether it's from him, or that are dern scamp of a Spaniard they've got there."

"Are you alone?"

"Wal, I guess I don't happen tu see nobody round."

"Wait, and I will let you in."

I heard the window close, and then I fancied I could detect low voices speaking inside.

"Remember, Stebbins, not to mention having seen me, as you value your life!" I whispered, taking hold of his arm to impress it more particularly upon him. "Take notice of

every thing and person you see, and be in no hurry to get away. I shall soon be with you."

"I won't forget, doctor—all right."

I now heard steps approaching within, and I glided away, alongside of the house, lest a ray of light should stream out upon me at the opening of the door. When the door was at length opened, it was a strange voice that bade Caleb Stebbins enter.

After that I heard nothing more, except the roar of the storm, which gradually increased in fury, till I sounded the knocker myself, some fifteen minutes later. Again the window was raised, and the voice of Sebastian demanded:

"Who is there?"

"Leslie Walbridge, at your service, captain."

"Ha, doctor, is it you?"

"Unfortunately for myself it is."

"Are you alone?"

"Quite."

"Excuse me one question more while I keep you waiting: do you bring me any alarming intelligence that you are here at this hour?"

"No, I have merely come to inquire about my friend, Ernest La Grange."

"Ha! yes! wait a moment!"

The window closed, and shortly after the door opened slightly, and the same voice that had spoken to Caleb, invited me to enter also.

I was conducted at once to the apartment in the second story from which I had first seen the glimmer of light. It was a small, square room, neatly furnished, something between a sitting-room and library. On a round table, surrounded by a few books, loose papers, and writing materials, stood a large, globe lamp, giving out a clear, soft light. There were a couple of sofas in the room, some three or four easy chairs, and a number of pictures around the walls. Cap-

tain Sebastian, in dressing-gown and slippers, was carelessly seated before a genial fire, which had been kindled in a small fire-place, probably to drive away the night-damps, for the weather was not really cold.

I was surprised to find no other person in the room—not even Stebbins, who I knew had not left the house. Perhaps the captain fancied I was surprised, for he certainly eyed me keenly, if not suspiciously, as he rose and shook hands with me, and placed a seat for me before the cheerful blaze.

"A disagreeable storm has set in, and you are quite wet, doctor," he said; "pray sit down and dry yourself. Fortunately I can offer you the unusual luxury for the season of a pleasant fire, for I have been sitting up late, attending to some business matters, and did not like the damp, chilly feel of the air. I think you said you were alone?"

"Yes, and I must crave pardon for paying you so unseasonable a visit; but the fact is, my friend Ernest not having returned home as expected, and his father having become uneasy at his absence, I have come over to make some inquiries about him."

"Really," he answered, with a look in keeping with the words, "you half alarm me! for I have neither seen nor heard of him since he rode out with my daughter Flora."

"And has she not returned?"

"Not to my knowledge. I will be sure, however."

He turned to the table and rung a small bell; and the servant—a well-dressed, good-looking mulatto—the same who had admitted me—immediately answered it.

"Miss Flora, where is she? has she come home?" he demanded.

"No, sir, she's not come yet, sir!" was the answer, in a tone and accent very little like the ordinary negroes.

"Is it not strange, Henry? ought she not to be here now?"

Was it fancy on my part, or was there really a significant

glance exchanged between master and slave? I was not sure; but I could not help thinking they understood each other very well.

"I don't reckon there's anything to alarm, sir!" replied Henry; "for she rid out with Doctor La Grange, to see old Mrs. Blodget, who got took sudden, and she might not think it best to come away to-night."

"Who is this Mrs. Blodget?" I inquired.

"I know her very well," answered Captain Sebastian; "a poor widow woman, whose husband died last spring. She lives in a cabin, on a piece of land I gave her, about four or five miles from here. If Ernest and Flora have gone to her house, we have nothing to fear; for if Flora found her very sick, she has probably remained to nurse her. Dear heart! she is very charitable."

"At least I know they said they were going to visit some old woman about that distance away from here," returned I, "and it is a great relief to me to find you think they have met with no misfortune. The fact of my returning alone, and Ernest not making his appearance at all, at last caused his father so much uneasiness, that I volunteered to ride over here and endeavor to ascertain the cause of his absence."

"Well, you are satisfied now?"

"As well as I can be without seeing him."

"Flora will hardly run away with him!" said the captain, with a laugh that I did not like.

"I did not fear that," I rejoined; "but I thought it possible he might have met with some accident on his way home."

Where was Caleb Stebbins all this time? I had expected to meet him here; but of course I could not say so — could not inquire about him — for that would make known the fact that we had met, and might excite some troublesome suspicions. Had he delivered his letter? and what did that letter contain? I knew it was the wish of Colonel Brandon to lure

Captain Sebastian to his house, and there arrest him. But would he succeed? Might not the scheming captain know more than we supposed, and outwit us? Was there a design against Ernest? would there be one against me? I began to feel uneasy.

"By-the-by, when did you see Colonel Brandon last?" he asked, as if the question had come up without reflection, and was merely put for something to say; but I noticed that his keen, black eyes were fixed very searchingly upon my face.

"Not since yesterday," I answered boldly, though I felt at the time that I was blushing.

I had told the literal truth — for it was then past midnight — but I knew I had not answered the question according to the meaning of the interrogator; and I was almost certain he would see it in my face, which perhaps he did. I was hoping he would let the matter drop, but he did not.

"I remember," he pursued, "you left him here yesterday. You have not seen him since then, you mean?"

His eyes were searching me; I saw he had a motive for his question; but I would not tell a direct falsehood.

"If I were under oath, perhaps I should not say I had not seen him since I met him here," I replied. "But why do you ask? have you a particular motive for the question?"

"I asked," he replied, with a shrug, "because I happened to think of it; but you seem to have a motive for not answering."

"Then, sir, to make as few words of the matter as possible, I will say I *have* seen him since I was here."

"And you had some conversation about me?"

"Well, suppose we had?"

"You would not like to repeat that conversation to me, perhaps?"

"I know no good reason why I should."

"But several why you should not?"

"I did not say that."

"I did."

"To what is all this tending, Captain Sebastian?" I inquired, feeling almost certain his suspicions were aroused, and that he really knew more than he was disposed to declare.

"It tends to this," he replied, with a peculiar look, "that I think you have some design in this visit, at this hour, which you have not disclosed to me."

"I can honestly say, Captain Sebastian," I quietly rejoined, "that my sole object in coming here to-night was to learn what has become of Ernest La Grange."

"I have told you all I know."

"Then I believe I have no further business here, and will not longer trespass upon your time," I said, rising and preparing to take my leave.

"Do not be in haste!" he returned, with an expression I did not like. "Pray sit down again, doctor! I wish to ask you a few more questions."

"You will oblige me then by being as brief as possible!" said I, still keeping my standing position; "for it is my intention to return forthwith and acquaint Mr. La Grange with what I have heard, hoping it may relieve his mind of all fear for his son's safety."

"When did you last see your travelling companion, the inquisitive Yankee, who has of late been sojourning at Colonel Brandon's?"

"I have not seen him since I was here yesterday," I replied.

In this I told the truth; for I had not *seen* him — though I had *spoken* to him — the night being too dark for sight.

He looked at me searchingly, as he rejoined:

"Perhaps you will be surprised then to learn he has been here to-night!"

"I cannot say I am overwhelmed with astonishment at the fact, if fact it be, since I know no reason why he might not have come if so disposed!" I answered, with a sort of

careless irony. "He is certainly big enough to come, and come alone at that."

"Yes, he has been here, and brought me a rather curious letter!" said the captain, still eyeing me sharply.

"Indeed! Well, sir, does the letter concern me?"

"Perhaps you may be concerned in the letter — it is that I wish to find out."

"Well, sir, let me see the letter, and then perhaps I can tell you whether I am or not. At least I can say this, to begin with, that I have had no hand in writing any letter, and did not know that any was going to be sent to you to-night."

"You are sure on that point?"

"Quite, sir!"

"The letter is from your friend, the Spaniard, Diego Gomez."

"My friend?" exclaimed I. "Why do you call him *my* friend? Do you wish to insult me?"

"Oh, then you are not *friends*, eh?" returned Sebastian, with a kind of devilish smile. "Excuse me! I had forgot."

"From some cause, sir," I said, rather sternly, "you seem disposed to be facetious at my expense! I do not altogether understand you! I trust you are not seeking to quarrel with me again?"

"It would be a sorry business for you, Doctor Walbridge, if I *should* quarrel with you again!" rejoined the captain, in a cool, half-insolent manner. "Although, for reasons unnecessary to mention now, I sent you a written apology yesterday, I have not *forgotten* the fact that you put a very serious stigma upon me, in the presence of a large crowd, on the night of the tragedy!"

"And did I not return you a written apology in answer to yours?"

"But did that clear me of suspicion in the minds of my enemies?"

"It is not in my power to help that now, sir."

"I know it, and therefore the stigma remains."

"But if not true, why should you fear it?"

"If not true indeed!" he sneered. "Why, you speak as if you thought it *might be true*, after all!"

"I see you are disposed to catch up every inadvertent word of mine, and put the worst construction on it!" said I, with a conviction that matters were rapidly approaching a crisis.

I began to feel that I was really in the lion's den—perhaps completely in the power of a man wicked enough for any deed; and, though resolved to be bold and firm, I could not but wish myself safely out of the dwelling—a free man in the dark and driving storm.

"To come back to the letter!" said Sebastian, without replying to my last remark. "It is from the prisoner, Diego Gomez, and was sent over here to-night, at this late hour, by Colonel Brandon."

"At this late hour, say you? Then the messenger has just come?"

"He only preceded you a few minutes."

"Where is he now, then?"

"Perhaps he has gone back—perhaps gone to bed—perhaps he is taking some refreshments in another apartment! I cannot see what that has to do with the matter in question."

"Only that if Mr. Stebbins is here, I should like to see him."

"Well, perhaps you may be gratified before you leave," returned the captain, with another devilish smile. "But to the point. This letter, I say, is from Diego Gomez—at least it purports to be, and has his name signed at the bottom. In it he says that he believes himself to be dying—that the surgeon has declared he cannot live many hours—that he desires to see me before he goes his long journey;

and he requests me to come to him with all speed, this very night—threatening, if I fail to be with him by daylight, to disclose something that will get me into trouble. Now then, Doctor Walbridge," pursued the captain, with his keen, black eyes searching my very soul, "as I am an honest man myself, living in a tolerably honest community, having no fear of the law nor my fellow man, I do not see why I should leave my comfortable quarters on a night like this, to go a disagreeable journey, to please any dying scoundrel, and more especially under the spur of a threat! What do you think about it?"

"I think you should judge and decide for yourself—it is no affair of mine."

"Why does Colonel Brandon want me to come to his house to-night?"

"Does he want you to come?"

"Why else has he sent for me?"

"He may have felt it to be his duty to send to you in all haste the message of a dying man."

"But is he dying, doctor?"

"I know nothing about it beyond what you have told me."

"Did not Colonel Brandon say anything to you about it when you last saw him?"

"He did not."

"Did he not mention that he would like to see me?"

"He might have done that."

"But said nothing about the dying of Gomez?"

"Nothing."

"Then you see, doctor, from your own mouth I establish this important fact: that Colonel Brandon desired to see me before he knew this man to be dying; and yet the only request for my presence there, comes from the latter: this, to say the least, looks suspicious."

"What then do you suspect?" asked I.

"What do you suppose?"

"How should I know?"

"You certainly come from a region where people are said to be good at guessing, and so you ought to be able to guess. But sit down, doctor — sit down!"

"I thank you — I must be going."

"Nay, I insist! Pray, oblige me!"

I took the proffered seat; and Sebastian, turning full upon me, continued:

"What good fortune sent you here to-night, doctor? Would you believe it, I had been wishing for this very thing just before you came; and when I heard your voice below, I could hardly credit my senses!"

"Why, Captain Sebastian, this is strange language!" I returned, in surprise, and at a loss to know what he meant.

"Yes, I wanted to see you so much — to ask you some important questions!" he smiled — that smile that was so glitteringly cold and wicked — that smile that seemed so much more to be feared than a frown.

"Proceed then!" said I, with a feeling of more uneasiness and alarm than I should have been willing to confess to him.

"Yes," he pursued, "I am almost certain you can give me information that no other can, or at least that no other will. But first to see that we have no listeners!"

He rose, as if to approach the door; but, being the nearest to it, I sprang up, and, before he could detain me, threw it open.

I started at seeing the mulatto standing before it, and, just behind him, a short, stout, thick-set white man, with a full, bronzed face, heavy whiskers and eyebrows, and dressed in a rough, careless manner.

"I beg pardon, sir! I was just agoing to knock, sir!" said Henry, the mulatto. "Master, here's a gentleman wants to see you!"

"Walk in, sir!" said the captain, politely. "Ha! Mr.

Moncton," he pursued, meeting the new-comer near the door, "I am glad to see you! this is quite an unexpected pleasure. Dr. Walbridge, Mr. Moncton!"

"Happy to know you, sir!" said Mr. Moncton, in a half-polite, off-hand manner.

I started, with a strange thrill; the voice was peculiar, and I recognized it; it was the voice of Blake, one of the leaders of the desperadoes!

CHAPTER XVIII.

ESCAPING THE TOILS.

IN my mind there was no longer any doubt. This man Moncton was Blake, and Sebastian was Guido. Captain and lieutenant had met, and I was in their power.

As there had been no knocking since my entrance, I had the right to infer that Moncton was in the dwelling before me, and that this meeting between him and the host was a piece of preconcerted acting to deceive me. The intercepted letter had stated that the writer was about to visit the chief; the writer, as I knew from Cato, was Blake; and Blake, or somebody who had his voice, was here. I had suspected that Blake might be here when I first saw the light; and if so in fact, then there had been a little plot arranged against me between the time of my knocking and being admitted.

But a plot of what kind? Did it involve liberty, or life, or both? If these were the men I believed them to be, they were bold, reckless villains, who would stop at no crime necessary to their own preservation. The whole course of conduct, manner, and conversation of Captain Sebastian, since my entrance, tended to convince me that he was not

only the chief of the bandits, but that he believed both Colonel Brandon and myself either suspected or had proof of his being so. Perhaps his design now was to seize and murder me at once.

What had become of Stebbins? why had he been removed? and why were this Moncton and the mulatto waiting at the door when I so suddenly threw it open? and why had the captain suspected he might have listeners, unless he knew they were there, and intended thus to bring them in upon me?

These were startling thoughts that flashed through my brain in a moment, and I glanced quickly around to see what chance there was for me to escape in case my worst fears should be confirmed. There seemed little hope, except through the window, and only there unless I should burst out at the first leap. The room was in the second story, and, with perfect success in the attempt to plunge through the sash, the fall might break my limbs or neck, and yet any risk was better than being murdered where I was.

Captain Sebastian had risen at the same time with myself, and was now standing before the fire; and Moncton, having entered and closed the door, now stood with his back against it—not as if purposely to prevent my egress—but rather as if waiting to see what might next be required of him.

I did not like his look, believing, as I did, that he was the man I had once foiled. It was not that it was so very villanous, but rather so determined. I had seen worse faces in respectable society; it was not fiendish; it was not unusually vindictive; a piteous appeal, under certain circumstances, might reach his heart much quicker than that of his master; his nature was more open, more candid, and less deceitful than Sebastian's; but there was a certain quickness of decision, energy of action, and fixedness of purpose, expressed in the whole countenance, which warned me that in him might be found a very formidable and dangerous antag-

onist. He did not look fiercely at me, nor yet in a very friendly manner; but rather like one who was preparing himself to be governed by what should follow—something as an officer of justice might be supposed to look at a criminal he had just taken into custody.

"Come, doctor," said Captain Sebastian, in an easy, careless tone, "take a seat. I am not afraid to talk before my friend here. Come, Moncton, sit down."

"After the doctor!" nodded Moncton, with a peculiar look.

"Oh, never mind ceremony, gentlemen."

"Thank you," I answered, politely but firmly, "I have no further time to sit to-night. I must be going!"

"Not in this storm?" said Sebastian, with a peculiar glance at Moncton, who still remained with his back against the door.

"Yes, sir, even in this storm!" I answered, taking occasion to work up, with the hand furthest from the two men, the butts of my pistols, so that I could quickly bring them into use in case of necessity.

"I have not yet done with my questions," said the captain.

"Then suppose you defer them till we meet again!"

"No, I prefer to put them now."

"Sir," said I, in a tone there was no need of mistaking, "I came here in good faith, to see about my friend, Ernest La Grange, and, unless detained by force, I shall leave now!"

"You will hardly leave before we learn something about the negro you carried off—eh! Moncton?"

"What negro?" said I, not certain the captain did not refer to Sam, who, it will be remembered, I took away from the ferry at the bayou.

"What is his name, Moncton?"

"Cato," he replied, looking at me in a peculiar way.

I understood it all now. Not only were all my previous conjectures concerning these men confirmed, but they in turn knew more than I had suspected of my own doings. Somebody had certainly seen me carrying off Cato, and they must of course know that the letter intended for Horset had fallen into the hands of Colonel Brandon; and consequently Captain Sebastian would have good reason for mistrusting the letter he had received, and the motive of the chief of the Regulators in sending it to him in such haste.

But what was my proper course now? Comprehending everything in an instant, I knew the danger in which I stood, and the little time that would be left me for action. I was in the toils, and how could I break through them? These men certainly had a design on my liberty, if not my life; and in another minute, or less time, I might be beyond the power of resistance. I felt my situation to be desperate; and thought, at such a crisis so rapid in its scope, embraced many things in the twinkling of an eye. One impulse was to draw my pistols and shoot down the two men before me; another, to try the window for escape. I chose the latter; and with a couple of bounds, before either of my foes had time to comprehend my purpose, much less to take measures against it, I had thrown my whole weight against the sash. It gave way, with a tremendous crash of snapping wood and jingling glass, and I went through it, out into the night and storm, down, down, till I struck heavily upon the earth below, half-stunned and bewildered, and much cut and bruised.

"Quick! quick! follow him! don't let him escape!" I now heard shouted in the voice of Sebastian.

I had not lost my presence of mind, and I knew that my life depended upon my escape in the darkness. Exerting all my physical powers, I now got upon my feet, with my head reeling and a sick feeling in my stomach. I might be internally injured, but I thanked God that no bones were broken;

and I began to stagger away, running as fast as I could into the black storm, I knew not in what direction, urged on by the noise behind me.

Soon my foot struck against some object, and I fell heavily. My sickness and faintness now increased to such a degree that I felt it would be useless to attempt a further flight at the time, and I remained where I was, praying Heaven I might not be discovered.

I heard Sebastian and Moncton, alias Blake, in their search for me, cursing and swearing.

"The — scoundrel has got away again!" cried Sebastian.

"He's got the nine lives of the cat, by —!" growled Blake.

"We must have him at any cost! Here, Henry, quick! light three or four lanterns, and start out all the boys in the house, and let loose a couple of the bloodhounds! Stir yourself now! But hark you! first look in the — Yankee!"

"Great ginger! not as you knows on, mister!" I heard shouted back, in the voice of Caleb Stebbins; and, sick and bruised as I was, my heart beat fast with the hope that the honest fellow might be able to make his escape and tell the tale, even should I fail to do so.

"Seize him! seize him, Henry!" was shouted to the negro.

"I've got him, master — I've got him!" was replied. "Here! here! quick! quick!"

"Let go, darkey, or I'll make a hole clean through ye!" shouted Stebbins.

"Hold on, boy! hold on just two seconds, and I'll fix him!" exclaimed Blake.

At this moment I saw a dim flash, and heard the crack of a pistol, followed by a wild yell. Then the loud voices became so mingled that I could not distinguish what was

said. A minute after footsteps approached me rapidly. Then something struck against me, and a human body pitched headlong over me.

"Darn it all to darnation!" I heard Caleb exclaim, as he scrambled to his feet to pursue his flight.

"Hollo, Stebbins! don't desert your friend Walbridge!" cried I.

"Hollo! snakes! great ginger! Jerusalem! Jehoshaphat! is this 'ere you, doctor?"

"Yes, I am hurt. For God's sake, assist me to escape from these villains!"

Fortunately the wind blew toward us from the house, so that we could hear the voices of persons there without ours being heard in return.

"I'll du all I can for ye, I snum tu Guinea!" was Caleb's answer, as he felt me out in the darkness. "How be you hurt, doctor? And what in thunder's the matter anyhow? I don't understand things at all. I would n't wonder now if I've shot that are nigger, that tried tu hold me, putty bad! But what could I du? I's afeard of murder or so'thing!"

"And you were right, my friend; you would have been murdered, if you had not escaped, and myself too. But this is no time and place to talk; we are in danger here. Help me up. There—so! Now let me lean on you, and let us both get away from here as quick as possible! Do you know where you left your horse?"

"Don't know a dern thing about nothing, I snum! I's never more turned reound and conflusticated in my life, I tell you! I don't know a single p'int of compass from a stack of black cats!"

"Well, let us go on, and put distance between us and our foes; that is the main thing now."

For the next half hour but little more was said. We travelled on through the increasing storm, thanking God for the darkness that was shielding us from our enemies, and the

rain that was obliterating our steps and destroying the scent of our trail.

My leap from the window had given my system a severe shock; and this, together with my loss of rest, the fatigue of long rides and great anxiety, ending in alarm, had put me in a very poor condition for making much progress on foot. At times I would feel very faint and sick, and then would revive a little, and fancy the worst was past.

At length I resolved to take some rest. Coming to a wood, I felt out a large tree; and putting it between me and the driving rain, I sat down, with my back against it. It was not my intention to remain here any longer than necessary—though whether I should gain anything by wandering about, I knew not whither, was a question I was not prepared to answer.

It was curious to reflect how fast events had been crowding together for me in the last two days—momentous events, too, that concerned many others as well as myself. It was only the night before that I had gone to Captain Sebastian's, one among the gayest and happiest, and now I was wandering through the country, in darkness and storm, anxious to preserve my own life, and save the community from the evil designs of our then honored host. As I looked back over the intervening time, it seemed rather like years than hours, and I could hardly realize that I had been blessed with only one short sleep since then. It summed up, too, what months and years might not have given of things to be remembered—some to be treasured. The ride thither with the girl of my heart; the joyous throng; the many bright eyes, lovely faces, and beautiful forms; the lively conversation, sweet music, and gay dance; the trial games between honesty and knavery; the fearful tragedy; the insult and retaliation; the serious ride homeward and confession of love; the capture of the murderer; the suspicion; the father's consent; the inquest; the apology; the strange discovery of the villain's

plot; my narrow escape from the ruffians; the rousing up of the country; the loss of my friend; the ride to find him, and all the strange adventures of the last two hours: the remembrance of all these, in their order, in the brief time of their action, now came over me more like some dream of romance than a reality.

But there were some things yet I wanted more clearly to understand, and I proceeded to question my companion, who, by the way, I should state, was not altogether easy in his mind since shooting the negro.

"What happened to you, Mr. Stebbins," said I, "after you left me and entered the mansion of Captain Sebastian, before we were so singularly brought together again?"

"Wal, nothing to skeer, I should say!" he answered. "The nigger he took me up into the captain's room there, and there was another chap sot reading. I gin the captain the letter; and arter he'd read it through, he gin it tu t'other chap, and axed him what he thought about it. Then they axed me a whole lot of questions, about this ere and that are, and t'other, and so on, till I got a'most tired of answering 'em."

"And what were some of these questions?"

"Wal, they wanted tu know who'd ben tu Colonel Brandon's house through the day, and who he'd got there now, and sich like."

"Did you mention my name to them?"

"Wal, yes, I did, doctor, afore I thought — though I did n't say nothing 'bout me and you meeting down there tu the door."

"Did you say anything about the negro I had taken to Colonel Brandon's?"

"Wal, yes, I guess likely I did say so'thing about him, 'cause I remember they axed me his name, and I told 'em I thought it was Cato."

"How did you know that?"

"I don't know — I expect somebody or other must have told me."

"And how did they look, and what did they say, when you mentioned the negro's name?"

"Wal, I guess, come to think on 't, they looked putty queer at each other; and they axed me a good many questions about what he said and done, and where he'd ben put, and all that are — which I did n't know nothing about — and, what's more, did n't care — for the nigger wa' n't none of my consarn."

I perceived now, after hearing Stebbins' story, that it would have been much better for me to have had my interview with Sebastian first — though, even then, perhaps some foul play would have been afoot before I should have got away from the two villains.

"Well, passing over their questions, what happened next?" I pursued.

"In the middle on 't all, you knocked, you know; and arter Captain Sebastian had answered you, and found out who you was, he seemed plaguy anxious tu git me and t'other chap out of the way afore you 'd see us."

"Mr. Stebbins," he said to me, drea'ful polite like, 'I've got a little private business with Doctor Walbridge; and won't you jest oblege me, you and Mr. — Mr. —'"

"Moncton, was it?"

"Yes, that's it. 'Would n't we oblege him by stepping into another room for a few minutes, and he'd send us in so'thing good tu eat and drink.' Of course we went."

"Was it an adjoining room?"

"No, it was down stairs."

"Did you get what was promised? and did Moncton remain with you?"

"Yes, the nigger fetched us in some good things, and I pitched right into 'em. I eat mostly, and Moncton he dranked."

"How long did he remain with you?"

"Wal, I don' know exactly; but he went out some time afore I heerd the racket."

"Did he say anything when he went out?"

"He told me tu wait — that he 'd be back afore long."

"Well, what noise did you hear?"

"A regular rattling smash tu begin with, and then a hol-
lering, and a thundering thrash-a-to-bang down the stairs.
I was skeered some, I'll allow — for I did n't know what it
was — whether there was a fight, or the house a-fire, a 'arth-
quake, or what. I jumped up, and blundered through tew
or three rooms, and got tu the door as soon's I could, and
there I heerd the captain tell the nigger tu lock me in. I
hollered back so'thing sassy, and the nigger he grabbed me,
and would n't let go; and then, afeard I was a-going tu be
murdered, I outs with one of my pistols and lets him have
it. Great ginger! it's awful to think on — shooting a feller
being! I never done sich a thing afore, and I'm afeard it
was kind o' like murder — hey?"

"No, it was justifiable under the circumstances. You
have a right to defend yourself against murderers and assas-
sins. If the negro had held you a minute longer, Moncton
would have killed you like a dog."

"What for, doctor? what had I done? And what 'd you
jump out of the winder for?"

"To save my life: I think they were about to murder me."

"Great ginger! you don't say so! I al'ays told you I
did n't like Sebastian, but I never s'posed he was the kind
of chap that 'ud want tu murder us in his own house."

"It is because we have got at his secret."

"What secret?"

"Who do you suppose he is now, Stebbins?"

"I don't know, I snum!"

"And who is Moncton?"

"I don't know that nother."

"Do you remember that fellow Blake, who commanded
the party that kidnapped Miss Brandon?"

"I know who you mean — though I did n't see him, you
know."

"Well, that Blake and this Moncton are one and the
same."

"Snakes alive!" cried Caleb.

"Hush! not so loud!"

"Jerusalem ginger! you don't say so!"

"Yes, and the captain of these desperadoes is Sebastian
himself."

I now proceeded to tell the Yankee the whole story in as
few words as possible — of my capture of the negro, and all
that had occurred since to prove Sebastian the chief of the
gang. I also told him of my night's adventures, and the
fearful state of the country, with these bandits gathering to
commit a series of horrible deeds.

"Here we are," I concluded, "no one knows where, and
it is so important that we should be at Colonel Brandon's,
to tell him what has happened, and help him defend his
dwelling in case of attack!"

"I jest wish I's out of the dern country altogether!"
grumbled Caleb.

I was at a loss what to do — whether to remain where I
was till daylight, or go on in the darkness — perhaps right
— perhaps wrong.

As my faintness and sickness diminished, however, I found
myself too restless to remain inactive, notwithstanding my
great fatigue and loss of sleep, and so we once more set off
together through the drenching rain.

We walked on over smooth ground, and stumbled over
rough, for some two hours, when we met with an adventure
so strange and remarkable that I must take another chapter
to record it.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE MYSTERIOUS RENDEZVOUS.

I HAD never known a darker night in my life, and I had never wandered about so long before without having some idea as to whether I was going north, south, east, or west.

After the late moon came up behind the low, thick, dripping clouds, we began to see near objects like shadows; but neither of us knew where we were, nor whether we had gone toward La Grange's, or Brandon's, or in an opposite direction, or had wandered about in a circle.

On one point, however, reflection made me pretty easy; which was, that neither Sebastian nor Blake would remain where we left them, to search for us in daylight, but rather would be off themselves, for their own protection, while the darkness should enable them to conceal their flight.

All our garments were thoroughly soaked through and clinging to us, and the rain was still beating steadily against us, when suddenly Caleb, who was walking by my side, grasped my arm, and said, in a low tone:

"Hark, doctor! what's that?"

"I hear nothing but the storm!" I replied, coming to a halt.

"Then my ears is better'n yours."

"Well, what do you hear?"

"There's somebody a talking, as true's you live! There! hark! don't you hear that?"

I listened intently for some time, but could detect no such sounds.

"Imagination!" said I. "That black line, just ahead of us, is a wood doubtless, and the wind is complaining to the trees."

This was a kind of poetical expression that the literal, prosaic, and practical Yankee could not comprehend at all, and he said so.

"Why, you don't s'pose the wind talks, du you, doctor? come now!"

"Sometimes," I replied, "and I believe it has done all the talking you have heard out yonder."

"No, it haint, nother! Hark! There, now — great ginger! I hope that's plain enough!"

Sure enough I did fancy I heard something like a distant or muffled human voice, as he spoke, though I probably should not have noticed it had I been alone.

"Where is it?" I asked.

"On ahead somewhere."

"We must be careful not to fall into the hands of any prowling freebooters."

"Jerusalem! let's go back, doctor!"

"Back where, man? I would give something to know which way is back."

"Oh, dear! what 'll become of me?" he began to whine. "I wish I'd stayed tu home in Connecticut; and I would tew, if I'd a knowed as much as I du now, I tell you — that's a fact!"

"Well, never mind Connecticut just now; but let us attend to matters not quite so far off. If that was a human voice we heard, there is somebody near us — perhaps more than one — and it may be important for us to find out who it is. It don't follow that it is an enemy because we hear it where we are. We may be near some planter's dwelling, where there are hundreds of negroes."

"That's a fact, I snum!" returned Caleb, somewhat cheerfully, catching at the unexpected hope. "We'll keep on and find out anyhow."

The voice, or whatever it was, had now ceased, and we stood and listened for a couple of minutes, hoping to hear it again.

We were not disappointed. We did hear it again, and louder than at first, and I fancied I detected two or more voices mingling together.

We went forward very cautiously, often stopping to listen.

We drew nearer to the sounds, which gradually resolved themselves into many voices, and then we grew more cautious still.

A little nearer, and we made the voices out to be those of white men—talking excitedly, if not quarrelling—though we could yet distinguish nothing of what was said.

We took hold of hands, and still went forward, gradually and slowly, step by step.

It was dark, and grew darker as we began to enter the shadows of a wood, but not the faintest glimmer of a light became visible to our straining eyes.

The voices, which had gradually been growing louder as we had advanced, now suddenly ceased, as if the speakers knew there were listeners drawing near.

We stopped under the first tree we reached, and waited and listened for several minutes. Could we have been mistaken after all?

"Wal, it's curious now, doctor, but I'd a ben willing tu went afore a justice of the peace, and took my Bible oath—Great ginger, doctor! there's a light! d'you see it?"

"Yes! yes!" I little more than whispered. "Be still now—don't speak above your breath!"

The light in question was like that of a lamp glimmering through the trees at no great distance; and from the fact that it remained stationary and did not flare, I was led to believe it shone through a window.

"Depend upon it, we are near some dwelling," I guardedly said to Caleb; "but I intend to reconnoitre it very carefully, and be sure it belongs to some honest individual, before trusting my precious person inside of it! Let us move up cautiously, and see what we can make of it."

We had advanced only a few paces, when the light suddenly disappeared.

Soon after we again heard human voices, dull and muffled, and seeming rather as if they were under us, and beneath the ground, than distant and above it.

We stopped, and I felt the Yankee's hand tremble as he laid hold of my arm.

"Doctor," he half gasped, with his mouth close to my ear, "what is it?"

"There are people about here somewhere."

"Them aint no people, doctor, I'm afeard—no, sir! There! there! great ginger! don't you hear 'em right under us? Come, let's git out of this ere about the quickest! This ere's a haunted wood, as sure's you live, and them is ghosts, or so'thing."

"Pshaw!" returned I; "don't be a fool!"

I spoke thus to Stebbins; but I by no means felt as courageous as the words implied. There are very few human beings that are not more or less superstitious, and apt to ascribe mysterious things to supernatural powers; and, to confess the truth, I am afraid I should not have been willing to make oath that I believed the sounds I heard came from mortal lips.

While we stood listening, undecided what to do, we were startled by a heavy creaking noise near us; and then a strange thrill of fear shot through me, as I beheld a ruddy light stream up through what seemed the upheaving of the ground within six paces of me.

"Oh, Lord, save us!" ejaculated Caleb, clinging to me in terror.

The mystery was soon explained, though my fears were not diminished thereby. It was soon settled in my mind that no ghostly inhabitants were present, though there were others that might be far more dangerous to encounter. Doubtless we had stumbled upon one of the haunts of the

bandits; and, should we be discovered, then farewell to hope.

A heavy trap-door—the entrance to, or exit from, some subterranean place—had been thrown open by some three or four men, one of whom held a flaming torch, that flared and sputtered in the wind and rain, and another a lighted lantern. They came forth like so many dark, shadowy phantoms, and huddled themselves together in the storm, within a few feet of us. Instinctively we shrunk back behind the nearest trees.

“Ugh!” grumbled one; “it’s as dark as ——!”

“And so much the more reason for the light, for fear they’ll miss their way!” said another.

“Well, boys, up with it, and let’s git back!” said a third.

I could see now, by the lights they held, that a rope was dangling from one of the trees. This they laid hold of, fastened the lantern to it, ran it up to a height of some twenty feet, and secured it there, where it swung in the breeze, as a guide to any party that might be approaching within a reasonable distance. This done, they hurried back into the subterranean passage and disappeared, greatly to our relief.

“This is a rendezvous of the robbers and cutthroats!” I said to my trembling companion.

“Jehoshaphat! Jerusalem!” he returned, with a long breath; “let’s git away from this ere tarnal place about the quickest.”

“I should like to know where this place is, and how to find it in daylight,” said I, “for it may be of the greatest importance to the Regulators. I do not think there will be much danger in remaining about here till the first streak of day, and then we can see where we go.”

Stebbins was for leaving at once, but I would not consent to go, and he was afraid to venture off alone.

As the light, swinging up in the tree, would serve as a

guide to us, in case we should wish to find our way back to our present locality, I proposed moving off, to see what else we could discover.

“I am inclined to think there is a house where we first saw the light,” I said, “and I am disposed to go forward in that direction and ascertain.”

“I’m ready tu go anywhere away from here,” was his answer.

I went first, he taking hold of me and urging me to be “drea’ful keerful and not run agin nobody, and not tu pitch down no pit.”

About twenty rods from where we had stopped, I found a log-house. All appeared to be dark inside, though I could hear voices and laughter, sounding as if they were down below the level of the earth. Perhaps the freebooters, already collected here, were holding something of a revel in their subterranean quarters.

I now began to comprehend the matter. This log-house was probably the visible representation of some quiet, honest settler; and none, save the initiated, who saw this humble dwelling, ever dreamed that it was the rendezvous of banditti—robbers, horse-thieves, negro-stealers, counterfeiters, incendiaries, and murderers.

Here was an important discovery, if I could get away with a proper knowledge of the locality, and back to Colonel Brandon’s in time to make it available to the Regulators.

As I stood listening beside the house, I do not know why, a strange and curious suspicion came upon me with startling force. Could this be the residence of Mrs. Blodget, the old woman to whom Flora Sebastian had conducted Ernest La Grange?

Perhaps there was no such person in existence; perhaps the whole story was a fabrication, to get him away with her and into her power; but might not this be the place to

which she had taken him? Might he not, at this very moment, be a prisoner within these walls?

I walked carefully around the house, to ascertain its size and shape, and its number of doors and windows. It was a log-house of a superior kind, the logs being squared and well fitted together, and it was much larger than habitations of this kind usually were. It had several glass windows, and two doors, admitting from opposite sides. These were all the peculiarities I could make out in the darkness.

"I am tempted to try one of these doors and see if it is fastened," I whispered to Caleb, who had all the time been as close to me as ever was my shadow."

"Oh, no — don't du it, doctor — for it might open!" he replied.

"And what if it should?"

"Thunderation! you wouldn't go in, would ye?"

"It would hardly be prudent, I think."

"Great ginger! I guess not! Come! let's go now — come!"

"Go where?"

"Wal, any where, so it's away from here. I tell you what 't is, I've kind o' ben a trembling ever sence I got into this ere derved wood — I snum I have — that's a fact."

"On second thought," said I, impelled by a strong desire to explore the mystery, "I believe I will venture to try the door, and go in if I can do so with safety."

"You can't, and you're mad tu think on't!" rejoined Caleb, laying hold of me.

I have never been able to account for the almost irresistible desire that possessed me to enter that house at such a time and in such a manner, believing it to be a den of cut-throats. If my friend were there, as I half conjectured, without any reason for the suspicion, except that Flora's father was the chief of the bandits and she had drawn Ernest away with her at the very moment of their rising,

and had not returned with him — if he were there, I say, what could I do for him, alone and single-handed, against a host? and would not my capture leave him more fully in their power than if I were to depart at dawn and lead the Regulators to his rescue?

Still he might not be there; and the temptation to know for a certainty, if indeed I could know, was so great that I resolved to yield to it.

After all, the door might be fast, and that would settle one point at once.

At least I would try it, and did. I raised the latch cautiously and pushed. It opened into a small room. A faint light glimmered up from below, from whence came the sound of many voices.

I drew back to speak to my frightened companion.

"Mr. Stebbins," said I, "I think I shall go in and see what I can discover. I have been led hither in a strange manner, and it may be for some purpose that will not be gained if I resist the desire that urges me on. But there is no necessity for you to accompany me. In fact I think you had better not."

"Wal, you needn't be afeard, doctor, for I ain't a-going tu!" he replied, in a very decided tone. "Great ginger! I wouldn't go in there now for fifty dollars — I snum tu Guinea, I would n't."

As this was a very large sum of money in the eyes of the cautious Yankee, I knew that his resolution was pretty seriously taken.

"Now the best thing for you to do," I pursued, "is to go back to the place where we were when those men ran up the lantern, and wait for me there. Should anything happen to prevent my return to you by the break of day, which cannot be far off, make your way back to Colonel Brandon's with all speed, and bring down the Regulators, whom you will probably find assembled there."

"Confound it all, I don't know which way tu go tu find Colonel Brandon's," he said.

"Neither do I; and I am so worn down with fatigue and loss of sleep, not to mention the shock and bruises of my fall, that I fear I should not be able to get there very soon afoot."

"And not a dern hoss for us nother—for I can't tell a thing about where I left the one I rid?"

"Was it yours?" queried I, thinking the Yankee bore the loss with unusual equanimity.

"No, it was the colonel's," he replied, quite calmly; "and if he's lost, 'taint my fault, you know; and he's rich enough not tu mind it; and besides, I's duing his business, you see."

Caleb finally agreed to do as I requested, though not till he had made another strong effort to dissuade me from my perilous purpose.

I returned to the door, pushed it open, and crossed the threshold, with more of the feelings of a midnight burglar than I should care to experience often.

I found myself in a small, dark room, with, as I have said, the glimmer of a light coming up from below. I moved forward, stealthily and noiselessly, to the point where the light was to be seen, and found it came through a nearly closed trap-door, that doubtless led down to the subterranean passage I had previously discovered.

There were men down there, talking carelessly, as if the idea of being listened to by a stranger in that place had never occurred to them.

I remained at the aperture for some half an hour; but during that time I scarcely made out one connected sentence, owing to the fact that several persons were speaking at the same time and on different subjects.

From what I did put together, I drew the conclusion that the men there were mostly counterfeitters, who worked at their unlawful business in the place where they were; that

they were only a part of a thoroughly organized band, and that another party was expected to join them that night.

Suddenly there seemed to be an arrival, and the speakers to hurry away to meet the new comer or comers.

Was I safe where I was? Might not somebody enter the house through the same door as myself and discover me? What hope of life would I have then?

I drew back to the door and looked out.

It was still blowing and raining, but the moon had risen so as to make near objects dimly visible, and I knew I could see any person approaching before he could reach the house.

No one came, however; and hearing loud voices again speaking below, I ventured to return to the trap-door and once more place my ear to the aperture.

I started, if I did not tremble, at hearing two familiar voices—those of Sebastian and Blake. Truly this was a night of adventures to me.

"Yes," I heard Sebastian exclaim, with an oath, "the whole——country will be roused and upon us just as soon as those Northern devils can spread the news of what took place at my house; and I shall never cease cursing myself for a——fool for letting them get away from me! It was outrageously stupid; and if any other man had done it, I should have been tempted to blow his brains out! Surely that rascal of a doctor is my evil genius, thwarting me at every turn! But let him beware! Should he ever fall into my hands again, I shall make short work of him!"

Little he dreamed, as he said this, that I was standing almost over and within a few feet of him.

Some words were spoken now that I could not distinguish.

"Have you seen Flora?" I at length heard Sebastian inquire.

How eagerly I strained my sense of hearing to catch the answer; but I could not make it out—not a single word of it.

It was something, though, to know that he asked these men concerning his daughter—proving, as it did, what I had already conjectured, that she was in the confidence of her father in his dark deeds, and that my friend had been deliberately enticed away for her own wicked purpose.

What had become of him? and what would be done with him? I did not think his life would be sacrificed so long as Flora's mad passion for him should continue; but I knew his high-toned, fiery, impulsive nature so well, that I feared he might, when he should come to learn the truth and comprehend all, both say and do something to turn her love into hate, and then his doom would be sealed.

Had she conducted him hither? For some reason, to me yet unknown, I could not divest myself of the belief that this was the place to which she had lured him, and I would have given no little to have caught the reply to her father's question.

"Did Durang say he'd be here to-night?" I now heard asked in the voice of Blake.

"That's what I understood, sir!"

"That's why you hung up the lantern?"

"Yes, sir!"

"I don't much like that way of showing a light, for it might attract the wrong persons here!" said Blake.

"We only shows it on nights like this yere, yer honor!" replied the man; "and then it's not like there'll be stray travellers, that's not wanted, in this yere out-of-the-way place at sich times."

"Well, no harm has come of it so far; and now our time in this region is about over, I reckon; for whether our plan goes through or fails, we'll have to make tracks out of the way of them—Regulators. So long as our captain here held the honorable position of lieutenant in that body, and had their confidence, and knew everything they were a-going to do, and could give us a hint in time, it was all right; but

now that he's something more than suspected, I'm afraid we're in a bad way. Only two or three days more would have settled everything to our notion, and we'd have struck such a blow as would have been felt here for years to come. We could have settled every plantation for miles around, and got horses, niggers, and money enough to make us all rich."

"And is it too late now?" asked a quiet, manly voice, that I had not before heard.

"I'm afraid it is, Gartner—I'm afraid it is—though I haven't lost all hope. Something depends upon how much the Regulators have already got hold of. You see that party at Guido's house, and that—quarrelling fool of a Spaniard, killing that man and getting caught afterward, like a stupid ass, and being recognized by Brandon, made things bad enough. We'd have got along though with all that, if we'd been ready to strike at once. But there you see was the trouble again: our forces are divided and scattered—some scouting and reconnoitering, and others not yet here that should be—Kingston, for instance, with his twenty or thirty experienced cutthroats—and Durang, with his ten or fifteen. And then, as if the devil himself was setting the fates against us, the messenger I sent to Horset, with a letter of caution, must get taken and carried to Colonel Brandon's, to be scared and pumped. By-the-way, Gartner, see that a trusty man—a man, mind ye! no nigger now—is sent off by daylight to tell Horset to come here with his men as soon as he can. He'll probably be found at the old shanty at the Three Pines. I was to have met him at the Ferry, but he did n't get my letter."

Blake now spoke in a lower tone, and I could not hear what further he said. In fact, soon after, the voices of all parties gradually died out, as if they were moving away to some distant point, and then all became as still as if the house, above and below, contained no living soul.

I was now strongly tempted to cautiously raise the trap-door and descend far enough to see how the subterranean cavern looked, but the thing seemed too much like trifling with fate. The light was still burning, and there might be some one on the watch. Besides, I fancied the dull gray of morning was beginning to drive back the black shadows of night, and, if so, it was high time for me to be leaving a place where discovery would be death.

CHAPTER XX.

NEW DISCOVERIES AND ADVENTURES.

I WAS right—the morn was already breaking—and feeling how dangerous it was for me to remain another minute where I was, I was just turning away to steal off and rejoin the anxious Caleb, when I heard the voice of Captain Sebastian, himself evidently not very near me, speaking to some one at a considerable distance from him.

“Yes, let her have her way. It is foolish, I grant you; but all girls have their fancies and whims.”

To this there was a reply, for I could just hear the tones of another voice, but could not distinguish what was said.

“Yes,” rejoined the captain, “all right. And tell Paretz to bring all the negroes down here to-morrow night, for I don’t wish to lose them, and it will not do for me to return home again at present.”

He then, every moment drawing nearer, began to talk in Spanish, and I resolved to leave at once.

The room I was in contained only a little furniture, and that of the most ordinary description. I could see there was a door opening into another apartment, but I did not

think it prudent to make further explorations. I went out accordingly, and carefully closed the outside door behind me.

Objects were beginning to be visible, and I felt some uneasiness lest I might be discovered. The lantern was still burning in the tree; and, guided by that, I hurried to the place where the Yankee was to wait for me, the wind still blowing and the rain falling still faster.

Caleb was there, squatted down at the foot of a tree, sheltering himself as well as he could from the driving storm. The moment he saw me, he sprung up and came toward me.

“Doctor,” he said, grasping my hands, “I’m drea’ful glad tu see you, I tell you, and no mistake—for I’s awful afeard you’d git ketched, I snum! and I was jest agoing tu put out and git away from here while I’d got a head on.”

I glanced at the place where we had seen the men come out to hang the lantern. The trap-door was yet open, and I could see there was a framework of wood, and steps leading down into the underground passage. I could readily believe that, when the door was closed and covered with earth, no one, not acquainted with the fact, would suspect the existence of any such place.

It was not yet light enough to see things clearly; but I could make out that we were on hard, elevated ground, (it could scarcely be called a hill,) which sloped off down to a cypress swamp, that looked unusually dreary in the dull gray light now stealing over it.

Feeling our safety would be increased by getting out of the more open wood and into the dense cover of the thicket, we now hastened down to it, and breathed much freer when we found ourselves inside of the closing bushes, though ankle deep in mud and water.

Nor could we congratulate ourselves too much on this timely escape, when, peeping through our leafy screen a minute after, we saw a man come out of the subterranean passage, let down the lantern, and return below, closing the

trap-door after him. Had he been one or two minutes sooner, we might have been discovered.

"I shall always thank God for this storm," said I, in a low tone, "for it has not only proved our salvation thus far, but enabled us to make some very important discoveries."

"It's putty wet and sticky though, for all that!" said Caleb, shivering. "I don't believe I've got a dry thread on me; and I wouldn't go through sich another night for all the tarnal scamps 'twixt this and Tophet!"

"Are you not thankful for your life, Mr. Stebbins?"

"Wal, I 'spect I be; and I'd be plaguy thankful jest now tu git tu a good fire and dry myself. Jest look here, doctor—all my clothes is sticking tu me like wax, and I'm as hungry as all git eout! And then where be we, I'd like tu know? and how be we agoing tu find our way back tu Colonel Brandon's?"

"After you left me, and went back to where I found you," said I, changing the subject, "did you see any one enter or leave the underground passage?"

"Wal, yes, two on 'em. I was setting down, with my back agin the tree, when I thought I heerd somebody talking; and I peaked around, and seen two fellers jest agoing down."

"Did you know them?"

"No, I guess not—how should I?"

"Did you hear anything they said?"

"No, I could n't make nothing out."

"Those two men were Sebastian and Blake."

"Jerusalem! you don't say! Du tell! I say, you—then this 'ere's their nest, aint it?"

"This is one of their infernal dens—I don't know how many more they have got."

"Let's git away from here, doctor—du!"

"With all my heart; but I have not the remotest idea which way to go to find our friends."

"Nor I nother, consarn it all! but I'm bound tu put out somewhere, anyhow."

"We must keep in the edge of this swamp till we get out of sight of this rendezvous."

"Say! what 'd you see inside there? and how was it you did n't git ketched?"

I replied to him as we passed slowly along through the bushes, keeping back far enough from the edge of the swamp to conceal ourselves from any one on the higher ground.

We could barely see enough now to pick our steps and avoid the little pools of water in the swamp. It was very difficult walking, for we mired at every step; and I was so worn down by this time, with my long-continued exertions and loss of rest, that it was only by a considerable effort I could move one foot before the other and keep myself awake.

Oh, what would I not have given then for some comfortable place in which to lie down and go to sleep with my mind at ease! In fact, had my mind been at ease—free from alarm for myself and friends—I believe I could even have stretched my over-wearied frame out there in the mud and water and slept soundly through the pelting storm.

But there were more than myself to consider—friends, near and dear to me, in danger—the fair being I so devotedly loved, in peril—and I struggled on, praying Heaven for strength and success to save the innocent and punish the guilty.

Observing, by the increasing light, that the ground on which the house stood descended more abruptly on the other side—more in the form of a steep pitch, or embankment—and fancying I perceived another structure, through the trees, farther down—I took that direction, thinking it possible to make some new discovery.

The swamp made a bend around this acclivity; and after working our way around (it was rather working than walking for some quarter of a mile, we found ourselves abreast

of a long, low structure, resembling a barn, or stable for cattle, with one end resting against the hill. It had a yard in front, in which were three cows and several goats. That this stable belonged to the house, I naturally conjectured; and also that the subterranean passage was connected with it — thus giving two places of ingress and egress to the dark workers of iniquity — the cows and goats increasing the domestic appearance of the whole, and serving as a further blind to the uninitiated neighbors and chance visitors.

While I looked at this structure, with curious feelings, wondering what dark deeds had been done within, I saw a door open, and a mounted man ride forth.

I happened at the moment to be standing in such a position that he might have seen me — though he did not — and I instantly drew back farther into the thicket and watched him with interest.

He was moving away, along a path that led round the hill, in the same direction that we were going, when a voice, that I recognized as Blake's, called to him, and he turned back.

Blake himself next appeared, coming out of the stable; and this proved, to my satisfaction, that the underground passage ran through to the trap-door on the other side of the dwelling-house. This was important to know, in case there should be an attack made upon the villains by the Regulators.

The two men conversed together for some time, in a tone too low for even the sharp ears of the Yankee; but we both heard Blake say, in conclusion:

"Remember now what I've told you! Take all the by-ways, and avoid any large parties, even if you have to make a run for it. Tell Horset all I've told you, word for word; and don't forget that he's to scatter his men, and have them get in here one at a time — for if they're seen together by the Regulators, it will be all up with some, if not all, of

them. Now haste, my man, and do your duty faithfully, for our whole existence may be depending on your success."

"I won't fail, sir!" returned the other, touching his hat as he rode away.

Blake watched him till he disappeared over the crest of the hill; and then, drooping his head, in a thoughtful mood, he turned back into the stable, closing the door after him.

"Now would I give half I am worth," said I, "if I knew the shortest way to Colonel Brandon's, and had a good horse under me."

"And how much d' you calculate you be wo'th neow, doctor?" inquired the inquisitive Caleb, who always had an ear for any subject touching on money.

"Well, say fifty dollars," I replied, in a quizzing way, though I never felt less like joking.

"Sho! more'n that, I guess."

"Well, perhaps; but that will do for the present."

"I should n't wonder if there's lots of hosses in that ere barn now!" he said, looking anxiously toward it.

"Nor I," I replied; "but we shall have to foot it for all that."

"It 'ud be stealing tu take a couple, even from them rascals, would n't it?"

"It would certainly be *death* to attempt it!"

"Yes, wal, I guess we won't try it."

At this moment a negro woman came out of the stable, with a pail in her hand, and proceeded to milk the cows.

"You see," said I, "that place is alive with people. Come, it is time for us to be off. God grant that we may be successful in getting back to our friends in time to make our knowledge of service to them! An idea strikes me! I know, pretty nearly I think, where this man is going; and if we can pass round and get upon his track, without being discovered, I am almost certain it will lead us to some locality with which we are acquainted."

"Wal, I'm ready and willing tu git out of this ere sticky hole, I tell you!" said my cheerful companion.

The swamp here bent around the higher ground like a horseshoe, and so we kept on round in it till we reached the opposite side of the house from which we started. Here I observed a door opening into a mound, not unlike a tomb, and I thought it very probable that it was merely another place of entrance and exit for the outlaws.

"These villains have a good many holes to run in and out of," said I, "and to capture them here will require a force large enough to surround the whole area, or at least keep a strong guard at several points."

"There won't nobody git me tu attack 'em inside there, I calculate!" returned Stebbins.

"You are not fond of a fight, I know."

"Not much, neow."

"You would rather run any time, eh?"

"Wal, I haint no desire tu git killed for nothing, and I never see nobody that had 'cept a fool!" returned Caleb, rather sharply.

"Even your grandfather, that fought in the Revolution, was a man of prudence, undoubtedly!"

"Any how, he did n't fling his life away for the sake of gitting killed."

"It is necessary a man should risk his life sometimes, Mr. Stebbins; and whoever shall attempt to capture these bandits, should be prepared for bloody work."

"Wal, I aint agoing tu try tu catch 'em, I tell you! If I live tu git back tu Colonel Brandon's with a whole skin, I'm agoing tu put out for home."

"You will not buy any land in this section then?"

"Rather guess not."

"Nor marry any rich planter's daughter?"

"Not tu live down here, where a feller's life aint safe a minute. If any gal wants me, she'll have tu pack up her

duds and travel! You see, doctor, I aint made for this ere kind of life. Them that likes it, can have it — but I aint one of them kind."

"And yet I have seen you show a good deal of bravery."

"Yes, it's in the Stebbins' blood, that's a fact; but it aint no enjoyment tu me. Of course I'll fight when I have tu; but I don't like tu be where I've got tu."

"At least you are candid in saying so, and that is something. One thing you must certainly do, however. If you escape, and I do not, you must not refuse to guide the Regulators to this place!"

"Why, du you 'spect you aint a-going tu escape, doctor?"

"I hope I am, of course; but I don't know what may happen."

"Wal, I can tell you one thing," rejoined Caleb, with the air of a man uttering words of wisdom, "if you go and run your head into every hornet's nest you see, you must calculate tu git stung, that's sartin. I only wonder you're here now, arter what you tried last night."

We continued in the swamp till we had got so far away from the haunt of the freebooters as to render it comparatively safe for us to come out upon the harder ground, and then we began a search for the tracks of the horse which the messenger had ridden away.

Presently we found the trail, and then followed on as fast as we could.

We were now in an open country, apparently uncultivated, with here and there a tree, and thickly scattered clumps of bushes, but not a dwelling in sight. The wind had now pretty much died away; but the clouds were low and dense, the rain was still falling, and a sort of steaming fog, rising from the earth, made the whole scene look dreary enough.

When it is remembered what I had gone through of excitement and fatigue, it will not be surprising that I now

found myself in the worst possible condition for travelling on foot. In fact I was faint and weak, and could hardly drag my heavy limbs along; and at last, coming to a tree, around which grew a cluster of bushes, I threw myself down on the wet earth, declaring I must have some sleep.

"Go on, Stebbins," I said, "and leave me here. Find your way to Colonel Brandon's, and tell him all you know; and say that, with God's help, I shall get in before night."

"I won't du it, doctor—I snum, I won't! If you stay here, I'll stay tu."

"Are you afraid to go alone?"

"No, 'taint that."

"What then?"

"Wal, you might git sick, or so'thing, and I don't want tu have them are gals blaming me for leaving you."

I did my best to get him to go on without me; but finding I could not succeed, and feeling how important was the intelligence in my possession, I arose and resumed my weary march, leaning upon his arm.

We had advanced about half a mile farther, when Caleb suddenly grasped my arm and exclaimed:

"Great ginger, doctor! look there! True's you live, there's a woman on hoss-back!"

"A woman? where?"

"Why, right yonder, coming round behind that are tree!"

"Ah! now I see her! She is coming this way!"

"Jes' so!"

"Good heavens! if it should be Flora Sebastian! Quick, Stebbins—let us hide in these bushes before she sees us!"

CHAPTER XXI.

THE ENSNARER CAUGHT.

THERE was no good reason why I should have suggested Flora Sebastian as the name of the rider, except that it happened to be uppermost in my mind, that I believed her to be somewhere in the vicinity, and that the shadowy form, dimly seen through the misty rain, was evidently that of a female. This I explained to my inquisitive friend, as we hastily secreted ourselves in a thicket that chanced to be near us.

The horse, at no great distance, was coming toward us, but slowly and heavily, as if he labored to lift his feet from the soft, miry earth. I took care to part the bushes, so as to get a clear view of the fair rider, and awaited her approach with the most intense anxiety.

"And s'pose it should be that are Sebastian gal—what then?" queried Stebbins.

"I hardly know myself."

"Would you speak tu her, d' you think?"

"I ought to arrest her, and take her to Colonel Brandon's, as a hostage for the safe return of my friend, Ernest La Grange, whom she certainly lured away. There is no doubt in my mind that she is concerned in her father's plot."

"She's a putty chip of the old block, aint she?"

"One of the most beautiful girls you ever saw."

"Sho! you don't say! Thunder! If she had a respectable father, and was a decent gal herself, she'd be so'thing for a feller tu court—hey? I say, you—I guess we'd better take her along, anyhow—that is, if you think we can du it without gitting ketched by any of her party. I wouldn't like them scamps tu git hold of me with her in my hands, I

tell you! Great ginger! they'd make short work of us then, and no mistake!"

"If they catch either of us, whether she be in our hands or not, we shall probably have short time for prayers!"

"Jehoshaphat! doctor, don't scare a feller clean tu death!"

"You had better make up your mind to fight to the death, rather than be taken; and, as a preliminary, suppose we take occasion, while waiting for our lady to come up, to reprime our pistols. I am almost certain that neither of us could discharge a shot in their present condition, and I would be willing to wager something handsome that she can fire at the word."

"She?" cried Caleb, with a look of alarm. "D'ye think, now, doctor, that she's got loaded pistols with her?"

"If she is Flora Sebastian, I not only think that she has got loaded pistols with her, but that she can use them better than one half of the men."

"Then I tell you what 't is, doctor — you'd jest better let her go by peaceable now, and not say nothing tu her!"

"Do you ever run from your own shadow, Mr. Stebbins?" returned I, in rather an irritating tone, as I proceeded to reprime my weapons — shaking out the old powder, and pouring in fresh, and guarding it, as well as I could, from the rain, by covering it with my hat.

Under different circumstances, I might have been amused at the timidity of my companion; but now, situated as I was, it was a matter of deep regret; for I felt that little dependence could be placed on his courage, except he should be forced into the position of a beast at bay and compelled to fight for his life.

"Tell you what 't is, doctor — if you're agoing tu seize on tu that are gal, you'll have tu go ahead and du it yourself — for I've no notion of being shot, jest tu please you or anybody else!"

"And you can sneak off, like a coward, and boast of your

fighting grandfather and Stebbins blood!" returned I, quite angrily. "But now, if you please, just hold your tongue! for the lady is evidently going to pass near us, and I don't wish to have her either charmed or frightened by your siren voice."

"Oh, you're gitting huffy, be you?" grumbled Caleb.

"Hold your tongue!" said I, in a low, determined tone, fixing my eye sternly upon the Yankee; "or you will have reason to fear me as much as any human being you ever saw!"

Perceiving I was in angry earnest, Stebbins looked another way and did not venture on another remark.

By this time the approaching party had drawn so near that I could clearly make out her graceful form, though I could not yet distinguish her features. From what I saw, however — the feathered cap, the riding habit, and gayly equipped horse, coming forward at a heavy canter — I felt almost certain it was Flora Sebastian; and weak and exhausted as I was, the idea of meeting her so strangely, with the hope of thus being able perhaps to save my friend, caused me to tremble with nervous anxiety. How should I proceed to capture her? and what should I do with her when once in my power? and what if I should fail? I soon discovered it was no use to think — for my mind was in such a state that this only made me more unfit to act — and so I quickly decided that I would be guided and governed by the circumstances of the moment. She was coming steadily forward, and, unless she should change her course, would shortly be within a few yards of me.

"Mr. Stebbins," said I, in a guarded tone, "as you have seen proper to throw this whole business upon my shoulders, you will oblige me by remaining perfectly quiet here, and keeping yourself out of sight for the present! When I require any further service of you, I will let you know. Do you understand?"

"Wal, I 'spect I aint quite a fool!" he answered, in a surly tone.

"You will be, if you provoke me to lay hands on you!" I rejoined, with a look that made him quail.

As the fair equestrian drew nearer and more near, my doubts and conjectures gradually resolved themselves into certainties. It was indeed Flora Sebastian and no other, and she was about to pass within a dozen yards of me. I could see that her features had an anxious look. Her head was bent a little forward, and her eyes fixed on the ground, as if occupied with serious thoughts; but she evidently was not troubled by fear of anything around her. Had she seen her father since I had? Perhaps not; and if not, she might not know of what had taken place during the dark, eventful night just past. Perhaps I was wrong in my first conjecture, that she had been to the mysterious rendezvous at all; perhaps she had taken Ernest to another place and secured him, and was now riding over to meet the gathering bandits; or, again, perhaps she was now on her way home, to confer with her worthy father. In either of these cases, my appearance might surprise, but not alarm her, and I resolved to make the trial boldly.

She was now so near me that there was no longer any time for indecision or delay, and I quietly stepped out of the bushes, a little to the right of front of her. She started at seeing me, turned slightly pale, jerked her rein nervously, and for the moment seemed about to change her course and dash away.

"Well, upon my word," laughed I, "who would have thought of meeting the gay and dashing Flora Sebastian, with her feathers all drooping, in such a storm as this!"

"Ha! Doctor Walbridge!" she said, with a crimson flush, reining up her horse as I advanced to meet her; "what brings you out here at this early hour? Upon my faith, you look as if you had slept on the ground."

"The worst of it is," said I, as I reached her side, and put myself in such a position that I could instantly grasp her bridle rein and control her horse, "I have not slept at all. I set out from Mr. La Grange's last night to visit a neighbor, lost my way, and here I am."

"And a most pitiable looking object you are!" she laughed — her suspicions, if she had any at first, evidently laid at rest. "Why, if I had met you on the road, with your face concealed, I should have thrown you alms."

"If you will make it *arms* instead," said I, in a gay, bantering tone, "I shall not object to be the recipient of such charity now."

"How would a good round box on the ear suit you?" she queried, with a laugh, bringing her dark, lustrous eyes to bear upon me in a most fascinating manner.

"Almost anything from you will be acceptable," I replied, in the same merry strain.

She was very beautiful, with her symmetrical and graceful form, classic and intellectual face, raven curls and speaking eyes; and as I now gazed upon her smiling and radiant countenance, so enchanting with its youth, beauty and seeming innocence, it was hard for me to realize that her soul was dark with sin, if not with crime.

"By-the-by, before I forget it, pray tell me where I am?" said I, thinking it best to get this important information from her while I could. "How far am I from Colonel Brandon's? or Mr. La Grange's?"

"Well, upon my faith, you are lost indeed, if you are this far from your friends without knowing where you are!" she said, with a smile — a smile that I fancied had something of secret guile in it. "Why, doctor, you must have been wandering all night! Pray, what neighbor did you set out to visit, that you got so far astray?"

"Am I indeed so far astray?" said I, determined of course not to reply to her last question.

"Indeed you are! It is ten good miles, as the crow flies, to Colonel Brandon's."

I gave a whistle of surprise.

"In which direction?" I inquired.

She pointed with her finger. The horse's tracks, which we had been following, were so far conducting us properly.

"May I ask why you are here, so far from home, riding in this rain?" said I. "It certainly cannot be for pleasure, unless you are partial to mud and water."

"Why, I spent the night with a friend," she answered — seeming, as I thought, a little embarrassed.

"The sick woman you went to visit?"

"Yes."

"I did not know she was a *friend* of yours."

"Oh, yes."

"Mrs. Blodget, was it?"

"Why, how did you learn the name?" she asked, with a look of surprise.

"I think I heard it mentioned when I was at your house."

This was true — though the time when I heard it mentioned did probably not correspond with that in her mind — for, it will be remembered, this piece of information had been given in the conversation with her father on that visit which had come so near being fatal to myself.

"Yes," she pursued, "the poor woman was very bad, and, not being blessed with many friends, I did not like to leave her all alone."

"Where does she live?"

"About a half or three-quarters of a mile from here," she answered, pointing back in the direction from which she had come.

Could this be true? and had she really no connection with the bandits I had discovered? Her statement might be true, and yet she be in her father's plot. I had now so brought the subject round that an inquiry concerning my friend would seem perfectly natural.

"And what has become of your escort?" I inquired.

"Oh, my gallant doctor, you mean? Well, he went home."

"And left you all alone with the sick woman?"

"Must I confess," she blushed, "that I had not attractions enough to keep him over night? And besides, he had left his medicines at home, and it was necessary for him to return for them and dispatch them by a servant."

"What time did he leave you?" I inquired, keeping my eye steadily fixed on hers.

"I did not notice the time."

"Before, or after, dark?"

"Oh, long before: he only remained a short time."

"And did the servant bring the medicines promised?"

"Yes," she answered, with a sort of impatient look, as if the question did not altogether please her.

"And what time did he get there with the medicines?"

"Who?"

"The servant."

"Oh, I did not notice — midnight perhaps. But why are you so inquisitive, doctor?"

"Because I am so much interested in this matter," I answered, still keeping my eye on hers.

Perhaps she saw something in the expression of my features that she did not like — something that aroused her suspicion of me — for she changed color, as she put the question, with what I fancied was assumed indifference:

"Why, what do you find to interest you, doctor, in an old woman's sickness?"

"I might perhaps find a good deal if I had the case," I answered; "but as I have not, my inquiries are made more on my friend's account than hers."

"And what of him?"

"Simply that he did not come home last night, Miss Sebastian!"

"Not come home?"

"Not before midnight."

"How then could he have sent the servant with the medicines?"

"That is what I do not understand."

"Oh, yes," she said, somewhat quickly and excitedly, "I remember now — how stupid in me to have forgotten — the boy said something about coming over from Colonel Brandon's. Ernest must have stopped there."

"But how could he get the medicines there?"

"That of course I know nothing about — only the facts as I have related them. Come, doctor, we shall get our deaths of cold standing out in this rain: come with me, and get your breakfast, and wait till the storm is over, and then have a horse to take you home! You look pale and ill! Do you really feel well?"

"I have felt better, I must admit, for my night-wanderings have fatigued me not a little."

"Then come with me. I will give you a ride, too, if you will accept such an awkward seat as you can find on the back of my beast."

"Thank you — you are very kind — but where are you going now?"

"Just over here, to a very intimate friend's, where I shall be as welcome as in my own house."

"Do I know the people?"

"I think you have never met them. The gentleman is a very eccentric man, and lives in very plain style — a log-house, in fact — but he is quite wealthy, for all that."

"What is his name?"

"His name?" she repeated, with a slight flush — evidently, as I thought, a little at a loss for a ready answer: "oh! his name is — is — Gartner!"

Matters were getting deeply interesting for me now. Gartner was a name I had heard her father use in addressing one of his confederates in the subterranean den; and Miss

Flora was no doubt anxious to take me with her to that delectable place, where I should probably have more attention than might be good for my health.

"Gartner!" I repeated; "I do not think I know any such person."

"I am almost sure you do not; but he and his family are great friends of mine, and I can assure you of a cordial welcome."

I had no doubt that some of the persons there would be glad to see me — *in their power* — but I did not think it best to say so.

"If I am not mistaken, I stopped at the house you mean during the night," said I.

"You stopped there, doctor?"

"Yes, and went in; but did not meet any of the family, and so left and resumed my travels."

"Perhaps they were abed!"

"Somebody appeared to be down cellar, for I saw the glimmer of a light and heard voices."

"That is strange!" she said, with a curious look, and turning slightly pale.

"Yes, I thought so myself."

"Why did you not speak to them?"

"Well, I was not sure they were not *robbers*, and I did not wish to risk my life for nothing."

"I declare you almost frighten me! I hope no harm has befallen the family! Really now, doctor, I must ask you to go with me for protection!"

"I should be afraid to go back now myself."

"You afraid indeed!"

"To tell you the truth, I have been fearful of showing myself to strangers ever since."

"And was that the reason you were hiding in that thicket?"

"I saw you coming, before I knew who it was, and did not wish to be seen."

"Well," she said, tightening up her rein, as if about to start, "if you will not go with me, I must venture on alone and see what has happened."

"A great deal has happened since yesterday, Miss Flora!" said I, carefully taking hold of her bridle rein and giving her a peculiar look.

"Why, what? what do you mean?" she exclaimed, in a quick, anxious, startled manner.

"Ernest La Grange did not come home for one thing!"

"How do you know that?"

"Because I was there at a late hour in the evening."

"But that does not prove he did not reach home subsequently!"

"Miss Flora Sebastian," said I, sternly, "you know he has not been home since he rode off with you!"

"Sir!" she exclaimed, in a haughty tone and with flashing eyes, and I began to see the devil I had been looking for.

"I may as well end this matter in a few serious words," I returned, in a tone as haughty and with an eye as unquailing as her own. "Ernest La Grange was lured away by you for a wicked purpose, and is now a prisoner, either under your control or that of some of your criminal confederates!"

She turned deadly pale at these words, her hands clutched the reins nervously, and if a look of concentrated hate and rage could have annihilated me, this tale would never have been told. It did not daunt me, however, or deter me from finishing what I had to say.

"Keep down your temper, girl," I continued, "for you are about to hear some very unpalatable truths; and if you meet with no other trouble, you will have reason to thank your stars! It has come out that your father is the leader of a gang of cutthroats; that he has been plotting the destruction of the honest community he has so long polluted with his vile presence; and should he be captured by the Regulators, who are already gathering to take him, he will surely have

a strong rope and short shrift. In one way and another you have been betrayed, and all is lost for you! I have been the means of finding much of this out and making it known. It was I that discovered your mad passion for Ernest La Grange, which you fancied was only known to yourself; and it was I that traced to you and your father the devilish plot to carry off the innocent girl, Alice Brandon, that you might the better succeed in your infamous wishes! It was only last night, in your father's house, where one of his villainous associates had already committed a murder, that he attempted my life. I escaped from him almost miraculously; and chance, or Providence, conducted me through the darkness to the infernal den whither you would have lured me now; and there I had a confirmation of my worst suspicions in what I both saw and heard. I was now in fact making my escape when I fell in with you. Now then do you think I know enough to justify me in arresting you here and demanding my friend at your hands?"

An artist would have found a rare study in noting the countenance of the guilty Flora while I thus addressed her. Surprise, fear, hate, rage, were all expressed, separately and in combination—the eyes at times fiery and glaring—the breath sometimes held and then the breast heaving—the lips compressed and the features flushing and paling; and when I had concluded, the hands were suddenly and convulsively brought up to the face, so as to cover it, and she almost shrieked forth:

"My God! my God!"

CHAPTER XXII.

A BOLD VENTURE.

FLORA SEBASTIAN, the guilty daughter of a guilty father, was now here in my power — but what was I to do with her? Had she been a man, instead of a woman, the matter would have been easily settled; but I was loth to lay violent hands on one of her sex; and yet the safety of my friend, myself, and the community at large, might require it; for if permitted to escape, how soon would she make known to the bandits all I had revealed to her? and then what chance of surprising them in their stronghold? And yet how should I begin? What say or do first? To take her with me, even if she were to go peaceably, was to risk life if discovered by any of her prowling friends; and to bind, gag, and leave her behind, was a proceeding most repugnant to my feelings.

To rescue my friend, was now my uppermost desire; but where to find him, and how to effect his liberation at once, were questions not easy of solution. In this matter I could expect no assistance from Flora; and yet what could I do without it? Could she be appealed to successfully to aid me? I thought not; and I would not trust her — more especially since she had so coolly and deliberately attempted to lure me to destruction. She was artful and treacherous — of a cat-like nature — putting forth her softest tones and silkiest feel while getting ready to strike her claws deepest.

Had she told me truly about the place where she herself had spent the night? Perhaps! I could not gainsay this — for I had heard her father inquire for her at the den I had left behind, and afterward speak of the whim of some girl; and this, along with the fact that I had met her at so early an hour, coming toward the place where I had fancied she

was, seemed to be evidence that on that point she had told something like truth. Of course the statement that Ernest had gone home at any time was false; but where had he spent the night? and where was he now? Perhaps a prisoner in the house alluded to, wherever that might be; and if so, had he been seized by some of Flora's vile gang? and was he now under guard? and could I by any possibility liberate him?

These speculative thoughts, questions, and reflections, which have taken me some minutes to record, went through my mind almost with the rapidity of a flash, and while the excited Flora sat with her face buried in her hands; and in that brief time my resolution was taken, to seek out this house at once, and endeavor to find and free and warn Ernest La Grange before it should be too late. How I should effect this purpose, if at all, and under what perils, I did not know, but I felt willing to trust all to that Directing Power which had so far mysteriously carried me forward, preserved me, and enabled me to accomplish so much.

With a sudden and unexpected movement, Flora now withdrew her hands from her face, seized the reins, and struck her high-mettled beast a smart blow with her riding whip. Instantly the animal reared and plunged, and but for the fact that my eye was on her, and my motion in seizing the bit as quick as her own, she would have gone from me like an arrow from a bow.

"Unhand my bridle and let me pass!" she cried, in furious rage, at the same time giving me several stinging cuts with her riding whip across my hands and face, the horse all the time rearing and plunging madly.

This was not a time and occasion for courteous and gallant acts to such a girl — my life and that of my friends depended upon my retaining her a prisoner — and shouting to Stebbins to come forth and hold the beast, I seized her rudely with one hand and actually dragged her from the back of the animal.

Scarcely had she touched the earth, when she drew a pistol; but fortunately I was near enough to strike down the hand that held it; and I did it with such a blow that the weapon fell to the ground in a small pool of water, and the arm hung down as if paralyzed.

She now gave vent to several wild shrieks and cries of murder; and fearing she might be heard, and some one brought to her assistance, I let go of the horse, which fortunately Caleb had just reached, and, seizing her, and exerting all my strength, I held her, and crammed a handkerchief into her mouth, and kept it there till she ceased to resist.

"Miss Sebastian," said I, when I found I could speak and be heard, "I do not want to treat you harshly, and I have no designs against your life; but let me assure you of this, that I am determined to keep you a prisoner for the present! and, sooner than let you escape from my hands, I will shoot you through the heart! Now then, that you know you are dealing with one as madly desperate as yourself, or any of your villanous accomplices, I hope you will have the good sense to conduct yourself in a more rational manner!"

"You are a devil!" she fairly hissed, with red and fiery eyes, as she tore the handkerchief from her mouth.

"Then I am the better match for you!" said I.

"You are a coward—a base, paltry coward—to lay in wait, with your vile accomplice, and put violent hands on a lady!"

"Unfortunately there is no *lady* here, or I should have had no occasion for what I have done!" retorted I.

"I will be revenged on you, Sir Poltroon, if I have to send my soul to perdition to accomplish it!" she hissed out between her teeth, with such a look of fiendish hate and malignity as secretly made me shudder.

"It is all very well to talk when talking can do any good," returned I, coolly; "but as you happen just now to be wasting your precious breath, you will oblige me, and do yourself a

service, by either saying less, or making your remarks more generally interesting."

At this she did what many an enraged woman had done before her day, has done since, and will do to the end of time—burst into tears, and cried and sobbed hysterically.

I am naturally tender-hearted and sympathetic, and a woman in tears has never been a pleasant sight to me, and I now felt that Flora was assailing me in my weakest point with her strongest battery. I remained impregnable, I admit; but it was only because I fortified the assailable point with the recollection that my friends were in danger as well as myself.

I kept a close eye on her, and permitted her to vent her rage and grief in tears, without a single attempt at consolation, though not without a pang of sorrow, that one so young, so beautiful, so accomplished, and so fascinating, should be so given up to guile and wickedness.

What was I to do with her? It was no place to remain out there with her in the rain, where we might be discovered by some of her friends at any moment—to let her go would be to ruin all my hopes—and to take her with me would simply be impossible, unless with her consent.

I began to regret that I had met her at all; and yet there was a hope, that, through her, in some way, I might rescue my friend.

I thought seriously, painfully, and finally resolved.

"Mr. Stebbins," said I, in a stern, determined tone, to the Yankee, who was now holding the beast and looking at the weeping Flora in gaping astonishment, "hitch the horse to a tree, take off the saddle, and cut the cloth into strips strong enough to bind this girl with!"

"Jerusalem!" exclaimed Caleb; "be you agoing tu bind her, now, doctor?"

"Do as I tell you, and make no words about it, or it will be the worse for you!" said I, not feeling in the mood for

arguing nice points, or answering the idle questions of a man who was all the time disposed to shrink away from danger and leave me to face it alone.

"See here," returned Caleb, bristling up, "I ain't your nigger, and I ain't agoing tu be ordered about like one!"

Flora checked her tears and turned upon him an approving glance. Undoubtedly she was surprised to find one, who, if not absolutely siding with her, was at least disposed to act as an obstacle to my design. Caleb saw the look and swelled with importance.

"Will you do as I tell you?" demanded I.

"Wal, see here, doctor," he answered, rather evasively, with a furtive glance at Flora, whose beauty and distress had evidently made considerable impression on him, "I don't think it's exactly the thing tu bind this ere gal like you would an obstropulous nigger, or a two-year old calf, now — come!"

"Ah, thank God, I have a friend in you, noble sir!" exclaimed Flora, who was not slow to perceive the exact material and calibre she had to work upon.

"I did not ask you for your opinion," said I to Caleb, "but whether you will do as I tell you or not? Speak, sir! — yes or no?"

"Not if you're agoing tu order me about in sich a top-lofty style, and afore Miss Sebastian tew!" he replied, getting his approving look and smile from her.

"I ask you, for the last time," said I, "whether or not you will tie that horse to a tree, take off the saddle, and cut the cloth into strips?"

"Of course you will not!" said Flora; "you are too much of a gentleman to treat a helpless lady in that rude manner!"

I do not think that Stebbins had at first any idea of assisting the girl — or of taking her part, only so far as to annoy me, because of the irritation produced by my rather harsh words

—but now her beauty and flattery seemed to make him forget who she really was, and the danger in which he stood, and he replied, in a very abrupt and surly manner:

"No, doctor, I don't want tu have nothing tu du with it, I snum! If you want it done, you 'd jest better du it yourself!"

"Bravo!" cried Flora.

"Give me the horse then!" said I.

"No, no, my friend," exclaimed Flora, advancing; "do nothing of the kind; the horse is mine; give it to me, and be my protector here, and you shall be nobly rewarded!"

"Do not follow me!" said I to Flora, as I took the bridle, from the hand of Caleb, and led the beast away toward the tree I had alluded to, as if about to hitch him myself.

She stopped, and began talking to Stebbins, in a low, eager tone, and I doubted not she was trying to persuade him to assist her in recovering her horse and getting away. I merely observed this, and then I acted upon the resolution I had already formed. I hastily took off the saddle, and threw myself upon the bare back of the beast.

"Can't du it, miss!" I heard Caleb say, in reply to something from Flora. "I'd like tu, tu oblege you — but 't would n't be right, I don't think!" Then, as his eye chanced to fall upon me: "Hollo, doctor! what be you agoing to du now?"

"I am going to give you a few parting words," I replied. "As you have been too cowardly and too obstinate to be of any service to me, you will now be under the necessity of looking out for yourself. That girl, with whom you sympathize so deeply, I want you to remember, is Flora Sebastian, daughter of the bandit captain, who last night sought to take your life and mine; and the only way you can now preserve your miserable existence, is to keep her from getting to any of her friends before dark. As you would not have her bound, I leave you to be her keeper, and thus settle the troublesome question of what to do with her. Keep her till

night, Stebbins — don't let her get to any of her friends before then! I know you can do it — you have just the courage required for such an exploit — and, what is more, your very life depends on it! Hoping you will have a pleasant time together, I wish you both good day!"

With the last word I struck the fiery animal a smart blow with my hand, and the next moment he was plunging over the wet and miry ground through the still falling rain.

"Hollo, doctor! don't leave me! don't! don't!" came floating through the humid air, in the whining voice of an astonished and distressed Yankee; but the only heed I gave to it was to urge on my horse.

I looked back, and saw him holding out his hands imploringly, and Flora shaking hers defiantly, and the two acts seemed to mark the two characters in the hour of trouble and peril.

I felt pretty certain, however, that Caleb Stebbins would not let Flora Sebastian get away from him immediately, if only for his own salvation; and I consoled myself with the reflection that, in case he should get off with whole bones, the lesson might be of use to him through life.

I was now taking the backward trail of Flora, which was easily seen in the soft earth. It would lead me to the place from which she had started that morning, and perhaps I should find Ernest there. It was a bold, daring venture on my part; but I had resolved to seek my friend at any hazard, and save him at any peril.

When I reached the point where we had first discovered Flora, I once more looked back at her and her interesting companion. The steaming fog did not permit a clear view; but, as well as I could make out, they had already begun the battle, which I hoped might last many hours. He seemed to be holding her and she struggling to get away.

"Ay, Caleb Stebbins, do your duty nobly," said I, "and keep that girl from reaching her confederates till night, and

as much longer as you choose! Everybody may be of some use to somebody else, and at last I have discovered how to make you useful to me."

With this I rode my horse behind some trees and beheld the parties no more.

After pushing on some quarter of a mile farther, over ground that gradually grew more miry and swampy, I came in sight of an humble log cabin, half buried among trees and bushes. My heart beat fast at the sight, for my hope of rescuing my friend was now centred in that. Undoubtedly it was the dwelling alluded to by Flora — perhaps the place in which she had passed the night — and possibly Ernest might be a prisoner within its walls.

But then, if the last were true, would he be there without a guard? and what could I do against numbers in my then weak state?

This was a point for serious consideration; and riding my horse into some bushes, I stopped and thought, planned and decided.

Tying my horse where he was, I stole forward to reconnoitre. I drew near the house without seeing a living soul. The door was closed, and there might be no one within. I went carefully around the structure, and found nothing stirring but a couple of lank, half-grown hogs, rooting in a mud-hole. A little distance from the dwelling was a kind of log barn, with a yard attached, in which were two cows, and a woman milking. I went far enough to see this, but not to discover whether she was white or black. Then I turned back, and knocked at the door of the cabin.

"Who's thar?" demanded the sharp, thin, querulous voice of an old woman.

"A friend!" said I, lifting the latch and pushing open the door.

I entered a small, close apartment, that had a very unpleasant smell of bad tobacco, and found a shrivelled old

hag, with a short, black pipe in her mouth, just in the act, as it seemed, of coming forward to meet me.

"Who's you, and what do you want?" she demanded, with a searching look; and I saw that, though she might be old, she had an eye like a hawk, and, I may add, a nose not unlike the bill of that bird of prey.

"Are you Mrs. Blodget?" I inquired.

"Well, and what ef I is?"

"You need not be so cross about it. I come from Miss Flora Sebastian!"

"Oh! ah! yes! Welcome, sir! She must hev flew like a kite — or met yer!"

"She met me."

"Any more of yer?"

"No, one is enough for my purpose."

"She told you 'bout him?" jerking her thumb over her shoulder toward a door which opened into another apartment.

"Yes! and how is he now?" inquired I, believing that my friend was referred to.

"He! he! he!" chuckled the old hag; "he sleeps now. They had a good time last night. I's sick, you know; and they sot up to watch; and both got loving. Why not? She's a rare gal, and you don't often come agin a purtier. They's made for each other. Well, she gin him the stuff in his coffee this morning, and he's went to sleep — he! he! he! But maybe I ought n't to told yer — 'cause I don't know yer!"

"Oh, yes, Mrs. Blodget, it is all right."

"She wants him over thar, I 'spect?"

"To Gartner's?" I ventured.

"Exactly. But how you gwine to tote him?"

"Why, his horse is here, I suppose, and I have one for myself."

"Yes, his hoss is in the stable — true. But how 'bout waking him?"

"Oh, I think I can do that, unless she gave him an overdose."

"Oh, no — nothing like what I takes. Not more 'n thirty or forty drops, I 'spect. You see he'd ben up long, and was nateral sleepy. But won't he make a row when he sees she's gone and he's got to go with you? You 'd best git one or two more! I kin send for black Jim."

"Oh, I can manage him without the least trouble!" said I. "You see, he knows me; but don't know that I belong to — *them* — you understand?"

"Oh! ay! — he! he! he!"

"So I shall simply persuade him to go with me."

"Yes, I see — he! he! he! But when he finds he's trapped, how then?"

"I suppose she has arranged all that!"

"Reckon! — he! he! he! She's deep — cute!"

At this moment a stout black girl, of perhaps twenty-five, entered, with a small pail half full of milk.

"Nelly," said the old hag, "this gent's come from Miss Flora for 'tother."

Nelly eyed me sharply, suspiciously, and, I may add, impudently, from head to foot and from foot to head; and then, turning quickly to her mistress, she said, with an angry fling:

"Does n't 'spect so."

"You don't think nothing's wrong, gal?" demanded the old woman, becoming alarmed.

"I's seed a great many, missus; but neber *him* — *dar* — dat's cl'ar!"

"Well," said I, "I come from Miss Flora Sebastian, and know all about the whole affair, and that is proof enough. Come, where is he? I must hurry this business through, for I am wanted elsewhere!"

Nelly spoke a few hasty words to the old woman, in a tone too low for me to distinguish them, and then ran out of the house. I stepped to the door, and saw her flying in the

direction of the stable. I called to her, but she would not stop nor answer.

I feared she either knew me, or suspected I was not sent there by Flora, and was now running for assistance. I would have followed and stopped her, only that I feared to leave the house, lest I should be bolted out and miss the chance of rescuing my friend, Ernest La Grange, whom I now believed to be in a drugged sleep in another apartment.

If my surmises were correct, it was all important that what I would do I must do quickly; and I suddenly closed the door with a bang, shot the bolt, and turned back for rapid and decisive action.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE TIMELY RESCUE.

YOU ain't what you purtend to be!" screamed the old woman; "and so out of here — git!"

"Mrs. Blodget," cried I, fiercely, producing one of my pistols, "do you want the devil to get you before his time?"

"Lud sakes! don't kill me!" she prayed, clasping her hands in terror.

"Then help me get this young gentleman away before any one interferes with my design, or your life will not be worth a rush-light!"

"You hain't got no time to lose then," she returned, with a frightened look, "for Nelly's gone fur help!"

"Quick, then!" cried I, "lead the way!"

"You'll find him in that yere room!"

"Open the door and go first! I shall not trust you out of my sight!"

She did as I bade her, and I followed close on her heels.

The room was small and dark, the only light in it coming through the door by which we entered, for the shutter of its only window was closed. I could see it was furnished better than the other apartment, as if used for a parlor and bedroom both. It contained a bed, a table, two or three chairs and a settee, and had a rag carpet on the floor.

All this I took in at a glance. The human figure, stretched out on the settee, arrested and fixed my whole attention. I flew to it, bent over it, and saw it was my friend, Ernest La Grange, in a deep, heavy sleep, his clothes unchanged, and a pillow under his head, as if he had carefully laid himself down there.

I did not wait for ceremony; but at once seized hold of him, and shook him roughly, exclaiming:

"Up, Ernest! up, and come with me! for there is danger here — danger, if not death! Ernest! Ernest! up! up! awake! awake!"

I shook him hard all the while I was speaking; but he still slept on — a dull, heavy, stupid sleep.

"Woman," cried I, turning fiercely upon the old hag, who seemed not a little alarmed, "if this gentleman has been murdered by your cursed drugs, I will have every life concerned in the foul deed!"

"He's only sleeping!" she answered, trembling from head to foot.

I dragged him from the settee to the floor, and rolled and shook him in a most vigorous manner. How precious seemed every moment that he was thus unconsciously sleeping away! for in what fearful peril did we both stand! I could not know when the black girl would return, with the person or persons she had gone to seek, and how was I to get him away unless he could aid himself?

"Quick!" cried I to the old woman; "water here! water!"

"There ain't a blessed drap in this yere house this yere

minute!" she answered; "but I'll run out and git some!"

"No!" said I, fiercely; "sit down there! you don't stir a step out of my sight!"

I thought of the milk which had been left in the other room, sprung in and got it, and dashed it into the face of my friend, in such a manner that it partly choked him. He strangled, coughed, and threw out his arms somewhat wildly. I seized hold of him again, and jerked him up and down, this way and that, calling him by name, and bidding him, for God's sake, rouse up before he should be murdered!

At last he opened his eyes, with a somewhat flushed face, and stared at me like one stupidly bewildered.

"Ernest! Ernest! awake! arouse! awake!" I cried. "Do you not know me — your friend — Leslie Walbridge?"

"Ha!" he muttered at length, thickly and gutturally; "Leslie — is it — you? what do you — want?"

"Up! arouse! awake! away! for there is danger here! — they want to murder you!"

He stared at me, as if he heard but did not clearly comprehend, and then looked fixedly at the old woman, who sat trembling in the chair into which I had ordered her, and then gazed stupidly around the room. I did not cease my exertions to arouse him — still shaking and talking at the same time — for I felt that a moment's relaxation might permit him to sink back into the same heavy stupor in which I had found him.

He now began to gather his senses by slow degrees; and at length, to my unspeakable joy, demanded, in an almost natural tone:

"Why, Leslie, what is the matter? What has happened?"

"You have been ensnared, Ernest!" I hurriedly replied; "drugged — put to sleep — and your very life depends upon your rousing yourself at once and getting away from this devil's hole!"

He rubbed his hands over his face and eyes, and, with my assistance, started up to his feet, saying, as he looked quickly and eagerly around him:

"I don't half understand this yet! Where is Flora? Miss Sebastian?"

"Gone to get some of her father's cutthroats to take you prisoner! She drugged your coffee, and put you in a stupid sleep, intending to have you conveyed away from here before you could wake again. Her father is the captain of the desperadoes that have long been prowling about this region. I have discovered all. It was he and Flora that caused the kidnapping of Alice Brandon, so providentially rescued by me."

"Gracious Heaven! what do you say? Am I awake now? or do I dream?"

"You are awake now, Ernest — you do not dream — I tell you the fearful truth — and oh! arouse all your senses, all your faculties, and get away from this devil's den before it be too late! Even now the black girl of this old beldam here has gone to get help, to prevent the escape of both — perhaps to murder us!"

"Do you hear this? and is it true?" cried Ernest, now fully aroused to his danger and turning fiercely upon the old woman.

"Thar — thar — don't —"

"Ha! I remember now — you were sick — and Flora and I sat up with you! Was that a sham? Speak! quick! before I get wild and wring your neck!"

"The truth, Mrs. Blodget!" cried I, flourishing one of my pistols; "the truth! unless you want to die!"

She fell down on her knees, and held up her aged, shrivelled, trembling hands imploringly.

"She axed me to do it, and what could I say to her as had sich power?" she answered, deprecatingly.

"Who asked you to do it?" demanded Ernest.

"Miss Flora."

"Then it is all true? you confess to all?"

"Thar! don't kill me, good dear!"

"The truth, or I will!"

"Yes, I confess to all."

"And what was to have been done with me?"

"I don't know that yar — 'deed I doesn't!"

"Come on, Ernest!" said I, taking hold of his arm; "we are in danger here! I can tell you the rest. Let us hurry away while we can! Where is your horse?"

He rubbed his temples, as if still a little confused, and then answered:

"I put him in the stable."

"Quick, then — come with me! I hope we shall find him there now, for we shall need him. I fear, however, that girl may have had something to do with him, for she went in that direction! Have you your pistols with you?"

Ernest felt for them, but they were gone.

"I had them before I went to sleep," he cried, turning fiercely upon the old woman, "but they are gone now, and I have been robbed."

"No, I jest tuk 'em, afeard you 'd hurt your blessed self!" returned Mrs. Blodget. "I'll git 'em for you."

I kept by her side while she went into the other room and took them down from behind some dishes which she kept on a shelf. I examined and found them still loaded; but I shook out the old priming and put in some fresh, and by that time Ernest was ready to accompany me. I would have stopped longer, to question the old woman closely about many things which she might have been able to throw light on, but I did not think it best to remain another minute in a place so every way perilous. I therefore ordered her not to show herself at the door, nor call out, at the risk of being shot; and, taking the arm of Ernest, I hurried him away toward the stable. On the way thither, I discovered that

he walked unsteadily, with a staggering motion, and he complained of severe pains in his head. I told him to rouse up every faculty, and shake off his ailments with his whole will, for on his active exertions his life now depended.

To our great satisfaction we found the horse of Ernest in the stable, with the bridle and saddle where he had placed them himself, after he had consented, at Flora's earnest request, to pass the night with her under Dame Blodget's roof.

And here, to keep my narrative together in proper order, let me relate, in as few words as possible, what I subsequently learned, of the manner in which the artful Flora Sebastian had managed to deceive and ensnare my friend.

From the time he had left her father's house in her company, up to the period of his forgetfulness, no girl or woman had ever made herself more fascinating. In fact, so great had been her powers in this respect, and so sweetly charming her blandishments, that Ernest frankly confessed himself in danger then of forgetting his engagement to Alice Brandon, though her name had once or twice been mentioned by the artful Flora in gentle praise. During their ride across a lonely country, she had been all life and animation, exerting every power she possessed to please and charm, and with such effect that they had reached their destination ere he had supposed himself half way there. She had entered the house alone, requesting him to take the horses down to the stable and feed them, saying there was no man-servant about the place. On entering the house himself, he had found the old woman lying on a bed, in one corner of the first apartment, apparently very weak and in great pain, with the black girl kneeling beside her and crying, and the tender-hearted Flora sitting in a chair and holding one of her hands. On feeling her pulse he had fancied her feverish, and regretted he had come to visit her without his medicines, which had been left at home. There were some nostrums in the house, however, which the dame declared had once or twice relieved

her during a similar attack, and he had ventured to give her one of these—after which she had apparently fallen into a quiet sleep.

To make a long story short, Flora had persuaded him to remain there with her all night, and had continued her fascinations in so successful a manner, that, to use his own words, he had quite fallen in love with her. At daylight the black girl had made some excellent coffee, and set before him and Flora some plain but palatable food. They had both eaten and drank, and he remembered nothing afterward till awakened by me from his lethargic sleep.

What Flora intended to do with my friend in the end, I can only surmise. She was madly in love with him, and her design probably was to have him carried off by the outlaws, so that she could secure him to herself. Perhaps she herself had no fixed design beyond getting him completely in her power, to be governed in the future by the circumstances which might arise.

As it was important that Ernest should know what strange events had happened since we had parted the day previous at Captain Sebastian's, I hurriedly and briefly narrated the facts, while we busied ourselves in putting the saddle and bridle upon his horse.

"Gracious Heaven!" he at length exclaimed; "can all this be true?"

"Every word, Ernest."

"And I, like a simple fool, idling my time away, with that guilty wretch of a girl, while all my friends were in peril!"

"And are still, I fear!"

"Oh, let us away from here! and home, home, with all speed! Fool, fool, have I been!"

"Nay, do not blame yourself, Ernest! You did but act as any gentleman might under the circumstances. You had faith in the girl."

"And but for you, I should have been carried off, a help-

less prisoner, and perhaps all my friends murdered in their beds! Stupid fool that I was, to be so criminally blind!"

"Do not stand here accusing yourself because you did not know more, for only by accident, or Providence, did I discover what I have revealed!"

"Gracious God! to think of the volcano that has been burning and seething beneath us! and we living on in such innocent, unconscious simplicity! To think that the high-toned Sebastian, one of the trusted leaders of the Regulators, should be the captain of a band of desperadoes! and his beautiful and accomplished daughter a vile accomplice! Ah, my friend, I can scarcely credit the statement, even coming from your lips."

"Well, let us waste no time here in words! You will soon have evidence, I fear, of a more terrible nature! There, your horse is ready for mounting; and now let us away! Mine, or rather Miss Flora's, is tied back here in the bushes; and I will try to keep you company, though I confess I feel very weak and faint."

"Good Heaven, Leslie, you are ill!" cried Ernest, as his eye now fell upon me; "you are as white as a sheet and trembling like an aspen!"

I did now indeed feel very sick and faint; and but for the necessity of keeping up, to save my life and the lives of my friends, I should have yielded at once and thrown myself down where I was. I started to leave the stable, in which we had saddled the horse, and found my head swimming and limbs staggering. I should have fallen but for the support of Ernest, who, as he threw his arm around me, exclaimed, in alarm:

"My dear, dear friend, you are really ill!"

"Don't be alarmed!" I said. "I shall do very well, I think, after I get to my horse."

I had scarcely uttered the words, when I was seized with a violent chill, and shook so that all my teeth rattled.

"Oh, merciful Heaven!" he exclaimed; "I fear you are attacked with fever! If you get sick here, what will become of us?"

"Mount and ride for your life!" I managed to say, though every word was literally shaken out of me. "Go! go! don't stay for me; but get to Colonel Brandon's with all speed, and tell them all you know! You may be in time to save them!"

"But I must take you with me, my dear friend! I will not leave you here to perish!"

"I fear I am not able to sit my horse, Ernest."

"Oh, for God's sake, rouse yourself, with all your will, as you told me, and throw this sickness off!"

"Alas! it seems as if I have no will left!" said I, despairingly.

"I will take you up in front of me and hold you."

"And the attempt will cause us both to fail!" said I, feeling that I could not make any further effort, even to save my life. "No, no, Ernest—for the love of God, ride away while you can and save our friends! Every minute now is precious! That black girl will soon be back with the party she has gone to seek, and then I fear it will be too late!"

"No, no, Leslie—I will not leave you!"

"Then we shall both perish instead of one, and all will be lost!"

"Come, come—let me help you on the horse! Oh, do, do, my dear friend, make the trial!"

I was now shaking so violently, and felt so utterly prostrated, that I did not even reply to him. He hurriedly took off his coat and wrapped it around me, and thus tried to impart to me some warmth. It did no good, however. I shook and shook, in every nerve, muscle, and bone. The chill lasted some five minutes longer—precious minutes—and then it was followed by a burning heat, a hot, dry skin, bounding pulse, hurried breathing, and intense thirst. I

knew I was now the victim of a raging fever, of an inflammatory type; and, under the circumstances, I feared I should never behold the face of another friend in this world.

While Ernest was talking to me, in accents of despair, pleading for me to keep up for an hour or two longer, we were both startled at hearing voices.

"There," groaned I, "I fear all is lost even now!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

PARTING AND MEETING.

ERNEST sprung to the door of the stable, closed it, and peeped out through some chinks.

"The Lord deliver us!" he ejaculated, in a low, anxious tone. "Here comes a party of eight or ten mounted men—strangers—some of them quite ruffianly-looking fellows! What is to be done?"

"For God's sake, fly while you can, Ernest!"

"And leave you, Leslie, after all you have done for me? Never! never! never!"

"But you cannot aid me against them, and we shall both be taken!"

"So be it then! Better die with honor than live in disgrace!"

"But our friends—your father, mother, Alice, Cora—think of them, Ernest!"

"You have already warned them, Leslie, and more I could not do if I were to desert you. But these men may not stop here after all. They are heading this way, it is true; but their business is probably beyond, with the others you mentioned. Can we not secrete ourselves somewhere?"

Yes — there is a quantity of hay piled up yonder — let us hide ourselves in the middle of that. Come, Leslie, I will assist you."

It would be a terrible thing to fall into the hands of a gang of ruffians, and I made a desperate effort to avoid it. Assisted by my friend, I was soon mounted upon the hay. He was about to follow, when it occurred to me, that if these fellows should stop and look into the stable, and find the horse saddled, they would be more likely to search for us than if there were nothing on his back and he hitched by a mere halter. I hurriedly whispered this to Ernest, and asked him if there was time to strip the beast before being discovered.

"At least I will make the effort," he answered, in the same cautious manner, and at once set about the task.

The voices every moment now grew louder, and I trembled lest Ernest should not have time to finish his work before they should be upon him.

"Here's a stable, and thar's a house," I presently heard one of them say; "let's see what's inside of 'em."

"No, come on," returned another; "we've got no time to stop. If Kingston gits in ahead of us, we'll be blamed."

"Thar won't no hurt come of jest looking in," rejoined the first speaker, "and I'm agwine to do it."

Just at this moment Ernest appeared on the mow; and hurrying back to one corner, we threw ourselves down together, and pulled the hay well over us. There we lay, perfectly quiet, half holding our breaths, and listening intently. A burning fever was on me still, and I prayed that the ague might not return and thus lead to my discovery.

The stable door was shortly after thrown open, and we heard a voice say, with an oath:

"A good-looking horse here, by ——!"

"Well, come on, Dan — we've nothing to do with that — we can't be robbing people round yere in the daytime!" said another.

"Hollo, wench! who do you belong to?" we now heard called out by a different speaker and in better language.

"In dar yar — Missus Blodget," we heard answered in the voice of Nelly. "I says, marsers, ain't you ob *dem*?"

"Who, wench? We don't understand signs."

"Marser Guido — hah?"

"Ha! do you know him?"

"Guess I does — some."

"She one of them too?" probably referring to Dame Blodget.

"Reckon, sar! If you's der capyin, I's got so'thing to tell yar private."

"This way then."

What was further said between these two we could not hear; but as Nelly had run off to get help, I supposed it to be something concerning ourselves; and, to confess the truth, I felt a good deal alarmed.

Soon after this the men all started on, and all once more became quiet around the stable.

"Thank God, they have left us!" ejaculated Ernest, with a long breath of relief.

"If they do not return."

"How do you feel now, Leslie?"

"I am sorry to say, no better. And you, Ernest?"

"I had almost forgotten myself, in thinking of you, my friend. My head is still rather giddy; but if you can only hold out till we reach our friends, I shall do very well."

It was such a relief to rest myself there in the hay, that I did not feel like making an immediate attempt to resume my journey. There were a few minutes of such peaceful quiet, that, in spite of my fever, I began to lose myself in sleep, when Ernest startled me with the words:

"Hark! I do believe the scoundrels are coming back to search for us — probably directed hither by the old woman or the black girl! Hush! not a breath now!"

We could now hear some three or four persons talking together, and presently the stable-door was again thrown open.

"You see, if they'd come yere," said a gruff voice, "it 'ud ben for the hoss, and they'd a put bridle and saddle on to him. No, the old woman's mistook — they've put off afoot."

"We mought s'arch the building anyhow," suggested another.

"What's the use, Dan? They got off a right smart bit ago, and they wouldn't be hiding yere 'fore anybody come about to skeer 'em. No, sir — they'd ben a fixing up the hoss, and we'd a found him all ready to travel."

"In course we would," put in a third.

"Wall, I'm agwine to take a look," persisted the one called Dan.

"Just you hunt away then, whilst we takes the hoss and gits."

Presently we heard the horse led out of the stable, and at the same time became aware that some one had mounted the mow where we were. We felt that the critical moment for us had now arrived, and we fairly held our breaths with intense anxiety. Should we be discovered, all would be lost, and the man searching for us was within a few feet of us. We could hear him moving about on the mow, and presently his foot pressed the hay down beside my face. I felt sure now that all was lost; but fortunately we were well covered; and one of his comrades called to him at the same moment, saying that they were about to push on.

"Ay! ay!" he answered, and immediately hurried away.

Even then I was not sure he had not discovered us and gone to inform his companions of the fact, nor did I breathe freely till I heard him tell the others we were not in the barn, and the voices of all gradually died away in the distance.

"Saved, thank God!" I whispered then.

"Thank God indeed!" returned Ernest. "And yet, Les-

lie, but for your forethought, in having the beast stripped, we should surely have been discovered! Ah, me! what is to be done now that they have carried off my horse?"

"Perhaps the other may be left for you, Ernest; and if so, you must leave me and ride to Colonel Brandon's with all speed!"

"But how can I leave you, Leslie?"

"What good can you accomplish by remaining, Ernest? I am weak and ill as it is; and if I get worse, what can you do for me here? No, go, and tell our friends all, and then you can send a party for me."

"But can you not go with me now, Leslie?"

"I dare not attempt it, my friend. I am completely exhausted for one thing, and feel that I must have some sleep. If I were to set out now, I might faint by the way and find myself in a worse place; and I should, even at the best, be a great hindrance to you. No, no, my dear friend — go on, if you are able, and send me assistance as soon as you can. Do not be alarmed about me! I feel comparatively comfortable where I am, and I am almost certain a few hours of sleep will be of great benefit to me."

I still had considerable difficulty in persuading my friend to leave me, but at last succeeded. He shook hands with me, with tears in his eyes, and said, in a choking voice:

"God bless you, Leslie! It pains me to the heart to leave you thus — but necessity compels. Keep up your courage, do not despair, and I will soon get assistance to you."

"Be very, very cautious, Ernest, not to fall into the hands of these desperadoes, who seem to be all about the country, gathering from all quarters for their wicked work! God grant that we may be able to foil and punish them! There — Heaven be with you! Good-bye! good-bye!"

He pressed my hand in silence and turned away. In another minute he had gone, and I was again alone.

Soon after Ernest's departure, I was seized with another

violent chill, which lasted some five minutes; but I was thankful he was not present, lest he might have refused to leave me at all. My clothes were still wet; but the hay around me had a comfortable feel; and after all the fatigue, excitements and perils I had passed through, I thanked God that my present situation was no worse. I did not in the least despair. I felt that I should eventually pass safely through all my troubles to the happy scenes for which we all seek in this world — whether high or low, rich or poor, old or young — though the ends sought may be as various as the individuals, and the means to attain them as different as each from the other.

The ague was again succeeded by a fever heat, some pains, and such a burning thirst that I determined to quench it. I remembered having seen a cattle trough in the yard — an old log hollowed out, and now of course full of water — and at the risk of discovery I resolved to reach it and drink my fill. I had not touched a morsel of food since my supper the night before at Colonel Brandon's; but I had no appetite now — only a wild desire for drink — and so intense was this that I thought, if I were about to be put to death, with only one request to be granted me in this world, I would ask for water. I remembered, too, the raging thirst of the old negro Cato, and the beneficial effects that had followed the gratification of his desire, and I now determined to satisfy my own, hoping of course for a similar result.

Accordingly, I crawled out of the hay and went to the door, feeling weak and giddy. The rain was still falling, but not so fast, and the clouds were beginning to break, as if the storm were coming to an end. All was still around, and no person in sight. I reached the trough, and drank, and drank, till I was satisfied. Then I crawled back to my bed in the hay, and soon after fell asleep, my last thought being of Cora Brandon.

I slept for several hours, and awoke in great perspiration,

still feeling weak, but considerably refreshed in body and mind. The storm had cleared away, and the sun of midday was now shining beautifully, as I could see through the crevices of the log structure. A ray of sunlight even streamed down upon the spot where I lay, as if to give me hope and comfort. I now felt comparatively comfortable where I was, but with no disposition to stir from my quiet bed.

What of Ernest La Grange? Had he escaped? had he reached Colonel Brandon's? and if there, what excitement would be caused by his narration! and would not one heart beat quicker than all others to hear of my adventures and misfortune? Had the Regulators already assembled there in sufficient numbers to sally forth on the offensive? and would they or others come immediately to my rescue?

There was a secret satisfaction in feeling that I should be missed, and that one heart at least would tremble for my safety. Ah! it is sweet to feel, even in the depths of woe, that the one living being, whom we prize above all others, is sorrowing with us, though that very sorrow in turn cause us a pang of regret.

I fell asleep again, and had troubled dreams; and when I awoke the second time, the sun was far down toward the western horizon. I did not feel worse than before, and I fancied I was stronger — that perhaps I might venture to set out on my homeward journey. It seemed like a great undertaking, however, and I was by no means certain my strength would carry me safely through. My pulse still indicated considerable fever, my mouth felt parched, and my skin dry and hot. And yet there was less of apathy, less of prostration, and more of a desire to move.

I finally rose to my feet; but everything swam around me, my sight grew dim, and I fell back with a shaking chill.

From that time, for several hours, I lost all recollection. Perhaps I was in a state of stupor — perhaps delirious — at least I was unconscious.

I next remember of finding myself in utter darkness, and hearing voices speaking in low, hushed tones. Then there seemed to be the opening of a door, and I distinguished the words, coming from the lips of my friend:

"Gracious God! if he should not be here!"

I heard all this — for my hearing seemed to be very acute — and yet in such a condition was my mind, that I fancied the sounds were miles away, and had been made a long time before they reached me.

"Leslie, my dear friend, are you here?" was now anxiously spoken by Ernest La Grange.

"Pshaw!" thought I; "what is the use of his asking me such a question as that, and he miles away? Of course I am here, wherever it be, and any fool might know it; but if I attempt to call out loud enough to send my voice back to him, I shall be as big a fool as he, and I will not do it."

"Leslie! Leslie! do you hear me?"

"Ay, ay — well enough!" I thought; "but if you expect me to reply to you, you will be disappointed, unless you have the good sense to come nearer. I at least am no fool if you are."

"Oh, my God!" I heard him groan; "why did I leave him? Perhaps he has become delirious and run off — perhaps they have captured him — perhaps he is dead!"

"He may be asleep!" suggested another voice.

"At least I will soon know the worst," replied Ernest; and I heard him mount the hay and come toward me.

Then it was, without yet comprehending where I was, or what was my condition, I was suddenly seized with the strange idea that he had become a robber and come to murder me; and if I could have got away from him, I should have done so.

The next moment he was feeling in the hay, and his hand laid hold of me. Instinctively I tried to shrink away from his touch.

"Ah, God be praised! he is here and alive!" I heard him exclaim.

"Die, devil!" I shouted, suddenly feeling myself impelled to grapple with him with all my strength.

My mad desire now was to seize him by the throat and strangle him; and had we been left to ourselves, I fear I should have accomplished my horrible design. I did get him by the throat, and bore him back upon the hay, with myself uppermost.

"Help! help! he is mad — furious — he is choking me!" I heard him exclaim.

Others sprung forward to his assistance, and I felt myself seized and overpowered, and my arms finally pinioned, though I all the time fought like a tiger.

At last I resolved to struggle no more, but quietly yield to my fate.

Then they took me up and carried me out into the open air, where there were many others who came up and surrounded me; and I heard those in charge of me tell the others what had happened, and express sorrow for my condition, and say I was wildly delirious.

"Fools!" thought I, "how little you know of the condition of a gentleman!"

Then lights flashed around me, and I saw two ladies walking near me whom I recognized, Alice and Cora Brandon, and one was weeping. The sight affected me strangely; and then I thought they were two angels sent from Heaven to save me, and I cried out:

"God bless you, sweet ministering spirits!"

They bore me into the house of Dame Blodget (though I knew not where it was then), and laid me on a bed; and a fiend came and drew blood from my arm; and the ministering spirits came and hovered over me; and I began to feel happy; and at last I fell into a sweet and tranquil sleep, and dreamed of love and Cora Brandon.

CHAPTER XXV.

CAPTORS AND CAPTIVES.

TIME unnoted is nothing to us. A moment is the same as a million of years—a million of years the same as a moment.

I was not altogether unconscious, but my mind was not in a state to measure duration. There were sweet sounds, and harsh sounds, and no sounds at all. There were comings and goings, as in a troubled dream—faces of friends and faces of foes—light and darkness, and a wild whirl of confusion. And out of the confusion comes the recollection of hearing angry voices, the sharp rattle of firearms, the screams of women and shouts of men. Then follows that half-consciousness of being, in which we know we exist but have no reason—in which a man may turn into a beast and afford us not even the emotion of surprise. After that I opened my eyes upon the startling scene I am now going to describe.

I was stretched out on a sort of rude litter, under the cover of a large, old building, that had once been used as a kind of storehouse, but was now fast falling to decay. Above me it was open to the rafters, and in the roof was many a crevice, through which the sunlight of a lovely day was pouring in long, silver streams. In front of me, on a rude bench, sat Cora Brandon, with her sweet face bent forward and covered by her hands, weeping bitterly. To the left of her stood Alice Brandon, in a queenly attitude, her arms folded across her breast, and a stern, proud, haughty expression on her classic features. Her eyes were fixed upon the stern, proud, haughty, but still beautiful, face of Flora Sebastian, who, with her arms also folded, was slowly pacing to and fro, a little to my right. Grouped a little further

back, were several rough, villanous-looking fellows, two of whom, with short rifles or carbines in their hands, were carelessly watching a game of cards, which was being played by some three or four others, who were squatted down on the floor. Beyond these again were other forms stretched out, as if they might be asleep or dead, but the light in that direction did not permit me to see anything distinctly.

All this I took in at a single glance, without even turning my head; but it is needless to say that I was too completely bewildered to comprehend anything—even to know whether I was asleep or awake, dreaming or seeing.

"That's my trick, by ——! and that's game!" were the first words I heard spoken.

"We can dispense with your swearing here, sir!" said Flora Sebastian, rather sternly.

"Yes, don't go and make a —— fool of yourself, Jim, afore the cap'in's darter!" returned the first speaker's opponent, in a tone of reproof.

"Shut up, Bill—you's as bad's him!" said one of the two who were standing up.

"Consarn it all, this ere hurts like all git out!" I next heard spoken, in the well-known voice of Caleb Stebbins. "I say, you—Miss Flora—can't you jest let one of them are fellers loosen this ere cord a bit? It's putting my arms tu sleep—I snum, it is—that's a fact!"

"Shut your Yankee meat-trap," growled one of the ruffians, "or I'll guv yer so'thing as 'll put the hull of yer to sleep, so's you won't wake agin afore Gabriel guvs his last blow!"

This was followed by a general laugh on the part of the villains; but Caleb still ventured to whine out:

"Great ginger! I should think you might neow! I say, Peter, du your cords hurt you?"

"Vell, s'pose as dey does?" answered the Dutchman, in a surly tone; "I dinks it was no good for keeps dalking already."

All this was a mystery to me—the more perplexing that I had been unconscious and delirious—hearing something and understanding nothing—unable to separate the real from the false—and could not remember connectedly what had preceded the present. I knew Alice, Cora, Flora, Caleb, and Peter—I could name them all, as persons I had met—Alice as a friend, Cora as a very dear, sweet friend, Flora as something different and misty, and Caleb and Peter as passing acquaintances—and though they all seemed mixed up in some way that concerned me, I could not tell how, or what it was, or why I should be lying there myself so weak and mystified.

“What is it all?” I thought; and involuntarily I spoke the words aloud, and drew the eyes of the three maidens upon me.

Flora stopped in her walk and faced me; and Cora dropped her hands, raised her head, and gazed anxiously at me through her tears.

“I do believe he is in his right mind!” said Cora, in a low tone, clasping her hands. “May I speak to him, Miss Flora?”

Flora turned and looked at her, and answered, with a half-suppressed sigh:

“If you wish.”

“Be careful and not excite him!” whispered Alice.

Cora approached me, with anxious timidity, her blue eyes looking so sweetly, so lovingly, into mine, that I felt as if she were bringing me the blessed peace and happiness of heaven. My very soul seemed to go out to meet hers, and I felt that she somehow belonged to me, was a part of my own being, and this without any distinct remembrance of the past. She came up and gently took my hand, and the very touch thrilled me with joy.

“Leslie, my dear friend, do you know me?” she asked, in a low, gentle tone; and I fancied her voice was the sweetest music that had ever reached my ears.

“Know you? certainly!” I answered, though it seemed as if I spoke only by exerting all my will. “You are my dear, sweet friend, Cora Brandon!”

“Ah, God be praised! he has his reason again!” she exclaimed, with a gleam of joy.

She seemed to have spoken from sudden impulse, without reflection, forgetful of the present—for the next moment she brought her hands together, turned deadly pale, and murmured, in a low tone, as if to herself:

“Perhaps it would have been better if he had never known!”

“Where did we meet last, my dear friend?” I queried, still unable to connect the events of the past with her name.

“The last time that you really knew me,” she answered, in a low, tremulous tone of deep emotion, “was at my father’s house.”

“Your father’s house?”

“You remember Colonel Brandon, do you not?”

“Oh, yes—the name is quite familiar. Stop! let me see! Ah, yes—I have it now—I remember seeing you there. How long ago was that?”

“It was night before last.”

“And where was I last night?”

“You fell sick in the barn, and we found you wildly delirious, and carried you into a log shanty, and had you bled, and watched over you all night.”

“And what then?”

“This morning we had a litter constructed, and were carrying you home, when we were set upon by—by—the friends of Miss Flora Sebastian, and overpowered, and we are all here now as her prisoners.”

“But this is Miss Flora Sebastian!” said I, glancing at the haughty girl, as she stood looking on, with folded arms.

“You know me also, then, do you?” she said, with something like a sneer.

"Oh, yes, I remember you."

"And when and where you saw me last?"

"For Heaven's sake, do not excite him, Miss Sebastian!" interposed Alice.

"If you please, Miss Brandon, I am mistress here!" returned Flora, with a haughty bow; "and I beg you will not forget your place and attempt to dictate to me!"

"Kill him, then, if you want his blood on your soul!" retorted Alice, with a stern flash of her dark eye.

"And if I should, perhaps it would be no more than a just punishment for what he has done!"

What had I done? I tried to recollect, but all was confusion. There were lingering impressions of anxiety and trouble, but I could connect them with nothing definite.

Flora again addressed me.

"Do you remember when and where we last met and parted?"

"I do not," I answered.

"Shall I tell you?"

"If you please."

Cora turned a silent, but imploring, look upon the bandit's daughter; and the latter paused, and seemed to soften, as she met her tearful eyes.

"Shall I not?" she asked.

"If you will please to grant me this favor!" said Cora; and there was an angel's pleading tenderness in her sweet voice.

Flora looked at her steadily for a short time, during which she seemed to be making an effort to call up all her sterner, harsher nature; and then, half turning her head aside, as if ashamed of her weakness, she said:

"Be it so! You make a fool of me. I can, it seems, refuse *you* nothing!"

The next moment, ere she was aware, the soft arms of Cora were around the erring girl's neck, and the pure kiss of an angel was imprinted on her cheek.

The first impulse of the surprised Flora seemed to be to clasp the other to her heart; (which, it is but justice to say, was far from being all evil;) but, as if suddenly remembering her position, and the wide gulf that yawned between them — between innocence and guilt — she drew herself up haughtily, and said, with stern harshness:

"Girl, you forget yourself!"

"Indeed you *did*, Cora!" exclaimed Alice.

"Silence!" stamped Flora, as if glad to find some one to quarrel with; and she wheeled upon the elder sister, with the same fierce look I had seen once before, when in her anger she would have slain me.

Strange as it may seem, that one single look appeared to sweep a cloud from my brain, and let in the past as a startling glare of light. In a moment, as it were, everything that had happened to my knowledge, up to the time when, after my delirium, I had fallen asleep on the bed in the cabin of Dame Blodget, was clearly before my recollection, and I now comprehended that we were prisoners indeed, and our very lives depending perhaps on the whim of a guilty girl. The sudden remembrance came with too great a shock for my then weak, unnerved system to bear up against, and I fainted as I lay.

When consciousness again returned, after the lapse of a few minutes, one of my hands was held by the weeping Cora; and Alice had one of hers gently pressed upon my forehead; while Flora, with folded arms, was pacing to and fro, as I had seen her at first.

"Dry your tears, dear angel — I am better now!" I whispered to Cora.

"Oh, Leslie," she returned, in a voice that was music to my soul, "you must not speak! — the least exertion may prove *fa* — may overcome you!"

"And yet, dear girl," I replied, "it will be better for me to know some things than to remain in my present state of

uncertainty, my mind tortured with the most fearful conjectures. Up to the time I was bled, I now remember nearly everything, even my attempt to kill my friend in my delirium; it was indeed the sudden recollection of all this which just now overpowered my senses; and now for you to tell me the rest — all that has happened since — will be a benefit rather than an injury."

Cora turned pleadingly to Flora.

"May I tell him?" she asked.

"Girl," answered Flora, sternly, with a settled frown on her brow, as she stopped and looked at both of us, "what are you and he to me, save as security for the safety of my father in case he be taken alive? What do your affairs concern me now? If he now remembers the past, as he says, he knows now that we have changed places — that I am not in *his* power now, but he in *mine* — and that, to receive justice at my hands, he should be punished with death!"

"Oh, mercy! mercy!" pleaded Cora, clasping her hands.

"Tell him what you like!" said Flora, turning abruptly away, and retiring to a distant part of the building.

And while all these things had been taking place with us, the ruffians on the floor had been playing their cards, and talking and laughing among themselves, the two with carbines seeming to act as a sort of guard. The male prisoners — of whom there were now four, all bound — I could dimly see just beyond; but from these latter came no word of complaint, with the single exception of Caleb Stebbins, who occasionally whined out against his hard fate, and piteously begged to have his cords loosened, though he was only noticed with words of derision.

These, however, were not all of either party, as I soon learned. Two of the bandits were stationed outside of the building as sentries, and a third was keeping watch over three of Colonel Brandon's negroes, who were confined in a

small apartment. There had been four of the latter, acting as bearers of my litter, under charge of a white overseer; but one of these, and the overseer, had been killed by the desperadoes in their attack on us.

I will now relate, in something like regular order, and briefly as I can, the stirring events that had taken place, as I learned them from the gentle Cora.

After leaving me at the stable or barn, Ernest La Grange had succeeded in reaching Colonel Brandon's a little past noon. He had found his father there, with a number of the Regulators, and others fast dropping in. His intelligence had caused great excitement, and ended in a resolve to march upon the bandits in their stronghold, and attack them either that night or the next morning. A smaller party, consisting in part of negroes, had been formed to go for me; and this party, in spite of all remonstrance, Alice and Cora had insisted upon accompanying. Ernest had acted as guide to both. On their way they had met Caleb Stebbins, who reported that he had kept Flora from getting back to her friends till a body of the ruffians, (probably the same who had nearly caught us at the barn,) had frightened him off; after which he had wandered about till he had fallen in with the Regulators. As he happened then to be no more eager for bloody deeds than when I left him, he of course had united with the party going to rescue me, being quite anxious about my health. This smaller party had separated from the main body when within a mile or so of the house of Dame Blodget, who it was supposed had with her servant gone off with the ruffians. Ernest had guided the smaller party to the house, and subsequently left them there and returned to the Regulators, since which nothing had been heard of him.

In the morning my friends had set out to take me to Colonel Brandon's, and had only gone about three miles, when they had been assailed and captured by a small band of

ruffians, who, with Flora Sebastian at their head, had been flying across the country. Why she had been so flying, with such ruffians, at such a time, away from her father and without a companion of her own sex, she had been frank enough to tell Alice. An attack had that morning been made upon the underground stronghold of the bandits by the Regulators, and she feared her father and others who were there might be captured. She had seen this assault while guiding these men over from her own house, where she had spent the night, and had set off with them to make a capture of women and children, to hold as security for the release of her father in case he should be taken. As fate would have it, she had discovered our party, and we had fallen into her power—the men surrendering after the first fire of the outlaws, which had killed two and slightly wounded two others. An old building being near, we had been taken into it, and disposed of in the manner I have described; and from here Flora had at once sent off a messenger, a Spaniard, to get communication with her father if possible, and tell him what she had done; but in the event of his failing to reach the captain of banditti, he was to reconnoitre the position of the Regulators, gather what intelligence he could of the condition of both parties, and report to her at the earliest possible moment.

"Thus, my dear friend," said Cora, in conclusion, "you see in what peril we stand. Should anything happen to the father of this strange girl, she might give orders to have us all put to death."

"Hardly that, I think!" said I; "and yet I do not know. Alas," I groaned, "that I should be lying here so helpless, and you, my dear Cora, and your noble sister Alice, in the hands of such ruffians!"

"There! there! I knew I should excite you, dear Leslie, and I would rather not have told you!" returned Cora, as she marked the effects upon me of her narration.

"Do not attempt to rise," said Alice, gently pushing me back as I made an effort to sit up. "You could do nothing for us if you had your strength, and you will do yourself an injury now."

"Oh, that I had my strength, even though I were in bonds like those men!" rejoined I.

"Do not despair!—this may all be for the best. We are all in God's hands, as well as in those of His creatures!"

"How long has this messenger been gone?" I asked.

"Some two or three hours."

"He may soon return then?"

"At any minute."

"Has Flora threatened you?"

"No more than to say we should be held as security for the safety of her father."

"I must speak to her."

"Nay, dear Leslie," said Cora, in a sweet, tender tone, "do not exert or excite yourself in any way! I am so fearful it will make you worse!"

"God bless you, dear girl! I will try and be very calm, if only for your sweet sake!"

"Can I not speak to Miss Sebastian for you? For some reason she seems kinder to me than to any of the others."

"Nobody could be harsh to you, my sweet darling!"

"Hush! here she comes!" suddenly exclaimed Cora, putting her finger to her lips.

CHAPTER XXVI.

PERILOUS TIDINGS.

WITH folded arms, a bowed head, a heavy frown, and gloomy looks, Flora Sebastian, who had been out of hearing during Cora Brandon's narration of the events of the last thirty hours, came walking slowly back to the side of my litter-couch. I was watching to catch a glance of her eye, in order to address her, when she suddenly turned away to the men, who were still busy playing cards, and said, in a sharp, angry tone:

"Have you no other means of passing your time when your chief is in danger?"

The men stopped their game, and looked up in a rather confused and embarrassed sort of way, and one of them said:

"If you've any thing for us to do, we'll do it."

"I have nothing for you to do at present, except to look out that none of our prisoners escape, and we be not surprised!" returned Flora; "but the playing of cards at such a critical time, seems to indicate such reckless indifference concerning the fate of yourselves and comrades, that it annoys and vexes me!"

"Then we'll stop it, marm," answered one; "though we've ben used to the like in every sort o' fix; and hev played over the dead body of a comrade afore now, without meaning no disrespect, and not feeling none the less about his loss; but ef the thing don't please you, as I said afore, we'll stop it."

"You will oblige me by doing so, and then keeping a sharp lookout around us! The messenger I sent to my father should have been back before this, and I am impatient for the first news of his approach."

"I say, marm," put in another coarse voice, "I s'pose you'll jest let us play this yere game out, won't yer?"

"Shut up, Jim, and quit whar you is!"

"Yes, that's wall enough fur you, case you knows I'll win; but jest you fork over your half, and then we'll call it squar'!"

"Not as you knows on, by a —— sight!"

"I mought take it, you see, by rights."

"Wall, you won't!"

"Don't brag, or I'll try!"

"Come on then, and let's see you do it!"

"Come, come, men, no quarrelling!" interposed Flora. "Play out your game, if that is all you want, and then stop!"

"Them's 'em! — hoorah fur our cap'ins darter!"

"I say, you — Miss Sebastian!" called out the uneasy Yankee.

"Well, sir, what is it?"

"Why, this ere tarnal cord is cutting intu my wrists like all git eout! Great ginger! you can't think how it hurts!"

"Does it indeed?" said Flora.

"Wal, you'd better believe it now!"

"You wish to have it drawn tighter, I suppose?"

"Drawn thunder! Why, hain't you got no feeling?"

"Not for such distress as yours, sir! I have not forgotten how bravely you fought a defenceless woman, and kept her from getting back to her friends till you were frightened off!"

"Wal, I didn't tie you, did I? and didn't I keep t' other chap from duing it tew?"

"Never mind, sir; you will remain as you are for the present; and if you meet with no greater trouble, you will have reason to bless the saints."

"I ain't one of them kind — I ain't no Catholic now, I tell you."

"That is enough, sir!"

"Shall we gag him, marm?" said one of the ruffians.

"If he does not remain silent!" answered Flora, as she turned away.

She came back to my side, looked steadily at me, and said:

"Well, doctor, have you heard the whole story?"

"I suppose I have."

"What do you think of it?"

"That things come about strangely."

"Very strangely!" she said, looking at me in a wicked sort of way. "Do you know that, ever since you have been in my power, I have been strongly tempted to put you to death?"

"Oh, Miss Flora!" exclaimed Cora, clasping her hands in terror.

"And but for you, poor puss, I would do it yet!" she said, looking strangely at Cora. "Somehow," she pursued, "I have not the heart to punish you!"

"And why him?" asked Cora.

"Because he has brought all this trouble upon myself and father, as he boasted to me yesterday, when he had me in his power!" she almost hissed out, with a look of fury.

"Miss Sebastian," said I, "do you blame me for trying to save my friends?"

"You foiled me, sir, in every way, and I should not spare you now!"

"Oh, forgive him! forgive him! as you hope to be forgiven!" pleaded Cora.

"Hark you, one and all!" said Flora, drawing herself up with haughty fierceness; "in this extremity I have recorded a vow in heaven! It is this: If my father escape unharmed, you shall all go free; if he be captured and executed by the Regulators, not one of us shall escape death! I will see you all slain, and then die myself!"

"Oh, my God! my God!" groaned Cora, covering her face with her hands, as if seeking to shut out the horrible idea.

"Pray that my father may escape, girl!" said Flora, with a gloomy sternness, as she again began to pace to and fro.

"Would you punish these innocent girls for what others have done or may do?" said I. "Let your vengeance fall on me, if you must have a victim for bloody sacrifice, but spare those who have been your companions and friends for years and never lifted a hand against you!"

"You plead in vain, sir!" returned the stern, proud, beautiful girl; "my oath is registered in heaven! If you know any way to save my father, save him, for on his life depend yours and mine!"

"And that is revenge enough. Stop there—spare them!"

"Do not plead for my life, if yours is to be taken, dear Leslie!" exclaimed Cora, lifting her head boldly and placing her little trembling hand confidently in mine. "If you are to be murdered, let me be slain with you!"

"Ah, God bless you, sweet one! this is love!" I breathed out; and at that moment I would have given the world, had it been mine, for strength and power to bear her away and save her from the impending doom.

One of the sentries outside now called out something in Spanish, and Flora started, turned deadly pale, and involuntarily placed a hand upon her heart.

"My messenger is returning—I shall soon know," she exclaimed, and darted away.

The few minutes of fearful suspense that followed, were among the most painfully trying of my life. The thought that the man approaching was bringing intelligence that would either set us free or consign us to a bloody death, was terrible indeed! and none the less so to me, that I was lying there so weak and helpless, and could not lift a hand in

defence of her I so devotedly loved. Alice was pale, but proud, composed and firm; and my dear Cora showed none of the shrinking timidity I should have expected her to display. She was pale, and the hand still clasped in mine trembled, and her blue eyes were moist and loving, but the whole expression was rather as if she feared the loss of a dear friend than her own life.

"God bless you, sweet angel!" said I: "if I could but save you with the sacrifice of my own life!"

"I would not accept my life on such terms, dear Leslie!" she answered. "But try and be calm, my dear friend! try and be calm! Oh, I am so afraid this excitement will kill you, even if you escape the murderer's steel!"

The ruffians, with the exception of the two acting as a guard to the prisoners, now went to the door, and the two began to pace to and fro like sentinels, but with their attention often directed to a point which I could not see from where I lay. A deep silence then prevailed, every one listening intently.

Presently were heard the dull, pattering sounds of the feet of a horse being urged to his greatest speed. The beast came nearer, the sounds grew louder, and our hearts beat faster.

Miss Sebastian said something sharp, commanding, and decisive, in Spanish, and then returned with a quick step, and seated herself on the bench from which Cora had risen, almost in front of me. There was a fixed and fearful determination on her beautiful face, which had the rigid, pallid look of marble; and as I gazed at her, I felt certain she was just the one to keep her oath, even though it should require her own hand to deal the murderous blows.

The horse now dashed up, there were some loud words, several voices speaking in quick, excited tones, the hurried trampling of many feet, and then the ruffians came back, following close on the heels of a tall, slender, black-haired,

black-eyed, swarthy young man, whom I instantly recognized as one of the two fellows I had seen playing cards with Diego Gomez on the night of the murder of Edward Mason.

"In English, Lucio, that all may understand," said Miss Sebastian sternly, "for the fate of many here will depend upon your words. What of my father?"

"I did not get speech with him," answered the man, who spoke English very well, with only a slight foreign accent. "The fight was going on when I got in sight. I waited till I saw a sally made by a small party; which, after a fierce struggle, was overpowered, and all but one or two either killed or captured. Captain Guido was one of that party."

"Was my father killed, captured, or did he escape?" demanded Flora, with a dark frown and almost bloodless lips.

"He did not escape."

"Ha! killed?"

"Killed or captured—I think the latter."

She sprung to her feet, with the look of a furious Amazon, and glared around upon us.

"You hear!" she cried. "My father is in the hands of your friends. If *he* die, *you* die!"

"Then why not let a messenger be sent to the Regulators, informing them of our capture and detention here, and the conditions on which we are held?" said I. "If your father be a prisoner in their hands, Miss Sebastian, I doubt not they will give him his liberty for the lives of Colonel Brandon's daughters."

"Yes, yes—that are's the thing—that are's the thing!" called out Caleb Stebbins, who had not before spoken since the threat of the outlaws. "Jest let somebody go that can tell 'em all about it, and they'll be tarnal glad tu swap prisoners, I tell you! I'll go, this minute, if you'll let me."

"My one sole wish is to save my father," said Flora to me, slowly rubbing one hand over the other, in a manner

that denoted much internal emotion, "and I will do anything to accomplish it."

"I can du it—I snum, I can!" put in Caleb Stebbins, who was fairly trembling with the hope of liberation. "You see now, Miss Sebastian, it wants somebody that's got a great gift of gab, and that's me tu a p'int. I'd put the hull thing afore Colonel Brandon in tew minutes, and talk it right into him, I would. Come! what d'you say now? come!"

"You are sure my father was one of the party that made the sally, Lucio?" said Flora, addressing the Spaniard and taking no notice of the Yankee.

"I am sure, for I saw him!" was the positive answer.

"And you are also sure he did not escape?"

"I am."

"Was he mounted, or on foot?"

"Mounted. He and some eight or ten others, all mounted, came dashing out of the southern entrance, and broke through the line of Regulators that were guarding that point. They followed him, however, with wild shouts and a rapid discharge of firearms, and he was soon intercepted by a larger party, when a fierce fight ensued, and only two escaped. I only waited till I saw he was either killed or captured, and then I rode for my life to bring you the news."

"God help him! the saints help him!" groaned Flora, in great distress.

At this moment there came a wild shout from the sentries without, and Flora and the bandits rushed to the door.

"Ah, God of mercy!" we soon heard Flora exclaim; "it is my father! I should know him among a million by the way he sits his horse! He has escaped their clutches—he is heading this way—he will outrun his pursuers! But he does not know that I am here, and he may take another course at any moment. Quick, men! quick! for the love of all the holy saints! mount and ride to his assistance!"

Save him! save him! and bring him here, where his life shall hold with the lives of those as dear to them as his to me!"

There was bustling, and shouting, and the trampling of horses; and then a few minutes of breathless silence, broken only by the voice of Flora, as she urged on the men to the succor of her father.

"We may yet be saved, dear angel!" I whispered to Cora Brandon, as I pressed her little trembling hand; and her soft, blue eyes, looking sweetly into mine, were instantly filled with tears of hope and joy.

CHAPTER XXVII.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

THE most trying thing to the soldier on the field of battle, is to remain inactive under fire—to see himself in danger, and his comrades falling around him, and yet be able to do nothing in defence of himself or them—and such inactivity was now mine. There I lay, on my sick couch, unable to take any part in that which involved the safety of myself and the sweet being who was more dear to me than my own life.

For some time after the clattering of the horse's hoofs had died out on the ear, nothing was heard save the exclamations of Flora and her Spanish companion, and then came distant shouts and the report of firearms.

"I cannot lie here idle at such a critical time!" said I, making an effort to rise.

"Nay, you must, my dear friend!" said Alice, gently pushing me back. "You will injure, perhaps destroy, your-

self, if you get up, and do nothing either for your own benefit or ours."

"But only let me see what is taking place!"

"Let me see for you then! I will look and report."

She was hurrying away, when one of the two ruffians, left as a guard, sprung forward, exclaiming:

"Back, gal, to yer place! back, I say! or by —— I'll fire on yer!"

"I have no intention of escaping," returned Alice; "I only wish to see what is taking place outside."

"It don't make no difference what yer want to see!" gruffly rejoined the ruffian, pointing his carbine at her. "Git back to yer place, I say! or by —— I'll shoot yer!"

"Oh, come back! come back!" cried the frightened Cora.

Alice returned to my side, saying

"We shall soon know the worst, Leslie."

The noise outside soon came nearer — the shouts, the occasional discharge of firearms, and the thundering tramp of horses. Nearer and still nearer came the sounds.

"Here, father! here! quick! quick! in here you will be safe!" we heard Flora shout.

A minute after we could hear several horses dash up to the building, amid wild cries and yells, and all the tumult of fugitives being closely pursued. Then a door was thrown open, several horsemen came thundering into the building, and the door was closed with a loud bang.

"Ah, father, dear father, you are saved! you are saved!" we heard Flora exclaim.

"They may assail us here, but we will fight them to the death, my brave girl!" we heard him reply.

"No, no, they will not dare, father, when they know all!" cried Flora; "we have other lives here that will compel them to make terms with us — such terms as we may choose."

"Whose lives? what? what do you mean, Flora?"

"We have Colonel Brandon's daughters here in our power."

"Ha! where?"

"In there. See! look through here — you can see them now!"

The bandit captain gave a loud, wild laugh of triumph.

"This is glorious!" he exclaimed; "whose work is this?"

"Mine, father! I thought you might be taken, and I was determined to have prisoners to exchange for you — and you see how fortune has favored me."

"At least I will have revenge!" he fiercely exclaimed; "and revenge on Colonel Brandon is fully worth such a life as mine! Let us kill the creatures at once, and throw the bodies to the devils outside!"

"No, no, father!" cried Flora; "we will only use them in exchange for all the lives here."

"But I tell you, girl, I would rather have revenge than life, and they shall not live another minute!"

"Nay, you shall not touch them, father!" cried Flora; and we could hear sounds as of a struggle — as if she had seized hold of him, and he was endeavoring to get away from her to accomplish his fiendish purpose. "Quick, here, men! seize your leader and detain him from murder!" she continued, in a tone of alarm. "He is not himself, and does not know what he is about to do. Seize him here and hold him! for your lives, his, and mine depend upon it!"

There seemed to be a violent struggle, and we heard Sebastian shout:

"Off! off! or I will murder you all!"

Soon after this, things grew more quiet, and we had reason to believe that the wicked chief had been overpowered by his own men.

Meantime Alice and Cora had been standing by my side, listening to all — the former pale, erect, and firm, and the

latter trembling like an aspen. As for myself, I cannot tell how I felt, except that I feared my senses were about to desert me again.

Outside there was the noise of several horsemen riding up and surrounding the building; and presently we heard the voice of Colonel Brandon exclaim:

"Surrender, Captain Sebastian, you and your men, or we will fire the building and take you, dead or alive!"

"Father! father!" called out Alice.

"Ha! whose voice is that?"

"Father, your daughters are here, Alice and Cora; I pray you be not rash and destroy us!"

"Oh, Alice, are you indeed there?" we now heard exclaimed, in the voice of Ernest La Grange.

"Yes, Ernest, we are here, prisoners, captured by Flora Sebastian while on our way home; and if you would save us, you must make terms with Captain Sebastian and his men, for we are all here in his power."

"Ha! ha! ha! do you hear that, you devils!" shouted the half-demented captain.

"Great ginger! yes, and I'm here too — bound like a tarnal old sheep — with my arms as numb from the cords as if I'd laid on 'em for a week!" called out Caleb.

"Fire through the crevices, my gallant boys, and shoot down the devils as fast as you can!" yelled the captain.

"Not a shot, on your lives!" was the countermanding order of Flora.

"Who is master here, girl? you or I?"

"But you should not forget yourself, dear father."

"By heavens, I will have revenge, if I die for it! Unhand me, men! unhand me!"

"No, no — hold him! keep him fast!" cried Flora.

The captain and his daughter, and the men who had entered the building with him, were still in an apartment adjoining where I lay; but the partition was not very sound,

had crevices in it, and we could hear everything said in there as well as if they had been in the room with us. A struggle now seemed to follow the last order of Flora, as if the captain were trying to get away; and the horses snuffed, and snorted, and trampled heavily on the floor, as if frightened.

"I will kill you for this as soon as I get my liberty!" said Sebastian, at length, in the low, panting tone of one struggling violently.

"Hold him, men! hold him!" cried Flora; "for if he get his liberty now, he will kill you, sure enough! Father, pray be calm, and forgive me for this harshness, which is only done to save our lives — your life as well as mine!"

"I don't want life, unnatural girl! I want revenge while it is in my power, and I will have it!" cried the furious father.

"Bind him!" cried Flora; "if there is no other way, you must pinion his arms till he become reasonable! I fear this trouble has been too much for him — that he has already lost his judgment. Quick, there, with the rope! bind his arms fast! You have my orders, and I will see that no harm come to either of you for obeying me! There — so — bind him fast!"

The struggle with the bandit chief now soon came to an end; and then we heard Flora tell the men to let her father get up, but keep by him, and prevent him from injuring himself or others.

A minute or two after this, a door opened into the main centre of the building where we were, and Flora came forward, looking pale and excited, followed by the ruffians, with their chief between them, his arms bound tightly to his body by a stout rope.

I shuddered as I looked at him. His dress was disordered, his hair dishevelled, his face swollen and flushed, as if he had been drinking to excess, and his eyes bloodshot and

brutally savage in expression. I did not think he was altogether sane; but whether mad from drink, passion, or excitement, or all three combined, I could not tell. He came forward, glaring round like a mad bull, and said to the shrinking and trembling Cora Brandon:

"Ay, girl, I would like to murder you and your sister for your father's sake, and then they might swing me on the first tree!"

"Do not be alarmed!" said Flora; "he shall not harm you."

"God bless you, Miss Sebastian, for saving our lives!" returned Cora.

"Yes," joined in Alice, with feeling, "we have overheard all, and know how much it must have pained you to be severe with your father!"

Flora turned and looked at her, and, in spite of her effort to remain cold and harsh, I saw her lips slightly quiver.

"Had I done it for your sake," she said, in a cold, proud tone, "your remarks would not be so much out of place. But I did not. I simply did it to save my father's life and my own."

"No matter!" rejoined Cora; "we shall still remain grateful for our preservation."

"You were a fool, Flora!" said her father harshly.

"You will think better of me, by-and-by, dear father!" was the gentle reply.

There was something touching in the affection of that beautiful girl for her parent. Erring, sinful, guilty, criminal she might be—but who had made her so? Her very passions might have been inherited, and education in his wicked school perhaps had done the rest. There were noble traits in her evil-formed character, and not the least of these was her devotion to the guilty author of her being—devotion that would have led her to sacrifice her life for his.

"Well, who are *you*? and what is the matter with you?"

now demanded the captain, looking fiercely at me, from among the armed and scowling ruffians on either side of him.

"Here, father, I wish to speak to you!" said Flora, quickly, trying to draw him aside, doubtless fearing the mention of my name would excite him still more.

"Who is it, Flora? I have seen his face before."

"Never mind now, father! I want to ask you some private questions. Here! this way!"

"Oho! so you don't want me to know this man, eh?" he said, with the cunning suspicion of a lunatic. "But I will know! Let me see now!"

He moved along to where he could get a better view of my face, and then half bent over me.

"Ha! Doctor Walbridge!" he said, slowly drawing in his breath and beginning to scowl more darkly. "I remember now. You escaped me when you first came to the country—you escaped me at my own house—and *I owe you so much*. By —," with a fearful oath, "you shall not escape me now! Here, my good fellows, will one of you oblige me by blowing out his brains!"

Cora Brandon uttered a wild cry of terror, and tried to shield me with her person. Poor, sweet soul! it was all she could do.

"A thousand dollars to the man who blows out this fellow's brains!" cried Sebastian, in hellish fury. "We owe all our misfortunes to him, men! It was he who discovered all our plans and exposed them!"

"It was he who swore my comrade cheated and got him into his trouble!" said the Spanish messenger, who had been the companion of Diego Gomez; and suddenly drawing a pistol, he levelled it at my head.

Alice and Cora both uttered wild cries of terror; but Flora alone saved me, by knocking up the weapon just as it was discharged. The ball barely passed over my head, and I felt the heat of the burning powder on my face.

All now became wild excitement, within and without.

Within, Flora, madly furious at this murderous attempt, which might have brought down destruction upon all, drew one of her own pistols, and, presenting it to the head of the Spaniard, cried :

"Back, Lucio — back, all — or I will fire!"

The ruffians fell back in awe, and dragged the Spaniard away.

Without, they had heard the cries of terror and the shot, and now began to thunder at the different doors, demanding admittance, and threatening to break in and put everybody to death.

"Hold, all!" called out Flora; "and you men outside, listen! or not a prisoner here shall escape!"

"Speak, then — what is it?" said the voice of Ernest.

"Ah, sir," returned Flora, "you are the one of all others I would treat with!"

"Speak, then, unfortunate girl!"

"Ay, unfortunate indeed!" muttered Flora, in an undertone. And then, in a loud voice, to him: "No harm has yet been done here, Ernest La Grange — though an attempt has just been made upon the life of your sick friend — which I, who have little cause to wish him spared, have foiled. We have several prisoners here — all, in fact, who were of this party, except a white overseer and a negro, who were killed at our first assault. I headed the men who captured your friends, and their lives are all in my power. With a word I can have every one slain before you can reach them — ay, I can even slay them myself. I took them prisoners, however, for the purpose of saving my father — with the view of offering them in exchange for him in case he should fall into the hands of the Regulators. He has escaped, as you know, and is now here; and I now offer all our prisoners in exchange for the safety of him, and the men here with him, and my unworthy self. Now then you know all. Agree

to my terms, and your friends are safe: refuse them, or attempt to break in here, and they die!"

"You will give us time to consider your conditions, I suppose?"

"If you do not take too long."

"In a few minutes you shall have our answer," said Ernest.

"I shall not agree to your terms, Flora!" said her father.

"Why not?"

"Because you can do better."

"What then would you have?"

"The release of *all* our men — not only of those that are here, but of those captured elsewhere."

"Are there many of them in the hands of the Regulators?"

"A number — I do not know how many."

"Are they here with this party now surrounding us?"

"Of course not."

"Then I do not see how we can save them. If we attempt to do too much, we may fail in all."

"Colonel Brandon would give up every prisoner for the lives of his daughters!"

"But are they in his possession, father?"

"He is the commander of the Regulators."

"And are we to remain here till he can send off and have them brought in?"

"Why not?"

"I do not like the idea, dear father — something might happen to prevent our own escape. I think we should fly while we can."

"Tut, child — we are perfectly safe here, while we have the lives of these girls in our hands! Here, somebody, cut these cords!"

"Nay, dear father, not unless you give your sacred promise that you will do no injury to any of the prisoners!"

"A pretty spectacle, this!" cried Sebastian, beginning to grow furious again: "a father governed by his daughter! a bandit chief bound like a slave, and his own prisoners free!"

"Nay, father, you were not yourself—are not yet, I fear—and what I did I did for the best. Had you carried out your impulsive design, you would have put us all beyond hope. And besides, you must excuse me for saying these are not your prisoners; they are mine, and were captured for the very purpose I am now using them, to save you and myself."

"And why are they at liberty?"

"The men are not—only these young ladies."

"I bound and they free! a pretty spectacle indeed! Here, somebody, cut these cords, I say! Lucio, out with your knife and sever these bonds!"

"Do not a man of you touch him!" said Flora, making a gesture with the hand that still held the pistol. "As I have told you before, the life of every man of you depends upon the safety of these prisoners, and my father is too much excited still to be trusted with his freedom. For the sake of revenge he would sacrifice us all!"

"I would, by ——!" confirmed the captain, with a wicked oath.

"Come, dear father," said Flora, with pleading gentleness, "think, reflect, and be calm!"

"Calm, girl, when all is lost! Away with your foolish prattle! I cannot be calm—I will not be calm!"

"All is not lost, dear father! You will have your life and freedom, your daughter, and your wife left to you."

"Ha! your mother! where is she?"

"She will join us at ——"

She whispered the name in his ear, and I did not hear it.

"But my estate, my negroes, and nearly all my personal property, are gone."

"No, dear father, many of the negroes fled with my

mother; and she carried off gold, plate, jewels, and other valuables, to the amount of thousands of dollars."

"Say you so, Flora?" returned the father in surprise. "Why, then, matters are not so bad as I thought!"

"No, dear father—we shall see many happy days yet."

She sighed as she spoke, and turned her head away to conceal a tear. Poor girl! I was compelled to pity her, even while my judgment condemned. She unquestionably had some redeeming, if not noble, traits of character, and under different circumstances might have been an ornament to society.

"Come, dear father," she said, turning fondly to him, and putting back his dishevelled hair with her soft, fair hand, "you must tell me now how you managed to escape from your foes. Lucio had only just brought us the dreadful news that you had either been taken or killed, and I was in an agony of distress, when you were seen coming this way, hotly pursued by the men who now surround us. How did you manage to escape, after once being in the power of the furious Regulators?"

"They never had me in their power—who says they had?" returned the captain.

"I had sent Lucio with a message to you, and he returned to say that you had sallied forth at the head of a small party, which had been killed or captured, all save two. You were one of the two then that eluded them?"

"Ha! ha! that was a ruse of mine!" laughed the chief. "I was not of that party that made the sally. We had a man, of my size and general appearance, dressed to represent me; and while the Regulators were congratulating themselves that I was in their clutches, I was darting off in another direction. Unfortunately I was seen by Brandon, who, with a strong party, was just coming up from another quarter, and he instantly gave chase. My horse did not fail me, and here I am, though little I dreamed I was flying to

my daughter's arms. When I first saw our men issue out of this building, I supposed them to be another cursed party of Regulators, and gave myself up for lost; but as soon as I discovered my mistake, I resolved to have one shot at Brandon if I died for it. Turning in my saddle, I aimed and fired; but my confounded beast stumbled, and I missed him. The shot, however, came near doing execution — for it either tipped the ear of young La Grange, or whizzed so close to his head as to make him dodge."

"Oh, father!" exclaimed Flora, impulsively raising her hands.

"Pshaw, girl, he is nothing to you now!"

"I know it, father — I know it!" she rejoined, with a heavy sigh and a sorrowful shake of the head.

At this moment loud rapping was heard at the central door.

"It is the answer which will be life or death to all here!" said Flora, solemnly. "Father, will you leave this matter in my hands?"

"You may speak."

She advanced to the door, and every ear was strained to listen.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

DELIVERANCE AT LAST.

WHO is there?" we heard Flora demand, in a clear, calm tone.

"Ernest La Grange."

"Your answer?"

"If you will admit me, I will speak to you face to face."

"Are you alone?"

"I am."

"On your word of honor?"

"On my word of honor."

"It is enough — I will admit you!" returned Flora, advancing to the door and beginning to unfasten it.

"Forward, men, and guard her against treachery!" exclaimed her father, in a tone of alarm.

"Back, men!" was the commanding order of Flora. "I need no protection while conferring with a gentleman of honor."

"Bah!" sneered Sebastian; "honor indeed!"

The door opened, Ernest entered, and was immediately surrounded by the ruffians.

"Give up your arms!" said Lucio.

"Who gave you the right to order here, in the presence of my father and myself?" cried Flora, as she hurriedly refastened the door and confronted the Spaniard.

"It is my duty to see you protected, Miss Sebastian."

"I have said I need no protection while conferring with a gentleman of honor!" returned Flora; "and so fall back, sir! and you, men, fall back!"

"I thank you for this confidence, Miss Sebastian!" said Ernest; "and you see I have trusted you, by voluntarily putting myself in your power. Here are my arms, if you wish them."

"No, Ernest La Grange," returned Flora, in a quavering tone, "I do not fear you — though I confess I have wronged you. You have cause to hate and detest me, and justice would give me severe punishment at your hands. But let me not recall the past. We are here met, perhaps for the last time, to settle a question of vital importance to all. We are here, so to speak, in each other's power, and must either separate for life or remain in death. You know what I require — the safety of my father and friends — for which I will yield up my prisoners — the dearest friends you have in the world — and I now await your answer."

"I have consulted with Colonel Brandon and others, and all have agreed to accede to your terms," replied Ernest.

"We want you to yield up *all* your prisoners in exchange for ours!" interposed Captain Sebastian.

"Are you not satisfied with the release of yourself, your daughter, and the men with you?" queried Ernest.

"No, we are not."

"Father, I thought —"

"Silence, Flora, and let me speak! You are a mere girl, and know nothing of these things."

"And yet but for what I planned and executed, how would you have escaped?" returned Flora.

"Well, sir, what is your present demand?" said Ernest.

"We demand the release of every man captured by the Regulators, in exchange for the prisoners we have here, yourself included."

"Myself?" exclaimed Ernest, in surprise. "I am not your prisoner!"

"Indeed you are!"

"Indeed then he is not!" cried Flora, with a proud, angry, commanding look. "Ernest La Grange entered here in good faith, and will not be detained one minute beyond his own desire!"

"I did not understand, Miss Sebastian, that you claimed the release of all the prisoners in the hands of the Regulators in return for the release of my friends here!" said Ernest.

"My father thinks such should be our terms," she answered, in a somewhat confused and hesitating manner.

"I hope you will not insist on this, for it might prove a serious thing for all of us. I have no authority to accede to such conditions, and I doubt if they would be granted."

"Not even to save the lives of Colonel Brandon's daughters?" sneered the bandit chief.

"You could not put them to death and escape yourself, Captain Sebastian."

"Well, we could die with them."

"We have offered you life and liberty as it is."

"We must have the liberty of all!"

"Do your men say the same?" inquired Ernest, turning to the ruffians. "Hark you," he pursued, "and understand this matter for yourselves! You are all brave, I grant, and probably fear death as little as any; but which of you does not prefer to live a little longer? which of you is ready at this moment, with all his sins on his soul, to be suddenly launched into eternity and brought before the awful Bar of an offended God? As it is, you are surrounded by at least twenty men, as brave as yourselves, through whose hostile line you cannot pass with life; and yet they freely grant you life and liberty, in return for the life and liberty of those here in your power. Now, are you disposed to throw this certain chance away, for the uncertain chance of having men released who are miles from here? — men who, so far from sacrificing their lives to save yours, would not hesitate a moment to sacrifice yours to save theirs?"

"No, no — we won't give up our lives for them!" was the general response.

"Then let our treaty be brought to a speedy close!" said Flora. "In return for the release of all the prisoners here in our power, what terms do you offer us?"

"You shall all pass through our line unmolested."

"What assurance can you give us that your friends will not break faith with us?"

"I will pledge you my sacred honor!"

"That is not enough, sir!" said the suspicious captain.

"Then I will accompany you a reasonable distance as a hostage for your safety."

"That is better; and if you will increase the security by adding Colonel Brandon's daughters, we will agree to the conditions."

"What!" exclaimed Ernest indignantly; "leave with you

the fair prisoners we are seeking to release, as a pledge that we will keep faith with you? and get nothing from you in return to secure us against treachery on your part? — that would indeed be a piece of folly you could scarcely expect men of ordinary common sense to agree to!”

“You are right, Doctor La Grange,” said Flora; “my father is unreasonable in his demands. Your pledge of honor is sufficient, without even your person as hostage.”

“I thank you, Miss Sebastian, for this confidence in myself, and shall take care that you have no reason to regret it! Am I then to consider the matter settled? and that your prisoners here are now released to me?”

“One word more, sir! Neither you, nor your friends, nor any of the Regulators, are to follow us, to arrest or punish us for anything that has occurred.”

“I am authorized to say, that, for the space of one week, you shall neither be followed nor molested, provided you immediately quit this part of the country, and commit no further aggressions; but if found within the State of Louisiana after the time specified, you will be held responsible for all that has occurred.”

“And our property — my father's estate — what of that?”

“I have no power to offer any terms in regard to any thing or person not present here, Miss Sebastian.”

“But may I venture to ask you to use your personal influence in our behalf — in — in remembrance of — of — happier days?” faltered Flora.

Ernest looked at her steadily for a few moments, and felt pity in his heart for one who, whatever her sins, had a passionate love for him, and perhaps through that very passion had been led to do things which she otherwise would not have done; and though she was none the less guilty, and not to be excused, he was disposed to deal kindly rather than harshly with her.

“Yes, Miss Sebastian, I will use my personal influence in your behalf,” he answered.

“Oh, thank you! thank you!” she rejoined, in a tone that showed she was much moved. “A word from you will go far.” She paused a moment, with drooping head, and then said falteringly: “Ernest La Grange, we shall probably never meet again, and I crave your forgiveness for the past!”

“I freely grant it for all offences committed against myself individually!” he replied.

She stood a moment in a thoughtful attitude; and then, lifting her head, with something of the old pride and hauteur, observed:

“I believe there is but little more to be said. The prisoners here I now release to you. Come, father — come, men — let us mount our horses and depart!”

Ernest now advanced to me, and, taking my hand, said, with tearful eyes:

“Do you know me, my dear friend?”

“Yes, I have my reason now, my dear Ernest.”

“God bless you! I hope this excitement may not prove fatal. There — say not another word; but try to be calm, and leave all in the hands of your friends.”

He then turned away, and greeted Alice and Cora most warmly; and while holding a hurried conversation with them, the impatient Yankee called out:

“I say, Doctor La Grange, be you the boss-feller here now? 'Cause, if you be, I want you tu cut these ere cords, and let a feller about my size git up and swing myself. I snum tu Guinea, I's never tied so afore in all my born days! I hain't got no more feeling in my hands and arms than if they was dead.”

“I will attend to you presently,” replied Ernest, as he turned away to the door to admit his friends.

In another minute some eight or ten of the Regulators,

headed by Colonel Brandon, entered the building, leaving as many more outside. When I saw them gathered around me, and Alice and Cora fondly greeting their father, I for the first time felt we were really saved; and the reaction, from the long strain of anxiety, excitement, and fear, rendered me so weak that it was with difficulty I could speak.

While some of the Regulators hastened to cut the bonds of the prisoners, the colonel addressed a few kind words to me.

"I am sorry to see you in this condition, my friend," he said, "but hope you will soon be restored to health. You have gone through much peril and suffering, and have done a great work for us, for which we are all grateful beyond expression. All that human skill and care can do for you in return, shall be done—but we can never hope to repay the debt we owe you."

"I am a thousand times repaid already, Colonel Brandon!" I managed to answer; and then everything began to swim around me, the fever blood once more mounted to my brain, and my mind again wandered through wild scenes of trouble and delusion.

From that time, for many days, the Angel of Death hovered over me, and more than once I felt the chilling airs of his dark wings.

Though of myself I have no more recollection of what occurred between the bandits and the Regulators, I subsequently learned the facts, and shall proceed with my story as if I had remained an eye-witness of what I relate.

Though the desperadoes and Regulators in some degree became mingled together before the departure of the former, there was of course no friendly feeling between the parties, and many a glance of hate was exchanged. The villains, being the weaker party, were afraid to become the aggressors, and the Regulators were bound by their pledged words of honor to lift no hand against those they would gladly have taken out and hanged.

When Captain Sebastian, with his arms again at liberty, once more found himself mounted, at the head of his men, with his beautiful daughter by his side, he asked permission to speak a parting word with Colonel Brandon.

"What is it, father?" inquired Flora, with an uneasy look.

"None of your business, girl!" was the savage answer. "I am not bound now, and will have neither advice nor dictation from you!"

Colonel Brandon, being informed that the bandit chief wished to speak to him, came forward, with several of his friends, to hear what he had to say.

"We meet to part," said Sebastian, with a black scowl, "and as each is bound by his agreement not to lift his hand against the other, I have no way of revenging myself for the injury you have done me; but I am free to say that I *hate* you, from the very depths of my soul, and that the time will yet come when I shall be even with you!"

"That you *hate* me," quietly returned the other, with his clear eye fixed upon the villain, "I consider as much of a compliment as if the devil had told me the same thing."

"If you have not a coward's fear in your breast, I should like to settle this matter now!"

"Oh, father!" exclaimed Flora.

"Silence, girl! or you shall feel the weight of my hand!" cried the furious father. "Remember, I am not bound now like a galley-slave!"

"Your language shows of what vile stuff your soul is made!" said Brandon, sternly. "No father of a daughter who had risked her life to save his, would threaten her in such a manner, unless he were a vile coward at heart! for true courage has in it the nobility of manhood."

"Well, coward or not," cried Sebastian, "you dare not meet me with pistols, at either ten, fifteen, or twenty paces!"

"I certainly shall not meet you in honorable combat," returned Brandon quietly, "because you are not a gentleman."

"In this respect then we are equals — for I here denounce you, in the presence of your friends, as a dishonest, scheming coward!"

Here the friends of Colonel Brandon became much excited, and several angry exclamations were uttered, and several weapons raised in a threatening manner.

"Do not lift a hand against him, gentlemen," said the colonel, "for we are pledged to let him go, with his vile crew! But hark you!" he pursued, turning to Sebastian, and giving him a look that made even his bold eye quail; "be careful, when once away, that you never cross my path again! Circumstances have saved you this time; but if ever you come within my power again, so sure as there is a God in Heaven you shall be hanged like a dog! I will use my influence to have your property confiscated, and yourself proclaimed an outlaw, with a heavy price set on your head! Now go; and thank the wits of your daughter, rather than your own, that the devil has not your wicked soul in keeping this day!"

For nearly a minute Sebastian sat glaring at Brandon, his teeth gnashing with rage and his fingers working convulsively; and then, uttering a sound, not unlike the howl of a wild beast, he turned, buried the rowels in the flanks of his horse, and dashed swiftly away, his men following him at the same break-neck speed.

Flora cast one wild, sorrowful look around, and, catching the eye of Ernest, said:

"Farewell! God help us!"

The next moment she was flying after the others.

"Now would I give fifty thousand dollars to cancel my pledge, that I might follow those villains!" said Colonel Brandon.

"Poor girl! poor girl!" sighed Ernest La Grange.

CHAPTER XXIX.

RECOVERY.

FOR the space of nearly two weeks, my spirit hovered on the confines of the two worlds, and of that period I have no recollection beyond that of a wild, troubled dream.

Then came a time when I again began to realize existence — to know that I still lived on this material planet — and that, weak and helpless though I was, I was surrounded by as kind and gentle friends as ever ministered to mortal being. No parents could be more devoted to a son than Colonel Brandon and his wife to me — no sisters more tender and loving to a brother than the noble Alice and sweet Cora.

Ah! Cora — my dear, little, darling, blue-eyed Cora — what happiness the memory of those days of feeble languor, when she was one of my ministering angels, brings back to me even now! — days which I can only recall as so many rosy hours of love — when her sweet face and gentle voice filled all my heart and left not even a chilling void — when waking was to live in her presence, and sleeping was to find her in my dreams.

Oh, love! love! love! what a cold and barren world would this be without love!

I recovered slowly; and it was many days after the crisis had passed and convalescence begun, before I was able to converse on the stirring events that have occupied so large a space in my narrative. One day I said to Cora:

"Tell me, dearest, what happened after I lost my consciousness at the building where we were all prisoners?"

"Ah! do you remember that fearful time, my dear friend?" she replied, with a shudder. "Even now it makes my blood run cold to think of it! No wonder you lost your senses

then! I only wonder that I retained my own and you survived the excitement. But wait till you see Ernest to-morrow, and he will be able to tell you all, far better than I can."

The next day I saw Ernest, and he related all the principal facts; and it was then I learned of the final departure of Sebastian and his daughter, as narrated at the close of the preceding chapter, and also that I had been conveyed on my litter to the house of Colonel Brandon, where I had been treated by the best medical skill to be found in that region.

Of the bandits, some four or five had been killed, and seven captured and disposed of by the Regulators — three by hanging — Blake, Horset, and one other. The Spaniard, Diego Gomez, *alias* Velando, had long since died of his wound. His letter to his master, Captain Sebastian, *alias* Guido, stating his condition, had been no fiction. Of the Regulators, three had been killed, and five wounded, one badly. But the country was once more at peace, and it was believed the desperadoes had been effectually put down in that quarter — more especially as, at the instigation of Colonel Brandon, the Governor had issued a proclamation, citing Felipe Guido Sebastian and others to appear on such a day at such a place and take their trial for crimes committed against the peace and dignity of the State, under penalty of being placed beyond the pale of the law and having a price set upon their heads.

"Has the time expired, Ernest?"

"Not yet."

"Of course Sebastian will not appear!"

"That is pretty certain — he is not a fool."

"Has he been heard from since he left this region?"

"No."

"Nor the beautiful Flora?"

"Ah! was she not beautiful, Leslie? From my soul I pitied that girl."

"And she loved you."

"I fear she did!" sighed Ernest.

"And you have forgiven her the evil she sought to do you?"

"She asked my forgiveness, and I granted that which only concerned myself individually. I could not forgive her attempt against the liberty, if not life, of my dear Alice; but I was compelled to pity her, for all that — so young, so beautiful, so accomplished, to be so vilely linked on the downward road to ruin!"

"You are right, Ernest — it is only Christian charity to pity her. But her vile, treacherous father should have been hung!"

"Nothing but her plan saved him. Ah! you can believe, my dear Leslie, it went hard with us to be obliged to give life and liberty to that head villain and his ruffian crew; but the sacrifice of our dear friends was not to be thought of for a moment, and they would have been murdered had we rejected the conditions."

"As certain as we are now living, Ernest! for Flora had sworn that not one of us should survive her father, and she was the very girl to keep her oath. But tell me now about that mysterious rendezvous! What did you find there?"

"All the machinery for counterfeiting coins, engraving plates, and printing bank notes — probably the most extensive establishment of the kind in the country."

"And to think, Ernest, that it may have been in operation for years, and so near you!"

"I can hardly realize it, Leslie — it seems so much more like fiction than fact — though such was really the case. And to think that you should have wandered about and stumbled upon it in the dark — that was not the least remarkable part of the whole affair! To see the place by the light of day, no one would dream of the reality that lay concealed under such a quiet, common-place exterior; and

even when, following out your directions, I had guided a party of the Regulators to it, I thought surely that either you or I had made a mistake, till the matter was put to the test, and we found we had the villains like so many burrowed animals."

"By-the-by, Ernest, what has been done with the two negroes, Cato and Sam?"

"Colonel Brandon, true to his promise, procured the freedom of Cato, and gave him quite a handsome little sum, with which he has gone to some other locality, for fear some of the villains might find and murder him; but Sam has been put to work on another plantation."

"And what of Caleb Stebbins and Peter Reichstadt?"

"Oh, the Yankee and the Dutchman!" laughed Ernest; "they set off together, about ten or twelve days ago, on a tour of speculation—Stebbins averring that he had been idle long enough, and that it was very important he should make a little money to pay him for coming into the 'tarnal country.'"

"But he told me he should leave for home at the earliest opportunity!"

"So he did intend, I believe; but after he found that the outlaws had either been destroyed or driven off, he reconsidered that resolution, and concluded to try his chances for a fortune here first."

"And that reminds me, Ernest, that I have wholly neglected the business which brought me into this region, and which I must now attend to as soon as possible."

"You must not think of leaving us at present, my dear Leslie! Why at all? Cannot some one else be found to attend to your affairs?"

"No, there are certain matters I must see to in person."

"What will little Cora say?"

"Doubtless she will be glad to get rid of me for a while."

"Nay, my friend, you know better than that!"

"You flatter me with the idea that she will miss me,"

"And I hope you flatter us with the idea that she will soon find you again."

"My own happiness depends on that."

"When shall it be, Leslie?"

"What?"

"Our marriage."

"Ours?"

"Yes, yours and mine—for Alice and I have agreed that you and Cora shall name the happy day."

"You are very kind, my dear friend; but before I individually venture to name a day, it will be necessary for me to know that Miss Cora will accept my hand and heart."

"I will answer for her."

"Will you indeed, Mr. Meddler?" said the fair girl herself, with a rosy blush, as at the moment she came gliding into the room. "Is there any other trifling matter you will answer for?"

"So, you have been a listener, eh? I am glad of it—it will save time. Cora, you know you are in love with Leslie Walbridge, I know it, he knows it, we all know it, and now I want to know how soon you will let the whole world know it?"

"For downright impertinence, I think it would be hard to find your equal!" returned Cora, as she darted out of the room, with her face all aglow, the hearty laugh of Ernest ringing after her.

A few days after this conversation, I settled the matter with the fair Cora in a very different way. There were sighs and blushes, low tones, sweet words, thrills of joy, trembling hands, fluttering hearts, and the holy kiss of a love as pure as beats within the breasts of the blessed angels above. On the eve of the coming Christmas, by the laws

of God and man, we were to be sacredly bound together for time and for eternity.

"Oh, blessed, blessed moment, dearest," I whispered to her soul, "when I can call you mine — all mine — forever mine!"

CHAPTER XXX.

CRIME AND RETRIBUTION.

WHEN I had sufficiently recovered to bear the fatigues of a long journey, I took leave of my kind friends, mounted my horse, and, with a trusty black servant, set off to visit various localities within the State, and complete the business which had been intrusted to my care.

Of that journey I shall only mention such facts and incidents as concern the main story with which I have endeavored to interest the reader.

One day, while riding through a lonely wood, I was startled at hearing a heavy groan, as if from some human being in deep distress.

"Lor' bress us! what's dat, marser?" cried Tony, my servant, in alarm, pressing his horse up close to mine.

I looked quickly and keenly around, and soon discovered what appeared to be the body of a man, lying by the side of the road or path, some few paces ahead of me. I rode up to it, and, with a thrill of horror, perceived it was indeed a human body, face downward, lying perfectly still, with both arms stretched forward, and a pistol clutched in one hand.

"What is the matter, friend?" I demanded.

As I spoke, I heard another groan, coming apparently from a thick cluster of bushes a few rods ahead. The man

I had spoken to did not move. I threw my reins to the servant, drew my pistols, dismounted, and bent over the still body. The dress looked familiar. I turned the body over, and, with a still greater thrill of horror, recognized, through blood and grime, the heavy features of Peter Reichstadt. There was a bullet hole in the forehead, and he was quite dead.

Leaving the body of the murdered man, I hurried forward to the bushes; and there, as I had half expected, found his companion, Caleb Stebbins. He was rolling about on the ground, his face all bloody, and occasionally uttering a heavy groan, though apparently unconscious of what he was doing.

"What, in Heaven's name, is the meaning of this, Mr. Stebbins?" I exclaimed, as I bent down and gently raised him to a sitting posture.

He continued to groan, with closed eyes, without taking any notice of me. There was a wound in his head, beginning near the centre of the forehead, and extending around over the right temple and lower part of the scalp, from which the blood had flowed in such profusion as to render him quite a ghastly-looking object. My first impression was that he had been fatally injured, and might never regain his senses; but, on a close examination, I saw nothing to positively confirm this idea. The wound was certainly not deep, I could not perceive that the skull had even been fractured, and most assuredly the brain had not been penetrated.

"Oh! oh! oh!" he suddenly called out, with a kind of spasmodic spring, partly opening his eyes; "I'm killed! I'm killed! I'm dead! I'm dead! oh! oh! oh!"

"Not quite so bad as that, friend Stebbins!" said I.

He opened his eyes and stared at me a moment, with a frightened, bewildered look; and then, shutting them again, and clasping his hands, exclaimed:

"Oh, don't murder me! now don't! and I'll leave this ere derved country right away, and go right straight home tu Connecticut—I snum tu Guinea, I will!"

"Stebbins! Stebbins! don't you know me?" said I.

"Why, who be you?" he inquired, opening his eyes again, and staring with a still bewildered, frightened look.

"Don't you remember Doctor Walbridge?"

"Jerusalem! yes, I guess I du! Why, be you him?"

"Don't you see that I am?"

He rubbed his eyes quickly with his hands, and seemed trying to recollect. Then he stared at the blood on his hands, and glanced quickly around him, in a wild, nervous, frightened manner.

"How'd you git here?" he demanded, in a startling whisper; "and where's *he* now?"

"He! who?"

"That are Capting Sebastian."

"Gracious Heaven! is this his work too?"

"Hush! he may be skulking about here!"

I started up and looked eagerly around, fearing that my own life might be in jeopardy. There were the tracks of several horses in the road.

"Quick!" said I in a whisper; "tell me all you know!"

"Where'd you come from, doctor?"

"I was riding through this wood, on my way to the next village, when I was startled at hearing you groan. I first found the dead body of your companion, Peter Reichstadt, and next yourself."

"You don't say Peter's dead now, doctor?"

"Yes, shot through the brain."

"Oh dear! oh dear! oh dear! what shall I du? what shall I du?" cried Caleb, wringing his hands. "Darn this 'ere country tu darnation! I wish I'd stayed tu home. I'spect I'm killed tew, doctor—ain't I? Oh, jest you look and see; but don't tell me yes now, or I'll die afore you know it and

leave you all alone! Oh! oh! ah! ah! what's that, doctor? what's that?"

The last exclamations were drawn from him by a remark of my frightened servant, who thus far had kept silent, more through fear than courage, but who now began to move up with the horses, asking, by way of saying something, if his master, meaning myself, were alive. I explained this to the trembling Caleb, and also informed him that he was still worth a hundred dead men.

"Great ginger! du you really think so now?" he said; "and du you really think now that I'll git well and live?"

"I see nothing to hinder. Your wound, which might have been fatal, is only trifling, and I consider your chance for life a thousand times better than mine was when you saw me last."

"Oh, yes, you was putty sick then," said the selfish fellow, "and I'm glad tu see you about agin."

"You will always be glad to see me about whenever I step in between you and death!" I replied.

A sensitive man would have felt the sarcasm of this remark; but it had no more effect on the Yankee than a paper bullet would have had upon the hide of a rhinoceros.

"Yes, wal, I guess so!" he answered, in a matter-of-fact way that was quite provoking.

"Now tell me how this happened?" I pursued; "how both you and Peter came to be shot?"

"You don't say he's dead, doctor?"

"You can see for yourself."

"Great ginger! it's drea'ful frightful! Poor feller! he was the best friend I had out this 'ere way, if he didn't talk good English, like you and I du. I say, you—don't you think his money and things ought tu belong tu me now?"

"If he has any money about him, it ought to be sent to his nearest relatives."

"He hain't got none in this country—he told me so."

"Then wherever they are."

"Wal, of course I ought tu be the one tu take charge on 't till they 're found — don't you think so?"

"Perhaps, if he has any money; but he may have been robbed."

This suggestion seemed to startle Caleb, who instantly put his hand to his side-pocket, where he kept his own money, and then shrieked out:

"Great ginger! Jerusalem! Jehoshaphat! I'm robbed! I'm robbed! Oh, my gracious me! oh dear! what shall I du? Oh, dear me! oh! oh! Oh, doctor, you hain't got it, now, have you? — come, now, doctor?"

"What do you take me for — a thief?" cried I, indignantly.

"Oh, no, I guess not — I don't know — I didn't know but you might took it in fun, you see. Oh dear! oh dear! what shall I du? what shall I du? du? du?"

He fairly danced up and down with grief. The loss of his companion was nothing to the loss of his money.

"Well, shut your mouth and stop your noise for one thing," said I, "or we may have another party down on us, and all be murdered!"

"I don't care! I don't care! I don't care!" he cried, stepping around as if on hot coals and swinging his arms wildly. "I might jest as wal be murdered as lose that are pocket-book of mine, with all my money in it, and my hoss gone tu! Oh, gracious! oh, dear me suz!"

It was at least ten minutes before I could get the excited Yankee sufficiently calmed down to tell me the tale of blood; and even then he continually interrupted the narration, to whine and groan about the loss of his money — more than once begging to know what I would be willing to give him to help him make up his great loss.

The story, as I finally succeeded in putting it together, was in brief about as follows:

The two men, Stebbins and Reichstadt, had been quietly riding along together, when, at this very place, Peter had discovered his girth to be loose, and had stopped and dismounted to fix it. Caleb, feeling weary of the saddle, and disposed to stretch his limbs, had also dismounted. In this situation a horseman had come suddenly upon them, Caleb scarcely knew from where, and this horseman he had recognized as Captain Sebastian. What had followed he could not clearly state, except that there had been loud words and pistol shots. He himself had fired once, and then run into the bushes where I had found him; and where he remembered being pursued by Sebastian, pistol in hand; and where, as I had reason to believe, he had been shot, stunned, robbed, and left for dead.

So, then, Captain Sebastian was still in the State, in defiance of the Governor's proclamation! and, by the expiration of the time named in that document for giving himself up, was now an outlaw, with a price set on his head! And where was the beautiful Flora?

Whether Captain Sebastian had seen Caleb and Peter at some other place and had followed them for revenge and plunder, or whether he had came upon them accidentally, could not be known; but it was pretty certain he had left them both for dead, and, after robbing their persons, had fled, taking along their horses.

"He has no great start of us, and may perhaps be taken!" I suggested; "more especially as he believes that neither of you will be able to tell the tale on him. At all events this is no place for us, and so let us hasten on to the nearest village and sound the alarm."

"Oh, dear me suz! what shall I du? without no money and no hoss!" groaned the troubled Yankee, as I assisted him out into the road.

"I will carry you to the next village," I replied, "and then give you sufficient means to reach Colonel Brandon's,

who no doubt will do something for you, after hearing your story."

Caleb was a good deal affected at the sight of his late companion; and, to do the fellow justice, I believe he really felt sorry for his untimely fate, aside from all selfish considerations; but, after weeping over him a short time, he suddenly dried his eyes and said:

"He al'ays carried his puss and pocket-book right over his heart, next tu his skin; and won't you jest feel, doctor, and see if it's there now!"

"Feel yourself!" returned I, rather gruffly.

"I don't like tu touch a dead man."

"Then let it alone! and mount the horse, if you are going with me!"

"I'll du it then!" returned Caleb, stooping over the body of Peter.

The next minute he was heard complaining that the outlaw had robbed the Dutchman of every dollar.

I had decided to leave the corpse where it was, and let it be taken charge of and buried by the proper authorities; and soon we were hurrying away toward the village of —, about five miles distant.

We had only gone some half a mile, when, to his great astonishment and almost alarm, Stebbins discovered his horse, with bridle and saddle still on him, feeding by the roadside. On going to catch him, Peter Reichstadt's was also discovered, feeding in the here rather open wood. In securing the latter, traces of blood were perceived, leading further back into the wood, and also the hoof-prints of another horse.

"What does this mean?" said I. "Was Sebastian wounded?"

"I don't know nothing about it," replied Caleb. "All I know is, I shot once, and I believe Peter did tew."

"I am for following the trail and endeavoring to find out what it means."

"There'll be danger in duing so, won't there?"

"We can tell better after we have made the trial."

"Yes, wal, you can foller the trail, if you want tu; but I guess I'd better go on tu the village at once, and let 'em know what's happened."

"Why, surely, Mr. Stebbins," exclaimed I, pretending to be alarmed for him, "you will not venture on to the village all alone?—you certainly will not be so rash as that?"

"Great ginger! you calculate then there's danger on the road—hey?"

"Have you not found danger on the road already?"

"What'll I du then?"

"You had better come with me for safety."

This settled the matter; Caleb resolved not to separate from me; and we all went forward on the bloody trail, taking all the horses with us.

About a quarter of a mile from the road, the trail led down into a little hollow, where some bushes fringed the bank of a small, running stream. Here we discovered a horse, tied to a small sapling; and Caleb informed me, with a good deal of trepidation, that he thought it was the beast on which the outlaw had been mounted at the moment of making the assault. Neither he nor my servant wanted to venture any further; and so I dismounted, and went carefully forward alone, pistol in hand.

The wounded man, after fastening his horse, had evidently dragged himself forward through the bushes; and from this fact I inferred that he had been very seriously injured—perhaps fatally.

I was not long kept in doubt; for, a few paces further on, I perceived the object of my quest, lying very still, with his right arm under his head, and his face toward the rippling rivulet, as if he had just been quenching his thirst.

"Surrender, Captain Sebastian," said I, in a stern, com-

manding tone, "for resistance will only bring certain destruction upon you!"

He moved not, and made no answer. He had already surrendered to a foe mightier than I. He was dead.

A cursory examination showed that he had been shot through the thigh, the femoral artery had been slightly ruptured, and he had gradually bled to death.

It is quite within the bounds of probability, that he had at first thought his wound very slight, and had not really discovered his danger until he had found himself gradually sinking.

Here then was the end of this bold, bad man! His guilty soul had gone to its final account, with another damning weight of murder on it!

But why he had come to this part of the country alone, I could not know. Had he been seeking these two men for revenge and plunder? or had he been lying in wait for me? If either, why alone? where were his followers? At all events he was here, and a fearful retribution had overtaken him at last.

When I had, for the second or third time, assured Caleb Stebbins that Captain Sebastian was quite dead, he became rather courageous; and having dismounted and washed the blood from his face, and received again my professional opinion that his own wound was very trifling—the ball having glanced, and done little besides stunning him and cutting a flesh-furrow—he began to regard the body of the outlaw with a good deal of soldierlike coolness.

"I thought 't was putty queer if I did n't pink him somewhere, for I ain't apt tu miss!" he said.

"You think you shot him then?"

"Of course I did—who else done it?"

"You said Peter fired."

"Wal, maybe he did—I ain't sartin."

"If you killed him, I suppose you will be entitled to the reward offered by the Governor!"

"Sho! you don't say! How much was it now?"

"If I am not mistaken, it was a thousand dollars."

"Jerusalem! great ginger!" cried Stebbins, his little cunning eyes sparkling with delight. "Of course I killed him—you can see that are plain enough, doctor!"

"Then you will claim the reward?"

"Wal, I should rather think I would now."

"But if any of his men should get hold of you after that, I would not give much for your life!" said I, a little mischievously.

"Oh, wal," returned Stebbins, changing color, "I guess maybe it's best not tu say nothing about it. I don't care about blood-money; nohow."

"Especially when you have so much of your own!"

He started and became deadly pale.

"Thunderation tu Jehoshaphat!" he exclaimed; "I'd clean forgot all about being robbed, doctor—I snum tu Guinea, I had! Maybe it's here!"

With the last words he fairly sprung upon the corpse, with the fierceness of a wild beast. A little search revealed the truth; and the next minute he brought forth his own pocket-book, with a shout of triumph, and then his purse, and in the two found all his money and papers.

He shouted like a madman, crowed like a cock, and danced like a fool.

"Stop!" cried I, angrily; "and behave yourself decently, in the presence of the dead, or I will not keep company with you another minute! Have you forgotten that your late companion lies dead by the roadside? and that only by the mercy of God you are yourself living now?"

"That's a fact, doctor!" he replied, with sincere penitence. "I was so happy tu git back my money, that I did n't think of nothing else, I snum! I'm right sorry now, I tell you!"

On the dead body of the outlaw, we also found a pocket-

book and purse—which the Yankee said belonged to his late companion—and a large roll of notes, most of which proved to be counterfeit. There was, besides, a money-belt around the body, which Caleb was anxious to remove, more especially as it was filled with gold, and jewels of great value, as was afterward ascertained.

"No," said I, "that is neither yours, nor mine, nor any of our friends, and we will not disturb it; but let it be examined at the proper time and taken charge of by the proper authorities."

"You don't think, then, we have a right tu that are?"

"No, Mr. Stebbins, we have no right to anything not our own."

"Wal, how about this ere money of Peter's?"

"You must hand that over to the proper authorities also."

"Yes, wal, jest as you say."

As I stood gazing down upon the white, bloodless face of the outlaw, feeling a sort of stern satisfaction that at last he had met the death he merited, I perceived a letter projecting from an inside pocket of his waistcoat. I drew it forth, found it written in Spanish, and returned it. It was subsequently translated, and read as follows:

"DEAR FATHER:—Why forsake us? What have we done to justify such cruel treatment? You must know that I at least love you most devotedly! Have I not proved it more than once? You know, dear father, that what I did was for your own good! Why leave us, and go where death awaits you? We have enough to live on for the rest of our days. Let us change our names, and go to some other country! Oh, dear father, come back to us, or my heart will break! I have little to live for except you, and I will do my best to make you happy and forget the past. Mother does not understand me—you only do—you always did. Oh, dear, dear father, do not leave me alone in this cold, selfish world! Oh, come back to us! or take me with you! If you forsake me now, I shall die—for I have nothing else to love—

and you know, dear father, my passionate nature cannot exist without love! Again behold me on my knees, dear, dear father, begging and praying you will return to your unhappy, and otherwise forever miserable, FLORA!"

From this letter, and the fact of his being here alone, it was evident the outlaw had forsaken his wife and his devoted daughter; but whether with the intention of returning to them again, wherever they might be, I cannot say. Beyond what is written I know nothing.

Caleb Stebbins accompanied me to the village of ———, where we laid our startling facts before a magistrate; and in due time everything was settled according to law—the Yankee eventually receiving the thousand-dollar reward offered for the capture of Felipe Guido Sebastian, dead or alive.

"As you've ben to some trouble in this 'ere matter, doctor," he said to me, as we were about to part, "and as I've come out a good deal better'n I expected tu, I guess 't won't be nothing more'n right for me tu du the fair thing by you."

Then, as if he had suddenly worked himself up to something desperate, he added, in a quick and business-like manner:

"Now I'll tell you what I'll du, doctor—I snum! You've lost quite a spell here, helping me out of this 'ere affair, and I'll jest pay your board and the nigger's for the time, pay your hoss-feed besides, and allow you three dollars. There, now!"

"Oh, my dear Mr. Stebbins," returned I, warmly shaking his hand, and biting my lips to keep my gravity, "you are *too* generous! indeed you are! I could not think of robbing you!"

"No, doctor—darn it all—take it!" he rejoined, with a magnificent air.

"Oh, no—never! never!" said I, with a stage attitude.

"Wal, won't you take nothing?"

"Nothing, Mr. Stebbins."

"Wal, then, I'm much obleeged tu you, doctor — I snum tu Guinea, I am — and you may be sure I won't forgit you in a hurry!"

I am almost afraid he kept his word.

We finally parted — he declaring he was "agoing to go right straight home." Perhaps he did — at least I never saw him again.

I finished my business, and returned to Colonel Brandon's in time to join my friend in being made the happiest of men.

Years had passed away — bright years of happiness for Ernest La Grange and him who pens this story — for noble, queenly Alice, and gentle, loving Cora.

It so happened, under the Providence of God, that Ernest La Grange was in the city of New Orleans during the prevalence of a fearful pestilence — at a time when brave men's hearts failed them, and they fled in terror, deserting kith and kin — when husbands forsook their wives, and mothers their children — when a noble few, sustained by a faith in Him whose kingdom is not of this world, ministered unto the many, body and soul.

My friend sickened and fell in the lurid light of the ghastly streets, where Death was busy in his work of desolation, and the timid fled from him as from a contagion. But the kind arms of a priest lifted and bore him to a place of rest and shelter, and the sweet Sisters of Mercy hovered around him like angels.

Many long days after, when returning life had made him conscious of human forms, he beheld a strangely sweet face bent tenderly over him.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Sister Bertha!" was the tremulous answer.

"Surely I have seen you before!"

"In your dreams."

"Were you not once called Flora Sebastian?"

There was a startled cry; and the beautiful face was gone — gone — to return no more.

Other sweet Sisters of Mercy came — but never more the beautiful face of Sister Bertha.

My friend recovered, to thank God and tell his fearful tale; but never again did he ever see, or hear, or get any trace of — THE OUTLAW'S DAUGHTER.

THE END.