

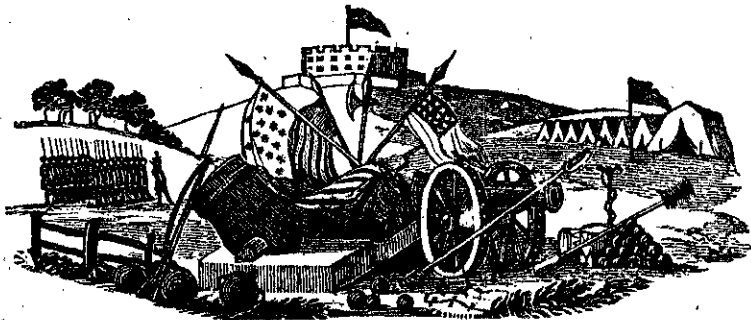
THE
WANDERING GUERRILLA:

—OR, THE—

INFANT BRIDE OF TRUXILLO.

A Story of the Troublous Times of Mexico.

~~~~~  
BY SYLVANUS COBB, JR.  
~~~~~



NAG p.v. 1006

NEW YORK:
PUBLISHED BY SAMUEL FRENCH,
121 NASSAU STREET.

1 Mexico-Miss. - Wars of
independence, 1812-1821 - Fiction

PH

THE NEW YORK
PUBLIC LIBRARY
529825B
ASTOR, LENOX AND
TILDEN FOUNDATIONS
R 1950 L

A Magnificent Pictorial and Literary Weekly Journal.

GLEASON'S PICTORIAL DRAWING-ROOM COMPANION.

A RECORD OF THE BEAUTIFUL AND USEFUL IN ART.

The object of this paper is to present, in the most elegant and available form, a weekly literary melange of notable events of the day. Its columns are devoted to original tales, sketches and poems, by the

BEST AMERICAN AUTHORS,

and the cream of the domestic and foreign news; the whole well spiced with wit and humor. Each paper is

BEAUTIFULLY ILLUSTRATED

with numerous accurate engravings, by eminent artists, of notable objects, current events in all parts of the world, and of men and manners, altogether making a paper entirely original in its design in this country. Its pages contain views of every populous city in the known world, of all buildings of note in the eastern or western hemisphere, of all the principal ships and steamers of the navy and merchant service, with fine portraits of every noted character in the world, male and female. Sketches of beautiful scenery, taken from life, are also given, with numerous specimens from the animal kingdom, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea. The Pictorial is now printed on the finest of paper, from a font of new and beautiful type, manufactured expressly for it,—presenting in its mechanical execution an elegant specimen of art. It contains fifteen hundred and sixty-four square inches, giving a great amount of reading matter and illustrations—a mammoth weekly paper of sixteen octavo pages. It forms

THE BEST FAMILY PAPER,

inasmuch as its aim is constantly, in connection with the fund of amusement it affords, and the rich array of original miscellany it presents, to inculcate the strictest and highest tone of morality, and to encourage virtue by holding up to view all that is good and pure, and avoiding all that is evil in its tendency. In short, the object is to make the paper loved, respected, and sought after for its combined excellences.

TERMS:—INVARIABLY IN ADVANCE.

1 Subscriber, one year	\$3 00
4 Subscribers, " "	10 00
10 " "	20 00

One copy of the **FLAG OF OUR UNION**, and one copy of the **PICTORIAL DRAWING-ROOM COMPANION**, if taken together by one person, one year, for \$4 00

The **PICTORIAL DRAWING-ROOM COMPANION** may be obtained at any of the periodical depots throughout the country, and of newsmen, at six cents per single copy.

Published every **SATURDAY**, by

F. GLEASON,

Corner of Bromfield and Tremont Streets, Boston, Mass.

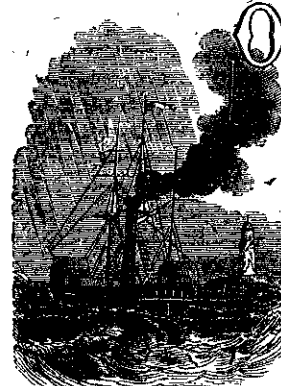
WHOLESALE AGENTS.

S. FRENCH, 121 Nassau, Street, New York.
A. WINCH, 116 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia.
HENRY TAYLOR, 111 Baltimore Street, Baltimore.
A. C. BAGLEY, corner of Fourth and Sycamore Streets, Cincinnati.
J. A. ROYS, 43 Woodward Avenue, Detroit.
E. K. WOODWARD, corner of Fourth and Chesnut Streets, St. Louis.
THOMAS LUNN, 40 Exchange Place, New Orleans.

THE
WANDERING GUERRILLA.

CHAPTER I.

THE MESTIZO AND THE GUERRILLA.



IN Mexico, the summer of 1822 had opened its store of warm sunshine. For long years the home of the Crole and Chapetone had been rent and torn by civil wars and petty troubles. The yoke of the Spanish monarch had been thrown off, but the liberty which the people had looked for came not to bless them. Augustin Iturbide was now the emperor. He had at first only been president, but his ambition aimed at something higher, and having gained the voice of a vitiated, licentious soldiery upon his side, he stepped upon the necks of the people, and placed the imperial diadem upon his brow. His sway over the nation had become absolute, and the oppressed subjects found that they had gained nothing by their change of rulers; but, on the contrary, that they had rather lost.

But Iturbide's throne stood on the brink of a precipice. A few short months had he worn the imperial robes, and he found that they sat not so easily upon his shoulders as he had fondly hoped. There were noble spirits still left in Mexico, and the standard of revolt was not long in showing itself. The people, used to strife and change, gladly joined with the few bold patriots who began to whisper of new strife, and ere the half of a year had rolled over his imperial head, Iturbide knew that his throne was trembling. Yet he grew no better. He still ground his heel upon the necks of all those who came within his reach, and to his officers and abettors he gave the most disgraceful license. The prison doors were continually creaking upon their hinges, and some of Mexico's best friends were chained

within the damp dungeons. Augustin I. was striving to crush the power that opposed him, for he would keep the bauble he had gained.

It was early in the afternoon of a warm, pleasant summer's day that a horse stood upon the edge of one of those broad tables of land that are stretched out among the mountains of Vera Cruz. The horse was a powerful animal, of a gray color, and upon his back he bore a rider. This rider was a man who could not have been far from forty years of age, and his complexion and the form of his features, indicated him to be of the Mestizo blood. He was tall and athletic, and though not massive in his build, yet an observer could have seen that where his garments fitted tightly the flesh was hard and muscular. Especially could this be seen in his arms and legs, and then his shoulders were very thick, even to a slight humping of the back. This hump was by no means a deformity, for its very shape plainly indicated that it was necessary for the containing of the surplus muscle which lay about the breast and shoulders. Then the hands, which were unusually large, looked hard and iron-like. His dress was of costly fabric, but very plain—his jacket and trousers being of green silk velvet, without any other trimming than a narrow tape of gold which adorned the outside seam of the latter. Upon his head he wore a broad sombrero, and by his side he carried a long, heavy sword.

Upon first sight our new acquaintance was by no means prepossessing, for his features were cold and angular, and then the long, curling moustache helped to give an almost sinister expression to his face. But upon closer examination he might appear differently—for he betrayed a certain calm, dignified bearing that could not have belonged to a dishonest man.

The Mestizo had stopped his horse at a point where the table abruptly terminated, and where quite a steep slope swept away down to a thick wood of stout oaks. A wide horse-path led up through this wood, and up that path two horsemen were coming. The foremost one was superbly dressed, and the nature of his uniform betokened him to be a colonel of the imperial staff. He was a stout, well-made man, about forty years of age, but, despite his gaudy dress and his martial bearing, he had an aspect at once repulsive and forbidding. His face was dark, his nose thick and large, his lips curling and sarcastic, his eyes deep-set and restless, and his brow low and contracted. Yet he rode with

a confident, important air, and his cloak, heavily fringed with gold lace, was thrown carelessly up over his shoulders, leaving his arms and the lower part of his body free.

The second horseman was only a common soldier, and followed his leader in the capacity of an humble servant. Yet he seemed to be a shrewd fellow, with plenty of wit and daring, unencumbered by troublesome ideas of truth and morality. In fact, both master and man might safely be placed in the last category, if one might judge from their looks.

It was evidently for these people that the Mestizo had stopped, for he watched them narrowly as they ascended the hill-side, and he even swung his heavy sword clear of the saddle trappings so that he might grasp it readily in case of need.

"Saint Jago!" exclaimed the first horseman, as he stopped his panting steed upon the edge of the table land, "this is a long hill, and hard to climb."

"Yes," said the Mestizo, to whom the remark seemed to have been made, "the way is hard, for the path winds around many rocks and ravines."

"In faith it does," returned the first speaker. "It is nothing but wind, wind, wind,—first over a rock—then around a rock—then through a ravine—and then around one, and then up a crag that fairly crumbles beneath the hoof. Why should a sensible man live up in such a place?"

"Because it is so beautiful when once you're up, I suppose," said the Mestizo.

"Very likely. 'Tis a goodly country up here—cool and pleasant, and luxuriant, too."

The officer looked about upon the surrounding landscape as he spoke, and having viewed the scenery, he turned again to the Mestizo.

"Do you live about here?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And know you where Don Miguel Truxillo lives?"

"Yes," replied the Mestizo, pointing off to the westward with his finger, "that is his dwelling. You can just see the broad piazza through the trees."

[SEE ENGRAVING.]

The officer looked in the direction pointed out, and a look of satisfaction came over his features as he saw how near he was to the place. But the Mestizo regarded him with a keen, scrutinizing look, and it was evident that his thoughts were not of the most pleasing character.

"Do you know anything of Truxillo's family?" asked the officer, throwing his cloak back from his shoulders, and thereby exposing the insignia of a cavalry colonel.

"Something," was the Mestizo's reply.

"I think there is a fair senorita lives beneath his roof?"

"His grandchild lives with him."

"Ah—yes—it is she I mean. Think you I shall find Don Miguel at home?"

"Yes, I think you will."

"Then come along, Pedro," said the colonel, turning to his servant. "The distance is but short, and we'll soon find the wherewith to wet our dry lips and fill our empty stomachs."

Thus speaking, the colonel spurred up his beast, and his man followed his example. The Mestizo watched them as they departed, and he shook his head with a dubious expression as he saw them galloping off towards the nobleman's dwelling; but he did not gaze long, for his attention was soon attracted to another quarter. Another horseman was coming up the hill, but he was totally unlike his predecessors, both in dress and personal appearance. He was a powerfully built man, of a noble, generous, frank countenance, and dressed in a garb such as was worn by the patriot guerrillas of the times. He must have seen half a century of life, at least, for his hair was streaked with silver, and the hand of time had traced long furrows upon his brow. Yet he was straight and firm in his carriage, and he held his saddle like one who was used to it. As he drew near, the Mestizo regarded him with deep interest, and it was plain enough to be seen that he experienced a sort of strange awe as he gained a full view of the features of the coming horseman.

"Ah, Aldamar," said the new-comer, as he stopped his horse, "you seem to be standing watch here. Has any one passed you?"

"Yes," returned the Mestizo. "Those two men passed. You can see them yet if you look sharp."

He pointed toward the spot where the two horsemen were just disappearing among the shrubbery, and the guerrilla looked that way.

"Yes, yes—I see them," he said, while his dark eye flashed. "They passed me on the plain, and I thought their steps were bent this way. Do you know them?"

"No; but I do not like their looks."

"And you will like them less if ever you become acquainted with them."

"Then you know them?"

"Yes; I know the master, and of course the servant is of the same stamp, though perhaps on a smaller scale. I think you are faithful to the interests of Don Miguel."

"I am," replied the Mestizo, with a firm, compact utterance.

"So I had thought," resumed the guerrilla; "and I think you may now have a chance to show your love. That man is Don Juan Calleja, and he is one of Iturbide's basest tools. Did you never hear of him?"

"Ay, I have heard the name," answered Aldamar, "and I fancied it was he as soon as he asked me the way to Don Miguel's house."

"Then let me advise you to watch him most narrowly. It may be possible that he means no harm, but I know that he is incapable of meaning anything good. If you love your old master be sure that Calleja does not escape your notice while he is about the premises; and you had better keep a watch, too, upon that servant of his, for I fancy his fingers are as light as his conscience is dull and easy. Just keep your eyes open, and Truxillo may have renewed occasion to bless you."

"I will do so," returned Aldamar, in a low, meditative tone; and as he spoke he regarded his interlocutor with a keen, inquisitive glance.

"Have you any idea what the fellow is after?" the guerrilla asked, after a short silence.

"Yes; I have my thoughts on the subject."

"Will you tell them to me?"

"Certainly. I think he is after the lady Isabel."

"Aha!" uttered the questioner, with a prolonged emphasis; "that's the game, is it? I have seen a young senorita in Don Miguel's garden—a girl as beautiful as the blushing roses that grew about her. It is she, is it?"

"Yes."

"And is she rich?"

"Yes—very rich. She holds more than half a million of dollars in her own right."

"Then you may rest assured that he will need looking after, and I wish that you would so watch his movements that you can report them to me if I should desire to know them."

The Mestizo promised obedience, and the guerrilla was about to turn away when the other detained him.

"You must excuse me," said Aldamar, with some hesitation in his manner; "but there is one question I wish to ask you. You are a

neighbor, and we meet often, and yet I do not know your name."

The guerrilla smiled, but was silent.

"Would you have any objections to giving me the information?" continued the Mestizo.

"O, not in the least. You may call me Boquilla; and if others ask you concerning me, you may tell them the same."

Aldamar looked sharply into his companion's face, and if he doubted the reality of the name he had heard, he did not say so. Of one thing he was assured—the guerrilla was a man who could mean no wrong, and in whom there could be no danger in placing the fullest confidence; but yet Aldamar was not satisfied.

"Is there anything else you would ask?" resumed the guerrilla, seeming to notice the Mestizo's inquisitive look.

"No," replied Aldamar; "nothing that I have any business to ask; only there are some people who have asked me who and what you were."

"And what did you tell them?"

"That I knew nothing about you."

"Then I hope you will make the same answer when the same question is asked you again. These are troublous times in Mexico, and he only is safe who is either dishonest or unknown. No offence, I trust."

"O, not at all," said the Mestizo.

"We may meet again ere long, and in the meantime be sure that you keep an eye open upon the movements of Don Juan Calleja and his man."

As Boquilla thus spoke he turned his horse's head and started off towards the neighboring mountain. Aldamar watched him until he was out of sight, and then he turned his own horse towards the dwelling of Don Miguel, and as he rode slowly on towards home, he meditated upon what he had heard, and resolved to follow the instructions he had received.

CHAPTER II.

ISABEL.

SITUATED upon the brow of a gentle hill that arose from the wide table land was the dwelling of Don Miguel Truxillo. It was a magnificent spot for a comfortable home, and the extensive range of buildings was worthy of the place. Through the open spaces between the great trees in front of the buildings could be seen the wide plains of Vera Cruz, and away off in the distance, where the sky seemed to rest upon the edge of the earth, could be seen by the strong eye, in a clear day, the blue line of the great gulf. All that wealth could procure towards luxurious ease and comfort was manifest about the place, and the most excellent judgment, too, was displayed in the order and arrangement of things upon the premises.

Don Miguel was a Creole noble, and one of the wealthiest men in the country. He was well advanced in years, for he had counted more than three-score winters since his natal hour, and though he yet enjoyed the best of health, yet he was not so vigorous as some men are at that age. His hair was white, and his brow was deeply furrowed, yet his eyes were bright, and his mind was clear and sound. Strange as it may appear, he had managed to get along in life without being seriously disturbed by the numerous revolutions that had been going on about him. Though his sympathies were with

the Republicans, yet he never became a partizan. He was naturally timid, and to save himself from trouble he had paid liberal tithes to whatever party or person happened to be in power. In his soul he hated Augustin Iturbide, but he had not the courage to make it known, so he paid his tax, and acknowledged Iturbide as the rightful emperor. From this we may see something of his natural disposition and character. Strictly honest, upright, truthful and affectionate, but with a timidity that sometimes almost unmanned him.

The old noble received Don Juan Calleja with the most flattering respect, and spent the remainder of the day and a part of the evening with him. Their business seemed to be of importance, and it must have been something somewhat startling, too, for Don Miguel might have been observed several times to even venture so far as to expostulate with the fire-eating colonel.

It was well into the night when Calleja retired, and Don Miguel was left alone in his study, for here it was that the old man spent most of his time when indoors, and he had everything fitted up to suit his exact wishes. Here, amid his books and papers, he sat, leaning forward in his chair, with his elbows upon the edge of the table, and his brow resting upon the palms of

his hands. He had been sitting thus some ten or fifteen minutes, when he was aroused by the entrance of some one, and he started up. It was a girl who had disturbed the old man's meditations—a dark-eyed, beautiful maiden, who had seen some nineteen years of life. She was of medium stature, with a complexion somewhat lighter than the majority of her countrywomen, and as lovely as the angel which Hope sometimes paints for us. Every line of her features may not have been faultless in their symmetry, but it was an inward beauty which shone with the most effulgence. She was one of those persons who grow more beautiful and lovely as we become acquainted with them—full of excellent points which are to be known and appreciated ere all the beauty is apparent.

Such was Isabel Truxillo. She was the only child of Don Miguel's only son. Her father had been killed twelve years before while fighting against the royalists, under the lead of Hidalgo, and since that time she had found a home with her kind old grandfather. Her mother she lost when she was only an infant, so that her grandfather was now the only near relative whom she had living. She was wealthy—very wealthy—for, independent of her grandsire's property, her father had left her the undisputed heir to more than half a million of dollars.

"Ah, Isabel; are you up so late as this?" uttered Don Miguel, as he noticed the maiden.

"Yes," she replied, approaching her grandsire, and leaning over his chair. "I did not feel like sleep until I had seen you."

"You might have seen me in the morning, my child," said the old man, apparently very uneasy.

"O, I could not wait until morning. I could not sleep until I had seen you."

Don Miguel looked up into the maiden's face, but he did not speak, and in a moment more, Isabel resumed.

"I wished to ask you about the man who has been to see you this afternoon."

"He is here now, my child."

"I know it, and for that reason was I the more particular to see you this evening. Now tell me what that man is doing here."

"He has come on very important business," replied Don Miguel, with some hesitation.

"I know that," said Isabel, moving around and taking a chair by the side of her grandfather. "I know that his business must be important."

"So it is, my child, and when it is concluded you shall know all about it."

"Ah, but I would know now, for I think that it is business which concerns me. Is it not so?"

"Yes, Isabel,—it is," the old man replied, with an effort.

"Then of course I should understand it. That man is Don Juan Calleja, is he not?"

"Yes."

"And has he not come here to demand my hand in marriage?"

The old man started, and moved uneasily in his chair.

"Answer me," the maiden continued. "If you love me, answer me truly, and without hesitation. Has not Calleja come to demand my hand?"

"He has, my child."

"And have you hesitated in your answer?"

Don Miguel passed his arm around the fair girl's waist, and drew her upon his bosom. He was deeply affected, and he trembled violently.

"My sweet child," he said, in a low, tremulous tone, "I had but one answer to make. Don Juan has come to claim your hand, and from me he demands it."

"And you of course told him that he could not have it," uttered Isabel, keeping up her confidence with a strong effort.

"Ah, my dear child, I could tell him no such thing. It lays not in my power to refuse him the boon. I wish it did."

"Not in your power!" repeated Isabel, holding her breath with fear. "Not in your power!" she said again, gazing imploringly up into her grandsire's face. "O, you do not mean so!"

"Alas! sweet one, it is even so. I cannot refuse him!"

Isabel started to her feet, and placed her hands upon the old man's shoulders. She remembered away back in the dim and dusky past, a scene that was not wholly worn from her mind,—it was a scene where there were the fluttering of priestly robes, and the glittering of golden taper sticks and images. Her father was there, and so there was a dark form of whom she was reminded by Juan Calleja. She remembered that that dark face was turned upon her then, and that she received a kiss upon her childish brow. She called it all back to her mind as she stood there with her hands upon her grandsire's shoulders; but it seemed a wild, fanciful scene, and

she shuddered lest the worst she could imagine should be real.

"Alas! my sweet child," resumed the old man, "I fear your fate is fixed!"

"But tell me of it," uttered Isabel, striving to appear calm. "Let me know how the matter stands. Do not deceive me, for I would know all, even though the end were death itself!"

"Do you not know what transpired some twelve years ago?" asked Don Miguel, speaking more calmly.

"I have a dim recollection of a strange, dark scene," returned the maiden, with a cold shudder. "It was in a church—for I remember the great dark aisles, and the glittering altar, and the robed priest; but I cannot call fully to mind all its purport. Tell me."

"I am glad you recollect even so much as that," said Truxillo, "for the rest will be easier to tell. You remember of course that your father was one of Hidalgo's firmest supporters. Don Juan Calleja was also with him in the Republican cause. He was a major in your father's division. At the taking of Guanajuato, your father was wounded and taken prisoner, and the royal governor of the city, Riano, had led him out to be shot, when Calleja came up with a company of his men and saved him. Calleja did this solely for the reward which he hoped to gain, as he afterwards confessed; but your father supposed it to be a deed of pure friendship, else he never would have done what he afterwards did. He would have rewarded the saviour of his life in money, but he would have done nothing more. As it was, he looked upon Calleja as a noble friend, and he gave into his hands his dearest earthly treasure. You were at that time only seven years of age, and yet your father resolved that you should become Calleja's wife. The major was pleased with this, for it secured to him all your parent's wealth, and as you even then gave promise of being a beautiful woman, it gave him the prospect of a lovely young wife.

"But there was one difficulty, and this Don Juan pointed out. If Isabel Truxillo should chance to die before arriving at the age of maturity, he would lose the wealth that was promised him. Your father resolved even to obviate that difficulty. He was impulsive and generous, and he did not stop to consider the magnitude of the deed he was about to do. He felt himself to be under the deepest obligations to Don

Juan, and he also believed that man to be all that was pure and good. He might have known better if he had only taken time to consider; but he did no such thing; he allowed his first super-generous impulse to govern him, and you were sent for. In the cathedral of Guanajuato you were pledged to Don Juan by the solemn rites of the church. You were so pledged that he became the sole master of your property on your father's death. This was all done and recorded in the archives of the church, and I know not what power, save death, can undo what was then done!"

Isabel Truxillo sat back in her chair, and buried her face in her hands. She did not weep, but seemed rather to be stunned by what she had heard. It produced for the time a sort of deadening influence, and her energies were all hushed. But at length she gazed up into her grandsire's face, and in a tone very low, but perfectly calm, she asked:

"Am I, then, Don Juan Calleja's wife?"

"Not exactly his wife, but yet bound to him as such. By the laws under which the contract was made you are his affianced bride, and the contract can only be broken by the mutual consent of both parties. It was a sacred oath, made by both, and nothing can be more binding."

"But I made no oath," whispered Isabel, mechanically.

"No; but your father did, and he was your legal representative."

"And I have not known of this before."

"I have not mentioned it, my child, because I had hoped that Don Juan would never come to claim you. He has been engaged in all the civil broils that have occurred, and part of the time he has been a fugitive, hidden from the viceroys among the rough passes of the Cordilleras. I have hoped that some chance bullet or lance would find his life; but I have hoped in vain. He has joined with Iturbide, and he is now one of that tyrant's firmest supporters. He has reached a position of power and influence, and now he has come for his wife."

"And so you think he will take me if I object?"

"Yes. I knew what would be your wish, for I knew the nature of the man, and I asked him to leave you free; but he will not do it."

"If my fortune is his, let him take it. Perhaps he will take the money, and let me go."

"No, no, Isabel," said the old man, with a sad shake of the head, "I asked him to do that,

but he will not consent to it. It is the wife he wants."

"And my father has left me to such a fate! But O, there must be some means of escape! The same laws may not be in force now, since the government has changed."

"Ah, my child, that is an ecclesiastical law, and has not been changed; and then at this present time Don Juan has the emperor on his side."

"And Calleja will see me on the morrow?"
"Yes."

Isabel Truxillo arose from her chair, and walked slowly towards the door. Once she turned and looked towards her grandfather. The rays of the great hanging lamp shone full upon her face, and the old man started as he saw how strangely she looked. She seemed more like some statue of alabaster, clothed in silken robes, than she did like a human being. Her large dark eyes looked deep and lustrous, but yet there was a strangeness about them that almost struck the beholder with awe. Her hands were folded upon her bosom, and her long dark curls swept back upon her white shoulders in a wild, unconfined mass. She gazed for a

moment upon the aged man, but she did not speak. Once her lips opened, but they were silently closed again, and then she turned and left the room.

The maiden sought her own chamber, and having knelt before the small golden crucifix that stood upon a marble pedestal in one corner of the room, she prayed to God and the holy mother for counsel and assistance. No tears had yet been shed, nor had she groaned or murmured over her fate. She was by nature a calm, bold girl, with a heart as strong and brave as it was true and faithful. She knew that she was bound by earthly laws to a hard, cruel fate, and now that she had reflected calmly upon it, she knew that it would require some powerful exertion to throw off the yoke. There was only one source of hope beside—she had not yet spoken with Don Juan. Perhaps she could persuade him to give her up. Her young heart's hopes were not yet all gone—it did not seem possible that she was to be so utterly crushed—and she allowed herself to hold the torch of hope still before her. She was capable of strong resolution in time of need.

CHAPTER III.

CLOUDS.

ON the morning following the interview between Don Miguel and his grandchild, the latter arose early and walked out into the wide garden back of the buildings, and by her side walked her maid—a young Creole, named Inez. The latter was a bright-eyed, small girl, not more than seventeen years of age, and in her countenance she betrayed a vast deal of shrewdness and ready wit. She was most ardently attached to her fair mistress, and she would have even laid down life itself in her behalf. She had learned why the dark-looking officer had come to the dwelling of Don Miguel, but she had as yet offered no opinion upon the subject.

There was one thing in the situation of Isabel which her grandfather did not know of—it was something which the maiden had never whispered to any one, but yet which Inez knew. She had learned it through her own quickness of observation, and she was now thinking of it.

"Isabel," she said, looking up into the pale face of her mistress, and speaking almost in a whisper, "does Francisco know anything of Calleja's claim?"

"Francisco!" uttered the maiden, starting suddenly, and blushing till the rich blood mounted to her very temples.

"Ay," returned Inez, without seeming to notice her mistress's manner. "Does he know

anything of this strange claim which Calleja has upon your hand?"

"And what if he did?" asked Isabel, trembling violently, and dropping her eyes.

"Why," said the girl, looking at first a little surprised, but instantly showing a gleam of intelligence, "you know how deeply interested he must be in this thing."

"Interested!—he interested!"

"Yes. Francisco Moreno, I mean."

Isabel raised her eyes to her companion's face and after a few moments of thoughtful silence she said:

"What do you mean, Inez?"

"Ah, my dear lady," replied the girl, shaking her head slowly and expressively, "I am not blind. I know that Francisco loves you even as he loves his own soul, and if you do not love him in return, then I have judged you most falsely. But I know that I am not mistaken. You do love the young man."

Isabel's eyes again drooped, and she trembled more than before. Then she stopped in her walk and laid her head upon her companion's shoulder, and the warm tears rolled down her cheeks. They were the first tears she had shed, for now her heart was touched where all its stores of hopes were laid.

"Inez," she murmured, "you have guessed

the truth; but mention it not. Francisco knows nothing of it. O, how shall I tell him the terrible truth?"

"You have not seen Don Juan yet," suggested the girl.

"True; but I fear he will not bend."

"Then tell it all to Francisco, and seek his aid," continued Inez, with a tone and look of assurance. "Perhaps you may find help in him. He is—"

The girl's remark was cut short by the appearance of a servant, who announced to Isabel that she was wanted in the house.

"Remember," whispered Inez, as her mistress turned away to obey the summons, "you have friends."

Isabel smiled a faint return of gratitude, and then moved towards the house. In the hall she found her grandfather, where he was pacing up and down with uneasy, nervous strides. He took the maiden by the hand as she entered his presence, and in a low, encouraging tone, he said:

"My dear child, Don Juan Calleja wishes to see you. He seems to be cheerful this morning, and I hope you will find him really a better man than we have been led to believe him. Remember, too, that it is your father's wish, and let this strengthen you."

"One question before I see him," murmured the fair girl, in a sort of choking tone. "Does Don Juan mean to take me with him now?"

"No. He only has come to assure himself that the boon is his."

"Then he will go away and leave me here yet a while longer."

"Yes—so he proposes."

Isabel seemed much relieved, and having received a kiss from her aged guardian she turned towards the door that led to the principal drawing-room. The old man led the way, and in a moment more the maiden found herself in Don Juan's presence. Truxillo introduced her, and then withdrew.

For a short time, Isabel remained standing there in the centre of the floor. She dared not raise her eyes,—or she did not raise them,—for a whirl of wild, overpowering emotions were possessing her. She knew that she was in the presence of the man who had so suddenly come across her life-path, but she could not yet summon the resolution to look him in the face. At length she heard a light, cautious footfall—it approached her—there was a warm breath upon

her cheek, and when she began to shudder a hand was laid upon her arm, and her name was pronounced. It was a low voice that spoke, but it sounded harsh and constrained. She raised her eyes, and found the gaze of Don Juan fixed upon her. It was with the utmost exercise of her self-control that she refrained from crying out when she thus beheld the face of her companion. It was so coarse—so dark—so sinister in its expression—it was so cold of heart, and yet so glaring of passion. Those curling lips, that thick nose, those deep-set gleaming eyes, that low, overhanging brow,—they all spoke plainly of the man. Isabel shuddered, and while she shuddered, she sank into a seat.

"Fair senorita," commenced Don Juan, so struck with the marvellous beauty of the maiden that he had not noticed her peculiar manner, "I suppose your grandsire has told you of my coming, and why I have come."

"Yes, senor," she replied.

"And from what he has told me I am led to judge that you were not fully acquainted with all the circumstances of our peculiar union."

"No, senor—indeed I was not," uttered Isabel, with considerable decision.

"But you must have remembered something of it—did you not?"

"Yes; I had a faint recollection of the scene, but I had lost its import."

"Your grandfather should have kept you in mind of it. In that respect he has been most negligent. But perhaps it matters not now, for he assures me that you have not fixed your affections upon any one else."

Isabel turned pale at these words, and the tremor that shook her frame was so apparent that Don Juan noticed it, and a quick flush—a dark, cloudy emotion—passed over his features.

"Did he not speak to me the truth?" he asked, in a hoarse, terrible whisper.

Poor Isabel!—she knew not how to answer. She did not even wish to speak falsehood to the man before her, and yet for the moment she feared to speak the truth. The thought that she might bring down some vengeance upon the head of her old grandparent, should she confess the truth, at first withheld her, for she knew that Calleja was capable of dark doings—she could read it in every lineament of his features. But then, again, perhaps if she were to confess all, the dark man might release her. He might not

want a wife whose strongest love was elsewhere centered.

"Did Don Miguel speak to me the truth?" asked Calleja a second time.

"He spoke what he believed to be the truth," returned Isabel, starting at the terrible force of the man's voice.

"Ah! and are there scenes behind the curtain which he knows not of? Speak plainly, lady, for I must know all."

For the moment, Isabel felt like resenting the cool freedom of her companion—the peremptory manner of his speech cut her to the soul, and her proud spirit rebelled; but she had judgment as well as courage and pride, and she knew that her own good demanded that she should be subordinate for the present.

"I have no desire to deceive you, senor," she said, "for I have done nothing that I deemed out of the way, or that I could have well avoided, and I must tell you plainly that if I ever become your wife it will be without a heart to give you."

Don Juan started up from his chair; but he sat quietly back again, and while a dark smile worked upon his features, he said:

"I am sorry for that; but you will be the greatest sufferer. You are even now, to all intents and purposes, my wife, and you must be aware of what will be your situation when your husband knows that he possesses not your whole heart; but perhaps this will wear off. Who is it that has gained your love?"

This was a question which Isabel had been expecting, and she was prepared to answer it.

"You would not know him if I was to tell you his name."

"O, perhaps I should. What is it?"

"Senor, perhaps he can be nothing more to me now, and if I must learn to forget him, I must commence now by not mentioning his name."

"Then you refuse to tell it to me?"

"I did not think you would press it upon me."

Calleja bit his fingers with anger and vexation, for he could read human character well enough to see that the maiden was not to be forced or urged into divulging a secret that she wished to keep, so he resolved to let that part of the subject drop for the present, hoping that at some future time he might learn all that he wished to know.

"Well," he said, with ill-concealed chagrin, "you may keep his name to yourself if you choose, but I shall trust to your honor that you will not see him again, for you must be aware of the impropriety of such a course. I have come here now to prepare the way for our nuptials, and as soon as practicable I wish them to take place."

"Don Juan Calleja," spoke Isabel, summoning all her fortitude, "when my old grandfather told me last night of the object of your visit, I could hardly credit the evidence of my own senses; but I soon realized the full force of the event. Yet I had one hope left of future happiness. With regard to yourself, personally, I know comparatively nothing. You might make for me one of the best of husbands; but you know that the heart's affections are not often at our own disposal—they cannot be bestowed where we will. I may respect you as a man, but I could not love you as a husband. I had entertained the hope, under these considerations, that you would release me from the bond by which I am bound."

"You need not burden your mind with any such thoughts," replied the colonel, with a bitter tone. "You need not ever hint at the idea again, for I have no thoughts of giving you up. It needs but a very simple ceremony to make us man and wife, and that ceremony must take place as soon as possible. I have a mission to perform in the city of Guadalupe, and I shall not return for a month. At the end of that time I shall come for you. Why, my fair lady," continued Calleja, in a softer and more pliant tone, "the very thought of such a thing should make you joyous. As my wife, you will at once take the lead of the social company at the capital, and you will be known only to be loved and respected. Do you realize all this?"

Isabel was to have a month's respite, and she felt that it would be better for her not to make Calleja angry now if she could avoid it. Within that month might lay the unborn means of her redemption, and she resolved to so conduct at present that he should have no more cause for apprehension, so she calmly replied:

"I suppose it would be as you say."

"And would not such a state please you?" he asked.

"Ah, senor, I have always been used to the quiet retreat of the country, and I love it the best; but were my home in the city, perhaps I should soon become attached to it."

"O, I am sure you would—I am sure you would; and then I shall give you such a splendid home."

Isabel thought of her own half million of dollars, and of how much that would have to do towards maintaining the home of which Don Juan spoke; but she did not give expression to her thoughts. Calleja went on and pictured out the beauties of the great city, and the joys that were to be found in the life at court; but the maiden only listened to them as the child listens to the howl of the wolf—remaining quiet for fear of disturbing the brute, and yet longing for the opportunity of escape.

And so Isabel sat there and heard Don Juan talk, and though she evinced no enthusiasm, yet he saw not how deep was her loathing. He gained from her no promise,—he did not ask for any,—but he placed rigid injunctions upon her, and though he made no direct threats, yet he plainly intimated that he was able and ready to punish any infringement of his orders. It came hard upon Isabel, for she understood well the hints he gave, and he hesitated not to show the full authority with which he was invested. His common soldiers he treated more like brutes than like human beings, and he was not very far from carrying the same mode of treatment to all who were under him.

At length he signified to the maiden that the interview was concluded, and with a hopeful emotion she arose from her chair.

"Only one word more," said Calleja, also arising.

He approached the fair girl as he spoke, and placed his stout arm about her neck, and on the next instant he had imprinted a kiss upon her cheek. She uttered a low, quick cry, and darted from his hold.

"Did it frighten you?" he said, with a flashing eye.

"I knew—I—I knew not what you meant to do," stammered Isabel, not wishing to offend the man now; but she could not have helped the shudder nor the cry when she received that stinging kiss, for it was like the touch of a serpent.

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed Don Juan, as he moved back and gazed upon the fair maiden, "you are not used to that sort of thing; but I meant you no harm, I assure you, only you need not follow up the lesson by practice with others while I am gone."

Isabel's eyes flashed, and her proud heart leaped painfully in her bosom; but she did not trust herself to reply.

"Now remember," resumed Don Juan, "you have a month to yourself, and at the end of that time I shall return to claim you. I hope you will use that term in preparing yourself for the station you are to fill. Your own sense must teach you what is to be done to that end, so I shall leave the matter with you."

Once more Isabel Truxillo was back in her own chamber. She sat down by the window, and tried to think of what had passed; but she could not think calmly. The whole scene was but a sort of wild, dark passage to her mind, and she rather strove instinctively to shut it out. In a few short hours how the whole picture of her future had changed! While the sun of yesterday shone upon her she had been full of hopes and joys—as light and blithesome as the feathered warblers that sang among the foliage at her window,—but now it was all, all gone. The change was as utter as it had been sudden and unexpected, and her life-plan was but a mere wreck of what it had been!

CHAPTER IV.

CONSPIRACY.

TOWARDS noon, Don Juan Calleja went out into the garden—a large enclosure back of the buildings, comprising a number of acres of land, which was set off most tastefully into flower-beds and fruit grounds. Every fruit that the climate would bear was cultivated here, and many were the exotics than required more than ordinary care. The vines, with their full clusters of white, black and purple grapes, were trailed over trelliced arbors, and small fountains played here and there with their sparkling, cooling jets. In the extremity of this place, Don Juan found his follower, Pedro Reyna. The fellow had been stuffing himself with half-ripe grapes, but he stopped when he saw his master.

"Well, Pedro," said Don Juan, looking carefully about, as though he would be sure there were no listeners, "how have you passed your time?"

"Well, my master—well," returned the man, throwing away a grape-stem as he spoke, and then wiping his mouth.

"And have you learned anything of importance?"

"Perhaps so."

"And have you excited no suspicions?"

"Let me alone for that."

"Well, and what have you learned?"

"Why, I have just found out that the old Don

has no near relative living except the senprita."

"Isabel, you mean."

"Exactly. She's the only bit of humanity that clings to his money-bags except himself."

"You are sure you learned truly?"

"No mistake, my master."

"Whom have you spoken with?"

"With a number of 'em. I got a little out of the fellow we met at the edge of the steppe, and a bit from the old gardener, and some from the cook. I've got enough, at any rate, to assure me that the senorita is the old man's only heir."

Don Juan's eyes sparkled at this intelligence, and for a while he stood in thoughtful silence, and pulled in pieces a rose that grew near him. There were various emotions visible upon his dark features, and a close observer could not have failed to see that they were of a dubious character, to say the least. He eyed his servant for some time; but it was not because he distrusted him. He knew full well that Pedro Reyna was bound to him, body and soul, and that he might be trusted with even life.

"Well, Pedro," at length spoke the colonel, "so far, so good. By Saint Jago! but you shall roll in gold yet. Let me but once get the wealth of the old Don into my hands, and Pedro Reyna shall be amply rewarded for his faithful services. Mind that, amigo!"

"To be sure I'll mind it," uttered Pedro, with a chuckle. "Santa Maria! but the old fellow's bags must be full."

"Full!" echoed Calleja, with sudden energy. "By Saint Juan! they are crowded. He has more than two millions at the very inside of the estimate."

"And if the senorita is yours, then those bags must be yours, too."

"Ah, Pedro," said Don Juan, with a dubious shake of the head, and at the same time looking once more cautiously about him, "I am not so sure of that. The old fellow is still hale and hearty, and he may live long enough to conceive a hatred of me. In that case he would take very good care that none of his money came to my coffers."

Pedro looked up into his master's face with an inquisitive glance, and instinctively he drew nearer, as though he knew that the next words would be spoken more low. But Calleja did not speak, and after a reasonable silence Pedro said:

"I suppose if Don Miguel should happen to die soon, there would be no doubt about your having all his wealth?"

"Not the least," was Don Juan's reply, and as he spoke, his eyes sought his servant's face with a trembling, furtive glance. "If," he continued, appearing more self-possessed, "the old man should drop off soon I should be sure of all his pelf. But he is very healthy."

"Upon my soul, my dear master, I entertain an opinion quite the contrary," said Pedro, with a quiet, meaning smile; but it was a smile as dark as the frown of a fiend.

"Did you think he was sick?" quickly asked Don Juan; and he showed by his manner as he spoke that he was suddenly and deeply interested in the observations of his man.

"I feel sure that he is sick, and I take his disease to be of a most dangerous kind, too."

"But I did not notice it, Pedro. What is the nature of it?"

"A plethora in the region of his money-chest!"

"Ah," uttered Don Juan, opening his eyes, and regarding his companion with a fixed look.

"Yes," returned Pedro, without moving a muscle of his face; "and then his heart is not in a safe place either. It is situated so near the surface of his breast that an accidental blow from a common knife would reach it. Upon my soul, I do think his situation is most dangerous!"

"By Saint Jago!" exclaimed Calleja, grasping his follower by the arm, "I understand you now, and we will talk more of this matter; but not now—not here. We will think of it well—think of it well. By the holy head of Santa Maria! I remember me now that the old man did show some such signs as you speak of, and they moved slightly in my fancy, but I gave them not such form and substance as you have done. But we will speak no more of it. We must haste away, for my business at Guadalajara must be done, and after that we will—think!"

As Don Juan spoke he turned towards the building, and Pedro followed him. After they were fairly gone and out of sight, a man stepped out from behind a thicket of rose-trees that grew close at hand. It was the very person whom we first saw upon the edge of the steppe—Aldamar was his name, and he was Don Miguel Truxillo's lieutenant. He was at the head of the old man's affairs, and had charge of all that appertained to the defence of the property and place. Aldamar stood for some time after he had come from his place of concealment, and gazed off towards the point where the two men had disappeared. He had profited by the advice of the guerrilla, and had kept one of the two men under his immediate surveillance since they had been at the place, and now he was rewarded for his pains, for he knew that the villains were moving towards a plan for taking Don Miguel's life.

At first the lieutenant thought of hastening at once to his master and revealing all that he had heard, but upon more mature deliberation he concluded to keep the affair to himself, as he thought that by so doing he might be more sure of thwarting the plan. When Don Juan and his servant came again, he could watch them narrowly, and then, if there was occasion, he could place the old man upon his guard. At any rate, he was in possession of what he deemed a most important secret, and he supposed he should have time to ponder upon it and lay out some good plan of action; but for the present he was resolved to keep it to himself, because by so doing he could hold the management of the affair and not be fearful of having the two plotters learn of the discovery of their plan.

Aldamar was upon the point of turning towards the dwelling, when he was arrested by the sound of approaching footsteps, and at the end of a few moments, he saw the guerrilla, Boquilla, coming towards him. The lieutenant had no

fear of that man now, though he had entertained some vague doubts concerning him. Very few people in the neighborhood knew anything at all of the strange guerrilla, and the hunters and brigands among the mountains only knew him as a wandering man, who feared nothing so much as dishonor, and who sought few acquaintances or friendships. Once the brigands had attacked a small hamlet where he was stopping, and after a few moments' conversation with the leader, he persuaded them to leave the place unharmed. From this circumstance he was judged by some to be a sort of generalissimo of the brigands; but to him who could read human nature at all from the most expressive features, he had no such appearance, though they were forced to admit that over many of the most powerful bands of marauders he held a strange control.

"Aldamar," said the guerrilla, smiling as he spoke, "you see I have taken the liberty to enter your grounds without permission; but the object of my visit must be my excuse."

"No excuse is needed, senor," quickly returned the lieutenant. "Our grounds are open to all honest people."

"And dishonest people will come in when they please," said Boquilla, with a light laugh. "But," he added, assuming at once a serious countenance, "I have come to learn something of our good friend, Don Juan Calleja. Is he here now?"

"Yes; but he will leave very soon."

"How soon?"

"Perhaps in an hour."

"Ah—so soon as that. Then he goes at once to Mexico?"

"No. I understand he goes to Guadalajara."

"Direct from here?"

"Yes."

"And starts in an hour?"

"I think so."

"Then I must be moving. But will you tell me what his visit has amounted to here?"

"I cannot tell you exactly. All I know is that he has some claim upon the hand of Isabel Truxillo, and he has come to secure it."

"Ah—yes—I know well his claim, and it is a most powerful one. Then he insists upon it, does he?"

"Yes—most strenuously."

"And I suppose Don Miguel would give in to him?"

"I do not think the old man could help himself, even if he desired to do differently."

"Perhaps he could not," returned the guerrilla; and then after a few moments of thought, he added: "But Don Juan is not just the man for such a place, though he has every legal claim upon it. Have you noticed anything else—anything that looked suspicious?"

Aldamar thought of the conversation he had just heard between Don Juan and Pedro; but that he thought it still best to keep to himself, so he replied in the negative.

"I hope you will not hesitate to trust me," resumed Boquilla, "for I assure you that every act of mine in the premises will be against the villainous Calleja."

"If I had anything to impart—anything that I wished to impart to any one—I do not know but that I should tell it to you as quickly as to any one else; but I have nothing now."

"Very well," said the guerrilla; "but," he continued, with an admonitory shake of the head, "beware of both those fellows. I know you have something on your mind which you will not tell, for I can read it in your face; but be careful, that's all. I shall see you again."

Thus speaking, the guerrilla turned and moved quickly away, and the lieutenant stood and watched his receding form in blank surprise. The last words he had heard put some strange thoughts into his mind.

CHAPTER V.

FRANCISCO MORENO.

Just as the sun was setting on the evening of the day on which Don Juan left the dwelling of Don Miguel, a young man rode up the hill through the deep wood, and entered upon the same spot where we first saw the lieutenant and guerrilla. He was somewhere about six-and-twenty years of age, tall and well formed, and possessing a frame of far more than ordinary muscular power. His hair was black, and hung in short, clustering curls about his head; and his eyes were also black, and large, and full. His countenance was eminently handsome—not so much for its purely classic mould or faultless outline, as for its genial, glowing, ever-speaking goodness. It was one of those faces that serve as true indexes to the soul, and upon which smiles look so blooming and happy. He was just such a one, as the true man would seek for a social companion, and in whom the true woman would delight to trust. His dress was of no particular order, though it came nearer to the garb of a guerrilla officer than aught else. He was well armed, and his horse was stout, firmly built, and powerful.

The young horseman's eyes sparkled as they rested upon the distant walls of Truxillo's dwelling, and after he had allowed his beast to stand awhile and breathe, he set forward at a good pace. When he reached the wide lawn in

front of the house, he dismounted and led his horse to the stable, where he found a groom to take him. The servants all knew him, for they not only bowed as he passed them, but they smiled as though they were happy at being recognized by him.

While he is going towards the wide piazza we may as well embrace the opportunity to introduce him. His name was Francisco Moreno. His father had been once a general in the Mexican army, and when Hidalgo arose against the royal power, General Moreno was among the first to join him, and at the storming of Guanajuato he was killed. Since that time Francisco had lived mostly at the capital, but on the ascending of Iturbide to the imperial power, he had refused to lend his sword and voice in support, and to save his life he had been obliged to flee. With Isabel Truxillo he had been acquainted from the days of her childhood, for her father and his father had been most intimate friends, and the acquaintance and friendship of the children was never broken. Don Miguel loved Francisco almost as an own child, and he was always happy to have him come and visit him; but there was one mistake under which the old man seemed to labor. He had seen Francisco in infancy, and had been acquainted with him ever since, and had never failed to treat

him as a child,—he did not even now seem to realize that the child of the past had grown to be a man. He even talked of the youthful pair—Francisco and Isabel—as “the little ones,” and when he felt in the mood, he would sit and tell them stories, and he never noticed that they often paid far more attention to each other than they did to him. In fact, the old man was blind. He prided himself on his excessive ability to see very minute matters with wonderful precision and shrewdness, but he was the only one who had yet been brought to believe it. He was a kind-hearted, timid, self-loving old man, but he could love others as well as he did himself.

Don Miguel was seated upon the piazza when Francisco came up, and with a bright smile, he arose to greet him.

“Ah, my dear, dear boy, how do you do?” exclaimed the old man, grasping the youth by the hand. “It has been a long, long while since I have seen you.”

“It has been some time,” returned Francisco, with a smile; “almost a whole week. What have you been doing the while?”

“Hasn't it been over a week?” asked the old man, manifesting considerable surprise.

“No more, certainly. Do you not remember that I spent the last Sabbath with you?”

“O, yes—I remember,—you were here then; but if I remember rightly, I saw but little of you at that time. You and Isabel were roaming off all the while after flowers and birds' nests. Upon my soul, you are naughty children to go off and leave your grandfather alone. But don't get angry, Francisco, for I do not mean to scold or punish you, though you do sometimes richly deserve it.”

The young man smiled at Don Miguel's quaint manner, and taking a seat by his side, he said:

“I am willing to submit to any punishment you may see fit to inflict, my good old friend, though you must inflict the same upon Isabel.”

“Upon Isabel?” uttered the old man, his voice suddenly changing its tone to one of deep pain. “Ah, Francisco, I couldn't punish her now. Poor girl!”

The youth started, and seized Don Miguel by the arm. He turned pale with apprehension, and his frame shook at every joint.

“What is it?” he uttered. “What ails Isabel?”

“Do you not know?”

“Surely, I do not; but tell me, quickly. Has she been injured?”

“In her soul she has,” returned the old man, speaking very slowly, and with a bowed head. He thought a few moments upon the subject, and then he added: “She has been seized upon by a claim which we had hoped was passed away forever. You know Don Juan Calleja?”

“Yes!” uttered Francisco, in a sharp, quick, hissing tone. “I know him for a most detestable villain!”

“Do you really think him a villain?” asked Don Miguel, with increased concern.

“Ay—I know him to be such. Did he not once pretend to be one of the most ardent friends of the people, and has he not helped to lead thousands of our countrymen to death, who gave up their lives willingly because they believed they died for a Republic! Ay—Calleja made that sacred word his war-cry. But now look! He was the very first to support Iturbide as emperor, and he did it because he could gain emolument thereby. By Saint Juan, he is a villain! But what has he to do with Isabel?”

“Have you never heard of the contract that was once made between them?”

“Contract! Between Isabel and him!” uttered Francisco, starting to his feet, and turning paler than before.

“Yes; I thought you knew of it,” continued the old man, not suspecting the true cause of the youth's emotion.

“I have known nothing,” returned Francisco. “Isabel never told me. I remember to have heard when I was a boy, of your son's having been in great danger, and that Don Juan saved his life; and I heard something more—I think it was about Don Juan's inheriting most of the man's property whom he had saved.”

“Ah, my boy, that is not all. But sit you down by my side, here, and I will explain it all. Isabel knows not of it wholly. I had hoped Don Juan would never come to claim his legal right, and hence I never deemed it best to burden her with the facts.”

After this the old man went on and related to the youth all the circumstances, as the reader already knows them. He did not seem to notice the fearful effects his words had upon his listener, and if he noticed anything he thought it was sympathy for the poor girl.

“Now, my poor boy,” he continued, “you must help me. I think you have considerable influence over Isabel, and I wish you would see

her and advise with her. You might possibly smooth the matter over so that she would not suffer so much. Will you not help me in this?"

"Yes, yes," quickly replied the young man, starting again to his feet. "By Saint Jago! I'll exert myself to the utmost to make her contented, even though it were to the giving up of life! Where is she? Let me go to her at once. She shall not pass another night until I have spoken to her words of comfort!"

"That's right, my noble boy," ejaculated Don Miguel, grasping Francisco by the hand. "You may go to her at once. You will find her in her own library. O, I hope you can smooth down the bed of her trials, for I know that she suffers."

Francisco Moreno did not trust himself to speak further. * * * *

Isabel Truxillo was in one of the apartments which was allowed to her own use. Her books were there, her embroidery frames were there, and her music was there. She had already lighted her lamp, and was seated at a small organ. It was a mild, plaintive melody which she sung, and the words truly expressed the sadness that lay heavily upon her heart. She had finished her song, and was running her fingers over the keys, when she heard a tap at her door. She quickly arose and opened it, and a low, bursting cry escaped from her lips as she recognized Francisco; but he sprang forward and caught her in his arms.

"Isabel—dearest Isabel," he exclaimed, "you would not turn from me. You would not avoid me."

"Alas! Francisco, you know not to whom you speak," murmured the fair girl, still struggling gently to free herself from her lover's embrace.

"Yes, yes," passionately replied the youth. "I speak to one whom I love as the very core of my soul!"

"O, Santa Maria!" ejaculated the maiden, giving over her struggles, and allowing her head to drop over her companion's shoulder, "the dream is passed. O, Francisco, the dream is passed!"

The youth led Isabel to a seat, and there, with his arm still about her neck, he imprinted a kiss upon her fair cheek. She started as she felt the quickening touch, and once more she would have moved from his side.

"Let me go," she murmured. "Our hopes of joy are all gone! For my own peace, and for yours as well, we must meet no more!"

"One word, Isabel," said the young man "one word ere I release you. You must answer me, truly. Tell me if you ever loved me?"

"Francisco," returned the girl, raising her eyes almost reproachfully to his face, "you know I have loved you!"

"Ay, with a sister's love—for we loved in childhood. But have you loved me with no other love?—no deeper, no stronger, no purer love? Have you not loved me with that love which those feel who unite their souls for life?"

"Why should you ask me that?"

"Because I would know. Listen to me, Isabel: I know all. Your grandfather has told me the whole, and I know the claim which Juan Calleja has upon you. Don Miguel begged me to come to you, and try to smooth down the roughest points of your agony. He hoped I might have influence over you, and that I could cheer you up amid your trials, and for that I have come."

"Then I beg that you will not try the experiment, for it would only serve to make me the more miserable. I know what fate is mine!"

"Yet, Isabel, you will not refuse to answer my question. O, tell me if you did not love me as I have said."

"Yes, Francisco, I did; and now let it be forgotten. It was a happy, joyful emotion, and its attendant hopes were the brightest of my life; but henceforth it can only be as a dream which is past and forgotten."

"No, no, Isabel—not so. I promised Don Miguel that I would do my utmost to make you contented, and I will do so. While I live you shall not wed with Don Juan! I know that the union would make you miserable, for he is a villain of the darkest dye."

Isabel started up as she heard these words, and a quick flush of hope passed over her face. But she soon relapsed into her former despondency, and in a sinking tone, she said:

"I know, Francisco, what a noble will you have; but you speak in the heat of passion. Don Juan Calleja is one of the most powerful men in the empire, and you are one of the weakest. He is the emperor's chiefest man, and you are a poor refugee. Alas! you can do nothing."

"By my soul, Isabel, I do not speak hastily," impetuously replied the youth. "I know what I say, and I have full confidence in my power to protect you from Don Juan's claim. By all the saints above, you shall not be his wife while I

live and am at liberty! This is the way in which I would comfort you."

"O, Francisco, I wish I could hope as you speak!"

"And so you must hope. I do not depend upon my own power alone, for I have a friend who will help me. There is among the mountains, a strange man, named Boquilla. I know not whence he gains his power, but I know that he has it, and I know that he will help me. Say that you would be free from Don Juan's power, and it shall be done if I live and have my liberty."

"Most assuredly would I be free," replied the maiden.

"And your love would be all my own," whispered our hero, drawing her nearer to him.

"It is all your own now," murmured she; "and yours my heart must ever be, let my hand go where it will!"

"Then hope all you can. Let my mission from Don Miguel have its full effect. O, I can die; but I cannot live and see you another's! From the earliest days of my childhood, even when mole-hills were mountains, and bubbling brooklets were great rivers in my sight, have I loved you with the whole ardor of my soul. The path of duty has been made brighter by the love I bore you, and many a pitfall have I escaped through the memory I held of you. O, I cannot give it all up now!"

The maiden sank upon her lover's bosom and wept; but her tears were those of joy—for she had indeed found a new source of hope. There was something in his words and manner that gave her a good degree of assurance, and she allowed her heart once more to fall back upon its former hopes and aspirations.

"You will not deceive me," she murmured, as she clung fondly to her companion. "You will not raise hopes that can be easily crushed, for my heart would break under another shock."

"Fear not. I have set my life at stake, and I know what must be the forfeit. Your grandfather tells me that Don Juan will not be here again for a month, and that will give me ample time to arrange my plans."

Gradually Isabel's countenance brightened, and ere long the young couple were talking as they had talked in times gone by, save that now there was a certain air of restraint in their communion, for until that evening they had never so plainly avowed their loves. But yet they were free and happy, for the bright sunshine of love chased away the dark clouds of sorrow and sadness, and they seemed to have forgotten that there ever had been a cloud hovering over them. Francisco had truly kept the promise he made to Don Miguel, though whether in such a manner as the old man had expected, the reader can judge.

CHAPTER VI.

THE AMBUSCADE.

EARLY on the morning following the events last recorded, Boquilla emerged from a small hut among the mountains, dressed as though for a perilous journey. The hut was situated in a sort of vale between two peaks, and it was surrounded by a very thick growth of stunted pines. It was a wild, desolate spot, and the wind tuned most mournfully among the dark boughs. Few people could have lived there in comfort, and even Boquilla himself did not seem to be entirely contented in his drear abode, but he was for the present forced to it, or he would not have been there. One could tell from his face that he sought not the mountain ravine from choice, for there was nothing of misanthropy in his look; but, on the contrary, his frank, open features betrayed strong social affections, and a noble, generous soul. Still that drear cot was his home, and there he lived, most of the time alone. Sometimes, to be sure, he had visitors,—perhaps they were only guerrillas,—but people said they were banditti. Let that be as it may, however, Boquilla never joined them in their excursions, and they never asked him, though they stood ready at any moment to tender him all the assistance he asked or needed. He held a strange power over them, and at times they seemed almost to worship him. Few, save the guerrillas and mountain

brigands, knew him even by sight, for he seldom left his mountain retreat.

After Boquilla came from his cot, he stood awhile and gazed about him, and then he moved on through a narrow path that led around one of the mountain peaks. At length he reached a spot from whence the country below him could be seen, and far away in the distance he could see the dwelling of Don Miguel Truxillo. Here he remained for some minutes, and then he started to descend the mountain. He was armed with a short, heavy sword and a brace of pistols, and his dress was mostly of leather. About half way down the mountain he came to a small bit of table-land, upon which the short, thick grass grew plentifully, and here there were two horses feeding. One of them he caught, and having led him to a tree, upon the lower branches of which hung a saddle and bridle, he threw the trappings upon the animal's back, and then mounted. The way was now more easy of travel, and part of the distance the horse could move on at an easy trot.

At length the guerrilla reached the foot of the mountain, and came upon a spot where the massive oaks grew large and thick, casting an almost impenetrable shade upon all around. Here he stopped, and placed a small horn to his lips. He sounded a loud, shrill blast, and ere long it

was answered by the appearance of half-a-dozen horsemen, who came from different parts of the surrounding thicket. A moment Boquilla gazed around upon the new-comers, as though he had not expected so many; but seeming satisfied that they were all friends, he turned to the one who seemed to be the leader:

"Tepec," he said, "have you sent out a courier yet?"

"Yes, senor—three hours ago. He started before the first peep of dawn."

"But he has not returned?"

"No, senor; though I should think he would be back soon."

"Of course he will not miss the game?"

"No—there is no danger of that. It was Bernardo whom I sent, and he is not a man to be misled, or to fall into neglect. You may be sure he will bring intelligence when he comes."

This Tepec was a stout, dark-featured, heavily-bearded man, somewhere in the middle age of life; and he was, in fact, the chief of a numerous band of brigands, numbering in all over one hundred, most, if not all, of whom had been patriot guerrillas, but who had taken to the mountains since the tyrannical rule of Iturbide had been established. The government had offered large rewards for Tepec's apprehension, but none of the peasants, or hunters, or poor miners would expose him, for he was in truth the poor man's friend.

Boquilla had conversed with the chief some five or ten minutes, when the quick tramp of a horse was heard, and in a few moments more, an armed man rode into the place.

"How now, Bernardo?" cried Boquilla, approaching the man as he rode up. "Have you been out on my mission?"

"Yes, senor," deferentially replied the brigand. "I have been, and I have found all you wish to know."

"Ah!—and they have started?"

"Yes, senor—six of them."

"Six!" repeated Boquilla.

He seemed to reflect for a moment, and then he turned towards the leader.

"Tepec," he continued, "are you at liberty for a few hours?"

"Yes—all day."

"Then suppose you take the men you have with you, and follow me."

"With pleasure."

"You had better make as much haste as pos-

sible," said Bernardo, "for they were swift upon the road."

"We will set off at once," returned Boquilla.

"Are you ready, Tepec?"

"Ay—always ready."

"Then forward!"

As Boquilla thus spoke, he put spurs to his horse, and started out from the wood. It was a somewhat narrow path into which he struck, leading around the base of the mountain, and as soon as he was in plain travelling the whole party set into a smart gallop. At the end of an hour they came to a point where a wide road crossed the way, and here the guerrilla made a sign for the rest to halt. He then rode forward into the road, and having examined the way, he came back.

"No one has passed yet," he said.

"But they'll be along pretty soon," added Bernardo, looking up at the place of the sun.

"I suppose so," replied Boquilla; "and," he added, looking towards Tepec, "we must be ready for them when they come. I don't want to kill any of them if I can help it, though we may possibly be forced to do it. They must be captured for the while, at all events, for I am determined to see the inside of the despatches they guard. There is no need that I should advise you how to operate, for you are all old soldiers and you know how to behave."

As Boquilla ceased speaking, he drew an immense black beard from beneath his vest and fitted it to his face. It altered his appearance wonderfully—so much so that even his own followers would not have known him if they had not been direct witnesses of the sudden transformation.

"Hark!" uttered Bernardo, shortly after the guerrilla had put on his beard. "There they come. I can hear the tramp of horses."

"Then stand close behind this copse," said Boquilla, "and watch for my word. Be quick, now, every man of you, for success depends more upon management than upon strength.—sh! Here they come!"

Up the road came a party of six horsemen, and at their head rode Don Juan Calleja. They were chatting glibly, and the coarse laugh that accompanied their words told pretty plainly the nature of their confab. Calleja was telling his nearest companion the result of his visit to the house of Truxillo, but ere he could finish the tale, he was startled by a sharp, quick cry from one of his followers, and on turning his head he

saw a body of armed men just emerging from the cross-path.

"Forward!" cried Boquilla, drawing his sword in one hand and a pistol in the other, holding the rein in the pistol hand. "Secure them at once, and shoot down the first man who attempts your lives!"

As he spoke he dashed out into the road, and confronted the dark colonel.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" cried Don Juan, whipping his sword from its scabbard.

"All that you have!" was Boquilla's response, as he fetched a blow upon the colonel's uplifted weapon that sent it whizzing upon the ground.

He had watched the movement of Don Juan's sword, and he struck it down the instant it came from the scabbard, and before it could be laid upon its guard.

"It is but little money you will get from me!" hissed Don Juan, at the same time drawing a pistol.

"If you are determined to resist, then take that!" uttered Boquilla, between his clenched teeth, at the same time dealing Don Juan a blow upon the right arm with the flat of his thick heavy sword that benumbed it in an instant. "Now make but another sign towards resistance, and I'll put a ball through your head as sure as death!"

"By San Dominic, I know that voice!" exclaimed Don Juan, starting back aghast.

"Never mind the voice now, but attend to my orders. I want to see every article of luggage you carry."

By this time the colonel's five followers were silenced, and each one stood trembling upon the ground with the muzzle of a cocked pistol at his ear. Don Juan saw how he was situated, and with as good grace as possible he submitted and slid from his saddle. As soon as his weapons were delivered up, he was ordered to reveal his luggage. First he produced a purse of gold, and this Boquilla threw upon the ground, remarking as he did so:

"I want none of your money, though some of my good friends here may like it." Bernardo stepped forward and picked up the purse, and then Boquilla continued: "Come, go on, I want to see all."

The colonel uttered an oath, and after some fumbling he drew forth a watch. The guerrilla took it and dashed it against a rock.

"You know I want not such baubles as that."

"Then what do you want?"

"You are bound to Guadalupe?"

"Yes," returned the colonel, evincing some surprise.

"And you are sent thither by Iturbide?"

"How do you know?"

"I guess at it."

"Then guess again."

"I have guessed again, and I have guessed that you have papers from the *soi-disant* emperor. I want them."

"Then you'll have to hunt, I think; and if you find any such you'll be more fortunate than I should be in the same search."

"Perhaps you speak the truth," said Boquilla, "but you shall be overhauled at all events."

Tepec and Bernardo were both at liberty, and with their assistance the colonel was soon stripped to the skin; but no papers such as the guerrilla sought for were to be found. The saddle was then taken from Don Juan's horse, and the different parts examined, but without effect.

"Look ye here," said Bernardo, as a sudden idea seemed to come to his mind. "I remember once how Hidalgo arranged to confine despatches for his couriers! Don Juan was with him then, and he may have remembered it. Let me look at that bridle."

The colonel made a spring towards the head of his horse, but he did not succeed in breaking away from his captors, and on the next moment Bernardo had taken off the bridle, and drawn a knife from his pocket. With this he commenced to rip up the stitching which confined the two pieces that formed the side straps of the headstall, and when this was done a neatly folded paper was brought to light. The opposite strap was opened with the same result, and after Boquilla had run his eyes over the two papers, he said, while his brow showed a triumphant emotion:

"I have found all I want, and you may now continue your way to Guadalupe as soon as you please, and when you return to the capital you may tell Iturbide that he has friends among the mountains who are watching him with more than ordinary interest. It may please him to know that he is so narrowly looked after."

"By San Jago! you had better beware lest you are looked after!" growled Don Juan, as he began to put on his clothes again.

"O, I am used to being looked after," returned the guerrilla, with a light laugh. "I have

been hunted by tyrants for years, and yet you see here I am, as free as the air of my native mountains. Go on, now, and give your orders to the governor at Guadalupe, and then hurry back and tell your master whom you met among the mountains, and how they treated you. Tell him you met the guerrilla chief, Boquilla!"

"Boquilla!" repeated the colonel, looking up with a doubting expression.

"Ay—do you not like the name?"

"I should if 'twere your own."

"It is my own, and you can tell your master that he can see me at any time he will come."

Don Juan gazed a while into the guerrilla's great dark eyes, for they were about all he could

see above the thick black beard, and then with a dubious shake of the head, and a bitter curse, he proceeded with his dressing. In time his toilet was performed, and then he was allowed to go and pick up his sword. All the pistols of Don Juan's party were discharged, and then returned to their respective owners. The ripped bridle was still fit for service, and having been placed upon the horse's head once more, the colonel remounted, and without another word, save a muttered threat of vengeance, he rode off at a brisk trot, and his party followed him.

Boquilla watched them until they were out of sight, and then turning his horse's head he rode slowly back towards the mountain.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MISSIONERO.

It was on the third day after the departure of Don Juan Calleja, and the shades of evening were gathering around the dwelling of Truxillo, when an aged priest, all toil-worn, weary, and dust-covered, walked slowly up the broad carriage path that ran among the great China trees. His form was bent, and the long, sparse locks that floated down from his temples, were white as snow. He leaned heavily upon the stout staff which he carried, and when he reached the piazza he sank down upon the lower step. Don Miguel had seen him, and he hastened out.

"Holy father," the old man uttered, gazing with reverence upon the weary form, "will you not walk into my dwelling?"

"Ah, a blessing upon thee, my son," returned the priest, in a low, tremulous, weak voice. "God forbid that I should intrude myself upon your hospitality unasked, but I am foot-sore and weary. Give me but a crust of bread, and a bed of straw in your manger, and I will bless you."

"No, no," quickly cried Truxillo; "such as you fare not so beneath my roof. What! give a holy father of the church but a crust, and place him with my beasts in the manger, when my larders are full, and my soft beds plenty and unused? No, no—let me help thee to arise."

"As you will, my son. I will not refuse your kindness, even though I fare better than did the Son of God. He had not where to lay his head.

But I am more blessed in worldly matters, and God grant that my blessings do not detract from my faith. Lift me easily, my son, for my limbs are weak and pain-stricken."

Don Miguel helped the stricken man to arise, and then he led him into his dwelling; and when he was placed upon a soft couch, Don Miguel rang for a servant, and soon afterward wine and bread were brought. The priest seized the wine eagerly, and after drinking two full glasses, he seemed to gradually revive, though he yet trembled exceedingly.

"I think you are the Don Miguel Truxillo," he said, after he had broken his bread, and prayed that God and the Saviour would bless and sanctify it.

"I am," replied the don, gazing with renewed reverence upon the old priest.

"Then you have not been falsely spoken of, for I have often heard your name, and you are called a noble, generous man. I am but a poor *missionero*, and most of my days I have spent in bringing the poor wild tribes of the *Indios Bravos* to a knowledge of the truth. I have seen much of suffering, and much of joy—for while my poor body has been racked with pain, I have seen my labors blessed and God glorified. But my work is nearly done on earth. I can see the dim verge of this earthly life, and I can hear the still small voice that calls to me from Eternity."

The *missionero* stopped and bowed his head, and after murmuring something that sounded like a prayer, he again looked up.

"For many weary days I have been upon the road," he continued; "and to-night, when I reached your gates, I was faint even to exhaustion. If you will give me but a few days of rest beneath your roof, I shall then have strength to go on my way. I would reach the humble cot where I was born, and where I hope to have a sister still living; and once there I will lay me down and patiently await the coming of the angel of death."

"Make this place your home as long as you please," said Don Miguel, much moved by the wayfarer's tone and manner. "I have enough and to spare."

The priest returned his thanks, and after some further conversation, he asked that he might be permitted to lie down and sleep. To this end, he was conducted to a well-furnished chamber, and there Don Miguel left him. On the following morning, the kind-hearted old man knocked at the *missionero's* door, and was bidden to enter. The old devotee was up and dressing, and having blessed his friend, he remarked that he would be left alone for his morning's devotions, and that then he would join the family at breakfast. He said he felt much better than on the previous evening, and that he hoped a few days of rest would enable him to renew his journey.

Half an hour afterwards, Don Miguel and his grand-daughter sat down to their morning's meal, and they insisted that the priest should join them; but it was with apparent reluctance that he consented. He craved the blessing of Heaven before he commenced to eat, and then he turned with a smile to Isabel.

"My fair child," he said, "your presence is like a gleam of sunshine here."

Isabel did not blush, for she was strangely attracted by the old man's countenance. He seemed to notice her manner, for he gazed fixedly upon her, and after a while, asked:

"Do you think you recognize a familiar face?"

"I do not know," returned the maiden, slightly startled; but quickly recovering herself, she added: "I thought your features at first appeared somewhat familiar; but I may be mistaken."

"No—I think you are right," said the priest, with a smile; "though your memory and observation must be very quick and keen. I knew

your father, and I have held you in my arms and blessed you. Now let us see if you can remember when you saw me last."

"I do not think I can," replied Isabel, gazing furtively, yet earnestly, upon the *missionero's* face.

"Can you not call the circumstance to mind," he resumed, breaking a fresh roll, and then passing his cup for more coffee.

"No, father, I surely cannot."

"But the circumstance was one of more than usual moment."

The maiden bowed her head, but did not speak, and in a few moments more the priest continued:

"It was in the old cathedral at Guanajuato. Your father was there, and the bishop was there; and there were others there, too. Can you not remember it now?"

Isabel trembled and turned pale, for she knew now what the old man meant, though she had no recollection of his features in connection with it. Don Miguel gazed up into the speaker's face with an inquiring look.

"I do not think I am mistaken," the priest said, as he noticed the look of his host. "Is not this the lady Isabel Truxillo?"

"It is," answered Don Miguel.

"So I thought," resumed the other; and then in a thoughtful mood, he added: "It must be some twelve years now since that eventful evening. I remember it well, for then it was that I first saw Hidalgo."

"And you remember the ceremony that took place on that occasion?" said Don Miguel.

"Yes—for I assisted. The lady Isabel was affianced to Don Juan Calleja. She was more than affianced—she was properly married, though the power of divorce was left in Don Juan's hands."

"Ah, then you know all about it," uttered the don, "and can tell us the particulars."

"Yes—I remember them well."

"I have never seen the record," Truxillo added, "though my son explained the matter to me. Then the power of divorce was left in the hands of Calleja?"

"Yes. I think fifteen was the age set. At the age of fifteen the bride was to be claimed if he saw fit, or at that time he could annul the contract."

"But that time has long since passed, and he did not claim me," exclaimed Isabel.

"And has he not claimed you yet?" asked the missionero, in apparent surprise.

"Yes—he came and claimed me four days ago."

"Ah, then his claim is the same. His claim is not impaired by the delay, but he could not now divorce you without your consent. The limit of his power to annul was placed at a certain time, so that you might lose no opportunity for a favorable match in case he chose not to keep the contract. You were really his wife twelve years ago, and are the same now."

"Not his lawful, wedded wife," uttered Isabel, trembling violently.

"Yes, most assuredly,—though there was a time set apart as a sort of probation. Yes, yes, you are really his wife, and I congratulate you upon your good fortune if he consents to receive you, for I hear that he is high in power and influence."

"I knew not that I was his wife," the poor girl murmured. "That I was so bound to him that he was really my husband."

"Yet it is most surely so," the priest returned.

He poured out a quantity of brandy into his coffee as he spoke, and having drunk it, he turned towards Don Miguel, and commenced conversation upon another subject. Isabel regarded him narrowly as his face was now turned from her, and as she saw his profile, she was impressed with the conviction that she had seen him since the time to which he alluded. It may have been from a sudden repugnance which she felt, but she could not avoid the suspicion that he was not wholly trustworthy, and the longer she gazed upon the boldly-marked profile, the deeper became her dubious doubts.

As early as politeness would permit, the maiden arose from the table, and sought her own room, and there she pondered long and deeply upon what the old priest had told her; but she could not make his words appear false, but, on the contrary, they seemed truthful, and though she had not so viewed the matter before, yet

now she felt that she was truly the dark man's wife. In the eye of human law she was so—but not so before God—before the sacred laws of Heaven. She looked into her own soul, where she knew the true talisman of the wife lay, and she saw there that she was not the wife of any living man. Then she sank upon her knees, and prayed to God to direct her aright, and after she had prayed she again pondered upon the subject of her connection with Don Juan Calleja. Her's was a soul not bound by fear, nor made to be ruthlessly trampled upon while she had the power of resistance, and after she had thought calmly upon the matter, she knew that she was no wife of Don Juan. With her own lips she had never spoken the word of promise, and though she might be forced to wed with him, yet she knew that no sin would lay upon her soul if she should escape from his power.

This was a great source of comfort to the fair girl. Had she believed that Heaven would hold her as the wife of Calleja, she would not have moved a muscle to escape from him, but would have suffered on in silence; but now that she had fully satisfied her own conscience that no such union lay upon her, she hoped that her escape might be accomplished, and for this she looked towards Francisco Moreno. To escape from her grandfather's estate without strong assistance would be impossible, and if she remained there without other assistance than her grand-sire, wedding with the fearful man would be inevitable. So Isabel Truxillo looked upon Francisco, and the prayer of her soul was in his behalf. She remembered the promise he had made, and though there was much room for dark and terrible doubt, yet she did not lose all hope. She knew that the young man was noble and heroic, and then she placed much weight upon the assistance of Boquilla. She knew him not, to be sure, save by casual sight, but in her mind he was clothed with a sort of mystic power, and she grasped the hope thus held out with more than passing ardor.

CHAPTER VIII.

SUSPICIOUS AND SUSPICIONS.

SHORTLY after breakfast Don Miguel ordered his coach, and in company with Isabel he set out for a morning's ride, intending only to be gone an hour or two. He left the old missionero in his study, where the man had expressed a desire to remain and look at some of the books. The host had not the least hesitation in leaving him there, for he placed the utmost confidence in his sacred character, and he even went so far as to order the servants not to disturb him.

For some time after Truxillo had gone the old priest sat there in the study, and pored over an old manuscript volume, to which his host had particularly called his attention; but his mind did not seem to be upon the book, for ever and anon his eyes would wander furtively about the room, and then he would listen, as though to ascertain if any one were near. At length he closed the book and allowed it to rest upon his knee for a moment. His next movement was to place the volume upon the table, and then he arose to his feet. At one end of the apartment stood a large mahogany cabinet, containing numerous lockers and drawers, and towards this the priest went. Again he gazed about him, and being assured that no one was near, he commenced to overhaul every paper that came in his way. He found keys, and with these he opened many of the places which were locked.

"I am gaining much knowledge," he muttered

ed to himself, as he pursued his rather dubious occupation. "By Saint Dominic, the old fellow little thinks whom he has left in his library. Wonder if he knows how many spies our good emperor is forced to employ. Now did ever mortal man see such a mess of trash collected together in one person's hands! All flesh is grass, and all gold is dross—dross is trash. San Jago! how the old fellow has piled the trash up! More than three millions thus far, all set plainly down here in regular inventory. Here are lands and houses, cattle and horses, and the richest mines in the empire. *Diablo!* Don Miguel, you must bleed for the good of your country—*ergo*, your purse must bleed! And now who is the heir? The lady Isabel, of course. Fortunate Don Juan! But upon my soul, you shall not have it all; nor shall Iturbide see much of the dross our good lord Truxillo has managed to accumulate."

And thus the missionero muttered on while he ransacked the place. He had found Don Miguel's private apartment, and private memoranda, and all such things as he deemed of sufficient importance he minuted down upon a small book which he carried with him. In this way he had spent an hour, when, as he opened a small drawer which was arranged within one of the lockers, he found a parchment roll, bearing several seals, and apparently of a recent date.

He eagerly opened it, and found it to be a will.

"Aha!" he uttered, with peculiar satisfaction, as he ran his eye over the instrument, "so the fair senorita is the sole heir. Upon my soul, she'll be a golden wife. Fortunate Don Juan!"

This will was carefully rolled up and put back in its place, and then the other things which had been disturbed were re-arranged, and all made as it had been found. This had hardly been accomplished when the sound of coach-wheels was heard, and having unlocked the door, the missionero resumed his seat by the table, and took up the book again. When, shortly afterwards, Don Miguel entered, he was so deeply engaged in the matter of the volume that he hardly noticed the entrance of his host.

"Still at the book," said Truxillo.

But the priest did not look up.

"You read as though you were interested, holy father," said the don, in a louder key.

"Ah, my son, did you speak? Have you not ridden yet?" the old man uttered, closing the book, and looking up.

"Ridden!" repeated Don Miguel. "To be sure I have, I started two hours since."

"Two hours! Impossible! Why, I have read ever since you left."

"Then you must have been most deeply interested."

"In truth, I have been. Ah, such noble thoughts!—such inspiring sentiments!—such holy aspirations!"

"Yes; but—but that is simple history written there," said Don Miguel, who had never discovered anything but plain, common-place, dry narrative in the volume.

"Ah, *amigo*," returned the priest, not in the least disconcerted, "I know it is history; but what tones of thought does simple history call up in the mind of him who stands in imagination among those of whom he reads. It is while travelling through the regions of the past that we gain our best thoughts—the future only leads to conjecture. But most anything in the shape of reading would please me now, since I have been so long without it."

"Yes, yes," answered Truxillo, more moved by the solemn manner of the missionero than by his words; "I suppose you have not had much reading among the Indians."

"Very little, I assure you. I have only read in God's great book of Nature; but even that is a book that may well please and instruct the pious student."

Don Miguel of course assented to this idea, and after that the conversation turned upon the natures, condition and habits of the Indios Bravos, and the priest proved himself well acquainted with the whole matter. The old don was well pleased with his guest's company, and he spent the greater part of the day with him.

If the old missionero imagined that he was remaining beneath that roof without any suspicion resting upon him, he was much mistaken. The ever-watchful lieutenant, Aldamar, had noticed him, and the same ideas had seized upon his mind that had at first moved Isabel. During the afternoon the lieutenant and maiden met.

"Where is Don Miguel?" was Aldamar's first question.

"He is with that old priest in the library," replied Isabel.

"Have you seen him?"

"Who—the priest?"

"Yes."

"Yes. I ate with him this morning."

"And what did you think of him?"

"I did not like his looks at all."

"Did you have any suspicions?"

"Only that I had seen him before. I knew that I had seen his countenance somewhere, and he explained it by saying that he was present in the cathedral of Guanajuato when I was affianced to Don Juan Calleja; but I know I have seen him since then. I have seen those features within these two years past, I know."

"So have I," returned Aldamar, with a puzzled look; "and yet I cannot at present make out where I have seen him."

"He is a strange looking man," pursued Isabel, "and has evidently seen much of the world. Perhaps he is some priest who once upheld Hidalgo, and has since kept himself in concealment."

"It may be so, but I much doubt it," responded the lieutenant. "I do not like the looks of him at all. Don Miguel places altogether too much confidence in him, and I wish you would watch him as narrowly as possible."

"I will do so, Aldamar, for I owe him no favor. He asserts that I am even now Don Juan's legal wife, and that he was present at the ceremony and knows all about it."

"Aha! Does he?" uttered Aldamar, with strongly-marked emphasis. "We will look to him, then. But let no such tale as that frighten you. I do not believe that Calleja will ever

gain you for a wife, except by your own consent. He is a villain."

"Ah, we all know that," said the maiden, with a dubious shake of her head; "and so is the emperor a villain!"

The lieutenant gazed into Isabel's face for a moment, and then he said:

"True, true—Iturbide is a villain, and through him Calleja may obtain your hand, for Don Miguel will not dare to say to him nay."

Isabel did not choose to reveal the hope she had in Francisco's promise, nor did she always hold it herself. Sometimes she tried to school herself for the worst, but try as she would, the future would take some coloring of light from her lover's pledge.

"But never mind that now," continued Aldamar, after a few moments' hesitation. "Don Juan Calleja has more enemies than friends. Look you now after the priest, for you can watch him better than I can. Let us find him out if we can."

Isabel promised to do her best, and after that she returned to the house, and Aldamar went out to the stable.

Don Miguel sat up with the priest until quite late, and most of the time Isabel remained with them. She kept her eyes fixed upon him, most narrowly, and he seemed to notice it, for he moved uneasily in his seat a number of times when he found her watching him with more interest than usual.

Various topics had been discussed, and if Truxillo had not been predisposed in the priest's favor he might have seen that his stock of learning was not so great as would seem to appear. It was superficial and empty, and he artfully contrived to draw more from his host than came from himself, but he did it in such a way that he seemed to hold it all beforehand in his own knowledge. At length there came a pause in the conversation, and Truxillo seized the opportunity to ask a question which had been for some time upon his mind.

"Holy father," he said, "you have travelled all over the country, and from your remarks I am led to judge that you have been a refugee. Did you ever chance to come across a man who calls himself Boquilla?"

The missionero started at the sound of the name, and it was some moments before he replied.

"Ah, my son," he at length said, with a dubious shake of the head, "I have seen him, and I fear he is not what an honest man should be. Has he ever been here?"

"Yes—several times," returned Don Miguel, with considerable anxiety depicted upon his face. "He has sought shelter here for the night, and I have had a curiosity to know who and what he was, but I could never find out any thing from him."

"Do you think he will be here again?" the priest asked.

"I cannot tell. He comes and goes when he pleases."

"I should like to see him, for I fear he is a bad man—a very wicked, degraded mortal."

Isabel gazed more sharply than ever into the priest's face, and she felt confident that he lied; she knew that he was speaking falsely, and her suspicions were confirmed. To be sure, she knew but little of Boquilla, but she had seen him enough to know that he had an honest, noble countenance, and that his eye could never belong to a wicked man. And then the assurance of her lover had much weight in her mind. Now, as she looked into the face of the guest, she was surprised that her grandfather did not notice what a villainous look he had, for she saw it in every feature, and most strange features they were, too.

"Then you know nothing positive concerning Boquilla?" said Don Miguel.

"No—only that he is a noted brigand."

"Ah, I feared such was the case."

"I know such is the case."

"But there are different grades of brigands, even," said Isabel, with much warmth, and at the same time directing a withering look at the priest. "Some are now apparently brigands who have been literally forced into the business by the cruelty of Iturbide—who are proscribed and dare not appear in public. They are men, too, who war not upon the poor and defenceless, but who make most of their levies upon the emperor's own tools. I do not believe Boquilla is a bad man, nor is he a mean man. He comes openly, and he speaks boldly, and his face is a passport to esteem."

The priest quailed before the proud maiden's look, and after a few moments of troubled thought, he said, with a faint laugh:

"You speak generously, lady; but it comes from a young and inexperienced heart. After you have seen as much of the world as I have, you will learn not to trust to appearances."

"Very likely," returned Isabel, coloring with emotion. "I know that appearances are often deceitful." Soon after she left the apartment.

CHAPTER IX.

THE TARANTULA!

DON MIGUEL TRUXILLO heard the clock strike the hour of midnight, and shortly afterwards he sank into an uneasy slumber. The events of the past few days had made more impression upon his mind than he revealed to others. He loved his fair young grandchild with the whole ardor of his soul, and the more he thought of Juan Calleja's claim, the more deep became his convictions that Isabel would be made only miserable thereby. He only wished that he had the power to prevent the match; but he had not. He could not prevent the consummation, even had he been a bold, fearless man—for Don Miguel acknowledged himself that he was a timid man, and he often wished that he had been constituted differently.

How long the old don had slept he could not tell, but he was aroused by a strange sound in his room, and on fairly awaking he found that his light had gone out. He started up to a sitting posture and listened, and he was sure he heard a movement of some kind upon the floor. He dared not leap out of his bed, but he sat there and listened, and trembled. He had presence of mind enough, however, to watch for the nature and direction of the sound, and it seemed to move towards the door. He dared not even cry out for assistance. Once he spoke and asked if any one was there, but he received no answer.

The sound upon the floor at length ceased, and the old man thought his door was shut to and latched. After this all was still, save the low wailing of the wind. It was very dark—much darker than usual—and he dared not yet get out of his bed. He listened eagerly for the repetition of the sound upon the floor, but he did not hear it, and at length he plucked up the courage to get out of his bed. His first impulse was to ring for some of his servants; but after sober reflection he began to think that he might have been deceived—that it was only his excited imagination which had been playing with him. After some search he found his tinder-box, and having lighted his lamp, he looked carefully about the room, but nothing had been moved or disturbed. He went to the door and opened it, and looked out into the corridor, but there was nothing unusual there. After satisfying himself that nothing out of the way was to be found, he felt confident that he had only imagined the noise, and setting his lamp upon the table again, he once more got into bed.

It was some time before Don Miguel slept again, and when he did sleep it was only to dream horrible dreams. Once he dreamed that a grim, gigantic skeleton—a horrid mass of human bones—came to his bedside and placed its clammy hand upon his brow. He tried to start

up, but he could not. He endeavored with all his might to cry out, but his tongue would not move, nor could he even breathe. The skeleton grinned a most horrid grin, and gradually its appearance changed. Its bleached, eyeless sockets seemed starting out from beneath a dark cowl, and the bones of the body became enveloped in the robes of a priest. The heavy hand was taken from his brow and laid upon his breast, and with one last, mighty effort he groaned aloud, and started to a sitting posture. It was again dark in his room, and he could hear that it had begun to rain, for the big drops were pattering against his windows. The wind made considerable noise as it moaned through the thick boughs of the China trees; but the startled man heard another noise within his own room. It was that same crawling, shuffling sound upon the floor. The sweat stood in great cold drops upon his brow and temples, and he trembled at every joint. At that instant there came a vivid flash of lightning, and the whole heavens seemed as one sheet of flame. The apartment was lighted up for the instant only, but it was long enough for Don Miguel to see a dark figure crawling along upon the floor towards the door. A low cry broke from his lips, and on the next instant came the thunder-crash. The whole building trembled—the very earth seemed to quake; and when the roar had passed away, and its reverberations among the distant mountains had ceased, all was still once more. The sound upon the floor was hushed, and the wind and the rain-drops alone broke upon the listener's ear. He listened only a moment, and then he reached forth and convulsively grasped the bell-cord, which hung at the head of his bed. He pulled it long and violently, and ere he had let go of it his lieutenant hastened into the room with a lighted lamp in one hand, and a pistol in the other.

"Don Miguel!—my master!—what has happened?" cried Aldamar, catching a glimpse of the old man's terror-wrought features.

"O, Aldamar!"

"But what is it? What has happened to move you so?"

"O, holy Saint Peter protect me!" gasped the terror-stricken man, reaching forth one hand and placing it with difficulty upon his attendant's shoulder. "Aldamar, I have had a most terrible time. But look you about my room, and see if any one is here!"

Aldamar started at the order, for it sided with

his suspicions. He hastened to obey the order, but he could find nothing.

"There is nothing here," he said, "nor can I find any trace of anything. What is it that you have seen?"

"O, terrible! terrible! I was awakened by some sound in my room at first, and I found my light had gone out. I surely heard a noise upon my floor, but it was soon hushed, and I got up and lighted my lamp. After that I got into bed again, but I did not sleep soon nor long."

The old man stopped here, and gazed furtively about him, and then he went on. He told of the dream he had had, and of what he had seen by the glare of the lightning.

"You are sure it was a man whom you saw upon the floor?" said Aldamar.

"Yes—I know it was."

"And his form—could you tell that?"

"No—for he was all crouched and bent, and I could only see that it was a dark form moving towards the door."

"Don Miguel, it was the priest!"

"The priest? Impossible!"

"Who else could it have been?"

Truxillo did not answer this question, but with one long, wild, loud cry he leaped from the bed and grasped the lieutenant by both arms.

"Great God of mercy!" he gasped, while he trembled like a dry leaf in the whirlwind.

Aldamar was for the moment struck dumb with astonishment; but he soon managed to gain his speech, and in a quick whisper he asked his master what had startled him so.

"That hand!" gasped Don Miguel. "I felt its cold touch again upon my breast! O! O!"

Aldamar was for the moment inclined to doubt his master's sanity; but there must have been some cause for such a movement, and he removed the old man's hands from his arms, and then held the lamp towards the bed. He moved down the coverlid, and was just upon the point of raising the sheet higher up, when he uttered a cry of horror, and started back.

"What is it?" whispered Don Miguel.

Aldamar spoke not, but again he moved up to the bedside and held the lamp over. The old man tremblingly drew near, and there, upon the very spot where he had laid, they saw the black, noisome, horrid form of a large tarantula! There it lay, a terrible death-minister, with its shaggy, spider-like body half crushed upon the bed-clothes!

Don Miguel stood aghast! For a moment he stood with clasped hands, and then he sank back upon a chair with a deep groan.

"I am a dead man!" he uttered.

"Did you feel it bite?" quickly asked Aldamar.

But the poor man could not tell. He fancied that he had felt the reptile's deadly fangs in his flesh, but he was not sure.

"But do you feel pain now?" continued the lieutenant.

"Yes. All over my body—everywhere!"

Aldamar was now calm enough for cool reflection, and without more ceremony or questions he proceeded at once to examine the old man's body. Had the tarantula bitten him, the marks by this time would have been terrible, but none could be found.

"Don Miguel, you are safe!" fervently uttered the lieutenant, after he had concluded his search. "The monster has not bitten you."

The old man gazed up into Aldamar's face a moment, and then he started to his feet.

"Not bitten!" he cried. "Safe! And shall I still live?"

"Yes, for you are not harmed. It is a miracle; but so it is."

Don Miguel was soon convinced of his attendant's correctness, and when he became assured that he was safe, the revulsion of his feelings was so great that for a long while he was perfectly powerless; and while he sat in his chair, trying to overcome the tumultuous beating of his heart, Aldamar took the tarantula upon the point of his dagger, and carried it away. When he returned he found his master more possessed and able to converse—for the first question that he asked showed that his mind was his own.

"Aldamar," he said, still pale and shuddering, "where could that deadly monster have come from? I have lived here more than half a century, and I never before saw one of them so high up on the table lands as this."

"Neither did I," responded Aldamar. "And," he added, in a very low, meaning tone, "that one would never have come without assistance! Without the aid of human hands it could never have reached the place where we found it!"

"Aldamar, what mean you?"

"I'll tell you, my good master. I mean that you are too trusting, too open, too unsuspecting. Your holy old priest has done all this!"

"Impossible!"

"I know it."

"Diable! It cannot be! What! a man so old, so infirm, so pious!"

"He may not be so old as you think him; and as for his infirmities and piety they are easily assumed. You saw a man upon your floor, and who else in this house could it be? Ah, Don Miguel, you have harbored a serpent!"

"Let us go to his room," faintly uttered the old man. "Let us see him and confront him, for by my inmost soul, I begin to fear you may be right."

Truxillo hurried on his clothes, and then the lieutenant took up the lamp and led the way to the apartment which the missionero had occupied. It was on the same floor with the one they left, and situated at the further end of the corridor. When they reached it Aldamar opened the door, and they both went in; but there was nobody there!

"He has gone!" said the lieutenant.

Don Miguel was now fully aroused, and he started forward and looked upon the bed. He saw where a man had lain, but the place was empty now.

"Aldamar," he said, "start up the household, and let search be made. Upon my soul, I think he is the villain!"

The lieutenant stopped to make no reply or remark, but quickly lighting the lamp which the priest had left upon his table, so that the don might have light, he started off, and in ten minutes a score of servants were assembled in the lower hall. In as few words as possible, Aldamar explained to them what had transpired, and then sent them upon the search. Lanterns were procured, and the house searched all through. The stables, the sheds, the granaries, the store-houses, and all other out buildings were thoroughly searched, but the priest was nowhere to be found.

"Don Miguel," said the lieutenant, after he had reported the result thus far, "we must take horses and set off. The villain is not far from here, and we may find him."

"Would you go in this rain?" asked the old man, looking out into the darkness, and at the same time holding out his hand upon which the great rain-drops fell fast.

"Never mind the rain," was Aldamar's reply, for he was anxious to commence, or rather continue, the search at once. "Besides," he added, "it will be daylight in less than an hour. Yes, let us set off at once, for I have some strange suspicions concerning that missionero."

Since his retainers were anxious to set off, in a few minutes a party of fifteen horsemen were under arms and ready for the search.

CHAPTER X.

AN ASTOUNDING DISCOVERY.

WHEN the party had reached the high road, Aldamar caused them to divide themselves into four separate parties, each taking a different route. One took the road to the westward, towards Guadalupe; one to the north, towards the higher mountains; one to the south, and one to the east, towards the edge of the table. Aldamar himself took this latter route, and with him he took two of the other men. He gave directions to the other parties to continue the search until daylight, and then they might be governed by their own judgment, as they could probably find some tracks if any one had gone over the road since midnight.

Aldamar saw the other parties set off towards their respective quarters, and then he moved on himself. It was very dark, and the rain still fell, though not so fast as before, and there were just visible some spots in the eastern heavens which gave indications of a clearing up of the weather. The lieutenant and his two companions rode very slowly, and listened attentively for any sound they might hear; but at length they reached the point where there was but one path, and here they set into a brisk trot. Fifteen minutes' ride brought them to the edge of the table-land, where we first met Aldamar, and by this time there was a glow of coming light all along upon the eastern horizon.

"Now, Walter," said the lieutenant, addressing the man who rode nearest him, "we must ride carefully, and take advantage of all good trotting ground, for I feel confident that the fellow is on this road. Keep your eyes sharply open, and your ears set for the first sound of footsteps."

"The old diablo took a curious time to set out, it seems to me," remarked Walter.

"Because he had no choice. The rascal dared not remain. I have no doubt that this weather just suits him, for very likely he thinks we won't follow him."

The path was now narrow where it descended among the rocks, and the three men were obliged to ride in single file, Aldamar taking the lead. By the time they were half way down the descent, the rain had ceased falling, and it was daylight; and as soon as they came to a spot where the sand had laid without washing, they stopped, and Aldamar slipped from his saddle.

"Ah," he uttered, after he had crept around a while upon his knees, "here is a track!"

"A fresh one?" asked Walter.

"Yes. It must have been made during the night—it must have been made very recently, for the sand is soft and pliable, and an hour's rain, even, would have surely obliterated it."

"Then he cannot have been gone long?"

"No, not over half an hour at the farthest. By Saint Jago! we'll have him yet."

The lieutenant sprang back into his saddle as he spoke, and again they set forward. They reached the plain before the sun arose, and here they had opportunity to trace fresh tracks in the sandy spots; but they did not extend far, for after a while it became evident that the fellow had taken the precaution to keep upon the grass.

The plain upon which they had entered was here and there dotted with thick clumps of trees, without any particular path, there being numerous tracks converging towards the mountain-path they had left. Under these circumstances, Aldamar sent his two companions in different directions, himself keeping the straight road towards Perote. He had ridden on some twenty rods, when his horse pricked up his ears and uttered a low snort. The rider knew that some living thing was near, and after riding on a few more rods at a quick pace, he stopped and looked about him. Upon his left hand lay a thick copse of tangled cypress wood, and after a moment's listening, he was sure that he heard something moving. His first impulse was to alight and dive into the thicket; but upon second thought he concluded to ride around it first; so he started on. He found, however, upon gaining the extremity of the copse, that it extended a great distance back; but he kept on, for he knew that no one could well leave it without his being able to detect them. He had ridden on more than a mile, when he found that the thicket had come to a swamp, and feeling assured that no man could escape that way, he turned back again. When he reached the point at the corner of the wood from whence he had started, he saw a human figure just ahead of him, beyond a light bunch of cotton-weed. He hastened around and came full upon the missionero! The fellow started, but he did not attempt to run.

"Ah, lieutenant," he uttered, "you are riding early this morning."

Aldamar was almost confounded by the fellow's coolness, and for a while he doubted his own senses. The priest stood before him, with his form bent and trembling, and not the least sign of fear was upon his wrinkled features.

"Yes, I am out early," Aldamar at length said; "and I am after no less a personage than yourself."

"After me?" cried the priest, with a look of utter astonishment.

"Yes—after you."

"And for what?"

"We want you back at Don Miguel's house."

"Ah, my son, I fear I cannot comply. I have business at Perote, which must be attended to. Is the case one of emergency?"

Again Aldamar was almost inclined to doubt whether his suspicions were correct—for the old devotee spoke in such a perfect tone of innocence and assurance, that it seemed impossible that deceit could dwell there; but again the lieutenant looked upon the outlines of that face, and his resolution was taken.

"The case is one of emergency," he said, "and you must go back with me."

"O, not must. You do not mean that I must go?"

"Yes, I do," said Aldamar, slipping from his saddle, and laying his hand upon the missionero's arm.

The latter seemed to have been prepared for this, for his hand had been resting within the folds of his drenched robe, and quick as thought he drew a pistol and aimed it at Aldamar's head. The weapon was already cocked, and he pulled the trigger before his captor could make a movement to prevent it; but there was no report. The powder in the pan had become too damp to take fire. This movement gave Aldamar all the privilege he could desire, for he no longer held any doubt, and with one blow of his heavy fist he knocked the priest down, and his next movement was to sound his horn which he wore at his side.

The missionero made several attempts to get up, but Aldamar held him firmly down, and in a few minutes the two men arrived upon the spot.

"Now," said the lieutenant, as he helped the priest to arise, "you will go back with me to Truxillo's house, and if you offer resistance, or attempt to escape, you will die upon the instant. I mean just what I say."

"You need not fear for me, thou godless man of war!" replied the old man. "I will accompany you, since I must, though it will disappoint me much."

"Ay, I think it will disappoint you," returned Aldamar, with a bitter sneer. "But I will take good care that you keep your promise."

As he thus spoke, he produced a strong cord from his pocket, and with this he bound the priest's arms behind him. Then the pinioned man was lifted to the back of the lieutenant's

saddle, and after this his legs were firmly bound. He made no resistance, nor did he utter a word during the operation; but the sharp grating of his set teeth could be heard, and his eyes might have been seen to burn with a fierce fire. As soon as this was done the party started back. Aldamar's horse was a powerful one, and he carried his double load easily.

When they reached the table-land, they found one of the other parties there—the one which had been sent to the southward, and at the junction of the main road they found the other two. These three parties had assured themselves that no person had passed along their allotted route during the morning or night, and hence they had returned.

In half an hour more the company reached the house, and the priest was conducted to Don Miguel's presence, who gazed upon him some moments in silence. The priest was the first one to speak.

"My son," he said, addressing the don, "what means this violence that has been offered to my person? Alas! I did not dream that you could have ordered such a thing."

Old Truxillo was completely bewildered by this, and he began to be sorry that he had allowed Aldamar to set off, for he really doubted now that the priest was guilty. But he soon found his tongue, and with many doubts and misgivings, he said:

"We went to your chamber to look for you, holy father, and upon finding you gone we were of course surprised."

"But why did you seek me?"

Truxillo hesitated, and Aldamar took it upon himself to explain, which he did by relating the events of the preceding night. He told them all, from the first time his master awoke to the finding of the tarantula, and the search for the missionero.

"O, holy virgin!" ejaculated the priest, with his hands clasped together; "and is it possible that you suspected me of so great and terrible a crime?"

"Why—we—that is—we thought we would ask you," hesitatingly returned Don Miguel, much moved by the old devotee's manner.

"Alas, is me! If I thought that even the suspicion of such a crime could rest upon my shoulders I would give up my life to wipe it off. My death-hour is surely near at hand, for I feel the cold touch even now upon my vitals; but I would rather be young again, with this dark

world of trials and afflictions all before me, than rest under such an imputation. O, my son, do not so wrong me!"

Don Miguel was now fairly moved to pity, and if his wishes had been spoken not another question would have been asked; but Aldamar seemed determined to know more, and taking advantage of the present silence, he asked:

"Why did you leave the house as you did?—at such an hour, and in such a storm?"

"I will tell you," replied the priest. "It may seem strange to you, but it is nevertheless true. An angel of the Lord appeared to me in a dream, and bade me hasten to the church at Perote, where a poor man was dying. I could not refuse to obey the summons, and I immediately arose to go. I at first thought of calling you up and acquainting you with the cause of my absence; but I concluded not to disturb you, and I went off without waking any one up. That is the true cause of my unexpected absence; but you have broken the charm, now, and I hope if Heaven be offended at the negligence of my mission, the penalty will not be mine."

"It appears to me that the angel went a great distance for a priest," said Aldamar, with a bitter curl upon his lips. "Could he not have found one nearer at hand, or did he want a broken-down, road-ridden thing like yourself?"

The priest assumed a look of holy horror, and crossed himself.

"Hush, Aldamar," said Don Miguel. "Do not speak harshly, for we may have wronged the poor man."

"Most deeply, my son," added the priest.

"Then you know nothing of that tarantula?" said the lieutenant, looking the priest full and sharply in the face.

"Nothing at all, my misguided son, save what I have heard from your own lips."

"And you were not in this old man's chamber last night?"

"Do not ask me such questions, for they pain me," said the missionero, with much apparent concern. "I never before suffered such poignant misery as your suspicions force upon my soul. I have been reviled and persecuted for my religion, and I was happy, for I was bearing the heavy cross of my Master; but I cannot bear this. Smite me, or even kill me with instruments of torture, but do not plant the dagger of foul suspicion in my moral character. If you have suffered wrong, God grant that you may find the sinner!"

This was spoken in such a tone of innocence, with such meekness and forbearance, that even Aldamar was for a moment staggered.

"Let it be forgotten," said Truxillo. "Pardon us, most reverend father, for the suspicions we have held, and take my hand in token of renewed friendship and confidence."

"Hold! Stop!" cried Aldamar, starting forward, and seizing his master's hand just as the returned guest was upon the point of taking it. "I am not yet quite satisfied. There is one point I want cleared up."

"Aldamar," spoke Don Miguel, with considerable severity, "I command you to give over this thing. Let this reverend old man rest now from the wrong we have heaped upon him.—Stop—I will not hear another word."

"But, my master, I—

"Stop, I command you, and leave the room!"

For a single instant there was an angry spot upon the lieutenant's cheek, and an angry spark in his eye; but he remembered his master's weakness, and it passed away. He did not leave the room, however, nor did he cease speaking, for laying his hand upon the don's arm, he said, in a saddened tone.

"Don Miguel, you know I never deceived you, nor did I ever knowingly do you wrong, and I am sure that I shall not commence at this late day, after having lived with you, boy and man, for more than thirty years. Now I am going to ask this man a few more questions."

Truxillo made no reply to this, and seeing that he was not going to object, Aldamar turned to the priest.

"Do you know Don Juan Calleja?" he asked.

"Yes, my son," the priest replied, without the least show of uneasiness upon his features, though a close observer might have seen that his fingers worked nervously.

"And how long since you have seen him?"

"I do not now remember."

"Then, by Saint Dominic, your memory must be very short! I think I might help you a little."

"I should be pleased if you would," the miserero returned.

He spoke with less of assurance now, for he surely saw the quick sparks of strange light that danced in the lieutenant's eyes.

"I will help you to remember!" whispered Aldamar; and as the words passed from his lips he darted forward and grasped the guest by the neck.

"I will help you!" he repeated; and as he spoke he seized the long white hair and beard, and tore them from the man's head.

The false priest struggled with all his might, but it did not avail him. His white locks were gone, and with them went the neatly-applied eyebrows and beards; and the transformation was as strange as it was sudden.

"Now, *Pedro Reyna*! what think you of Don Juan Calleja?" asked Aldamar, with a bitter sneer.

"*Pedro Reyna*!" gasped Don Miguel, not yet quite ready to credit the evidence of his own senses.

"Ay," returned the lieutenant, "Senor Pedro Reyna, Don Juan Calleja's own private minion and follower. Do you not recognize him?"

"Yes," answered the old man, moving farther back, and gazing with mingled feelings of horror and surprise upon the man before him, and whom he now readily recognized as the servant who had been there with Don Juan.

"Now, *Pedro Reyna*," said Aldamar, looking the villain in the face, "what have you got to say for yourself?"

A variety of emotions had manifested themselves upon the fellow's countenance since his exposure. He had at first made an instinctive movement towards the place where he usually carried his pistols, but they were not there now, for he had been entirely unarmed by his captors. With a power of self-control, which was natural to him, he had regained his composure, and become sullen and firm. His lips were tightly compressed, his hands clutched, and his eyes clear and fixed. First he gazed upon Don Miguel, and then upon the lieutenant, and after a while, he said, seeming to address both:

"You have found out who I am, but you need not ask me any more questions, for I shall not answer them. You, Don Miguel Truxillo, are easily deceived, and were I to lie in answer to your questions, you would not know the difference. And as for you, sir,"—to Aldamar—"I have nothing to do with you. Wait until Don Juan comes, and ask him what you please."

"But did you place that tarantula in my bed? Tell me that."

"I shall answer nothing."

"Do not waste words with him," said the lieutenant. "Place him under lock and key, and I will tell you all that you need to know."

Don Miguel did ask some more questions, however; but he got no answers, and he gave

the task up. The villain seemed to feel assured that they would not put him to death until they had seen his master, and he was perfectly indifferent to all their accusations, exhibiting an impudence and assurance that well became his character and calling.

Attached to Truxillo's house was a small building, which had been used in former years for the imprisonment and punishment of slaves, and to this place Pedro Reyna was conducted. His hands were shackled, and his feet were chained to a bolt in the floor; and after this was done, Aldamar saw that the gratings of the windows were all secure, and the locks firm.

"I've been in prison before," tauntingly re-

marked the prisoner, as his captor was examining the place.

Aldamar looked at him, and a flush of indignation came upon his cheeks; but he made no reply.

"I suppose you mean to keep me here until Don Juan comes," the fellow said, as Aldamar turned to go away.

"If you live until that time," was the lieutenant's reply.

A dark smile played over the rascal's features, and his lips moved, but Aldamar did not understand what he said, nor had he any desire to stop to listen, so he went out and carefully locked the door after him, and then went to report to his master.

CHAPTER XI.

IMPORTANT COMMUNICATIONS.

On the very next morning, Don Miguel Truxillo sat in his library. It was late—very late, for he had slept well into the morning hours. He was thinking of the strange events of the past few days, when he was aroused by the unceremonious entrance of his lieutenant.

"What is the matter, Aldamar?" he quickly asked, for he saw that the man was much agitated.

"Our prisoner has escaped!"

"Escaped? Pedro Reyna escaped?" uttered the old man, starting from his chair.

"Yes."

"But how? I thought the place was strong."

"So it was; but not strong enough for him. His hands must have been very small—as small as his wrists, for the irons were slipped off whole, and I am sure they fitted snugly when I put them on. The irons were taken from the ankles by wrenching, which was probably done with the aid of the hand-irons."

"But then the doors were locked, and the windows barred."

"Certainly; but he easily managed to move away one of the bars from the window with a purchase which he made of his long chain."

"He must be found, Aldamar. He must be found and kept till Calleja comes back, for it is fitting that the colonel should not only know what a villain he has taken into his service, but

that he should also have the opportunity to punish him."

"Ah, Don Miguel," uttered Aldamar, with a dubious shake of the head, "you do not yet know everything. But I fear the villain cannot be found. I have been out five hours, and the rest of the men are out now. He must have had a fair start in advance, and he will look out this time that he is not easily taken. He has stolen one of your fleetest horses, and he may be half way to the coast by this time."

The old noble started up and took several turns across the room, and at length he stopped and looked his lieutenant in the face.

"Aldamar," he said, "you have spoken words which seemed to indicate that you knew the secret of that villain's attempt upon my life."

"I have spoken so, senor."

"And do you know?"

"Yes—very well. Pedro Reyna is not at the bottom of this, my master; but another man, more powerful than he, sets him on."

"You do not mean Calleja?"

"I do, senor."

The old man turned pale.

"Aldamar, I want no suspicion. I do not wish to suspect Don Juan Calleja of such a crime without the proof. And then the object,—what object can he have? He can owe me no revenge, for surely I never wronged him."

"It is Don Juan Calleja who is aiming at your life, senor; and I have proof."

"But why should he do it?" uttered the old man, trembling with fear.

"Can you not imagine?"

"Indeed, I cannot."

"Then I will tell you. He would murder you for your money!"

"But how so?"

"Why, do you not yet see?"

"Indeed, I do not."

"Is not Isabel now your heir?"

"Yes—to every dollar."

"And Isabel is to be Calleja's wife. If you are dead, he will own the whole."

"I see, I see!" groaned Don Miguel. "And can he not wait for death to come of its own accord?"

"Ah, my dear master, he is afraid to have you live. He fears that you will discover his true character after his marriage, and that you will thereupon so change your will that none of your money can pass through his hands. That is his fear, and the cause of his wicked haste."

"And yet," whispered the old man, "you only surmise this."

"No—I know it. I overheard a conversation between Calleja and Pedro Reyna, and this plan was then all laid out."

"But you did not inform me."

"Because I would not give you needless uneasiness. I believed that I could watch their movements, having discovered their designs, and thus prevent them from accomplishing their purpose."

"And yet how nigh I came upon the brink of a horrid death," said the old man, with a fearful shudder.

"So you did," quickly returned Aldamar; "but had you known all that I knew you could not have prevented the risk you run, for you would never have suspected the priest. Even after the proof of his guilt was as clear as noon-day light you would have taken the serpent again to your bosom."

"So I would," frankly acknowledged the old man, "for I could not believe him guilty. And," he added, lowering his voice, and bowing his head, "Juan Calleja is against me—his hand is raised against my life—his heart is longing for my death. And this man is the husband of my child!"

"No, no, Don Miguel—not yet the husband."

"But he will be."

"Will you allow it? Will you, after what has happened, allow that marriage to go on?"

"I ought not," murmured Truxillo, in a troubled tone. "I must think of it, and when I see Calleja again I shall have my mind made up. And in the meantime, Aldamar, be sure and not slip to another soul what you have told to me, for I would not have it get to Isabel's ears. The people will think the false priest was alone in the matter; or if they think more they can only suspect it."

The lieutenant promised compliance, and shortly afterwards he left the room.

By noon all the servants had returned from their search, but they had not been able to find any tracks of the escaped prisoner, nor could they gain any clue to the direction he had taken. Walter was the last one to return, and with him came Francisco Moreno. The young man had heard all the particulars of Pedro's attempt upon Don Miguel's life, and he had wit enough to lay the heaviest blame in the right quarter. He suspected, after a few moments of reflection, that Calleja was at the bottom of it, and he suspected the right cause, too. It was as plain to him as the result of simple addition. As soon as he reached the house he sought Don Miguel, who received him with much more than ordinary pleasure.

"You have heard of my narrow escape," said the old man, after they had become seated.

"Yes—I know all about it."

"You know all that is known—how that villain so basely attempted my life."

"Yes," returned Francisco, thoughtfully, "I know it. And such is to be the husband of our sweet Isabel!"

"What!" uttered the old man, starting. "No, no—you mistake. It was Pedro Reyna who would have murdered me."

"No—it was the *tarantula*, Don Miguel."

"Ay; but the villain Pedro placed it in my bed."

"So he did—so he did. And who placed him in your house? Who set him to the bloody work? Do you not know that Pedro Reyna has a master?"

"Ah, Aldamar has been telling you."

"I have not seen Aldamar. I have judged this from other things. When the ground is wet I know clouds have been passing over the earth, and just as surely do I know that Juan Calleja is at the bottom of this foul attempt upon your life."

The old man gazed upon the youth for some moments without speaking. It could be plainly seen that there were conflicting emotions in his bosom, for his features showed it.

"Francisco," he at length said, "you are right. You have hit the truth precisely; but I must beg of you that you will not tell anything of this to Isabel, for I would not have her know of it for half my wealth."

"Not have her know of it? Then you would have her marry the man never dreaming of his real character. She must be placed within the cold, slimy folds of the snake without dreaming that poisonous fangs are resting near her. You would sacrifice her upon—"

"Stop, stop!" gasped the old man. "You wrong me now. It is not I who have done this. Her own father did it, and it is now beyond my power to undo it. If I could save her, O how willingly, how quickly would I do it! But I cannot, unless Calleja will give her up."

"Cannot!" cried the young man, his eyes flashing, and his hands working nervously together. "What! and cannot you make a motion in behalf of poor, noble Isabel? Can you see her united to the man who would take your own life?"

"O, O!" groaned the old man, in the bitterest agony, "I cannot help it if I would. What power can I oppose to the emperor?"

"If the emperor dares to mix up in this matter, you can oppose him much. We can at least die in the maiden's defence. If Iturbide dares to send his soldiers here, I can have two hundred stalwart men here, all well armed—men who will fight till the last drop of their blood!"

Don Miguel looked up in astonishment. He knew not what to make of this.

"Francisco, what mean you? Where can you raise such men?"

"From the mountains."

"What—brigands?"

"You can call them what you please. They are men who have been driven from their homes by Iturbide's proscriptions, and they now take vengeance by often stripping his followers of their goods."

"And are you connected with these men, Francisco?"

"No, senor. Boquilla will furnish them."

"Ah, then that wonderful man is a brigand."

"No, senor—he is not. He is surely a patriot guerrilla, but not a brigand. Yet he has a great control over the mountain bands, and they will look upon his word as law."

"And in this case I should work myself into a broil with the emperor, and after all without good result, for Iturbide can send a thousand men if he chooses, or even more."

Before Francisco could reply there came the sound of a horse's hoofs to their ears. He arose and went to the window, and saw a man just riding into the yard.

"Who is it?" asked Don Miguel.

"It is Don Juan Calleja!"

"Don Juan!" uttered the old man, starting to his feet and approaching the window. "So it is. How comes he back so soon, I wonder? I did not expect him these three weeks yet."

"Perhaps he has come to see how his murderous plot has worked?" said Francisco, in a tone of the most bitter meaning.

"Very likely," uttered the old man, speaking in a whisper, and shuddering. "Remain with me, Francisco. Stay near me until he is gone."

CHAPTER XII.

THE ACCUSATION AND THE CHALLENGE.

DON MIGUEL TRUXILLO was very pale when Calleja entered his presence, and it was with a strong effort that he extended his hand. He knew that he looked upon a murderer, and he felt his hand almost burn within the bad man's grasp. Calleja, on the contrary, was all smiles and bows, and his words were honeyed and smooth; but it would not have required an excessive degree of wit to discover that his manners were all assumed. They were too profuse for his nature, and not at all in accordance with his disposition. Francisco saw it, and his blood boiled with indignation.

"Ah, and here is young Moreno, if I may judge from his countenance," said the colonel, as he cast his eyes upon our hero.

"Francisco Moreno, senor, the son of General Antony Moreno," proudly replied the youth.

"I am happy to see you, young senor," resumed Calleja, approaching and extending his hand.

Francisco's first impulse was to refuse his hand; but an instant's reflection told him that such a course might produce a rupture that would not only do wrong to Don Miguel, but prevent any further business, so he arose and returned the dark man's grasp.

"You look pale and sick," said Calleja, after

he had taken a seat, at the same time turning towards the old man.

"Do I?" uttered Truxillo, gazing into the speaker's face with another shudder.

"Indeed, you do. Perhaps you are not well. It cannot be that my unexpected arrival has astonished you. You see I expected to have been gone a month, at least, but I met the governor of Guanajuato at Caderita, so I did not have to half perform my expected journey. But tell me, my old friend, what ails you. Have you caught cold during the storm?"

Calleja spoke in a quick, reckless, meaningless sort of way, and to our hero it was evident that his thoughts were not with his words, unless, indeed, the last sentence might be excepted. Don Miguel remained silent, for he knew not how to answer. He trembled with fear, and instinctively his eyes sought the face of Francisco. The colonel noticed the movement, and turning to the young man, he said:

"Perhaps you can tell me. Upon my soul, I am anxious about our kind old host here, for I see by his very face that something troubles him. Can you not enlighten me?"

"Yes, senor, I think I know what has affected him thus."

"Then tell me. By Saint Jago, I shall have to cure him and cheer him up ere I can enjoy

his company at all, and in order to do that I must find the cause of the malady. Let's have it."

Francisco looked towards Truxillo, and he knew from the expression of the old man's countenance, that he would not be able to tell the story of horror, for his nerves were already unstrung.

"Don Juan Calleja," said young Moreno, in a deep, calm voice, "you had a servant, named Pedro Reyna, who was here with you on your previous visit."

"Yes," calmly replied the colonel, without an apparent emotion.

"Well, sir, since you have been gone, that fellow has been here."

"Been here!" repeated Don Juan, in well-feigned surprise. "Ah, that's where the rascal went to. I left him to take care of my business at Perote, and he promised to remain there. I'll chastise him for this. But what did he do here? No harm, I trust."

Francisco was for the moment surprised at the colonel's coolness; but he remembered how cool and impudent the deepest villain could be, and he ceased to wonder. As soon as he settled his mind, he went on and related all that had transpired—how Pedro had come in the disguise of a priest—how he had worked himself into Don Miguel's favor—how he had attempted the dreadful mode of murdering his host, and how he had been captured, and of his subsequent escape.

"By the holy Saint Peter!" exclaimed Calleja, immediately upon Francisco's closing, "I can hardly understand that. I can hardly believe that Pedro Reyna would do such a thing."

"But we know he did do it."

"Then let me catch him, that's all!" exclaimed the colonel, bringing his fist down upon his knee. "I'll have him strung up by the neck, if this be true. *Mio Dios!* Don Miguel, I do not wonder you look pale. But you may rest assured that the rascal shall be punished. I will have him found if he is in the empire. And now let us turn to some more pleasing subject. How fares the senorita Isabel?"

"She is well," replied the old man, speaking mechanically.

"Heaven be thanked! I would see her. By my soul, I have put my horses upon almost lightning speed that I might the sooner clasp the fond, lovely being to my bosom. I will go to her room, senors, so please to excuse me."

A thousand daggers seemed piercing Francisco's heart, and a thousand souls seemed stirred up within his bosom. Don Miguel dared not speak. He could not muster the courage to openly accuse the fiery colonel of the crime of which he knew him to be guilty; and he would have seen him go on in search of Isabel without a word of remonstrance; but not so with Francisco. His young blood was up; and as he gazed upon the dark villain, he felt as though he were a serpent hissing at Isabel's feet.

"Stop! Juan Calleja," he said, in a hushed voice. "Before you go I would speak upon a subject that has not yet been broached."

Don Juan turned, and an angry flush was upon either cheek; but he quickly drove them away, and in a tone of comparative calmness, he said:

"If you have aught to say to me, I will thank you to say it quickly."

"I cannot make much haste. But you had better sit down, and I will be as expeditious as possible."

The colonel sat down, and for a moment his eyes flashed upon the youth, but he evinced no other outward sign of the feelings that worked within his bosom. The truth was, he knew of Francisco's love for Isabel, and he suspected she loved him in return. The young man gazed upon Calleja with a tremulous emotion, and for some moments he remained silent, for he was collecting his thoughts for speech. At length he spoke, and though his voice trembled, yet there was no fear in his bold, handsome face.

"Don Juan Calleja," he said, "you have pretended that you knew nothing of this business in which your servant has been engaged. Now, sir, before God and his holy host of saints, can you swear to such a fact?"

"Ha! ha! ha!—upon my soul, a very pretty confessor you make," laughingly returned the colonel; but his cheek blanched, nevertheless, and Francisco saw it.

"But that is no answer, senor," replied Francisco, determinedly.

"And what answer would you have?"

"A direct answer to my question."

"To please Don Miguel, if he wishes an answer to such a question, I will only say that I know nothing of what you mean."

"And you had no hand in the attempt which was made upon the old man's life?" resumed Francisco.

"Beware, senor!" spoke Calleja, turning very pale. "You are insulting me."

"I am trying to arrive at the truth," returned the youth, calmly.

"Then beware how you experiment upon me, for by the holy cross, if you touch my honor I will demand redress at the very portals of your heart!"

"I care not where you demand redress, nor when!" resumed Francisco, now fully aroused; "but before you go to seek the senorita Isabel, you shall know the odor that hangs upon your name. You *did* have a hand in the foul attempt at the murder of this unoffending old man!"

"Beware!" hissed Calleja, trembling at every joint, and turning frightfully pale.

"I know what I am saying, Don Juan Calleja, and I shall not fear your threats. Your villany is known. You set the murderer upon his track, for you wished to remove Truxillo from your way. You knew that his will, as it now stands, gives to Isabel all his property, and she, as your wife, would bring the whole to you. You feared to have the old man live too long, lest, finding out your true character, he should cut you off from all hopes or chances of obtaining his wealth, and so to be rid of him while the will was yet in your power, you hired your servant to kill him!"

"Fool!—idiot!—liar!" gasped Calleja, starting to his feet.

The old man uttered a cry of alarm, and on the instant the whole character of Calleja's countenance changed. His passion all disappeared, and his face became calm as the frozen bosom of a lake; but his eyes burned with a most intense fire, and his lips were purple.

"Don Miguel," he said, turning to his host, "do you believe this?"

But the old man dared not answer.

"He knows it," said Francisco.

"Sirrah!" hissed the colonel, turning to the

youth, "speak not again. I am now conversing with this man. I shall attend to you soon enough!"

"Now, Don Miguel, answer me. Do you believe this foul aspersion which you have just heard?"

"Alas! Don Juan, what can I say? I have feared it was true."

"And you think I could do such a thing as that! Don Miguel, I hope that you do not now believe it. For *your own* sake I hope so," he added, in an intimidating tone.

"I hope it is false," uttered the frightened old man.

"It is false!—and if I hear it breathed again, there shall be suffering. Let the thought pass from your mind, for it will be a very dangerous one for you to cherish there. Give me your hand, Don Miguel."

The poor old timid man tremblingly put forth his hand, for he dared not refuse.

"Now," resumed Calleja, "you shall be safe, for I know you will not again wrong me so deeply by suspicion. Will you?"

"No," faintly articulated Truxillo.

He dared not look up into Francisco's face, for he felt that he was acting the part of a coward, and he would not meet the reproachful look which he fancied was resting there. Had he looked, however, he would have seen only a look of pity, for Francisco knew his constitutional weakness, and he pitied rather than blamed him.

Next Calleja turned to the youth. That same fire burned in his deep-set evil eye, and the same demoniac curl was upon his lip.

"Francisco Moreno!" he said, in a low, hissing tone, "you have insulted me as man never insulted me before. Had you been in the open air you should not have lived to hear me speak thus; but I would not degrade the character I hold by spilling your blood in the house of a friend. You are, I presume, entitled to the name of a gentleman—or at least, I shall treat you as such. I am fatigued now with a long and tedious journey; but to-morrow, at the rising of the sun, I will meet you in the field beyond the vineyard. If you are a gentleman you will meet me; and there you shall eat the words you have here spoken!"

"Don Juan," proudly returned the youth, "it is I who must stoop to such an engagement; but I will meet you, and shall be glad of the opportunity—for if you fall your blood will be upon your own head, and the earth will be blessed! At sunrise, to-morrow morning."

"That is what I said," replied Calleja, now pale as ashes. "But beware how you employ the time until then, or you may not live to meet me. I will brook no more of your insolence! Mark that!"

Francisco's feelings were beginning to overpower him, and he knew that he could not re-

main longer in the same room with such a man and maintain himself. His sword seemed to struggle of its own accord to get out of its scabbard, and more than once he found himself upon the point of drawing it. He arose from his seat, and turning a flashing eye upon the colonel, he said:

"To-morrow morning, at the rising of the sun, in the field beyond the vineyard. God grant that I see you not again until that time!" and as he spoke, he strode from the apartment.

CHAPTER XIII.

SOUL STRUGGLES.

WHEN Francisco left the presence of Don Miguel and the colonel, he proceeded at once to the apartment of Aldamar, whom he found. He told the lieutenant all that had occurred, and requested him to act as his second at the coming duel. At first, Aldamar would have dissuaded him from engaging in the conflict, but when he found that the young man's mind was firmly made up, he freely consented.

"Aldamar," said our hero, calmly and dispassionately, "in behalf of what is usually termed honor, I would not have accepted that bad man's challenge. I would fight in no duel as a mere stickler for some point of injured honor; but in this case I have determined to do it for several reasons. In the first place, Juan Calleja is a villain of the deepest dye, and in his attempt upon the life of our noble Don Miguel, he has been guilty of a crime that deserves nothing but death; but he is high in power, and no law of our civil code can reach him. Mine it shall be to administer the punishment, since he chooses to lead the way himself. And then Isabel's happiness is at stake. If one stroke of my good sword can free her from the serpent's folds, why should I not make it? I shall meet him, Aldamar, and if I fall I shall hope, at least, that no crime rests upon my soul!"

"No—indeed there can be no crime; but I speak only of the danger."

"*Danger!*" cried the youth, his eyes flashing proudly. "I had not thought of that. He who fears danger had better die at once, for the country is reeking with danger. Ah, my friend, speak not of such a theme to me, or I may begin to doubt my own prowess, and until to-morrow morning at least, I must believe that I am the better man. But let us say no more upon this. My mind is made up, and you will be with me. That is enough."

After this, Aldamar related to our hero all that he knew concerning Calleja, and their conversation lasted until near evening. Francisco did not take tea with the family, for he would not meet Don Juan.

It was late in the evening, and Francisco was walking among the great China trees. He heard his name pronounced in a sweet, low tone, and hastening to the spot from whence the sound had proceeded, he found Isabel. Before he spoke, he clasped her to his bosom, and while she lay there she burst into tears.

"Isabel—my love—why is this?" tenderly asked the youth, gazing down into her moonlit features.

"O, Francisco!" she uttered, "I am most miserable! All unhappiness is mine!"

"But how? Why is it, dearest?"

"Alas! you know too well."

"You have seen Calleja?"

"Yes. He came to my own room, and he says he shall at once take me to his house at the capital."

"Then fear not," said the youth, with much animation in his tone, "for he will not do it."

"Alas! he will. When he left me he said he should take me with him to-morrow. He will return in the morning."

"Return?" iterated Francisco, with some surprise. "And has he left the place?"

"Yes—he went away an hour ago; but he did not say where he was going."

"I did not see him; but never mind, he will not take you. You have nothing to fear—nothing at all."

"O, Francisco!" groaned the suffering maiden, as she clung more closely to him, "I know what you mean; but you cannot quiet my fears. Alas! you only make me the more miserable."

"Speak, love," whispered the youth, kissing her pale, upturned brow. "Tell me what you mean."

"I mean that you are engaged to meet Don Juan to-morrow morning in deadly conflict. O, Francisco, let me implore you not to do it. If you should die, then my last hope of earth is snapped in sunder."

"And if I live, and do not meet him, he will take you from me," returned the youth, in passionate tones. "He has come much sooner than I expected, and the means I had depended upon are for the immediate present unavailable."

"But you must not meet him—you must not go forth to this deadly conflict. My poor old grandfather prays that you will not. He has even been upon his knees in that prayer. O, spare us yourself, at least!"

"Listen to me one moment, Isabel. Before God I believe that Calleja is not fit to live. His soul is black with crime, and his hands are red with blood. He has sought this encounter, and I feel sure that God will enable me to triumph."

"Yet Don Juan is a deadly man," urged the fair girl; "and he is a powerful man. O, he will kill you if you meet him!"

For a few moments Francisco was silent. He pressed the fond girl to his bosom, and upon her pure white brow he imprinted another kiss.

"Isabel—my love," he at length said, in a tone all calm and persuasive, "you do not regard this matter in its true light. You look only to the danger in which I am placed, and that should be the last thought at this moment."

"The last thought!" interrupted Isabel, in a quick, energetic tone. "Danger to you—fatal danger—be my last thought! O, such is not my love! It is my first, my only thought."

"Bless you, sweet one—bless you. I know your love, but I meant not exactly as I spoke—I meant that it should be my last thought. But listen. That base man has fixed his foul grasp upon you, and he has you in his power. He has attempted the life of your poor, inoffensive old grandfather, and may, if he lives, attempt it again; and you may be sure that on the next time he will accomplish his purpose. He is a viper in our path, and Don Miguel dares not even chide him for his wickedness. All will now know that he has challenged me to this combat—and will now know that I had it in my power to thwart his nefarious purposes. Then how shall I be looked upon if I skulk away, and leave him undisputed tyrant of the field? Remember, Isabel, that I am one of those whom the tyranny of the usurper has driven from the heart of the country, and among the mountains we now find our home. This Don Juan Calleja is one of the people's enemies, and thousands of honest men and true are praying that his sway of wickedness may be cut short. The opportunity to do all this has now fallen to my lot. O, how could I ever meet these noble exiles again if I cower away from the monster now? I should never again dare to show my face to an honest man among them. No, no, Isabel, I know you will not press me more. Remember the character I have at stake. Remember the groans of our enslaved countrymen—and then remember that I am called upon to strike a blow for Liberty! My own sweet love, look into my soul, and tell me if I am not right. You know the beatings of that soul, and you know how deep my feelings are. May God bless you and me; but do not—O, for the love you bear me,—do not seek to bless me with what would only prove a lasting thorn in my bosom!"

The youth had spoken eloquently, perhaps passionately, and his words had a power that moved Isabel deeply. She felt differently from what she had felt before. Her head lay upon her lover's bosom, and at length she wiped away her tears, and looked up into his face.

"Francisco," she said, in almost a whisper, "I will not urge you more. Act as your own judgment shall dictate, and may God protect the right!"

"Bless you, dearest," uttered Francisco, and then he changed the subject of conversation. He would not longer dwell upon a theme so dark, and he spoke of love and of hope; but Isabel could not be lifted out from the gloom into which recent and surrounding circumstances had cast her. She spoke no more of the coming conflict, but she could not cast it from her mind, nor could she appear her happy self so long as that terrible thing was present with her.

At length when the hour had become late, the lovers parted. Francisco strained the beautiful maiden to his bosom, and at that moment he wondered if it would be the last time! The thought came suddenly to him, and it pierced like a dagger to his soul.

"Good night, sweet one!" he said, striving with all his might to appear calm and assured.

"Good night!" whispered Isabel; and as she spoke she turned half away as though she would have gone; but in a moment more she turned back and threw her arms about her lover's neck, and she sobbed as though her heart would break.

"O," she murmured, "I cannot bear this! I shall never see you—"

"—sh!" interrupted the young man, stopping her mouth with a kiss. "Remember your promise. God is with me. I shall see you again to-morrow. Good night!"

With those words Francisco tore himself away, and hastened towards the lodge where slept Aldamar and his assistants. At a short distance he turned, and he saw Isabel standing where he had left her, her white robes gleaming in the moonlight like the garb of some visiting spirit from upper spheres; but he did not stop. He only waved his hand, and then kept on.

When he at length lay upon his bed, he thought of the coming morn, and the theme was in truth dark,—not that he feared for himself, but for another. He did not fear death—he only trembled when the thought came to him that he might have seen Isabel for the last time! He knew that Juan Calleja was a bold man and an excellent swordsman, and that he was merciless, too. There were few better tacticians in the country. He knew that it was no play in which he was to engage, but that it was a stern question of life or death. Yet Francisco fainted not at heart. He felt that Right was with him, and that all good men would honor him. So he clasped his hands and fervently committed his soul to his MAKER.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE DUEL.

THE morning dawned without a cloud. The east was all a-glow with the signal-fire of coming day, when our hero arose from his bed. He dressed himself, and then called Aldamar. The faithful lieutenant came, and in his hand he bore a sword.

"You are looking well this morning, my young friend," said Aldamar, as he extended his hand.

"And why should I not look well?" returned Francisco, lightly. "Perhaps you think that death may be staring me in the face, and that I should turn pale at the sight. No, no, good Aldamar, I have nothing to fear. I may fall; but if I do fall, good will surely come out of it, and my death may be the means of arousing a tumult that shall not cease until tyranny shall have been swept away from our fair soil. But why bear you two swords?"

"This one is for you," returned the lieutenant, extending the one he held in his hand.

"But I have a sword—a well-tried and faithful one."

"I know it; but this is one of a thousand. You will need a weapon this morning that cannot fail. This sword was one given me by my father, who brought it direct from Smyrna. It is a Damascus blade, pure as the soul of a saint. There is not another such in the coun-

try. With it I dare cleave the very rocks. Take it, Francisco, for it may serve you."

The young man took the weapon, and drew it from its scabbard. It was a broad, keen blade, and not a spot of tarnish had yet defaced it. It was firm in its haft, and its guard secure. He lifted it, and swept it above his head, and he found its balance perfect. He set the point upon the floor, and then bent upon it with all his might. It yielded, but came back to its place promptly and quickly.

"I will take it," Francisco said, while his eyes sparkled with satisfaction; "and I bless you, too, for your kindness."

So saying he threw off his own sword, and buckled on the Damascus blade in its place. Then he turned towards the lieutenant again.

"Now, Aldamar," he said, "it may be that I shall fall. I know Don Juan to be a man of great personal prowess, and the chances are not all of them on my side, by any means. If I do fall you will see Isabel—you will help her in her need. Save her from Calleja's grasp if you can."

"I will do it, Francisco, if it lies within my power."

"I think you will. You will also see Boquilla. For that strange man I have conceived a strong affection, though I know him not

wholly. Tell him how I feel, and that I hope he will not forget the cause for which I yielded up my life; for, Aldamar, as sure as there is a God in heaven, I go forth now because I feel that my country will be blest in Calleja's death. It is he who first helped the tyrant Iturbide to the imperial throne, and it is he who is now one of the tyrant's firmest, chiefest supporters."

Aldamar promised all this.

"Then," resumed the youth, "we have nothing more to wait for. The sun will soon be up. Come."

And the two started forth. The dew lay damp and heavy upon the bending grass, and the aroma of a thousand flowers filled the air. The birds had commenced their matin lay, and the lightly moving atmosphere was musical with their gentle notes. Francisco noticed it all, and it helped to cheer him. He snuffed up the fresh morning air with an expanded chest, and he felt strong and well. His step increased in elasticity and his brow grew more clear. At length they reached the spot which had been designated as the place of meeting, but the other party had not arrived.

"It is early yet," said Aldamar, looking off towards the eastward, where the tall trees lifted their heads up from the earth, and where the red glow was now mounting upwards, "but you may be assured that he will be here."

"O, I have no fears on that score, for with all Calleja's wickedness, I know him to be a bold man."

Aldamar gazed long and earnestly into the youth's features to see if he could discover the least sign of fear or trepidation there; but he could not. Francisco was calm as the balmy air that dwelt about him, and the only emotion that could possibly be detected was a slight show of anxiety—not the anxiety of fear, but such anxiety as every true man must feel when entering upon a most important business. The lieutenant was himself a most thorough soldier, and he experienced no small feeling of satisfaction and relief when he found how self-possessed his principal was, for he well knew that calmness was "one half the battle."

"Francisco," he said, after he had assured himself upon the most important point, "you will excuse me if I offer to so experienced a swordsman as yourself, a word of advice."

"Most kindly shall I receive anything from you," was our hero's frank reply; "for to you I owe much of what I already know."

"Well, my advice is simply this. I think Calleja will surely commence to play about your head. I know him well, and there is not a more confident man in the country. Watch his eye, and let his sword go where it will. When he looks you directly in the face, be assured that he is preparing to strike for your life. You can tell by the spark that burns there, if you watch him closely."

Francisco promised to observe all this, and shortly afterwards Don Juan Calleja appeared upon the ground. He was accompanied by an under officer, and they had both evidently left their horses in the wood.

"Ha!" uttered Aldamar, while Calleja was yet at some distance, "I saw something move in the wood off there." And he pointed in a direction exactly opposite from that in which the colonel was coming.

Our hero looked, but could see nothing.

"Only imagination," he said.

"O, no—I know better than that. It was most assuredly a human form which I saw there."

"Perhaps it may be some of the servants, who have come out to see the meeting," suggested Francisco.

"Perhaps it is," replied Aldamar; but he spoke in a manner which seemed to signify that he was not exactly satisfied with his own admission. However, he said nothing more upon the subject, for just then Calleja came up.

The face of the dark colonel looked vengeful and malicious, and his eye was restless and fiery. He stopped and gazed about him a moment after he had arrived upon the spot, and then turning to the youthful antagonist, he said, in a bitter, sarcastic tone:

"So you've come out to show yourself?"

"I have come out to fight!" calmly returned our hero.

"Ah! have you? Then we shall have rare sport," and as he spoke he drew his sword, and with one effort he plunged it into the earth up to the hilt. "I'll wipe my blade!" he added, with a dark smile, as he drew it forth.

"I'll wash mine!" returned Francisco, at the same time drawing it.

"Ha!—will you? Then the sooner you begin the better, for I can assure you that you have but a short time left in which to do it!"

"Wait one moment," said Aldamar, and so saying he passed over and introduced himself to the colonel's second.

"Let them fight as they best can," was the fellow's reply to Aldamar's query. "We will only see that there is no interference."

The lieutenant was satisfied with this; but he was somewhat puzzled to account for the fellow's manner, for he appeared uneasy and excited, and more than once while he spoke, his eyes were furtively turned towards that quarter from whence he had come.

"Francisco," whispered Aldamar, stepping quickly to the youth's side, "look sharp, for I fear there is foul play somewhere in the wind. I noticed that fellow's eye wandering uneasily off towards the wood."

"What, towards the place where you saw a man?"

"No—it was in the opposite direction. We may be surrounded. But fear not. I have a good sword and a stout arm. For God's sake—for your country's sake—for your own sake—for Isabel's sake, strike carefully and promptly. Watch that dark eye of his as you would a coiled serpent!"

"Are you ready?" asked Calleja.

"Yes," was Francisco's reply, and as he spoke he took his position, and raised his sword-point.

"Then look out!" hissed Calleja. "You have insulted me for the last time! We shall see now who will be left to smile upon the *senorita Isabel*!"

It was well, perhaps, for our hero that his antagonist spoke those last words, for they danced through his soul like the fire that tempers steel, and every nerve and muscle in his system was set like the sinews of the iron horse.

"Now come to the proof!" he said, as he looked his dark antagonist in the eye, and raised his sword.

Calleja said no more, but advancing his weapon he made a feint at our hero's breast. He seemed to play for a while, as though he would learn his antagonist's mode of attack, but he gained nothing, for the youth was only following his movements.

"You play carefully," Calleja said, seeming to rest a moment from direct attack.

But Francisco saw the quick flash of the colonel's eye, and it was well that he did, for on the same instant a lightning-like thrust was made at his breast, which he parried quickly and with ease. He now saw how useful had been the advice of his second, for without it he would not have mistrusted the blow he had just averted. Calleja seemed much chagrined at the fail-

ure of his trick, for it showed that he had much more to do than he had anticipated.

Francisco Moreno began to feel more confidence in his own prowess than before. He grasped his sword with a firmer grip. Again he caught the demon fire of Calleja's dark, deep eye, and a thrill of such strength as he had never before experienced pervaded his whole system. He parried another of those heavy strokes, and then, with all the might he could command, he brought his sword-point quickly across his antagonist's eye. Calleja instinctively closed his lids and stepped back, and as he did so, he parried a feint which was made at his sword-arm. He struck a downward blow when he parried, for he had been frustrated by the glimmer of the glittering point that had swept across his eyes. Quick as lightning, our hero raised his hand, and let his own point fall until his antagonist's blade had slid from it, and then he raised it again. The movement was like a flash, and before Calleja could bring his sword up again, Francisco had driven his weapon through the base man's body, and as he drew it forth he started back to avoid a descending blow.

For some moments Juan Calleja fought on, but his eyes grew dim, and his strokes became wild. He made one last, desperate effort—one more curse escaped his lips—and then he sank down upon the greensward, and his blood ran forth in a dark, bubbling stream.

"God be blessed!" ejaculated Aldamar, as he started forward, and caught the young man's hand. "By my soul! you handled your weapon nobly."

The youth made no reply, but with a thoughtful look he gazed down upon the fallen man; but he had gazed only a moment when he was startled by a sudden cry from his second.

"Ha!—see there!" exclaimed Aldamar, "By Saint Juan, we are betrayed!"

Looking quickly in the direction indicated, Francisco saw a body of some dozen horsemen coming from the wood. They were all clad in the uniform of Don Juan Calleja's regiment, and were coming on with drawn swords. "Sirrah, what means this?" asked the lieutenant, turning towards him who had acted as the colonel's second.

"It means that the man who has slain Don Juan Calleja is not yet clear!" returned the fellow.

"Base, cowardly dastards!" uttered the youth,

trembling with indignation. "And is this the honor of a Mexican don? By my soul! good Aldamar, we must fight them, and let us commence by slaying this one!"

But before the lieutenant could reply his attention was attracted by the approach of another party of horsemen from the opposite direction.

"More of the villains!" he instinctively said.

"No, no," cried Francisco; "those are men from the mountains! San Jago! they must be friends! Yes—one of them I know—a good man and true. By the hosts, we are safe!"

The horsemen who had first appeared, hesitated when they saw this new presence, and at length they came to a full stop, and for some moments they conferred together. The party from the mountains was much the more numerous of the two, and were led by a stout, powerful man, whose face was covered with an enormous beard. They came dashing on at a gallop, and at length the opposite party set forward again. Both Francisco and Aldamar, as well as the colonel's second, watched the coming people with deep interest, and without speaking. Both of the parties arrived upon the spot at the same moment.

"Well and nobly done!" shouted he who led the mountain guerrillas, as he reined up his steed.

"Ha! By the holy saints!" uttered Francisco, catching the deep tones of the voice, "you are—"

"Your friend!" quickly and meaningly interrupted the mountain leader. "Let that suffice for the present."

The youth understood what was meant, and he kept silence; but he had discovered the powerful man to be none other than Boquilla.

"How now?" exclaimed the guerrilla, turning his flashing eyes upon the leader of those who had come up from the opposite wood.

"What means this?"

"What means what?" returned the other.

"Your appearance here at this time."

"I might ask you the same question, *senor brigand*."

"By the holy cross, sirrah!" exclaimed Boquilla, at the same time drawing his ponderous sword, "you do well to prevaricate with me; but it shall cost you dear, nevertheless. Answer me, or by Saint Peter you shall bite the dust as

your base colonel has done before you! Now, why come ye here?"

The captain—for a captain's uniform he wore—looked for a moment into the guerrilla's face; but he quailed before the keen glance he met, and in a stammering mood, he replied:

"We have come to remove the body of Don Juan Calleja."

"And is that all?"

"Yes."

"I know you lie, coward!" said the guerrilla, "for I know you came here to take Francisco Moreno away. But you may go. Take the body and be off—and be off quickly, too, for I cannot long bear your sight!"

The soldiers dismounted and lifted the fallen man from the gore-stained turf. His body was yet warm, but his heart was motionless. The wound he had received was upon the right breast, and the sword that made it had come out under the shoulder. It had nearly stopped bleeding—only bubbling up a little as the body was moved.

"There will be suffering for this," muttered the captain, as he helped to place the body upon the back of one of the horses.

"Come, hasten with your business!" ordered Boquilla. "Work with your hands, and keep your tongue still!"

Ere long the body of Juan Calleja was safely fastened to the saddle, and then the party moved off towards the wood from whence they had come. After they were fairly gone, Boquilla removed the heavy beard from his face, remarking as he did so:

"This is an uncomfortable accompaniment, but a very handy one. Francisco," he continued, leaping from his saddle, and grasping the youth by the hand, "you have proved yourself worthy of your country's love. By the holy apostle Peter, I saw every stroke you made, even at the distance that intervened, and you may be sure that I leaped for very joy when I saw you parry Don Juan's first stroke, for I felt then that the victory was your own."

"But," said our hero, after he had kindly thanked his friend for his solicitude, "tell me how you so opportunely came upon the ground, for I know that I owe my life to you."

"If we had not come, you would surely have

been taken to the capital, and you can best judge what would have been your fate. But I will explain. I knew last night that this duel was to come off. One of my trusty spies hung upon Calleja's track all night—has hung upon him since he returned—and we learned that this duel was not only to come off, but that a party of the colonel's men were to be on hand to take you prisoner as soon as the duel was ended—for I think Don Juan had a faint presentiment that he might not be victorious. Of course I could allow no such proceeding as that, and so I came

as you see me," answered the guerrilla, with some emotion.

"Boquilla," returned the youth, in a tremulous tone, while he removed his cap and bowed his head, "I only hope that the time may come when I can thank you for this with more than words."

"I understand," said the guerrilla, with a happy, proud look. "I understand it all. But now let's on to the dwelling of Don Miguel, for by the mass, you must find us breakfast this morning."

CHAPTER XV.

PLEDGES.

ISABEL TRUXILLO sat upon the broad verandah, and with clasped hands she gazed off towards the vineyard. She was very pale, and her eyes were set and tearless. Sometimes her lips moved, and then her eyes would turn heavenward, as though she prayed to God for some blessing which lay alone in his power to give. The sun had just arisen above the distant mountains, and the golden beams came dancing about the place where she sat; but she noticed them not. They brought no joy to her then. She only gazed upon the narrow path that led down to the vineyard, and held her hands still firmly above her heart.

At length there came a sound upon her ear. She listened. It was the tread of horses. A little while longer, and she saw a human form through the clustering vines. It was a horseman, and as he came nearer she recognized Boquilla. Behind him appeared another. She gazed wildly—she saw the well known features; and with one low cry of joy she sank back. She would have gazed again, but her eyes were dim, and in a moment more the emotion had checked the current of her outward life. All was dark about her, save one glimmering point where her mind still clung to the face she had seen.

At length the morning's light came to her

again. There was a magic touch upon her pale brow—a magic whisper in her ear. She felt herself raised up, and round about her stout arms were twining. She opened her eyes, and they met the gaze of Francisco Moreno.

"Isabel—my life, my love, I am safe. Look up and be happy."

The maiden saw those features—she heard the joyful words, and with a bursting heart she bowed her head upon her lover's bosom, and the long pent-up tears flowed in big drops down her flushing cheeks.

"You are not killed!" she at length murmured; "you are not hurt!"

"Not in the least, dearest. The Right has triumphed!"

"And Don Juan?" whispered Isabel, shuddering as she spoke.

"Has fallen!"

Isabel bowed her head with a hushed emotion, and when she raised it again her grandfather stood by her side.

Half an hour later, and the whole party were at the breakfast table, Boquilla taking the head. All the circumstances attending the duel had been explained, and Isabel had regained much of her usual composure. Don Miguel was the only one who seemed really downcast; but even he was happy at times. He felt afraid that the

wrath of Iturbide might fall upon him, and it was only upon the most earnest assurances of Boquilla that he could be made to feel at all easy upon the subject. He was joyful that Francisco had escaped; and he was happy to think that Calleja was out of the way—it was only that his timidity was worked upon that made him otherwise.

"You say Don Juan was really killed?" he said, turning to Francisco.

"I think he was," returned the youth.

"By my soul, I would not give much for my life were I in his situation," added Aldamar. "He had a stream of daylight clean through his body!"

"True," said Boquilla; "and yet he might live with even that; but I don't think there is much prospect of his recovery. I think Mexico is well rid of him."

"I hope so," responded the lieutenant; "and when all of his kidney go after him we shall be a vast deal better off."

After this the conversation took a more general turn, and ever and anon Don Miguel would gaze upon Boquilla with a keen, searching, inquisitive look. He evidently had a great desire to know more of him. Perhaps the thought was with him that the strange guest might after all be a brigand, for at times he would appear nervous and uneasy. He knew that Iturbide had spies busy in all parts of the empire, and there might be even some about him now. At all events he contrived to make himself as nervous and uncomfortable as possible, and his air in part pervaded the company. They could not be entirely free and happy while their aged host was so evidently ill at ease. On the whole, the meal wore away dull and heavily, and all felt easier when they arose from the table.

Francisco ascertained that Boquilla would remain some time at the house, and then he drew Isabel away and led her out into the great garden. For a long distance they walked on in utter silence; but at length the youth spoke:

"Isabel," he said, "I am thankful for the result of this morning's adventure, but yet I am not wholly happy. There are clouds still about me, and their shadow is upon my path."

"So I feel," murmured the maiden, looking up with tearful eyes. "I cannot tell why, but a strange gloom has settled about me. When I first saw you returning this morning, and when I first felt your kiss upon my brow, and heard your sweet words, I was frantic with joy. But I

am not unhappy. It is only a gloom that pervades the atmosphere about me—a gloom that makes me thoughtful and prayerful."

"Alas! my love, it is a season for gloom—not only gloom for you and me, but gloom for our whole country. But there must come sterner times for us all. So many clouds cannot roll up into the heavens and pass away without a storm. The time must come, Isabel, when the land shall again quake beneath the tramp of the war-horse and the sharp clang of arms. I was talking with Boquilla—he is a wonderful man, and past finding out. I was talking with him, and he says that the imperial throne is even now tottering. There are heart-fires burning all through the land, and the flames must ere long burst forth. Perhaps this very affair of the morning may have a weight that shall be felt throughout the empire, for Calleja was a man of much importance to the tyrant's power."

At this mention of Calleja the maiden again shuddered. The event lay with a heavy weight upon her heart, and she could not shake it off. Francisco noticed it, and he avoided the name afterwards as much as possible.

"Isabel," at length resumed the youth, after they had reached the extremity of the garden, "I must now speak plainly, and of that which rests nearest to my heart. In the trials that are to come, I know not what part I may be called upon to act, nor where I may be placed, and before we separate now I would know how stand my life-hopes. You know the love that has existed between us. You know how deep is my love for you, and I think I know how deeply you love in return. Such love as ours must be for a life time. Now what shall be our hopes? What shall be my hopes? Shall I look forward, hoping to see the day when I can call you mine for life?—when you shall be all to me, and I all to you?—when we shall be one on earth—one in love—one in hope—one in joy and in sorrow, and one in all things of life? Speak, dearest."

Isabel raised her eyes, and though they were filled with tears, yet she looked happy now.

"You know my love," she murmured, "and that my heart has long been yours. I shall never be happy—truly happy—unless I know that your love is mine. I am all your own, and I hope—for I may hope now—that I can be all to you you would ask."

"Bless you, dearest!" fervently ejaculated the youth, straining the lovely girl to his bosom.

"You speak as I thought you would speak, and

happiness is mine. Here, then, let us pledge our vows. Shall it not be so?"

"With my grandfather's consent."

"Of course. I feel assured that he will consent, if he is governed by his own wishes. But I should not speak to him now, for his mind is all warped by fear. He fears to even lift a finger that might bring upon him the least opposition from the emperor, and in this case he may not speak as he feels. Let us understand each other, and when the time comes we will speak with him. Our hearts are already pledged—let our lips give life to the bond."

They sat down upon a moss-grown seat, and there they pledged their souls to a union for life. It was but the speaking of vows which had long had inward life and being, but they both felt happier now that they were spoken, and the season of pure and rational converse that followed was full of such joy as only young hope can afford.

The hours flew by unheeded, and it was not until near noon that the lovers thought of returning to the house.

"Remember," said Francisco, as they approached the dwelling, "we will remain with only hope to cheer us until the clouds have all passed. When all is settled—when the sun once more shines upon our fair land, then will we remember the vows we have this day taken, and act upon them."

Isabel only pressed the arm she held more closely to her bosom, and the glistening tear that stood in her eye told the answer she would have returned. It spoke of the hope she cherished, and of the love she bore. It told all that Francisco could have asked.

Late in the afternoon, Boquilla called our hero one side. The stout man was very sober, and his eyes were moist with emotion.

"Francisco Moreno," he said, "I have ordered my horse, and am about to return to the mountains; but before I go I would say one word to you. It may be a long time ere I shall see you again, for I am soon going to another part of the country. You remember what I told you hurriedly this morning. Our country is not comfortable. The clank of chains is heard all over the land, and the iron links are

wearing into the souls of the people. They cannot much longer bear it—they will not bear it. Iturbide grows worse and worse every day of his reign, and his course is more wicked. Now upon such men as you much dependence is to be placed. I know your heart is in the right place, and your mind is clear and strong; should the time come for all patriot hearts to bound into action, will you not be among the number?"

"Ay," uttered the noble youth, with one hand upon his heart, and the other raised heavenward. "I only long to be upon the tyrant's track! At the first call of my country I will enlist under the first patriot banner I can find unfurled!"

"That is the spirit; but you will not have to look far to find the opportunity of enlisting. Among the mountains hereabouts are hundreds of men who would readily flock to such a standard. You, yourself, must raise it. When the hour comes—and you will know well enough when that is, for you will hear the tocsin—you must repair to the mountains, and gather together the bold spirits, who will want a leader. All will know you, and all will gladly join you. How would that suit you?"

"Well—almost too well," returned the youth. "And yet I think I could lead a body of men where my country needed them without fear of danger."

"I know that, Francisco, and hence have I chosen you to the post. Before I leave I shall see that word is sent to every reliable man, and all you will have to do will be just to present yourself at my cabin. You know where that is?"

"Yes, very well."

"And all you will need to do will be to present yourself there, and you will soon find a bold body of men to follow you."

"But how long ere such a time can come?" asked Francisco, who now regarded the strange guerrilla almost as a fond child would regard a noble parent.

"Ah, that is more than I can tell," returned Boquilla, with a slight shake of the head. "It may be months yet; and," he added, in a low tone, "it may be years. But, be that as it may, when the time comes you shall know of it. I will see that word is sent to you, and at the same time you will receive directions how to

move. All I now wish is to know that you can be depended upon."

"If I am alive, and able to move my hand beneath the weight of a sword, you shall not find me wanting."

"Then remember, and let 'GOD, AND OUR NATIVE LAND' be the watchword! Here comes my horse and my men. I may see you again ere long; but whether we ever meet again on earth or not, we will neither of us forget our pledge. Farewell, and may God bless you!" he added, fervently.

Boquilla mounted his horse, and his follower drew up behind him. He waved his hand once more to our hero, and then he rode swiftly away from the place. Francisco watched him until he was gone from sight, and after that he turned back towards the house. It is no wonder that his thoughts should now be deep and soul-stirring. He did not stop to question the right of the man who had spoken the thoughts to him, for something within gave him ample proof of that. He only thought how he might best prepare himself to act nobly upon them.

CHAPTER XVI.

A FEARFUL STROKE.

Time passed on. The summer was gone, and autumn came with its loads of fruit and garner of grain. Don Miguel had heard not a word from the emperor, nor any of his officers, and he had become once more cheerful and happy. Francisco spent much of his time at the house of his old friend, and of course most of that time was spent in Isabel's company. The old man had been informed of the vows the young people had exchanged, and with pleasure dancing in his eyes, had he given his full and free consent.

"Yes, my children," he had said, when he fully understood what was asked, "I give all the power I possess to that end. Be ye one for life, and let your cheerful smiles light up the home of my declining years. I know of nothing it would give me more pleasure to grant—nothing it would give me more pain to see annulled. Bless you, sweet children! May God bless you as I know you will bless me!"

Those were the old man's feelings, and why should not the lovers be happy? They were happy.

Francisco had as yet heard nothing from Boquilla since the day of the duel. The youth had been among the mountains, and he had inquired for him many times; but he could learn nothing of him; none had seen him, and none knew

whither he had gone. The youthful hero knew that trouble was brewing, but he could find out nothing definite. At times, he feared that Boquilla was, after all, but an impostor; but such feelings were only temporary. When he remembered the man, and called to mind the noble traits of his character, he banished all such thoughts; and then he sometimes feared that he was himself forgotten—that Boquilla had found some more worthy man to lead the mountain patriots. But there were times, too, when Francisco waited patiently for the coming of the summons he hoped to receive.

So passed away the rainy season, and the calm, cooling, genial weather of a Mexican winter came to take its place. One pleasant afternoon, Isabel Truxillo sat upon the broad verandah, in front of the house, engaged in reading one of the meagre news-prints of the day. She was alone, for her lover had left the day before, and would not return for a week. The air was just cool enough to be bracing and comfortable, and she was enjoying her thoughts in calm tranquillity. The paper which she had was one that had been brought by the post-courier the day before, and she was now seeking for the news. She had read considerable that had but little interest for her, when she at length came upon a paragraph that fastened her atten-

tion. It was concerning a rising of rebels in the southeast. One General Santana had arisen, and at the head of a numerous body of men he was threatening to do much mischief. The thought came at once to her mind that her lover might now be called upon to leave her. While she was pondering upon this, her grandfather came out, and she showed him the paragraph in question.

"Suppose Francisco should be called now," she said, as soon as she saw that her grandsire had finished reading.

"I do not hardly think he will," returned the old man, whose judgment was good when left perfectly free and untried, "I know this Santana," he resumed, "and I do not think he can lead a successful rebellion. He is himself a man of inordinate ambition, and the people will place no confidence in him. He was one of the chief instruments in placing Iturbide in power, but it seems he has turned against him now. The emperor has done something to exasperate him."

"Then you think that this will amount to nothing?" said Isabel, hopefully.

"I do not think it will while Santana is at the head of it," answered the old man; "but they may raise the standard, and then find a better leader."

While they were thus conversing, Isabel noticed a horseman coming up towards the house from the Perote road. She pointed it out to her grandfather, and he, too, saw the same. It soon appeared that there were other horsemen, and as they came nearer they counted seven in all. He who rode in advance was evidently a tall man, and habited in the garb of an imperial officer. Don Miguel turned pale when he saw this, and Isabel was seized with a vague, but terrible fear.

"Who do you think it can be?" tremblingly whispered the maiden.

"I don't know," returned the old man, trembling from head to foot. "But God grant that it be no enemy!"

"But why should an enemy come?" Isabel asked.

"I know not, unless there is some vengeance to be visited upon us for the death of Calleja."

Isabel shuddered at the sound of that name, and before she could speak again, Don Miguel continued:

"O, I wish he had not been killed, for I knew that trouble would come out of it!"

The old man's fears were all returned to him, and he gave himself up to the first that presented itself. He did not stop to think, but only jumped upon the first conclusion that his fears excited. He almost felt a halter about his neck, or a dozen bullets, at least, through his body.

Isabel made no reply, for by this time the horsemen had come so near that their faces could be seen. He who rode in advance looked very pale and thin, and the long black locks hung about his neck and temples as though they were heavy and wet. At length they passed beneath the last of the China trees, and Isabel gazed with starting eyes upon him who had fixed her attention. She gazed so until he had alighted from his horse, and then she moved to her grandfather's side, and sank down upon her knees. She uttered a low, deep groan, and clasped her hands tightly together.

"What is it, my child?" uttered Don Miguel, whose eyesight was not now strong.

"See! see!" she exclaimed, pointing to the man who was approaching. "O, it is he!"

Don Miguel looked up, and the new-comer was by his side. He started to his feet, and while his form shook like a lightning-stricken tree, he uttered:

"Heaven save me! Don Juan Calleja!"

"Yes, Don Miguel, it is your old friend Juan Calleja!"

And so it was Don Juan Calleja; but how altered! His face was all pale and wan; his cheeks sunken; his lips cracked, and parched, and blue; his eyes cold and glassy, and his form weak, bent, and tremulous. Yet there was a spark in his eye as he spoke, and upon his cheek came a slight tinge of blood.

"Did you think me dead?" he continued, after waiting a few moments to notice the effect of his coming.

"I did," returned Don Miguel; "but I am glad it is not so. I have suffered much from the thought."

There was a slight curl of scorn about the colonel's lips as he heard this, for he felt pretty well assured that the old man had suffered more through fear than from any love for himself. But he did not speak his thoughts.

"Well," he said, taking a seat near Isabel, but looking towards Don Miguel, "I am alive, though I owe no thanks for it to the young rascal who fought with me. He did his work well, and it has only been through the aid of the most skilful physicians that I have recovered. Ah, I

was deceived in young Moreno. He was a great swordsman. But we may meet again; and when we do, his fate shall not be a very light or desirable one!"

As Calleja thus spoke, he turned towards Isabel. She instinctively drew back and shuddered when she found his snake-like eyes fastened upon her. She would have given much to be away—even upon the wild, bleak mountain top, but she dared not move now.

"Fair senorita," the colonel commenced, with a cold, dark smile upon his features, "how feel you upon my unexpected appearance?"

But the poor girl could not answer. She trembled more violently, and her heart was torn by the most terrible fears.

"What!" exclaimed Don Juan, "can you not speak to me?"

"Alas! senor, I know not what to say!" murmured Isabel.

"Can you not say that you are glad to see me?"

The maiden looked up into Calleja's face. Could she answer yes to such a question? She knew she could not.

"Come," continued the colonel, "let me know how I am received."

"I cannot tell that until I know wherefore you have come," at length murmured the poor girl, striving with all her power to appear calm.

"Why, surely, Isabel, you have no question upon that point. By the saints of the holy calendar, I should think you would know why I am here! But yet I can tell you—I have come to get my wife!"

Even the old man clasped his hands in speechless agony now, but Don Juan did not see him—he was too busy in witnessing the effects of his declaration upon Isabel. She uttered a low cry as she heard his words, and covering her face with her hands she sobbed with an aching, bleeding heart.

"It seems to take you by surprise, my pretty one," the colonel said, laying one hand upon her arm.

Instinctively she shrank away from his touch, and with a flashing eye, she said:

"Do not touch me, senor! I cannot bear the weight of your hand. You may talk—tell me of your purpose—tell of your wishes—of your determinations; but do not touch me!"

"Aha!—you are well posted up!" uttered Calleja, with a deadly look upon his features.

"There has been another hand at work here.

But," he added, lowering his voice, and speaking in a hissing tone, "you must beware! I love to see a woman of pride and independence, but I do not like to be treated as you have now done. What I do not like I will not have! Look out that you do not make up for yourself a bed which will be most painful to lie upon, for by the holy Saint Paul, I'll make such misery for you that you shall envy the very starving dogs in the street! Beware!"

Isabel had felt her pride aroused when she spoke before, but it was only crushed now. There was something so terrible, so dreadful, so demon-like in the tone and look of the man who spoke to her, that she shrank as she would have shrank from offending the wild tiger. She felt sure that he did not speak idly.

"Alas!" she said, when she next gained the power to speak, "why should you force me to this? How can you wish for a wife who cannot love you?"

"I'll tell you," returned Juan Calleja, with a strangely burning eye, and a darkling, lurking smile. "I'd have it, because it is mine! We are not fond of losing that which belongs to us."

"But how will you find happiness without love?"

"I'll have love! If my wife cannot, or will not love me, she shall at least obey me, and I will seek for love elsewhere. Love is easily found, my fair senorita!"

Again Isabel shuddered, and after gazing for a moment into the face of the man who tortured her, she bowed her head and sobbed aloud. Don Miguel was deeply moved. The words of Don Juan had struck chillingly to his heart, and the misery of his fair grandchild cut him deeply. He gazed upon the suffering girl, and he remembered how much of his own joy she had given to him,—he remembered her smiles and her laughter, her merry song, and her cheerful note of greeting, and for a moment he experienced a gathering of resistance in his soul.

"Don Juan," he said, "this thing must not be. It will kill my poor child, and her blood will be upon my head if I permit it."

"Ah!" uttered Calleja, elevating his eyebrows, and opening his eyes, while a sarcastic smile gathered around his lips. "I was not aware that you had anything at all to do with the matter. Pray, senor, will you be so kind as to inform me wherein lies your power, either for let or hindrance?"

"It lies in the fact that she is the only child

of my own son, and that to me she was given to protect."

"Ay—to protect, but not to keep. There is a relation stronger than yours, the ties of which even outweigh the bond that unites the parent and child. *I am her husband!*"

"Not yet!" gasped Don Miguel, looking up with a tremulous expression of countenance, as though he were struggling hard to maintain the part he had undertaken. "You cannot say that you are now her husband."

"I am her husband, and all the powers of earth cannot gainsay it!" returned the colonel, turning a flashing eye upon the aged speaker. "It may require a further ceremony if I choose, but even without such she is legally and truly mine. Would you deny it?"

"No—no," stammered the old man. "I would not deny it, but I would beg of you to let her remain with me."

"Ay," cried Calleja, with the most marked bitterness and sarcasm, "you would have her stay that she might become the wife of another!—become the wife of the man who would have killed me! By the hopes of my eternal soul, ere I would see that both she and myself should sink into the lowest pit of eternal fire! What! see her given to Francisco Moreno? Ask me to give you my eyes, my hands, my heart—ay, my very soul, ere you ask me that!"

Don Miguel Truxillo had said his say. He could offer no more resistance; he shrank from before the terrible man as the child shrinks from the mind-made ghoul in the dark.

"But come," added the colonel, after he found that Truxillo would make no further reply, "let us retire to the house and forget all that is un-

pleasant about this affair. I hope it is understood now what my business is, and that I am not to be turned from my purpose. Let matters move along smoothly, and when I reach the capital, the marriage ceremony shall be performed in the emperor's own presence. Come, let us in now, for I am weary."

Don Miguel led the way into the house, and Calleja offered his arm to Isabel as he turned to follow. She hesitated an instant, but her better judgment bade her not do more now to cause further rupture, and she took the proffered arm, but she shuddered when she did so.

After they were seated within the large drawing-room, Don Miguel rang for the servant who waited upon such occasions, and wine and refreshments were soon brought. Calleja drank deeply, and the portion seemed to revive him.

"How long will you remain with us?" asked Truxillo, as he sat down his glass.

"Only till to-morrow," returned Calleja.

"What!—return so soon?"

"I must, for my presence is needed. There is likely to be disturbance in some of the distant districts, and though I am not yet hardly able to bear arms, yet my counsels must be forthcoming. It will be easily quelled, though—only a few rebels have arisen."

"But you will not take Isabel with you so soon?"

"Of course. It is for that I have come, and surely I shall not go away without her!"

Isabel heard, and her brain reeled. So soon? Then hope was all gone! She sat there in her chair, and with one mighty effort she calmed her wild emotions; but it was the calmness of the freezing night.

CHAPTER XVII.

no!

DON JUAN CALLEJA had retired. He complained of his weakness, and asked to be excused; but before he went he had exacted from Don Miguel a solemn pledge that his property should all fall to Isabel. He introduced the subject boldly and unblushingly, and as much as intimated that by such a course alone could the old man make sure of his life. To Truxillo it now mattered little. He was to lose his sweet angel of joy, and he cared little what became of his property when he was gone.

"And must I go to-morrow?" the poor girl asked, after Calleja had gone.

"I cannot help it," answered Don Miguel. "Heaven knows I would if I could! Alas! my child, you must go from me!"

Isabel may have hoped that her grandfather would help her—that he would have offered some assistance, or some suggestion, even, for her aid, but he did not. He had no hope to give, no words for cheer—he could only bemoan the dark lot that had fallen upon them. The maiden bade the old man good night, and then she retired to her own room. She set her lamp down upon the table, and then threw herself upon her bed, and there she lay for half an hour. During that half hour she only groaned with the thought of the terrible fate that now wrapped her about like the mantle of night; but at the end of that time a sudden thought came to her

mind. It was a startling thought, for she started up from the bed, and stood erect. She swept the long tresses back from her face, and then clasped her hands upon her brow. The tears had all left her eyes, and the pain-marks had nearly left her face, and in their stead had come the firm, wondrous expression that tells of sudden and important impulse.

"O, my soul!" she murmured, gazing upon the burning lamp, as though she sought light upon the subject that had thus unbidden come to her, "why should I stay here? If to-morrow's sun finds me in this place, my earthly doom is forever fixed! If I flee from here, it will not be leaving my poor old grandfather, for I must be torn from him at any rate. Be still, O my heart, and leave me calm to think! Among the mountains I may find safety. O, among the mountains I shall be safe, for some there will know Francisco, and they will lead me to him!"

The subject had come suddenly upon her—for the idea of fleeing from the place had never before occurred to her,—but now that it had come, it came with a power that was not to be resisted. And then the last thought—the hope of meeting some one who would conduct her to Francisco—was a vast weight in favor of the plan. She knew that her lover was well known among the mountains, and that all those who dwelt and

wandered there were enemies of Calleja and the emperor.

For some time the maiden paced to and fro across the floor of her room, and ever and anon she would stop and gaze down as though some heavier consideration had presented itself. At length she stopped and sat down, and when she did so, her mind was made up. She opened a small inlaid escritoire, and having drawn forth pen, ink, and paper, she wrote a note which she addressed to both her grandfather and Calleja. She simply wrote that she had fled, and why she did so; and when it was finished she folded and directed it to them both, and laid it where it would be seen when any one should enter the room. She did this that her grandfather might not be suspected of conniving at her escape.

After this, Isabel knelt down and bowed her head in prayer; and when she had prayed, she arose and prepared the dress she would wear. Of course she selected a dark one, for that would be less easily discovered at night. Having picked out the one she would wear, she proceeded at once to put it on. She did not forget that money would be a very handy thing in case of need, and she took as much gold as she felt safe to carry. Upon her head she placed a close-fitting, dark-brown, coral-like hood, and upon her feet the stoutest pair of shoes she had.

After she was thus prepared, she sat down and reflected once more upon the course she was planning to pursue; but she did not falter in her purpose. If there chanced to come a thought in opposition, the very face of Don Juan was enough to drive that thought away. No—the mountains were her destination, for she knew how honorable even a brigand could be to a defenceless and suffering maiden. She thought once more of Calleja—of the words he had spoken, and of the character he had shown, and her mind was made up as firm as the very mountain to which she was about to turn.

The large clock in the lower hall struck the hour of midnight. Isabel went to her door and listened. Then she opened it, and passed out into the corridor, and there she listened again; but she heard no sound, save the deep breathing of her own maid who slept in the adjoining room, and whose door was partly open. As soon as she was assured that there was no one stirring in the house, save herself, she returned to her room and extinguished the light. Then she went back into the corridor, and with a slow, poiseless step, she descended the stairs. In the

hall she hesitated a moment, and then moved on towards the back part of the house. She passed through the kitchen, out into the water-room—from there to the wood-house, unlocking all the doors with the keys, which were either in the locks or hanging by the side of the door. One more step, and she was in the open air, and here she stopped beneath the deep shade of the building to look about her.

There was no moon, nor would there be one until near morning, but the sky was cloudless, and the stars shone most brilliantly. The air was somewhat cool, but by no means was it uncomfortable.

Isabel did not stop long to consider or reflect, but as soon as she felt sure that there was no one near to observe her, she moved along under the shade of the building until she reached the corner, and then moving across into the horse-path, she glided away among the trees. Once she turned; but she felt sure that she was not followed. When she had reached some little distance, she thought she heard the hum of voices in the direction of the stable; but she did not stop to listen—she only hurried on the faster. At length she reached the point where the path separated, and for a moment she hesitated to consider which way she should take. There were three ways from the place where she now stood—one of which was the wide road to Perote, and of course that one she had nothing to do with. The next one, to the left, led directly to the mountains; but it was a hard, rough path. The last, and the one to the extreme left, also led to the mountains; but it ran some distance around, striking the road to Guanajuato before it turned up to its higher point.

After a while, Isabel resolved to take the middle path. It was the most difficult, she knew, but it was the safest, and would the soonest lead her whither she wished to go. She set forward, and had taken some dozen steps, when she heard a footfall near her. For a moment she was nearly paralyzed with fear, but on the next she gathered all her strength and bounded forward. It was starlight overhead, to be sure, but there among the stunted trees and shrubbery it was very dark. Isabel turned her head, but she could see no one, though she knew that she was followed, for she heard the coming footsteps. The path was rough and uneven, with stones and unearched roots in the way, and the poor girl knew that she could not make her way any faster, for several times already had she stum-

bled. Yet she moved on with all the speed she dared to exercise.

After travelling some seventy-five or eighty rods, she came to a place where the path led down a gentle slope into a sort of basin. She knew the place well, for she had often been there. When she reached the bottom of the basin, she thought to look back, and as she did so, she saw, revealed against the starry sky, the form of a man. With a quick prayer and a leaping heart she started on up the opposite rise. There was no chance for her to hide, for the way was flanked by deep tangled wildwood, full of briers and thorns. If she could only reach a few rods further, she could leave the path. She did not think that her pursuer would have the same opportunity to see her when she reached the top of the rise that she had a few moments before to see him, or she would certainly have contrived some means of working her way in among the wildwood. But it was too late now. She had nearly gained the summit of the opposite slope, when she heard a quick cry behind her, accompanied by the sound of leaping feet. She made one more effort, but it was her last, for on the next moment a heavy hand was placed upon her shoulder.

"Ha! senorita, I've caught you at last. Let me see your face!"

Instinctively the poor girl struggled, but it was of no avail. In doing so she exposed her face, and as soon as the man saw it, he immediately exclaimed:

"I thought so—the senorita Truxillo. But upon my faith, lady, you take a strange time to ramble in such a place as this!"

"For the love of Heaven, senor, do not trifle with me!" uttered Isabel, gazing hard into the man's face, and recognizing him as one who had accompanied Calleja.

"O, I meant not to trifle."

"Then let me go. Do not detain me now. I am fleeing from more than death!"

"I won't detain you, senorita—only I must change the direction of your course a little, and then you may go as fast as you wish."

"Do you mean to take me back?"

"Of course. You don't think I would come so far for nothing."

"One moment, senor. Have you a child?"

"No."

"A sister?"

"Yes—two of them."

"O, then listen to me. Suppose it was your own sister who was thus fleeing from a horrible fate. Suppose her heart was all broken and bleeding—that a fate worse than death hung over her—and it laid in your power to avert it. O, would you not do it?"

"That would depend upon circumstances," replied the man, still holding Isabel by the arm. "I am a soldier, and my first duty is to my commander. He has ordered me to convey you to the house from whence you have come. His word is law."

"But it is only human law. There is a law of God, of Heaven—a law in your own heart; O, obey it, and let me go."

"You mistake me, senorita. I know nothing about any laws but such as my commander makes. If there are any others he knows more about them than I do, and you had better talk to him about them. So come along. Don't resist, now, for I don't want to hurt you."

The poor girl saw at once that there could be no impression made upon the soldier's heart, and with a deep groan she gave herself up to her fate, and shortly afterwards she was on her way back to the house. They met other soldiers at the forks of the road, and when they reached the house they found both Don Juan and Truxillo upon the verandah.

"Ah, my pretty one," uttered Calleja, with a bitter laugh, as the rays of a lantern shone into her face, "you thought to give me the slip, eh? I thought of this—I mistrusted that you would start off without company, and so I set my men to keep watch. Fortunate, wasn't it?"

Isabel only looked up into the bold man's face, and then she passed on and fled to her own room. Her faithful maid followed her, but she could offer no consolation.

"Go to your bed, Inez, and leave me alone," murmured Isabel. "I would only be left to pray."

The maid spoke not, for she saw that the sorrow was too deep to be reached; so she knelt and kissed the hand of her unfortunate mistress, and then, with her eyes streaming with sympathizing tears, she left the room.

Isabel looked up, and she was alone. Then she clasped her hands and sank down by her bedside, and her prayer was wild and incoherent, for the shaft had shattered her heart.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE COURIER.

It was a week after the events had transpired which were related in the last chapter, and the day, which was drawing towards its close, had been one of unusual splendor. The sun had not yet reached the tops of the tall trees in the west, when Francisco Moreno rode up into the yard of Truxillo's dwelling and dismounted from his horse. He allowed his beast to take its accustomed way towards the stable alone, and then he turned towards the piazza. He expected to have seen some friendly face there—some one to greet him—but he did not. The circumstance was strange, for he had left word when he last went away, that he should be back at this time. Surely some one should have remembered it—and if they remembered it, why were they not there to watch for him. This made him uneasy, but why he could not tell.

The youth advanced to the hall, and yet he saw no one—he entered the large drawing-room, but the place was vacant of life. He hesitated a moment, and then he turned his steps towards Don Miguel's library. It was on the second floor, and as he ascended the carpeted stairs each step seemed to give back a hollow, mournful sound which struck heavily upon his soul. Once he stopped, for his heart beat so strangely that it made him weak. There was something about the very atmosphere of the place that

seemed like the low voice of the grave. He heard no bustle, no voices, but all was hushed and still. He gazed about to look for some one of whom he could ask the cause of all this, but no one appeared.

Francisco moved on. Slowly and almost noiselessly he approached Don Miguel's door. He hesitated there a moment, and then he rapped—lightly, as though he were afraid of the very sound he made—as though it might raise some evil spirit to strike him. He heard a voice from within that bade him enter. He pushed open the door and passed in. Don Miguel sat there alone. He was pale and wan, and upon his furrowed cheeks there were traces of tears. The youth sat down—he spoke a word of greeting, but the old man did not answer him. Then the trembling visitor spoke again:

"Don Miguel, what has happened?" He asked the question in a hoarse whisper.

"Alas!" groaned Truxillo, "I am all alone!" "Alone?" echoed Francisco, in a hollow voice. "Tell me of it."

The old man looked up, and after much effort he told of the coming of Juan Calleja—of his purpose, and of his words—of Isabel's escape, and of her capture.

"O," he concluded. "I knew not then how terrible a blow it would be. Calleja tore her

away, and all weeping and moaning she went. I begged and prayed, but to no effect. He had no ears to hear, and no heart to feel. He took her from me, and now she is in his hands forever!"

The youth bowed forward till his brow rested upon his hands, and thus he remained for several moments. When he looked up again his face was all wet with tears, but they had ceased to flow from his eyes.

"Don Miguel," he said, speaking in a tone of strange, unnatural calmness, "I was not prepared for this—I had hoped—I—I had thought." His voice was choked, and as he stopped speaking the tears burst forth afresh from his eyes. He could not be calm—it was of no use—for his feelings were not to be controlled.

"Don Miguel," he continued, starting up from his chair, and clasping his hands, "I will follow that villain to the ends of the earth, if thence he takes his course, for by the Eternal throne of Him who sits on high, I will not rest until I have rescued Isabel if it lies within my power so to do. I can live while she may be saved, but when she is irrecoverably lost, then I may die. O, Truxillo, this is very hard to bear; but you have wept, and you will not think my tears bespeak undue weakness. I cannot help weeping."

"Alas, my son, I have wept tears enough to save a repentant nation. None can ever know, save my God and myself, how heavily this blow has fallen upon me. Isabel was the very light of my life, the joy of my home, the smile of my board, the angel of blessing to my soul, and the staff of my declining years. She was part of me, a portion of my inner life, and now that she is gone the lamp of life has gone out with her. I may never recover from the terrible stroke—I am even now upon the verge of the grave. But you, my dear boy, are yet young—you may outgrow the pang."

"O, say not so, my father," returned the youth. "I know I am young, but such a blow shatters the heart so that it cannot be healed. Nothing but Isabel's return to our embrace can make me smile ever again."

"Alas, Francisco, be not too sanguine in the hope you would picture. I have grown calmer now, for I have had time for reflection. Think not that you can wrest our sweet jewel from Calleja's grasp. He holds her with too powerful a hand. By this time he is in the city of

Mexico, and perhaps the marriage ceremony has been performed."

"—sh! For the love of heaven, speak not so," interrupted the youth, clasping his hands and sinking down once more into his chair. "Do not picture the thing worse than it may be. I will at once to the capital, and I know that by some means I can gain admission to Don Juan."

"And what then?" asked Truxillo.

"What then?" repeated the youth, with a burning eye. "Ask me not," he added with a strange shake of the head. "I will see him, and then—"

He stopped. Perhaps his mind was not made up further.

Don Miguel now arose from his chair and crossed over to where Francisco sat. He placed his hand upon the young man's head, and with his eyes turned toward heaven, and his cheeks wet with falling tears, he murmured:

"O, thou God of all things, be with us now. Hold us up in this our bitter trial, and be with her in her sufferings. Listen to us, and smile upon us. O, let the right be done, and let the wrong perish."

As he ceased speaking he bowed his head and wept more profusely, and for a long while no other words were spoken. They both suffered keenly, and they both seemed to be mentally praying. At length Don Miguel turned towards the door.

"Let us walk," he said. "Let us seek the cool, fresh air. I would be calm if I could, for I cannot overcome the fate that lowers upon me. Come, Francisco."

The young man arose and followed his host from the room, and when they reached the piazza the sun had disappeared behind the tree tops. Don Miguel seemed to be upon the point of speaking, when the attention of both was directed towards the road.

"Hark!" uttered Francisco, whose ear was the quickest. "That is the tramp of a horse. Are any of your people out?"

"No, not that I know of."

In a few moments more a horseman could be seen coming on at a swift gallop, and both the old man and the youth gazed upon him in silence until he was near enough to make out his dress.

"It is not the regular courier," said Truxillo.

"Nor is it a soldier," added Francisco.

"God grant that it be no further evil upon us," the old man ejaculated, fervently.

"There can be nothing worse than has already come," returned the youth.

Before they could speak further the rider had dismounted, and was approaching the place where they stood. He was a middle-aged man, with a frank, open countenance, and habited in the garb of a common hunter. He bowed low as he came upon the piazza, and after looking from one to the other of our friends a moment, he said:

"I seek a young man named Francisco Moreno."

"I am the individual," answered our hero, regarding the stranger with an inquiring glance.

"Then I have a letter for you," and as he spoke he drew forth the missive and handed it to the youth.

Francisco tore open the letter and read as follows:

"TO FRANCISCO MORENO:—The time has come of which we have often spoken. The sword is even now unsheathed, and the fires of battle are kindled. Hasten at once to the mountains, if you are not there when you receive this, and collect your men. Call together all you can, and then repair with all possible despatch to Puente del Rey, where you will find Santana, who will give you all necessary instruction. Do not delay, for all depends now upon expedition. Ere our designs are fully discovered, or our movements made known, we must have an effective force regularly organized.

"I have heard of the fate of Isabel Truxillo. Delay not on her account, for I will do all I can for you to wrest her from the villain's power, and I can do much more than you can do. At once to the mountains—raise the standard of the Patriot Guerrilla—gather your brave men, and then hasten to the South.

"For God and our country, BOQUILLA."

After Francisco had read this through the second time, he turned towards the man who brought it, and to him he said:

"I shall obey these instructions at once. Do you know where Boquilla is?"

"Boquilla?" repeated the courier, raising his eyebrows in surprise.

"Ay, the man who sent me this letter."

"I know of no such man. I have heard of some wandering guerrilla by that name, but I know him not."

"Then who gave you this letter?"

"It was one Bernardo, a captain in the Patriot forces."

"Ah, yes, Bernardo. I know him," murmured the youth to himself. "But do you know the contents of this letter?"

"No, only that they are of importance, for I was so told when I took the errand."

"So they are important, and you may tell Bernardo that I shall hasten to obey them. Now come in and have some refreshment and rest, for of course you will not depart until morning."

"I must start on my return immediately, for I have a long distance to travel ere the next rising of the sun. But you can grant me a great favor, nevertheless."

"Name it."

"My horse has been upon the road for the last six-and-thirty hours almost at the top of his speed, and I fear he will not hold out to carry me back as I could wish. If you could exchange horses with me it would benefit me much, and the Patriot cause more. Mine is a noble beast."

Don Miguel at once offered to make the exchange, and while the groom was making the necessary preparations the courier went in and partook of such refreshments as were at hand. In less than half an hour afterwards he was mounted upon a fresh, strong horse, and with a polite *adieu* he set off upon his journey back.

"Now I must be off," said Francisco, after the courier had taken his departure.

"Not to-night, my son," returned Don Miguel, earnestly.

"Yes, I must be among the mountains and have my couriers out before morning."

"And then I shall be indeed left all alone!" the old man uttered, with much feeling.

"But you must remember the cause," quickly replied the youth, at the same time laying his hand upon his old friend's arm. "It is a most sacred duty I go to perform—a duty I owe to myself, my country, and my God. You will not repine."

"Of course you must go, and, perhaps, if you succeed—if you overcome the tyrant emperor—you may—bring back—"

"Isabel, you mean," said the youth.

"Yes, yes," the old man added, while fresh tears started to his eyes.

"I hope I shall be able to do that," resumed Francisco. "I know not how you feel, but for my part I place great confidence in the words of

Boquilla, so much so, at least, that I shall go about my other duty, fully believing that he will do more for Isabel than I could possibly do."

"God grant that he may," was the old man's fervent ejaculation.

In an hour afterwards our hero was on his way to the mountains, and he was armed, too, in a way well befitting a guerrilla leader—not alone; with arms to overcome the lives of the enemy, but with those necessary to the solidity of his own command. Don Miguel had given him near five thousand dollars with which to pay his way with his troops if necessary.

By midnight the youth reached the cot where Boquilla had resided, and there he found Tepec,

and several others of the mountain rangers. He told them of the letter he had received from Boquilla, and that he was ready to set out as soon as the men could be got together. "And," he added, "you may inform the men that they shall be sure of ample pay, for if it is not obtained from the government I will pay them from my own pocket."

Messengers at once set out to different parts of the mountains, and by the hour of sunrise two hundred stout men, all well-mounted and armed, were ready to set out. Francisco received them with a proud eye, and when all was ready he placed himself at their head and commenced to lead the way down the mountain.

CHAPTER XIX.

AN EMPEROR IN THE DUST.

Now let us note the falling fortunes of the tyrant. In one of the great rooms of the imperial palace of Mexico was Augustin Iturbide. He was a man of fair stature, well built, and of a commanding appearance. His features were regular, and were very strongly marked, and the most prominent characteristic which the physiognomist would have found there was ambition. That feature was the more palpable because there were no fires of genius beaming there to soften or conceal it. He was a man with great ambition, fruitful of great projects, but without genius or judgment.

Near the emperor stood an old man, whose hair was white, and whose step was weak. He was habited in the garb of a bishop, and though there were some few traces of religious devotion to be found upon his countenance, on a close examination, and which might be only the result of habit more than the offspring of any inward feelings, yet the most of his face was written over with the language of physical indulgence.

"My good lord bishop," said the emperor, stopping short in the nervous walk he had been taking, "I want to ask you a question. Why is it that the people hate me?"

"Because you oppress them," returned the bishop, without hesitation.

"But I have done them good, too," resumed Iturbide.

"Not so much as you have done them harm and injury."

"Did I not abolish the infernal Inquisition?"

"Ay, but the people did not fear it under a Republic. When the royal power was overthrown the terror of the Inquisition was gone. And the people know, too, that you only did the deed in furtherance of your own ambition. What else have you done for the good of the people?"

Iturbide bit his lips and made no reply. Perhaps the old bishop was the only man in the empire who would have dared to speak so, and even he did not do it for the purpose of pointing out the emperor's faults—he only did it for the sake of maintaining his own importance and privilege.

"My lord bishop," at length spoke the emperor again—and this time his lip trembled—"there is sound of rebellion in the land. Do you think it can be successfully carried on?"

"I know not, Augustin. You must ask your generals that."

"But my generals flatter me with hopes that have no foundation."

"Ha, ha—and have you just found that out? Did you not know that such was the fate of all men in absolute power?"

Before the emperor made any reply a small private door at one corner of the apartment was opened, and a female entered. She was richly dressed, but yet from her manner of obeisance, only a servant. Iturbide noticed her, and started towards her.

"How now, Clara, have you found the children?" he asked.

"No, sire," she returned, trembling as she spoke. "We cannot find them."

"Has the palace been hunted all through?"

"Yes, sire."

"And the chapel?"

"It has."

"And the gardens?"

"Yes."

"And the guard-rooms?"

"They have."

"And no traces of them?"

"No, sire—they cannot be found anywhere. Every nook and corner has been searched, but without avail."

"By San Jago, that is most strange," cried the emperor, with much emotion.

"What is it?" asked the bishop.

"My children, good bishop," returned Iturbide; "my three little ones—my two boys, and my little angel girl—are gone. They have been missing since morning."

"Perhaps they have wandered off in sport," suggested the bishop.

"It may be so," responded the father, with a look of sudden hope. And then turning to the female he added: "Here, Clara, go you to the captain of the guard, and bid him that he send out his men instantly to all parts of the city after the children. Let them be found, or by the diadem I wear I'll have the heads of every one who has a charge in the children's department. Go, go, Clara, and let the work be quickly done. O, my heart will break if they be gone. But they must be found somewhere. They cannot be lost.—But what wait ye for?"

The female had waited to hear her master out, but at these words she quickly turned and left the place. Shortly afterwards a door in the opposite direction was opened, and Don Juan Calleja entered.

"The very man I wished to see," exclaimed the emperor, as he noticed his favorite servant and tool, "Don Juan, you must at once to horse and arouse our men, for by my soul this smell of rebellion is strong."

"You forget, sire, the ceremony which is first

to take place," said Calleja. "And even then you must not place too much upon my shoulders, for I am not strong."

"Ceremony?" repeated the emperor, thoughtfully. "Ah, yes, I remember. Your infant bride is here."

"Ay, she is, sire; and I would have the marriage ceremony at once performed. I have promised that it should be done, and you will remember that you, too, promised."

"Yes, I do remember, Don Juan; and I will keep my promise. But you must make haste, for these are busy times, and none to waste."

"I know it, sire, and hence I have sent the bishop on ahead, as you may see."

"Ah, then it is to your work that I owe the presence of our good bishop?"

"It is so," said the bishop.

"Then bring on the bride," resumed Iturbide, "and we will secure to you both the maid and the dollars."

Don Juan turned and left the imperial presence, and in a few minutes he came back leading Isabel Truxillo by the hand. The poor girl was pale as marble, and her eyes were red and swollen with weeping. She gazed about her with a half-frightened look when she entered, and her frame trembled violently.

"We are ready," said Don Juan. "Let the marriage ceremony proceed now as quickly as you please."

Isabel heard those words, and she started up with a sudden impulse. First she gazed upon the bishop, in his canonical robes, and then her eyes rested upon the emperor. A quick flush started to her face, and with one effort she broke from the grasp of the man who held her, and fell upon her knees before the emperor.

"Sire," she cried, clasping her hands and raising them towards him, "O, save me from this! I do not wish to be the wife of Don Juan Calleja. I cannot be his. It will break my heart. O, save me, for you have the power."

The emperor gazed down into the maiden's upturned face, but there was no sympathy in his countenance. He did not look stern, either, but he rather wore a look of malignant disregard of her appeal.

"My lord bishop," he said, turning towards the prelate, "you understand this matter. Is not this maiden the don's truly affianced bride?"

"She is, sire."

"And pledged by her father?"

"Yes."

"Then let the ceremony go on."

"O, for the love of Heaven, sire, save me! Save me, and all good angels shall bless you."

"I'll bless you, my mistress!" uttered Calleja, between his clenched teeth, as he stepped forward and lifted the maiden to her feet.

Isabel looked up into his face, and she was frightened by the terrible expression that rested there. It was a deadly, vengeful expression, and its shadow fell far into the future, casting a dark, gloomy shade over her path, which ended only where her hopes found the last resting-place of earth—the grave.

"Now go on," Don Juan continued, turning towards the bishop.

The maiden uttered a deep groan, but she did not faint. There was a power in her soul that sustained her, for she had not founded her hopes all upon the present—she had tried to school herself to bear the bitter burden until the hour of death should throw it off, and she had so far succeeded that life remained with her, even now. She now stood by the side of Don Juan, and he had taken her hand in his own, when footsteps were heard in the adjoining corridor.

"Have you invited witnesses?" asked Calleja, of the emperor.

"No, I have spoken to no one," replied Iturbide.

"But there is surely some one coming. Hold a moment, my lord bishop."

Before Don Juan could speak further the door opened, and a man habited in the garb of a priest entered. He was a powerful man, of a towering form and commanding presence, and the emperor and his companions were not a little surprised at the strange interruption.

"How now, sir priest?" cried the emperor, as the strange intruder advanced up the room, "what seek ye here?"

"I have come to seek you, Don Augustin Iturbide," calmly returned the stranger; "and I find that I have come just in time."

"Dog!" gasped the emperor, coloring with passion, "do you know to whom you speak?"

"Very well," was the calm response; and as the strange man spoke he threw back his robe and cowl, and revealed the noble form and features of him whom we have known as Boquilla! The emperor, the bishop, and the colonel started as though they had been shot, while Isabel, when she noticed the friendly face, uttered a quick cry of hope and sank once more upon her knees.

"Now by the holy Saint Peter!" gasped Iturbide, "your life is in my hand. Aha, you shall die now, traitor!"

"Hold a moment, Augustin Iturbide," spoke the patriot wanderer, while his eyes burned with a deep, massive fire, "it is you who are in my power. Stop, be not in too much haste, or you may repent it. — Ha, are you drawing your sword, Don Juan?" he continued, turning his eye upon the colonel, and at the same time drawing a heavy pistol from beneath his robe and cocking it. "Beware, for I would shoot you with the same relish that I would crush a tarantula!"

Juan Calleja cowered before the terrible look of the wandering guerrilla, and his sword fell back into its scabbard. The emperor, too, was strangely moved by the man's look and tone, for he changed color, and his lips trembled. As soon as Calleja's sword was put back, Boquilla turned again to Iturbide.

"Now, Augustin," he continued, "listen to what I have to say. Your three children are in my power."

"Ha, villain!"

"Be calm, and it shall be the better for you. They are in my power, and there they shall remain as hostages for the safety of this girl. I had them stolen away from your garden this morning and carried away in sacks. They shall be well cared for, and no harm shall come to them while Isabel Truxillo remains safe from the power of this villain who now stands in our presence; but let him make her his wife, and your three little ones die!"

Iturbide trembled and turned pale. He loved his children, for they loved him, and, with the exception of his wife, they were all he had on earth towards which his heart could turn for sympathy and kindness.

"Sire," cried Juan Calleja, purple with rage and mortification, "put the braggart rebel to death at once. Let his traitorous head be severed, and then let him carry out his diabolical threat if he can."

"San Jago, so it shall be!" gasped Iturbide, starting towards the bell-cord as he spoke.

"One moment," calmly interrupted the guerrilla. "If you slay me you will do more death than you count upon. If I die to-day, you will receive the headless trunks of your three little ones to-morrow! Do not think that I have come here to be entirely at your mercy. Beware! Augustin Iturbide, for I am not to be trifled with!"

The emperor turned pale again, and a deep groan escaped from his lips. He gazed first upon the guerrilla, then upon Calleja, and then upon the maiden, who had now risen from her kneeling position and sank down upon a chair. He knew not how to act. His pride, his ambition, rebelled against submitting to the demands which were thus made, and his hands itched to put the bold man to death; but his father's heart spoke in a language that could not be overcome. At length he turned to the prelate.

"My lord bishop," he said, in a trembling tone, "what shall be done?"

"Do as you please, sire. You are emperor, and are not prone to seek my advice." The bishop cared little for his imperial master, for his office would be the same with or without the imperial aid. He had foresight enough, too, to see that Iturbide's power was but transitory, and he did not deem it prudent to make much show of supporting him—he never had done so.

"But in this case, good bishop," urged Iturbide, "you might speak."

"Then I should say, let the matter rest where it is. Save your children."

At this juncture Calleja drew his sword and sprang like a tiger upon the guerrilla, but his movement availed him nothing, for Boquilla had watched him narrowly. As he raised his sword the guerrilla dashed its point aside with his pistol, and then with one blow of its butt, he felled the mad colonel to the floor.

"Now, Augustin Iturbide," resumed Boquilla, "this fellow is stilled for the while, let us understand each other. Let me see the Lady Isabel Truxillo on her way home, with Calleja detained here, and your children shall be sent back to you. Be not hasty, now, nor influenced by wrath towards me, for I have counted carefully

upon all the present bearings, and I find that you are wholly powerless to disobey or harm me without at once signing the death-warrant of your own children. Now let us know your mind."

For a moment the emperor was silent. It was evident that a powerful struggle was going on in his mind. It was a hard task—hard, very hard, for him to be conquered in his own palace by his bitterest enemy and a rebel, but it was harder to give up his children. The struggle was between the emperor and the father, but the father conquered.

"She shall be sent to her home," he at length said.

"And Juan Calleja confined here?" added Boquilla.

"Yes."

"Then so be it!" and with these words the guerrilla turned away.

"Hold!" cried Iturbide. "My children?"

"Shall be returned to you unharmed when Isabel Truxillo is upon her road home, without the gates of the city."

"But how shall I be sure?"

"By the word of a man who never told a lie," returned the guerrilla.

The emperor sank back upon a seat and covered his face. Boquilla turned towards Isabel and placed his hand upon her head.

"Senorita," he whispered, "take heart, and be of good cheer. You are not without friends."

So he spoke, and without waiting for any reply, he turned about and strode from the apartment. The emperor dared not stop him, nor dared he even to look upon him again, for his anger might overcome the father's heart, and his children be doomed to death.

CHAPTER XX.

THE TWO COLONELS.

THERE was a struggle in the empire. Men of noble heart and powerful arm came up and made war upon the usurper, and the imperial crown began to grow pale and heavy.

Francisco Moreno had joined Santana's army with his strong men, and he had struck nobly for the cause he had espoused. One thing alone amid the glory and honor he was winning came to cloud his happiness and make him sad. He had as yet heard nothing from Isabel. Every returning spy had he questioned, but he could learn nothing further than what he already knew. Early one morning he sat in his tent, with his mind upon this very subject, when he received an order to wait upon the general, who was quartered within the town of San Martin. Our hero made his toilet as quickly as possible, and then hastened to obey the summons. He found the general in a small private room, with only two secretaries in his company, and having paid his due respects he awaited the orders he was to receive.

Santana was a tall, dark-looking man, and though one in whom the people had not the fullest confidence, yet he was honored now, for he was working nobly for the liberty of his country, and he had done much to convince the people that he was not actuated by undue ambition.

After a while the two secretaries withdrew,

and Francisco was left alone with the general.

"Now, Captain Moreno," commenced Santana, looking with a smile upon the young man, "we will attend to our business. Thus far we have done nobly, and you have bravely done your part. We are now within fifty miles of the capital, and the victory is ours. First of all I have a colonel's commission for you."

Francisco started with a wild emotion. Such an honor was beyond his utmost hopes.

"A colonel's commission!" he uttered, in blank surprise. "I hardly deserve so great an honor."

"Then it is fortunate that there are some who know your deserts better than you know them yourself," returned Santana, with a smile. "Diablo! your sword is like lightning, and your body like a thunder-bolt. But never mind—we know how you led your men, and here is a colonel's commission, all signed and sealed."

The youth could find no words to express his gratitude. He only placed his hand upon his heart, and in a fervent tone he said:

"I accept the gift, and God grant that my future deeds may show how deeply grateful I am."

"I understand you," said the general, "and now we will let that pass. How would you like a furlough of a month or so?"

"I could not ask it," quickly returned our

hero. "While hostilities continue, I will not leave my post."

"But there is a fair senorita in the question," continued Santana, with a peculiar, twinkling look.

The youth started up and clutched his hands.

"You mean Isabel Truxillo?" he said, convulsively.

"Yes. She has been sent home to the house of her grandfather."

"She has!" cried Francisco. "Then God be praised."

"But we have heard from a faithful spy, who came from the capital during the night, that the Don Juan Calleja was about to set off after her. Calleja has joined the Patriot forces, and fled from the emperor."

"Juan Calleja become a Patriot!" uttered Francisco. "And in pursuit of Isabel!" he continued, turning pale with fear.

"He has joined the forces," said the general, "but you can judge as well as myself how much patriotism there is in his bosom. How like you the idea of his going to Don Miguel's dwelling, however?"

"General," spoke the youth, fearfully agitated, "I do not understand all this. What is it? Does he go as Isabel Truxillo's legal husband?"

"O, no. A certain wandering guerrilla, named Boquilla, put a stop to the marriage, and made the emperor promise that he would send the lady home, which he did. Now it seems that Calleja, suspecting that Iturbide will abdicate, has joined the enemy and goes once more to claim his promised bride. Now do you understand?"

"Merciful Heavens, yes!" gasped Francisco, clasping his hands upon his bosom and gazing wildly into the face of his commander. "O, if it would not be a neglect of duty to leave the army and go—"

"Fear not on that account, colonel," interrupted Santana, "for we shall have no more fighting to do. The courier who came in this morning brought most important news. The emperor has called the remnant of his Congress together and tendered his resignation, and he asked that he may have two weeks in which to leave the country. Of course there will be no more force needed, and you may take such of your men as you may choose, and hasten away to meet Don Juan as soon as you please."

"God bless you, noble general," ejaculated Francisco, springing forward and grasping his

commander by the hand. "If it is as you say, and I can leave with honor, then I will away at once."

"Just as soon as you please," returned Santana, with a warm shake of the hand. "You may call out your men, such as you want, and they will at once be detached. Only let me hope that we shall see you in the capital ere long."

"I will hasten back as soon as possible," said our hero, with a flushed cheek and burning eye; "for I must see the *Flag of the Republic* when it floats over the great city."

Once more the youth thanked his commander for his kindness, and then, accompanied by the adjutant, he returned to his own quarters. He selected twenty of his men—of those whom he had brought from the mountains—and they were at once relieved from duty, and detached "to accompany Colonel Moreno on a mission of importance." So read the record.

Before noon Francisco was ready to depart, and having seen that all his men were in good travelling order he set forth, taking the great Vera Cruz road to the northeastward.

It was not until the morning of the next day that Francisco struck upon the road that led to the capital, and of course until this time he was not upon Calleja's track. Near the middle of the forenoon he stopped at a wayside inn for refreshment for his men and beasts. The host was a Mestizo, and a Patriot, and he hastened to set before the travellers such articles of refreshment as he had on hand. First he placed a pitcher of pulque upon the table, but only a few of the men tasted of the fiery stuff, and in lieu thereof he furnished some goat's milk which was far more acceptable. He also found some brown Indian cake, called *tortilla*, and from this the party made a hearty meal. While the men were eating, our hero called the host aside and asked him if he had seen Don Juan Calleja pass.

"Is he a colonel in the Patriot army?" asked the host.

"He is an Imperialist of the most outrageous—" The youth stopped, for he happened to remember what Santana had told, and in an altered tone he added: "He has professed to join the Patriots, but he is a villain, notwithstanding."

"I think such a man passed here yesterday, somewhere about the middle of the afternoon," said the Mestizo, "and he had a female in his company."

"Did you see her?" quickly asked Francisco, starting.

"Not her face, for she was kept veiled, but I should judge her to be a young person, and her voice was sweet as the warbling of a bird, though sad enough, in all conscience sake."

"That was he. What company of men had he with him?"

"Twelve beside himself, and all well-armed."

"And he travelled to the eastward?"

"Yes."

"Yesterday afternoon?"

"Yes. He left about four o'clock."

"Thank you."

Francisco rejoined his men, and bade them make all possible haste.

"But the horses," suggested Bernardo, who was the young colonel's right-hand man. "They need more rest."

"But they cannot have it," impatiently returned Francisco. "They have already rested half an hour, and if they are likely to give out we will find some means to exchange them."

Bernardo said no more, but went directly and summoned the men, and ere many minutes they were again in their saddles. The afternoon was cool and pleasant, and the horses held out well until they reached the little village of Igualada, which was about half an hour after sundown. Here our hero learned that Calleja had passed through the place early in the morning, having stopped only a couple of hours to rest. Upon this the youth at once exchanged his horses, and after resting an hour he set out again, and rode all night, and on the following morning he found himself at the foot of the steep way that led up to the table land where stood Don Miguel's estate. His men were wayworn and fatigued, but they thought not of stopping now, for they could see by the tracks in the path that the party of Calleja could not have been gone along a great while.

They had ascended half-way up the rugged way when Francisco's horse gave a loud snort and pricked up his ears.

"There's something ahead," said the youth, turning to Bernardo, who rode by his side.

"Yes," returned the lieutenant, "and I think I can hear the tramp of hoofs. There! Did you not hear that?"

"Yes," answered Francisco, urging his horse on at a quicker pace. "On, on, my men, for I think we have the game close at hand."

Ere long an abrupt turn in the path brought

a party of horsemen to view. Francisco dashed on at a headlong pace, and in a few minutes he was up with them. He looked first for Isabel, and he saw her on ahead, with a man riding by her side.

"Halt!" thundered the youth, as he dashed up to the head of the party with his own men hard upon his heels.

The leader of the party turned in his saddle, and seeing the strength of his pursuers he drew in his own rein, and his men instinctively did the same.

"What means this?" he asked, looking at the youthful colonel in trembling surprise.

But Francisco made no reply. He drove to Isabel's side and placed his hand upon her arm. She had recognized his voice and raised her veil, and a quick cry of joy escaped from her lips as she found her lover by her side.

"Isabel, I am with you—fear not. But where is Calleja?"

The maiden pointed to a litter which was borne between two horses, and the youth saw a human form upon it, and upon a nearer view he recognized it to be Juan Calleja. With a wondering look he turned again to Isabel and asked the cause, but she was too much excited by the thrilling emotions of the moment to speak, so he turned to the man who rode by her side, and asked the cause of him.

"He was thrown from his horse at the foot of the hill," returned the man, "and I fear one of his legs is broken. So you will not detain us, for the dwelling of the lord of Truxillo is not far from here, and we would reach it as soon as possible."

"Of course I will not detain you," replied Francisco, "and you may ride on as quickly as you please; and to facilitate your progress I will relieve you of part of your charge. I will take the maiden under my own escort, and then you can devote the more attention to your wounded leader."

"No, no, senor," quickly replied the captain, for such he appeared to be from his uniform.

"You cannot do that."

"But I must do it," was Francisco's calm response. "You will go with me?" he added, turning to Isabel.

"Yes, O, yes," she uttered.

At this juncture Calleja aroused and gazed up at what was going on. A bitter curse escaped from his lips when he saw Francisco, and with all the energy he could command, he exclaimed:

"Put the villain to the sword, captain, and keep the senorita in your own charge."

"By the mass, Juan Calleja, you had better count your cost before you give such orders. If you wish to try the temper of your weapons, say so; but you'll find it expensive work."

Don Juan literally frothed at the mouth with mingled pain and rage, and in the meanwhile Francisco took the bridle of the horse upon which Isabel rode and led the animal one side. Then he turned to the captain and said:

"I don't think you'll be so foolish as to obey your leader's order, so I will take the maiden and ride on in advance, and inform Don Miguel that you are coming."

The man was evidently uneasy, but he dared not resist. He looked around upon Francisco's twenty stalwart men, and then he looked upon his commander.

"Colonel," he said, approaching the litter, "to resist them now would only endanger yourself. There are twenty-one of them in all, and well-armed at that."

Calleja raved and swore terribly, and while he thus spit out his vengeance, Francisco drew off his men and started on up the path without the least resistance being offered. When he was out of the way of those he had left behind him, he drew close to Isabel's side, and Bernardo instinctively drew back.

"Isabel," said the youth, showing by his look and tone that he was deeply moved by the thought that was uppermost in his mind, "you are not harmed?"

"No, Francisco," she returned.

"And your—your—present fate? You are not Calleja's wife?"

The words came hard, and they were spoken only in a low, trembling whisper.

"Thank God, no!" burst convulsively from the poor girl's lips, while the tears started down her pale cheeks.

The youth pressed his hand upon his heart and murmured a few wild thanks to God. Then he turned again to his lovely companion, and in a tone of the deepest sympathy, he said:

"But you have suffered much."

"O, more than I can tell. But," she quickly

added, while a flush suffused her cheeks, "God has been kind. I have not suffered so much as I might—nothing yet from which I may not recover."

Francisco realized how much he had to be thankful for, and all his thoughts were light and buoyant with hope. He turned once more to the being he so fondly loved, and warmly said:

"Forget the past, my love—forget it, and let it be as one of the things that have rolled away never more to return. We have hope now before us. Our cause has triumphed—the foul emperor is overcome—and I have friends now who are powerful and noble."

But Isabel did not seem to receive joy from her lover's words, for she still looked sad and unhappy.

"Alas!" she murmured, "what hope have I? The emperor sent me home—or rather sent me on my way, but a private courier overtook us and stopped us on the road, and for two weeks have I been kept in a miserable hovel. But at length Calleja came and took me away, and he says now that he will be my husband. He has joined the Patriot troops, and they are in power."

"He shall not be your husband!" uttered Francisco.

"O, if I could feel assured. But I have been so long the mere football of fortune."

"But do not fear now."

"Ah, but I cannot help it. Francisco, you do not, I fear, see the whole force that operates against us. The change of mere political power does not affect the bond by which I am bound. That is a record of the church, and the holy church alone can cross it out."

Francisco saw it all now. His hopes, started by sudden impulse, had overleaped this fact, but it came to him now, and it was the subject of no very agreeable thoughts. Yet he did not despair. He tried to make his companion hope for a better fate, and he succeeded so well in his endeavors that Isabel finally looked up and smiled upon him. But it was a smile like the dim and distant meteor in the midnight sky. It quickly passed, and could not be called back again.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE LAST STRUGGLE.

DON MIGUEL TRUXILLO had received his darling grandchild with open arms, and Francisco had been pressed to his bosom with a proud, fond embrace. Juan Calleja had come, and the family physician, an old, experienced surgeon, had examined his injury. There was no bone broken—the hip had been put out of joint, and some part of the flesh much bruised. The injury was yet severe, and the sufferer was long confined to his bed.

Nearly two weeks passed away, and during that time Francisco saw Isabel many times. They spoke not of their love, for they had both made to Don Miguel a solemn pledge that they would speak not a word upon that subject until Juan Calleja had recovered. The old man felt himself placed in an embarrassing position. It was the wish of Calleja, expressed in the form of a command, that Francisco should be driven from the house, and not allowed to see Isabel at all, for he still claimed the maiden as his bride. But the lord of Truxillo would do no such thing as that, though for the good of all parties concerned, he thought it best for the young people not to add too much fuel to the flames which were already burning so wildly, and to this end he asked them not to speak upon the subject.

Isabel had explained to both her grandfather and lover the circumstances of the visit of Bo-

quilla to the emperor's apartment, and of her temporary release from persecution. But it seems that the emperor himself must have been false to his pledge, for otherwise Isabel could not have been stopped upon the road as she was. She had been stopped by an imperial courier, her conductors sent back, and she placed under the keeping of some women who held her fast until Calleja came to take her away.

Francisco remained at the house, and there he meant to remain so long as Juan Calleja staid there. He walked with Isabel—he pressed her hands—he prayed with her, and he wept with her. Sometimes he even held a thought of breaking the pledge he had made, and speak boldly of the plans he would carry out. He often thought of the far-off country where liberty dwelt, and he would have flown there with the angel of his love. But his honor was too sacred a thing to tarnish, and he remained silent upon the subject—silent so far as words were concerned—but there was a spoken language, though silent, which was not to be misunderstood.

And Isabel. Alas, the blow fell heavily upon her. She felt the weight of it more than could be seen, for hers was a state of the most agonizing suspense. The sword hung suspended over her head, and she knew not when it would fall. And night she saw it. When she walked it fol-

lowed her—when she reposed it remained with her, and when she slept it worked its way into every dream. Day by day she grew more pale and wan, and the last hues of health were fading from her cheek. The bloom of her youthful joy had long since departed, and the darkness of despair was close upon her.

Juan Calleja became able to walk out, and he signified his intention of returning soon to the capital. He had given in his oath of allegiance to the new government, and had made a tender of his purse and sword to the wants of the executive, and he felt it to be fortunate for him that he had done this before the emperor had abdicated, for it wore the appearance of having come from the heart.

An aged priest who had for long years been the spiritual adviser of Don Miguel was at the house, and the old man asked his assistance in the ill-starred business that was upon his hands. Don Juan was called into the drawing-room, and he found the priest and his host there. A curl of scorn worked around his lips as he saw the holy man, but he managed to hide it in time to greet him with an appearance of friendship.

"Don Miguel," said Calleja, as he sat down, "you have sent for me, I believe. Was it upon matters of importance?"

"Yes, senor—of the utmost importance," returned the old man. He had brought himself now to a bold point, and he was resolved to speak as he felt. "Don Juan," he continued, in a tremulous voice, "you know all that has transpired as well as I can tell you. You know how my poor grandchild suffers, and you know for why she suffers. Now why will you persist in this outrage upon her feelings?"

"You use hard words, my good lord," returned Calleja, with a wicked twinkle of the eye.

"Not half so hard as the acts of which you are guilty. But no more of this. I have called you to beg that you will let alone this plan you have been so long engaged in, and allow Isabel to go free of your claim. I am aware that it was originally my son's desire that you should inherit his property, and you shall have it. I have had all the necessary papers drawn up, and the inventory can be placed in your hands at any moment; and in addition to this, senor, I will give you something handsome from my own purse. Now what say you?"

"Simply that I shall have nothing to do with your proposition."

"But consider, Calleja. Just consider what you are doing. What can you want of a wife who can only fade and die the moment you take her to your home?"

"Out upon thee!" uttered the colonel, with a bitter, burning expression. "Think you I know not how the wind blows? Here stands a waiting youth to catch the fruit the moment it shall fall from my grasp, and you are now to shake it from me! Hark ye, Don Miguel Truxillo, sooner than your grandchild should fall from my power would I see her dead at my feet! *She must be mine!* I should be less than man to give her up now after such a siege of trials and difficulties. You have tried all in your power to thwart me, even with death, and now that I stand clear of the dangers that have beset me, you coolly ask me to give up the prize and sneak away from the field! No, sir! It is not so much the wife I want as it is the *right* which is mine. You need say no more, for you cannot move me."

"Then I will have recourse to the law of the land," quickly exclaimed the old man, disgusted and pained by the pure malevolence which had been shown.

"Ha, ha, ha," laughed Calleja, with bitter scorn. "And that will most surely go against you. Here sits your holy adviser. Ask him."

Truxillo turned to the priest, and the old divine mournfully shook his head.

"Ah, Don Miguel," he said, "the man of words is right. The law will give you no aid. The compact which is signed by the maiden's father is solemn and binding, and the civil law cannot break it. I fear your hope is gone."

As the priest thus spoke he turned to Calleja, and after regarding him for some moments in silence, he said:

"My son, why will you persist in this? Let me entreat of you—let me beg of you, as you value your own future welfare, to leave this poor old man and his child in peace. You are seeking no benefit for yourself, but only carrying out a bold, bad revenge, which can do you no good, but which must work to your own harm. And then just think of the utter misery you are entailing upon a poor, defenceless female. Think of it, my son, and let your—"

"Peace, old man," hastily interrupted Calleja, with a look and tone of impatience. "I tell you once for all that Isabel Truxillo shall be my wife, and all the powers of earth shall not pre-

vent it. Now let me hear no more of this matter, for if I do you shall repent it."

Both Don Miguel and the priest saw that it would be useless to speak further, and they gave up the subject. Calleja only waited to see that nothing more was to be asked of him, and then he arose and turned to leave the apartment. After he had opened the door he stopped and looked back.

"Don Miguel," he said, "I shall not much longer intrude upon your bounty. I am almost strong enough to set out, and I assure you that I shall remain here not one moment longer than is necessary. You can bear this in mind, and be prepared to act accordingly."

With these words, and without waiting for a reply, he went out. After he was gone there was a silence of some minutes, which was at length broken by Don Miguel:

"Father," he said, "this is most bitter. O, and is there no way by which it can be stayed?"

"I can think of none," returned the priest. "The last resort has been tried. Alas, for poor Isabel! She has her hope now in God alone. I had not thought Don Juan so bad a man."

"He is a very wicked man," said Truxillo,

with a shudder—"a very wicked man. Poor child! God be with thee and guard thee. I, alas! can do no more!"

As the old man spoke he clasped his hands over his eyes, and the big tears trickled through his fingers. His groans were deep and heart-rending, and his frame shook with the fearful emotion that moved him. To him the moment was the most bitter of his long and weary life. He had allowed himself to hope that Juan Calleja might be influenced to pass over his claim, but that hope was now crushed, and its wreck was like death to his own soul. It was like putting out the sun from the heavens, and shutting away the stars from sight forevermore. The only cord that reached to his inner soul was to be snapped in twain, and he already felt the dreadful pang stinging through the chambers of his life. He arose from his chair and tottered to the door—he passed out into the hall, and sought his own chamber, and when he had reached it he threw himself upon his bed with a deep, agonizing groan. The aged priest had followed him, and with a fervent expression the holy man knelt down by the bedside and prayed.

CHAPTER XXII.

"BEGINNING OF THE END."

DON JUAN CALLEJA was at length able to walk freely about, and he had set the time for his departure. Francisco still remained at the house, and he had thus far kept the promise which he had made to Don Miguel; but he had resolved not to keep it longer, and to that effect he went to the old man and informed him that he wished the obligation removed.

"Do as you please, Francisco," returned the unhappy man; "I shall place no more injunction upon you. Isabel is not what she was to me, for she is lost now."

"Not if I can save her," uttered the youth, with compressed lips.

Half an hour afterwards he found Isabel alone in the garden, and he told her what had passed between himself and Don Miguel.

"And now," he continued, "why should we suffer this terrible calamity? Let us flee, and thus leave all misery behind us."

Isabel looked up with a mournful expression, and slowly shook her head.

"Francisco," she replied, with a tone of calm consideration, "I fear that what you propose is impracticable. We cannot flee where the law cannot reach us, and that law binds me to the fate we dread."

"You mistake, dearest one. There is a home we can find, where the foul law can touch you

not. There is another nation in America—the nation of free and noble men—the United States."

"And would you leave the land of your birth?" murmured the maiden, looking up with a thoughtful expression.

"Most assuredly I would, when that land becomes the home of inevitable calamity and woe. O, Isabel, we live for the rights and joys which God has given us to enjoy, and we have a heaven-sent right to seek those rights and hold on upon them. Shall we not do so, then? Think of it, love."

The maiden did think. It was a new thought to her mind, and she would not judge hastily. She would not marry Calleja, nor would she be a fugitive upon the face of the earth for the purpose of escaping him. But one thought, more than all others combined, weighed upon her mind. Her religious views were sober and reflective, and her ideas of religious duty were deep and operative. She knew that by an ecclesiastical law she was bound to marry with Don Juan, and she knew, too, that her father had placed her in his hands, and with his dying breath had enjoined upon her grandfather to see the contract fulfilled. This point had been most forcibly presented to her by the old bishop at the capital. He had worked upon her religious

feelings, and made her believe that the act of resisting the compact would be open rebellion against the holy church. With such thoughts, then, did she reflect upon her lover's proposition. Every motive of her noble, generous soul, which sprang from her innate conceptions, spoke for her to flee and be happy; but the other motives—those which she had received from the teaching of others—spoke for her to remain and carry out the will of the parent who had blindly bound her. Isabel pondered long and earnestly and the various phases of the subject passed her mind in rapid succession.

"Have you thought yet?" asked the youth, gazing earnestly into his companion's face.

"Ah, Francisco," she replied, with an effort to remain calm, "I know not what to say. O, you cannot know the emotions of my soul. My love bids me flee with you, and so does every inclination of my earthly nature, but I have another duty to perform. I cannot forget the dying wish of my father."

"Let not that influence you, my love," earnestly and eagerly urged Francisco. "O, if he were alive now you know what would be his wish."

"Yes," faintly returned the maiden, "but we know what he did, and after these few short days of earthly life are over, I would rather meet my father in the world of spirits and be able to say to him that his wish was fulfilled. But let me have more time to think of this. It is a new thought, and I would reflect upon it calmly. O, I do love you, Francisco—with the whole strength of my soul do I love and honor you. My whole heart is yours, and my—"

She stopped speaking, for her feeling overcame her, and the warm tears burst forth from her eyes. This was a talisman to the soul of our hero, for his own emotions would remain under control no longer—and they wept freely together.

"O, my life of all hope on earth, this thing must not be," burst convulsively from the young man's lips, as he clasped the weeping maiden wildly to his bosom. "We must flee from here. Every duty we owe to ourselves and to our God demands it. We will not be miserable through life."

"Not now, not now," murmured Isabel.

"Yes, yes, now is the time," passionately urged the youth: "You must not be doomed to the terrible fate of which we speak. God never willed that one so pure and lovely as your-

self should wed with such a detestable, murderous wretch as is Don Juan Calleja. Let the—"

"Ha! dastard boy—I'll teach thee to meddle with things that do not concern you!"

Both the lovers started, upon hearing these hissing words, and on the next instant Don Juan Calleja sprang into the walk before them with a drawn sword in his hand. Isabel uttered a quick cry of alarm and shrank back, but she did not let go her hold upon her lover.

"Hasten to the house, love," quickly whispered the youth. "Go, go—if you love me go at once. There shall be no blood spilled if I can avoid it."

"I'll not murder you outright," exclaimed Calleja, purple with passion; "so draw and defend yourself. But draw quickly, or by the holy saints, I'll run you through, as I would a wild beast! Isabel, go you to the house at once—it is my command!"

The maiden cast one more imploring glance upon her companion, and then she turned towards the house, but ere she had reached many steps she tottered and sank down upon the dry and withered grass.

"Let her be!" cried Calleja. "I will attend to her as soon as I have finished you. You have bearded me once too much. I raw, or—"

Every nerve and muscle in Francisco's frame was strung now like steel. The falling of Isabel, the taunt of the villain, and the harrowing events of the past, shot like a lightning bolt through his soul, and without waiting to hear the man speak further, and without drawing his sword, he leaped like a wild tiger upon the base coward, and knocking the sword-arm down, he dealt him a blow upon the side of the head that felled him to the earth like a dead man.

"Fool!" the young man gasped, as he stood above the fallen villain, "you should have known me by this time. Lay there and calm yourself." And as he thus spoke, he turned to where Isabel had raised herself upon her elbows, and assisted her to her feet.

"Come, sweet one," he said, "let us go now to the house. Lean upon my arm. You are weak and faint."

The poor girl did not speak, but having cast one trembling look upon the prostrate form of Don Juan, she turned with her lover and walked slowly away from the spot.

It was full half an hour before Calleja returned to the house, and when he came his face was pale and discolored. His step was trembling

and hesitating, and his hand rested nervously upon his sword-hilt. He sought Don Miguel, and after a deal of effort he made out to communicate what had transpired. The old man was frightened by the colonel's manner, and his limbs trembled violently. Don Juan was very savage—raving, maniac mad. His lips were livid, death-like and compressed, his eyes glaring and wild, his nostrils distended, and his thick black hair matted and dishevelled.

"Let Francisco Moreno pass beneath your roof again while I am here, and enter my presence, and his heart's blood shall pollute your floor. If you care for your own life, too, you will look to this matter yourself."

"It is no fault of mine, I assure you," returned Truxillo. "I cannot be responsible for their conduct, for I am old, and cannot follow them."

"I know not that you are to blame for what has happened," resumed the colonel, speaking in a tone less excited, "but you can forbid the young villain to enter your doors again."

Don Miguel was saved the trouble and perplexity of replying to this, for at that moment the heavy tramp of horses was heard, and on looking out at the window, they saw a party of six horsemen riding into the open court. They were soldiers, and he who led them wore the uniform of a major. Calleja recognized him as Apadoca, an officer of the Patriot forces, with whom he had formerly been on terms of intimacy and friendship.

"It must be some message from the capital," he said, as soon as he saw who it was; and again he blessed his stars that he had given in his adherence to the Patriot cause before the overthrow of the empire.

The coming of the soldiers had served to bring Don Miguel back to something like himself, and he at once proceeded to the verandah to welcome the new-comers. Calleja went to the mirror, and having smoothed his hair, and placed his features in as respectable a condition as possible, he followed the example of his host. When he reached the verandah he found the major already in conversation with Truxillo, and he thought he heard his own name pronounced. As soon as he caught Apadoca's eye he stepped quickly forward, for, though he apprehended no danger to himself, yet he was anxious to know what was the object of the present mission.

"Ah, colonel," uttered the messenger, advancing and extending his hand, "I am gratified to meet you."

"Not more so than I am to meet the gallant Major Apadoca," replied Calleja, with a look and tone of well modulated flattery.

"I was just asking our worthy old friend if you were here," resumed the major, with a smile, "and you must pardon me if I do my mission first, and dwell upon others matters afterwards."

"Of course—that is as it should be," responded Calleja, who gathered from Apadoca's face that the business was of an agreeable kind.

"Then my message is this:—I am directed by the Congress of the Republic to bring the Colonel Juan Calleja to the capital, or to see that he receives due notice of the order, for it is the wish of the rulers that all our friends be duly assembled at once, that proper offices may be distributed, and the necessary measures adopted to establish a beneficent and harmonious government."

"Ah, yes," said Don Juan, with a bright, self-gratulating smile. "Then it seems my letter of allegiance was received?"

"O, certainly."

"I was sorry," resumed the colonel, "that I could not at once take up arms and join the friends of my country in the heat of the conflict, but the most prostrating sickness alone prevented it. I hope this is understood."

"O, yes, that was all appreciated by the generalissimo," replied the major. "Your case was duly understood, and you may be sure that your inability to join the army has lost you nothing of favor, for your influence is not the least impaired thereby, and your presence in the council will be just as much needed. Now when can you set out?"

"At once," was Calleja's emphatic reply, while an exultant look overspread his dark face. "But," he added, after a moment's pause, "I shall not go alone. I have a companion to accompany me—my wife."

"Ah—married?" uttered the major, evincing much surprise.

"Well—no—not yet. Not exactly married, for there is no priest here to perform the ceremony. But the senorita will accompany me."

"Certainly," said Apadoca. "I think I heard Santana speak of that matter."

"Ah—and what did he say?"

"That he expected there would be a wedding soon after your arrival at the capital. He seemed to speak as though the matter had long been pending, and that you wished it brought to a termination."

"He was right. I know Santana well. Early to-morrow morning, major, I will be ready to set out."

After this the conversation took a more general turn, and the party adjourned to the drawing-room. After supper the major sought Francisco and held a long communication with him, and shortly after dark our hero, accompanied by three of the men who had come with Apadoca, rode off towards the valley road.

On the following morning, Isabel was prepared to set out on her return to the capital. She moved about mechanically, and her motions were slow and heavy. There were no tears

upon her cheeks, for the fountain was wept dry. She was pale and rigid, and her features seemed to have become petrified into a cast of utter despair. She did not seek for Francisco, for she dared not see him again. She only allowed his name to rest upon her lips in prayer, and then she shut him away in her deeply sunken heart. She bade her weeping servants farewell once more—she returned her aged grandsire's kiss—received his blessing—and then turned from the house. Juan Calleja assisted her to her saddle, and in a few moments more she was borne along at a brisk pace towards the capital.

CHAPTER XXIII.

CONCLUSION.

In a large apartment of the viceroy's palace at Mexico, were assembled some of the principal officers of the new Republic. Santana was there, and so was Garza and Guerrero. It was one of the chambers of state, and the imperial insignia had all been removed, and the Republican badges substituted. The large door at the head of the room was opened, and Don Juan Calleja was ushered in. He entered with a profusion of bows and smiles, but he received no smiles in return. At first this appeared strange to him, but perhaps there was perplexing business before them, and hence their apparent coolness.

"General," said Don Juan, approaching Santana, and extending his hand, "I believe my presence has been requested at this place, and at this time."

"Ah, Don Juan Calleja, if I mistake not?" returned the general.

"The same, at your service, excellency," responded Calleja, bowing low. "I think I am not mistaken. I was informed that my presence was needed."

"Certainly, colonel; but not yours alone. I think there is a fair senorita in the question. Is it not so?"

Calleja gazed hard into the general's face, for it sounded to him as though the words were spoken with more than ordinary meaning. But

he met only a calm, steady look, and after a moment's hesitation he gave an affirmative answer.

"Then we will have her brought before us," said Santana.

"But wherefore?" asked Don Juan, not a little surprised at the order.

"I thought it was your wish to be married to the Senorita Isabel Truxillo?"

"So it is, excellency—not only my wish, but my legal right."

"Then let the maiden attend us here. We have heard much of this affair, and have also heard that it has already been a source of trouble. Under such circumstances the sooner it is settled the better."

"Perhaps it is," replied Calleja, beginning to think that things might be right, after all.

"So we have thought," added Santana; "and you may go and bring the maiden before us. Major Apadoca will bear you company."

Juan Calleja turned, and in company with Apadoca left the apartment. There was a short consultation among the officers after he had gone, and some of them smiled, while some, on the other hand, looked grave. Ere long Don Juan returned, and by the hand he led Isabel Truxillo. She gazed furtively about her with a half-frightened look, as though she would have searched among all those present for a friend.

"Excellency," said the colonel, approaching the place where Santana stood, "this is the maiden of whom we have spoken."

"Lady," spoke the general, looking kindly into Isabel's face, "do you know why you have been brought hither?"

"Yes, senor," faintly articulated the poor girl.

"And for what?"

"To be made a wife!" she whispered.

"So—you are right there."

At this moment the door again opened, and Francisco Moreno, dressed in the full uniform of a cavalry colonel, entered the apartment. He gazed about him with blank surprise, and his very manner showed plainly that he knew not why he had been sent for. His eye had wandered half around the room, when it chanced to rest upon Isabel. He uttered a quick exclamation. The sound of his voice struck quickly upon the maiden's ear, and she raised her eyes. They rested upon the face of her lover, and with the first wild impulse of her bleeding heart she sprang towards him and pillowed her head upon his bosom. He, all thoughtless of the presence of his superiors, wound his arms tightly about her, and strained her to his quickly beating heart.

"Death and destruction!" exclaimed Calleja, darting towards them; "does the boy villain yet—"

"Stop, stop, colonel," spoke Santana, at the same time laying his hand rather heavily upon Don Juan's shoulder. "This is a new phase in the affair. What means it?"

"Means it?" gasped Calleja, turning first ashy pale, and then purple in the face. "It means that that villain has seduced the best affections of my young wife from me."

"No, no, colonel—not your wife."

"To all intents and purposes she is my wife, senor, and all the power of the land cannot annul the contract without first tearing down the authority of God's holy church."

"Ah, then the bond must be strong indeed," remarked the general, with something like a smile upon his face.

"It is strong—so strong that it cannot be broken. She is my wife, and I defy any power to unmake the fact. Let that dastardly villain be punished as he deserves, or let me take him in my own hands and chastise him."

"Methinks, Don Juan, you have already tried

that task, and made a failure of it," replied Santana.

Calleja started beneath these words, for they were spoken in a tone of sarcasm not to be misunderstood. He was a man of wild, ungovernable passions, and he felt now that he was for the time, at least, being made sport of.

"Santana," he said, in a grinding, hissing tone, while his hands worked nervously, "will you interpose your authority to wrest the maiden from that man's grasp?"

"Upon my soul, colonel, the maiden seems vastly well satisfied where she is. I am not used to using force to drive a defenceless girl from her own heart's wish."

Calleja grew more and more purple in the face. He hissed like a serpent, and made another movement towards the spot where the lovers stood.

"O, Francisco, save me! save me!" cried Isabel, as she saw her persecutor's movement. "For the love of Heaven, do not let him touch me."

"Not while I live shall his foul touch pollute you again," pronounced the youth, with one arm about her fair form and the other extended towards his sword-hilt. "When next he places his hand upon you he must pass over my dead body."

"Then be it so!" yelled Calleja, as he made a wild leap towards the youthful pair.

But he did not reach the object of his wrath, for the strong hands of half-a-dozen of those who stood about were laid upon him and held him back.

"Don Juan Calleja," spoke Santana, "if you value your own life as anything, you will be careful how you conduct yourself in the presence of your superiors. Let your acts be a little more circumspect."

"But you shall not drive me to desperation, then," uttered the colonel. "Let this business be at once settled. At your hands I demand my affianced bride."

"You must await the coming of one more powerful than I," calmly replied Santana.

"More powerful? Who?"

"The president."

"And you—are you not the ruler in Mexico?"

"No. — But here he comes. Make way there for GUADALOUPE VICTORIA, President of the Mexican Republic!"

The door was already open, and the president entered. Both Francisco and Isabel gazed into

his noble features, and a simultaneous exclamation of astonishment burst from their lips, for they recognized in the great and noble Victoria none other than their strange friend Boquilla, the wandering guerrilla!

And Calleja, too, recognized who was ruler in Mexico.

"General Victoria—president!" he gasped, while he shook at every joint.

"Ay, my bold colonel," replied the chief magistrate, "I am elevated to that office, and I am the more pleased since I shall thereby be enabled to mete out to you the reward which your noble character and distinguished services so richly merit."

Don Juan was confounded. He knew not what to do or say. There was a fear, however, taking possession of his mind, that all was not going to end so well as he could have wished. He looked first upon the face of Guadalupe Victoria, and then upon the faces of these who stood around, and he knew that he had not a friend among them all. He could read it in the countenances too plainly to be doubted. He began to think he was a fool for having trusted himself back in the city, but his thoughts were not very extended, for he was soon called to attend to the business upon which his presence had been requested.

"Colonel Juan Calleja," resumed the president, "you must excuse me for having kept you waiting, but I had an unexpected call, and was obliged to attend to it. Now, however, we will pass on at once to the subject, and I trust that justice will lose nothing by the delay."

"I hope not," said Don Juan, who tried hard to assure himself that none would dare to harm him since he had sworn allegiance to the Republic, and that his wife would also be given to him. "And to commence the administration of justice, let the Senorita Isabel be restored to me."

"That comes not first, Don Juan," calmly replied Victoria. "There are other matters to be disposed of ere we can reach that, and to them I must call your attention."

Calleja again lost his self-assurance, for there was something in the tone of the president, and a certain kindling fire in his eye, that betokened no good.

"Listen, now," continued Victoria, speaking in a deep tone, and looking sternly into the face of the colonel. "We well know the character you have sustained since troublous times first came upon our beloved country. Your whole

course has been one of the most reckless villainy and vandalism. You remember when you were stopped among the mountain passes last summer. I think you recognized me then?"

Calleja made a painful, nervous sign of affirmation, and Victoria continued:

"At that time I mistrusted your mission, and I determined to know the truth. I did know it, and I found that you were bound to deliver up a score of noble men to death—men who never harmed you, nor harmed the base government under which you worked; but they were to die because you hated them. I was enabled to frustrate your bloody purpose, and you returned empty-handed. But you were not satisfied to have one work of blood at a time on your hands. You must needs conspire for the death of your own best friend! For the sake of a few bags of gold you would have Don Miguel Truxillo killed!"

"It is false! false as the father of lies!" gasped Calleja. "He who—"

"Silence!" thundered Victoria. "I am not telling you of my suspicions, but I am telling what I know. Let me inform you that your immediate friend and confidant, Pedro Reyna, is dead. He died in prison. He was taken while acting as a spy in the Patriot camp under your directions! and before he died he made some curious confessions. But enough. Your fate, Juan Calleja, is sealed."

"But you cannot harm me. I have sworn allegiance to the Republic," exclaimed the poor villain.

"Ah, my bold colonel," returned the president, with a look of contempt, "it takes two parties to form an allegiance; and let me assure you that the party which I have the honor to represent, want no connection with such as you. No!" added Victoria, while his voice changed, and his look grew more dark. "Your sins are known, and your crimes are on record. Your whole life has been one continuous plan of villainy. For your many crimes you are sentenced to death! Let him be removed!"

A dozen men moved to Calleja's side, and ere he could think of resistance, he was bound and led from the place. He cursed and swore, and begged and entreated, but he was not noticed.

For a while after the villain had been led away there was a profound silence in the great apartment. At length, Guadalupe Victoria stepped down from his seat of state, and approached the spot where stood Francisco and Isabel.

"My friends," he said, with a warm smile, at the same time extending both his hands, "you know me now, and you will readily understand why one whom the emperor both feared and hated should have chosen to remain unknown and secluded. But I hope my wanderings are now over, and as my first aim is to remove all wicked enemies from our midst, so that our peace shall be secured, so my next shall be to reward those who have suffered persecution under the regime which has passed away. Colonel Moreno, you are a noble man, and I know that you love your free country, and to such should the care of our fairest daughters be given. Isabel, I have known you long, and I know the wishes of your good old grandsire. You may smile now, for joy is all before you, and the clouds of darkness have rolled away. Henceforth you must look to Francisco for protection, and if you want a husband I fear you will have to make yourself contented with him, for the man to whom you were affianced while yet an infant, and who has since claimed your hand, I must take from you. I think the change will not be painful, will it?"

But Isabel could not reply. She could only hide her face in her lover's bosom and weep.

But Guadalupe knew that she wept for joy, and he felt perfectly satisfied with what he had done.

* * * * *

The soft breath of spring again found the foliage about the house of Don Miguel Truxillo. One bright, warm day there was a great gathering in the capacious old dwelling. The Mexican president was there, and so were numerous other officers of the government. Don Miguel's time-marked face was all lighted up with smiles, for he was happy, very happy. The occasion was the uniting of two true and noble hearts by outward ceremony, for inwardly those hearts had been united for years. Francisco and Isabel stood most prominent in the group, and if they did not show their joy in such clustering smiles as beamed about them, it was because their grateful hearts were weighed more deeply down by solemn thoughts. They dwelt not alone amid the flowers that now clustered about them, but their thoughts stretched away into the future, and their prayers were with God—that he would keep them in the path they had chosen, and not let their weight of joy blind them to the stern and noble duties of life.

THE END.

FROM "THE FLAG OF OUR UNION."

THE PRIMA DONNA: OR, THE PEARL NECKLACE.

BY MRS. M. E. ROBINSON.

In a small village, a few leagues from Paris, lived an honest peasant called Jaquet, whose wife was familiarly known as Mother Mosette. The former was a hard working, inoffensive man, but ignorant; the latter was more intelligent and better educated than most of her class, and had gained considerable influence among the surrounding peasantry. Hers was a sympathizing nature, who had a cheering smile and a kind word for all.

One night as she sat thoughtfully gazing into the fire, while beside her was a cradle, in which lay a young child, a gentle knock fell upon her ear. It was late, but Mother Mosette was not timid and immediately opened the door.

A well-dressed man entered, bearing an object in his arms which he carefully deposited on a large arm-chair.

"Look at it," he said, in a respectful tone.

The good woman cautiously opened the folds of an ample cloak, and beheld a beautiful infant. She started back in surprise.

"The child is confided to your care; she is called Estelle. Her parents are well-born; at some future time she will be claimed. They have good reason to know you are kind, honest

and virtuous; that you will guard her from moral as well as physical evils."

"By what name are the parents known?" asked Mother Mosette.

"I am forbidden to tell. But do not fear, my good woman; the child need not blush for its parentage. Here is a purse of gold; when it is exhausted, more will be forthcoming."

Mother Mosette drew off the cloak, wrapped about the sleeping infant. She glanced inquiringly at the stranger as she remarked the richness of its clothing.

"That finery must be put out of the way; it will only attract attention. You will know best what is proper, under the present circumstances."

The woman stood a moment without speaking, as though considering the proposal.

"You do not hesitate?" said the man, with a concerned expression.

"I am fearful I shall not satisfy—that it may not be for the best. We cannot read the future," she replied, irresolutely.

"True; but be assured you shall suffer no loss by bestowing a mother's care on this innocent one. I would she could pass as your own child?" he added, turning abruptly to mark the effect his words might produce.

"That cannot be," was the quick reply, as she pointed to the cradle which the stranger had not observed.

The latter looked disappointed, but seeing her manner was decisive, did not urge the point.

"The child wears a pearl necklace," he continued, after a pause. "Preserve it religiously; do not part with it on any consideration. It is highly valued, as a family memorial."

The good woman bent over to examine the ornament. It was of exquisite design. A locket was attached to it by a small gold chain, which, to all appearance, contained a miniature. When Mother Mosette looked around, the stranger had disappeared.

"Gone!" she exclaimed.

At that moment the child opened its eyes, looked up in her face and smiled, as though imploring her protection in its helplessness.

The kind-hearted woman took it up, kissed its dimpled cheek affectionately, and inwardly resolved it should never lack a mother's care. She would divide her heart's treasures between the little Estelle and her own Lucine.

Jaquet was not particularly pleased at finding his family so unexpectedly increased; but his good humor returned by learning that the child was amply provided for.

A sad event occurred next morning. The infant daughter—the loved Lucine—sickened suddenly and died. The mother grieved sorely, but weeping would not give life to the dead. At length her saddened thoughts turned to the stranger child. It seemed providentially sent to fill the void in her heart. With an inexpressible yearning she clasped the little Estelle to her bosom, and from that hour the child knew no other parent. It was no difficult matter to pass it off as her own. The simple peasants had no suspicions, and although it was remarked that Mother Mosette looked pale and sad, no one knew the loss she had sustained.

In infancy, Estelle was singularly beautiful, and as years rolled on, they but added to her loveliness. Slight in figure, but of faultless proportions, dark-eyed and dark-haired, she was a model specimen of brunette beauty. Amiable, artless and unselfish, she won all hearts, and called forth general admiration.

But once had Mother Mosette heard from the stranger who had left the child in her keeping. About twelve months after his first appearance, a well-filled purse was thrown in at her open door, with a note which merely said that her

conduct had been satisfactory, and that the mother would soon visit her child.

Years passed away and she came not. The good woman was obliged to believe Estelle's friends had forsaken her, for she vainly looked for any tidings from them. Yet she was as thoughtful of her young charge as ever, relaxing not an effort to make her happy, and giving her such instruction as her means would allow. She loved Estelle as she had Lucine; she knew no difference. The worthy Jaquet had suddenly deceased, and Mosette was thankful God had given her so good a daughter for her solace.

One day Mother Mosette and Estelle sat by an open window. The latter was now fifteen years of age, and able to be of some assistance. At this time her work lay untouched, her usually nimble fingers were idle, while her dark, pensive eyes were fixed on the floor. At length she said: "I dreamed last night, mother."

"Don't you every night," replied the woman, pleasantly.

"But this was not a common vagary of sleep, resumed the young girl. "I thought we lived in a large chateau with grand old trees about it. The staircase was wide, the rooms high, there were corridors and saloons, we had servants to wait on us, and everything was very magnificent. O I should like to live in just such a place!"

Mother Mosette glanced at the lovely speaker in concern. "You are discontented, then?"

"O no, my mother; but that was such a pleasant dream, I have thought of it much. I even remember the large pictures that looked down on me from the wall. One of them was a beautiful lady, who seemed to regard me so tenderly that I loved her at once."

Mosette felt uneasy. Why did the girl have such fancies. Were her intuitions whispering the truth? "Such imaginary things are of no account; they should be forgotten."

"I suppose so," said Estelle, sadly. "And yet," she added, her countenance brightening as she spoke, "and yet who knows but some day we shall have plenty of money, and not have to work so hard?"

"Don't talk about it any more, my child. Sing to me," returned Mother Mosette, anxious to change the subject. "I like your singing better than your dreaming."

Estelle smiled, and did as she was requested. At first, the tones were of surpassing softness and sweetness, then they grew louder and clearer, and anon the melody filled the room.

"I love to sing, dear mother," said Estelle, as the last echo died away. "I cannot express myself in any other way. It makes me better, happier. My spirit seems to speak in a language of its own, while every pulse thrills with delight as I strive to give it utterance."

Mosette was about replying, when her eyes rested upon the figure of a man near the window. As she looked up, he came forward.

"I could not avoid listening to such rare music. I have been too much charmed to move," he said, courteously.

Estelle colored, and her companion invited him to enter.

"A wonderful voice," he observed, seating himself.

"Do you think so?" replied the woman.

"I never heard it excelled. If she could have good instruction, neither of you would be obliged to do that hard work any longer," he added.

"O how nice that would be!" exclaimed Estelle.

"You will spoil the child, monsieur," said Mother Mosette, with slight coldness, resuming her work.

"I should be sorry to do that. I do but speak the truth," returned the gentleman, warmly. "I should like to hear mademoiselle sing again. I am a great lover of music."

The young girl looked at her mother.

"Sing, my child," said the latter.

Again a strain of delicious harmony delighted the ears of monsieur. He bent forward eagerly, lest he should lose one of the bird-like tones.

"Excellent, excellent!" he exclaimed, when Estelle had ceased, and was timidly looking at his face, which certainly expressed wonder and admiration.

"My good woman," resumed the gentleman, turning to Mother Mosette, after a moment's pause, "such a voice was not given to your child for no purpose. She is capable of becoming a distinguished prima donna. I am manager of — theatre, and ought to know something about these things. Permit her to go with me. I will procure her the best masters that Paris can afford, at my own expense, and in two years she will be prepared to earn herself a name and a fortune. Do not decide without thought," he added, perceiving that she was about to reply in the negative. "Look at the matter deliberately. Reflect on my offer, and give me an answer in a week's time."

Thanking Estelle for her kindness in gratify-

ing him, and bowing low to Mother Mosette, he departed.

Estelle sighed, looked wistfully in the direction he had taken, and hoped he would come again. Mosette was silent for some time. When the proposition had first been made, she was on the point of giving an indignant refusal. A little reflection made her pause. She remembered Jaquet was dead, that time was already silvering her own hairs. Who would protect the girl when she was gone? Might not her wondrous beauty prove a fatal gift to her? These thoughts passed rapidly through her mind. The kind woman had always cherished a secret hope that Estelle would one day occupy her true position. She was aware that the girl had an uncommonly fine voice. From infancy she had warbled like a nightingale, making ill-humor vanish, and dull days pass cheerily. But whether this gift could be turned to account was a question. Perhaps the unknown had overrated her powers. But then, if Estelle succeeded, she would be placed beyond the reach of want, and better able to take care of herself, should she be left without a protector. She might attract some attention, and by that means her parentage be discovered. This last thought had more weight with Mother Mosette than all the rest. Estelle should decide.

"Estelle, my child, what are you thinking of?" she asked, looking searchingly at the fair girl.

"I was singing, in imagination to a large audience," replied Estelle, frankly.

"Foolish one!" exclaimed Mosette, in a playful manner. "Do not look so sad. I am not displeased. You are younger than I am, and look at things in a different light. But, my dear," she continued, speaking more seriously, "it is for you to say how we are to reply to this strange gentleman. It shall be as you wish."

"Then let us go," said Estelle, with vivacity. "I have so longed to see Paris. You will be with me, and I shall fear nothing. I will study hard and earn much money that your declining years may be made comfortable."

The point was determined; they would try their fortunes in Paris.

True to his word, Monsieur Delonde—as he announced himself—made his appearance at the appointed time. He heard their decision with no little joy.

"We go on this condition, only," said the woman; "that we shall not be separated."

No such sacrifice being demanded, Mother

Mosette felt more at ease. A few weeks found the two females comfortably installed in Paris. Estelle was at once put under the tuition of an excellent master, and initiated into a course of scientific training.

Nearly three years passed on. It was the night of her debut. Clad in simple white, with a few natural flowers in her dark hair, Estelle stood before Mosette, who gazed on her with fond pride for a moment, and then took from a small box the necklace which had been left in her keeping. Estelle looked at it with curiosity.

"It has a miniature within. Examine it."

Estelle touched a spring and the locket opened.

"It is like the picture of the lady that I saw in my dream!" she exclaimed. "The same beautiful smile, the same loving face as that! O, where did you get it, my mother?"

"Some time I will tell you all about it. Think now of what is before you. Act naturally, and you will act well. If your courage wavers, think of this picture and be strong. You will sing admirably—I am sure of it."

Mother Mosette smiled on her fair charge, kissed her tenderly, and abruptly left the room.

Estelle glanced again at the miniature, pressed it hastily to her lips, and then closing it, gave her hand to Monsieur Delonde, who at that moment made his appearance.

The curtain drew up, and the young debutante was led upon the stage. Rapturous applause greeted her appearance, followed by a deep silence. For a moment, she was perplexed and irresolute. The timid glance she cast at the audience, assured her that all eyes were fixed on her. Her youth and beauty had already secured the approbation of the house, but of that she was ignorant. For the first time she seemed to feel the crushing responsibility of her situation.

She averted her gaze before so many glasses and curious faces, and wished she was again beneath the humble roof of Mother Mosette. Thoughts rushed through her mind like lightning—she lived an hour in a second.

"Courage!" said the kind voice of Delonde, as the orchestra played a few bars.

The little word acted upon her like magic. Her bosom throbbed once more with hope—her brain thrilled with the inspiration of song. Raising her eyes, she broke the oppressive silence. Her voice, tremulous and weak at first, soon swelled into full and delightful notes, and gaining confidence as she went on, had conquered the diffidence of a first appearance.

Estelle forgot that thousands gazed upon her. Her slight figure seemed to grow taller, her chest heaved, and she gave herself up to the inspiring theme. She sang wonderfully. The applause was enthusiastic, and a general buzz of admiration gave evidence that the audience could appreciate true genius.

The young girl had indeed achieved a triumph, but the approval of Mother Mosette, the worthy manager, and her kind old teacher, was valued more highly than anything else.

Now, of course, the fair prima-donna had many admirers. Much perfumed note paper was wasted by the inditing of numberless epistles, all couched in extravagant language, and begging the honor of an introduction, while some contained jewels of value, which the debutante was desired to wear at the next opera. These numerous offerings necessarily reached Estelle through Delonde, who, agreeably to Mother Mosette's request, invariably declined giving her address, well knowing that the society of most of the disappointed applicants would do her no good. Estelle laughed at the missives, and returned the ornaments with polite assurances that she did not accept presents.

One day Estelle, closely veiled, sought the residence of her kind master. She did not notice, on her return, that a young man watched her steps, and surveyed the house attentively which she entered.

This was Paul Treville, the adopted son of a nobleman of wealth and influence. He also had been fascinated by the charming prima-donna, and had been eager to make her acquaintance. By chance he had learned what so many were anxious to know, but he was too honorable to take an undue advantage of the circumstance.

His wishes were soon after realized, however. He met Delonde, Mother Mosette, and Estelle one morning on a public promenade, and the former, who knew his name and high moral character, made him known to his companions. He was invited to call upon them; and one visit succeeded another, until he saw Estelle daily.

Paul Treville was endowed with rare musical talents himself; possessing a voice, deep, rich and melodious, he and Estelle passed many pleasant hours in practising duets together. Monsieur Delonde had his head full of business, and good Mother Mosette—simple soul—seeing the maiden was happy and content, went quietly on with her netting in a corner; and so neither suspected the two young people might take it

into their heads to fall in love with each other. But they did notwithstanding, although the kind woman was a long time in coming to a knowledge of the fact. One day Paul found Estelle looking extremely unhappy.

"I must practise alone in future," she said, in reply to his anxious inquiries. "I have been imprudent; I should not have seen you so often. My mother has talked to me very kindly, and I must be governed by her advice; but I feel very miserable about it."

"What was her advice?" asked Treville, striving to speak calmly.

"That I should see you no more."

"Does she know my feelings towards you?"

"I tried to tell her," murmured Estelle, averting her eyes, "but I fear she does not think as you do."

"Paul," she added suddenly, "do not attempt to see me again; it is best. Remember what you are, and what I am—a nobleman's son, and a peasant's daughter. Think what a gulf there is between us, and do not try to cross it."

"You have beauty, talent, worth, genius, and an inherent nobility of soul; what care I for more?" exclaimed Treville, vehemently.

"But your father, Paul—the Count de Beaumont," said Estelle, laying her small hand upon the young man's arm.

Treville's countenance assumed a disconsolate expression; he recalled the prejudices of his benefactor against those of low origin, and was confident he would never recognize Estelle as a daughter-in-law. Paul was too truthful to deceive the maiden in the slightest degree by any false statement.

A long conversation followed, which did not serve to make matters look more hopeful, and Paul Treville, who was a full believer in the maxim "that what can be done to-day ought not to be put off till the morrow," left Estelle and sought his father, to learn just how much opposition he might expect to encounter.

"I have come," said the young man, deferentially, "to speak to you on a subject of importance."

"In love, perhaps," retorted De Beaumont, turning a searching look upon Paul.

"Unfortunately, that is true," replied he.

"Well, who is she—a grillette, a ballet dancer, a third-rate actress, or an opera singer?" asked the count, somewhat contemptuously.

"A prima-donna," said Paul, in a penitent tone.

"A prima-donna!" exclaimed De Beaumont, dropping the book he had been reading.

"An angelic creature, I assure you," Paul ventured to remark, without looking up.

"Perhaps you think of marrying her?" pursued the count.

"With your consent," rejoined Treville.

"Of course I shall not withhold my consent; but I shall have to look up some worthy person to inherit my name and fortune."

"Ah, my benefactor, you should see her before you condemn her! She sings divinely!"

"The less you will need my name and estate, then," retorted Beaumont.

"Promise me you will see and hear her, before you give this matter serious thought."

"Such prodigies are not so rare that I need put myself out to see them," returned the other.

"This one is so rare that it would be worth going a hundred leagues to see."

"It has affected your senses already," said the count, compassionately.

"Will you go?" resumed Treville.

"Yes, I will go. My carriage shall be at the door at the proper hour. So dress yourself like a monkey, and make yourself ridiculous with perfumery, that your silly tricks may attract the eyes of your charmer, and your borrowed ambrosia delight her olfactorys."

Paul was well pleased with this consent, although so ungraciously given; for he was fully persuaded that the young prima-donna would carry the count's good opinion by storm.

Estelle had again charmed the Parisians.—Count De Beaumont and Paul Treville sat in a front box. The latter had expected to suffer his companion's raillery, but to his satisfaction he was silent, with his eyes fixed intently upon the beautiful singer.

The attention of our hero was divided between the stage and De Beaumont. The contemptuous smile that had curled his lip, on his entree, had given place to a singular play of features. Doubt, curiosity, interest, each in turn was dominant upon his countenance. Between the pieces he rested his head on his hand, and mused deeply.

The young man did not understand De Beaumont's mood; he was not sure whether it would be prudent to propound questions. So after making a few observations, which were very briefly answered, by the nobleman, Paul concluded to await some farther demonstration.

The carriage drove up, and the two stepped in. The senior gentleman drew his hat over his

face, and the junior leaned back in a corner to think of one who was every day becoming dearer to him. Not a word was said until they reached home, and Paul was about to take his leave for the night; then Beaumont spoke.

"I would speak with this prima donna," he said briefly. "Where can she be found?"

Treville was at first too much astonished at this unexpected request, to make an immediate rejoinder.

"You do not reply," added the count.

"Excuse me," said Paul, slightly confused.

"She has rooms at the Rue St.—"

"That is sufficient. Good night."

De Beaumont turned away, and Paul Treville repaired to his own apartment. That night he slept but little, for he could not forget the singular conduct of his friend and benefactor. In vain he taxed his imagination for some reasonable cause of the strong interest Estelle had excited in the bosom of the count. He awoke in the morning with such thoughts still in his mind, nor could he dismiss them. His watch had stopped during the night, and he was ignorant of the time; nor did he think to ask the servant who came to bring his breakfast, so that when he had paced his room for an hour, it seemed to him two; and he began to be impatient for Beaumont's return, even before he knew certain whether he had left his chamber.

Leaving the nobleman's adopted son to battle with his impatience as successfully as he can, we will visit Estelle. At an early hour, Delonde came to inform her that a middle-aged, respectable looking gentleman begged the favor of a few moments' conversation.

"You are aware that I do not often see strangers, Monsieur Delonde. What is his business?" she inquired.

"I can form no conjecture, or rather nothing but conjectures in relation to that. Judging from his appearance, you need not hesitate about giving him an interview."

"I trust it all to your judgment, monsieur; I believe it has never misled me. If you think proper, to admit him, do so," returned Estelle.

"Let him come up," said Mosette. "I will remain here."

Presently the door was thrown open by a servant, and a gentleman of distinguished deportment was ushered in. He bowed politely to the prima-donna, who had arisen at his entrance, and begged her to be seated. Blushing, she

complied, somewhat intimidated by the courtly bearing of her unknown visitor.

"Pardon me, mademoiselle," said the visitor, "nor imagine I came here merely to stare, you out of countenance. I heard you sing last night. You acquitted yourself nobly, but I have not come to fill your ears with fulsome flattery. You wore a pearl necklace, which I now see lying upon the table. Allow me the liberty, if you please, of examining it for a moment. The workmanship appeared to me very curious—being somewhat of a connoisseur in such matters."

Mosette inspired a deep breath, and grew deadly pale; and her hand trembled exceedingly as she passed the necklace and locket to the stranger.

It was now Estelle's turn to be amazed, and she timidly raised her eyes to the gentleman's varying countenance, who with nervous haste now opened the locket.

"Mon Dieu!" he cried, with startling earnestness, and was in the act of carrying the picture to his lips, but suddenly checked himself. "May I ask," he added hurriedly, "if this is a picture of yourself?"

"No, monsieur."

"Then, for heaven's sake, tell me whose it is."

"That indeed I do not know," rejoined Estelle.

"You trifle with me! It must be your mother's," added the visitor, much agitated.

"No; my mother has the honor of being before you," answered Estelle, pointing at Mosette.

"It is false!" he exclaimed energetically.

"This is a likeness of her who was your mother. Nature herself endorses this assertion, for you are her living counterpart. It was your resemblance to her, that so rivetted my attention upon you last night."

"Trust me, monsieur, you are deceiving yourself," resumed our heroine, with some firmness.

"How came this in your possession?"

"I never saw it until the night of my debut, when my mother placed it upon my neck."

"I will prove my words true," he said, with increasing agitation. "On the reverse of this locket is a secret spring."

"I know of none," said Estelle, whose voice was now quite tremulous, and whose countenance expressed more interest than she had avowed.

"When I touch this secret spring," resumed

the stranger, "the reverse side of the locket will open, and display, engraved these words: "Estelle De Beaumont, born July 10th, 1782."

"I have never seen them," returned the maiden, who had now quite lost her self possession.

"What does all this portend!" she exclaimed, glancing wildly at the necklace, the stranger and Mosette; for the agitation of the latter could no longer pass unnoticed.

"It means that you are the daughter of the Count and Countess De Beaumont," he replied.

"No, no! this is but a wild vagary, here is my mother; she can say. Mother, speak to this gentleman! say that I am your own daughter!"

"I cannot!" gasped Mosette.

"I knew it!" exclaimed the stranger.

"Who are you?" said Mosette, in a choked voice.

"I am De Beaumont—her father," he answered.

"Yes, it must be true," added Mosette.

"Do you hear that my child! Have you no embrace—no word of greeting for your father?" he asked.

But De Beaumont's words fell upon insensible ears; Estelle had swooned. The count caught her in his arms, and while he was pressing her convulsively to his heart, Paul Treville entered unannounced. He stood amazed. What had transpired? Why was Estelle in De Beaumont's arms? He advanced a few paces, and looked beseechingly at Mother Mosette.

"Estelle has found a father," said the latter, in answer to his mute entreaty.

"I was informed that her father was dead."

"I am her father," said Beaumont, abruptly.

"You are confounded, and I will explain the mystery. "I wedded Estelle's mother clandestinely, without the consent of her parents. Her brother and an intimate friend of mine were the only witnesses of the compact. One daughter was born of that marriage, whose birth we deemed necessary to keep secret. At a tender age,

she was entrusted to the care of my wife's brother, who found, as he thought, a safe retreat for her, and a careful nurse. Not long after this event, being an officer in the army, I was sent on active service in a long campaign. In my absence, my fair young wife died. When I returned, after three years, I learned that my brother-in-law had gone to America, with Lafayette, and had been slain in an engagement. Thus, I had lost all clue to my daughter. Last night, at the opera, the prima-donna's resemblance to my deceased countess attracted my attention, and afterward the pearl necklace, which had once belonged in my family; for, on account of its peculiar workmanship, I thought I could not be mistaken in regard to its former ownership. Nor did the evidence cease here; for her voice was that of my sainted Estelle, who was happily gifted with the power of song. So much was my curiosity excited, that it led to this visit, and the present denouement."

Estelle, who had heard the greater part of this narrative, now opened her eyes and smiled faintly upon Treville; and Delonde having entered, the same story was related to him, after which Mother Mosette gave those incidents in the life of her adopted daughter, which the reader already knows.

De Beaumont conducted the whole party to his chateau, where the chain of evidence was rendered complete by a full length picture of his wife (corresponding to the likeness in the locket), and sundry documents in his possession.

When our heroine found a father, the musical world lost one of its brightest ornaments; for she never appeared again in public.

De Beaumont forgot his prejudice against prima donnas, and when Paul archly asked him if he had yet "looked up a more worthy heir," he shook his finger at him playfully, and referred him to his daughter, for an answer to that impertinent question. The response which he received was given at the altar some months afterwards.

THE END.