

THE
MAID OF THE RANCHE:

OR, THE
REGULATORS AND MODERATORS

A STORY OF LIFE ON THE TEXAN BORDER.

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THE MAID OF THE RANCHE.

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CHAPTER I.

THE TWO HUNTERS.—MAURICE HARPER.

THE gentle winds of a cloudless summer morning were sweeping softly over the Texan prairies. Two men in a small boat were floating down the Brazos river, occasionally plying the paddle to direct the movements of their diminutive vessel. Both appeared thoughtful, neither in a hurry, but surveyed the shore and surrounding scenery with the nonchalance of persons inured to the forest.

"The times look rather dubious, and I think that we may calculate that there are breakers ahead," said one of the men deliberately.

"That's the general opinion, and it requires no logic to find it out," returned his companion.

"Perhaps not, and yet there are many who don't seem to realize it, friend Manuel," resumed the first speaker.

"There are many stupid people in Texas, as well as elsewhere, Noel Noon," added Manuel.

"The storm will burst on us soon, and I shouldn't mind havin' a try at the common enemy myself. A few of our backwoods rifles would tell the blank-ettid ruffians an awful story," said Noel, earnestly.

"I don't perceive that we need trouble ourselves about this war business. Let those that want to, fight it out. What care we? The woods are large enough for us; if there isn't room enough here, we can fall back to the Rocky Mountains, where General Cos and his army wouldn't care to come."

"You and I differ on this point. I think it our duty to fight for liberty; beside's there'll be some sport in it. There's women and children that ought to be defended, too."

"Let them that have women and children take care of 'em," responded Manuel, with a slight chuckle.

"You're not exactly the man I took you for, if them's your feelins. I know females that I would fight for to the last gasp. Liberty is sometimes represented as a woman; that's very appropriate, for it naturally reminds an honest feller of the best and fairest portion of creation," rejoined Noel Noon, decidedly.

"Perhaps you're thinking of Iris Rathbun; it sounds to me uncommonly like it. I've been wantin' to speak my mind to you on that subject for a long time, and I reckon I might as well do it now, and have it off my hands. It's possible, you know, and it's possible you don't, that I've had my eye on that girl for a considerable stretch of time, and it would be well, not to say *friendly*, of you, not to cross my trail," added Manuel, moodily.

Noel Noon's nether lip curled a little as he replied but otherwise he gave no sign that he was not perfectly calm.

"I'm not the man to be frightened by threats, although I can't say that I ever fixed my thoughts on Iris Rathburn, always considerin' her too much my superior to think of her as anything more than a friend; but if it wasn't so, and I aspired to more, all the hunters, trappers and villins on the Brazos couldn't frighten me off the trail; so the least you say on that subject the better."

"I'm glad you aint inclined that way, for such things sometimes make trouble among friends; but I say now, boldly, that the man who comes between me and Iris Rathburn, don't live to make much of a stir in the world."

Manuel pronounced those words in a voice low and full of meaning.

"You can act as you please; but let me tell you that it aint a good principle to go on; it's neither right nor manly. It's my notion, friend Manuel, that she'll never have anything to say to you in that way."

"And why not, Noel Noon?"

"For many reasons; she's uncommon handsome, has a large amount of book larnin', and is naterally gifted by nature. You understand what I'm aimin' at, I take it?"

"I should think I might," retorted Manuel, with a sneer. "You talk plain enough, so far as that's concerned. Perhaps I can see what you're drivin' at, and perhaps I can't."

"I wouldn't do anything dishonorable, Manuel Hart."

"Oh, your a parson, I dare say!"

"It won't do no good to get riled up and throw out in that way; but, my word for it, Iris Rathbun will never be Iris Hart."

"It's easy enough to see that you're against me. You are envious, I suppose?"

"Before heaven, no! I shouldnt know what to envy you for; no, not a thing, nor a quality."

"That's no great compliment, Noel Noon; but we wont stop now to argue it; we'll settle the question some other time, perhaps."

"I meant no offence."

"Some folks never do, and will keep on talkin' forever, in a way that is

right down insultin'. However, let it all go, only remember that Iris is as good as engaged, and govern yourself accordingly."

Noel made no reply, and the "dug-out floated along in silence for some moments."

"Have you ever seen that strange craft that's cruising about in these waters?" demanded Hart, at length.

"You allude, if I understand, to that young man who has been seen on the river lately?" returned his companion.

"That's what I mean. Can you say anything good of him?"

"I can't say no hurt of him, and that's rather more, I fancy, than can be said of the majority of people living hereabouts."

"I hope you ain't rubbin' hard on me again, in that quiet speech; but that's neither here nor there. I want to know what you think of the young sprig."

"Well, to be candid and speak to the point, I like the looks of him. He's straight as a young oak, and seems about as firm in his make."

"Do you call him good-lookin'?"

"Yes, that's what I was comin' to."

"We differ there, Noel; he appears, in my eyes, a green, boy, plain enough and awkward enough, and not experience enough to keep him out of fire and water. He'd be quite likely to take a moccasin snake for an eel, and a cypress-brake for a Texan plantation."

"He carries a fine rifle and a bold front; and as nice a dog runs after him as I have seen for a long time."

"Rifle indeed! what can he do with a rifle? Pshaw! you talk like a green-horn, Noel Noon. There's no spirit in that chap; he isn't fit for this country. He can't stay here!"

"Can't stay here?"

"Aye, that's the word—*can't*."

"And why not?"

"Because he isn't wanted."

"Who don't want him?"

"I don't for one; and there's others, I dare say, that will back me up."

"I believe in lettin' everybody have their own way. I don't know who will be fool-hardy enough to meddle with the young stranger. He behaves well, and I can't see as it's anybody's business how long he stops here."

"It's my business! The fact is, he has been at Rathbun's."

"Ah, yes; I see where the shoe pinches. He's seen the girl, and there's jealousy in the camp. If the plain, awkward, inexperienced boy should take a shine that way, ther'll be rather a poor chance for you, I allow; for he's much the best lookin', though I don't say it out of any ill will to you."

Manuel Hart grew red with anger, but managed to choke down any vocal expression of his resentment.

"You have affirmed," resumed Noel, "that he can't use a rifle; now in my estimation, that remains to be proved. The lad is perhaps as skilful in that line

as you or I. I've watched him pretty closely, and concluded at last, that Masrice Harper is no fool."

"It's hard tellin' what a man is now-a-days; but it's evident to me, that he's got entirely out of his reckonin', and has no more knowledge of the country he is in, than a child ten years old. I know fellers in these parts that can scare the hair off his head jest by two looks. What does he know about huntin', or the Regulators, or the moderators; or, for that matter about this new trouble that's brewin' for us by the way of Santa Anna?"

"I presume he knows his own business, and that's enough," said Noel, drily.

"He'd better go! he'd better go! or he'll find—"

"Find what?"

"Find himself regulated or moderated out of the world some fine mornin'."

"I understand you now, but let me tell you, that you'd better not attempt any game like that."

"You'll stand up for him, I suppose?" exclaimed Hart, with a sneer.

"I can't say what I'll do, Manuel Hart; but I'll take this opportunity to warn you to be careful."

"Trust me, I'll be careful—I know how to be careful—I can work as silently as the spider, and I'll entrap the silly fly as surely—yes—yes!"

"I've said all I need say now; jest set the dug-out to the right shore, and I'll leave you for the present, hopin' you'll be in a better mood when we meet next."

Manuel gave a few effectual strokes with the paddle, and the boat shot into the bank, when Noel Noon, taking his rifle and a small knapsack, stepped on shore.

"Cultivate more Christian feelings, Manuel," added the hunter, as he adjusted the knapsack upon his shoulders, and moved away.

Hart made no reply, but propelled the dug-out once more into the stream.

"He does very well for a hunter; he can bring down a deer," muttered the backwoodsman, "but Noel Noon ain't the man for this country, exactly; he's too honest, and honesty is the death of a chap here. I can trust him with all I'm worth, and feel as safe as if it was in the Bank of England; but come to the case in hand, he ain't the man to play a desperate game where there's a little underhand shootin' or drinkin' to be done. That's his failin', and it's one I can't forgive. There's no great love atween us now, and it won't be long, I take it, before there'll be absolute hatred, on my part. I don't like the way he goes on about this strange youngster that's driftin' about with his rifle and dog. I believe the loon is trying to please the Rathban girls, notwithstanding his assertions to the contrary. Well, I'll watch e'm both, and if things don't go to my mind, they'll be missed hereabout suddenly. Noel Noon don't know Manuel Hart yet; he has no idea of the power which I wield, and perhaps he won't till he feels it."

While the backwoodsman thus soliloquized, the dug-out was drifting slowly down the river. A dozen seconds had elapsed, perhaps, after the last word had left his lips, when the sharp report of a rifle echoed through the woods, and a

bullet struck the boat just forward of the thwart upon which he was sitting, and passing through the side, fell, spent and hurtless, into the water.

Hart seized his rifle and cast a hurried glance at the shore whence the unexpected messenger came. The first object that met his vision, was a young man standing a short distance from the river, quietly loading his rifle.

The sight seemed to madden Manuel beyond endurance, and he instantly brought his piece to his shoulder. But his hand shook with excitement, and his aim was unsteady. He was in the act of pressing the trigger, when the young man became aware of his intention, and instantly stepped behind a gigantic cypress. Perceiving that his design was frustrated, Hart lowered his rifle with a suppressed oath.

"What is your purpose, sir?" asked the young man, stepping into open view again.

"That's a more proper question for me to ask, I should judge!" retorted Hart, in a gruff tone.

"Explain," added the young man.

"The affair don't need any great explanation; here's the mark of your rifle-ball in my dug-out plain enough. What you aimed at, I'll leave other folks to judge; but it was evidently not this boat."

"I was not aware that my shot struck your dug-out, certainly. I fired at a bird on the wing, more for the purpose of getting rid of an old charge, than for anything else."

"A very good story to tell off hand, I'll allow, stranger; but it won't go down—it won't, by no means. Balls don't fly about in such a careless way, without bein' sent," rejoined the forester, in the same unfriendly way.

"I trust, sir, you do not mean to accuse me of an intention to do you mischief?" said the young hunter, quietly.

"It don't require much stretch of the imagination to understand what I mean. This is rather a serious matter, and it must be settled sooner or later."

"It is not serious unless you chose to make it so. Your dug-out was struck by mere accident, and you cannot well be angry with me for so slight and unintentional a provocation."

"Every assassin in Texas could make as good a plea as that, if he should miss his aim, and hit a dug-out instead of a man. I want satisfaction!"

"I perceive that you are resolved on a quarrel; but answer me one question. How happens it, that if I really had a design on your life, I did not immediately discharge the other barrel, for my rifle is double? What can you say to that?"

"That it's a shallow apology for a want of skill. Quite likely the other barrel isn't loaded, or refused fire. Don't think I shall let you off in this way. I care as little for a Northern six-footer as I do for a Texan kangaroo. If you've got any courage or honor, you'll promise to meet me, armed and equipped, according to the by-laws and regulations of this uncommon land of liberty."

"Speak and tell me what satisfaction you require?" said the young hunter.

"Nothin' very wonderful—only that we should stand up at a convenient dis-

tance, in such a manner as to look right straight into the muzzles of each other's rifles, and see the fire and smoke come out, and whatever other fixin's that may happen to be in 'em! That's all, stranger!"

"I do not see the necessity of a proceeding so extraordinary."

"I dare say not—most likely not, but I do; so that makes just the difference."

"Why should we put our lives in such peril, merely on account of an accident?"

"You aint the fightin' kind, I perceive; but you can't live in this enlightened country, without using the rifle and the bowie-knife freely. The *white feather* don't do here; so make up your mind to be perforated with a quarter ounce ball in due course of time, as soon as justice gets ready to do the right thing."

"Will nothing short of a meeting of this kind satisfy you, my friend?"

"Not a bit of it; it must be just as I have said, or I shall spread the report all over Texas that you are a sneak of a coward."

"Come ashore then, as quickly as possible," said the hunter, firmly and somewhat imperatively. "Come ashore, and I will give you all the satisfaction you will ever want."

Manuel Hart was by no means a man of courage; but he liked to brow-beat and over-awe where he could, and thus acquire the credit of much boldness. Maurice Harper, the young man with whom he was dealing, appeared to him one he could easily terrify, and he had resolved to take advantage of that peculiarity.

When Harper pronounced the above words with so much real earnestness and self-possession, he felt considerably embarrassed and disappointed; for he was the last man to wish to fight with an adversary in an open field where the chances were equal.

"The thing must be fairly done—we must have seconds," he replied.

"We can get along without them; it will be as fair for you, as for me. I presume you have been engaged in such affairs before?" replied Harper, promptly.

"This isn't the first, by sixteen, and I can't say that I ever missed my man," returned Manuel, bravely, although he uttered an exaggerated falsehood, being too careful of his safety to give any one an opportunity of shooting him.

"I go in for order and form in these affairs of honor. I couldn't on no account fight without a second. Don't be in a hurry, mister; there won't be any too much time to arrange your earthly affairs, I'll warrant. I shall get some of my friends to fix this business as it ought to be. A day or two won't matter to me, and I rather like the idea of keepin' you in hot water, thinkin' about your approachin' end," resumed Hart, in a bantering tone.

"Have it your own way, but be assured that I shall not lose much sleep on account of it, although I prefer to have it come off at once. It appears to me, that there is a great deal more smoke about you than fire; but that's your affair not mine."

"We'll see, mister, we'll see. I'm perfectly willin' you should run of that notion, but I shall bring you up to the scratch when you don't expect it. I never forget a bad turn, but lay it up till the proper time comes to remember it. When we meet again, it's my opinion you won't take the matter so coolly."

With these remarks, delivered in a menacing tone, Hart put the dug-out once more in motion and moved down the river.

CHAPTER II.

IRIS RATHBUN. JACK LAWLESS.

HARPER looked after the rough backwoodsman as he floated on, with an expression half-serious, half-comic. The red spot that had appeared upon either cheek a few seconds before, disappeared, and left his face of its wonted complexion, calm and undisturbed by passion. A dog of the largest size and of rare blood, lay crouching quietly at his feet, watching his countenance, apparently with much interest.

"Honest, you have a better nature than that man," said Harper, observing the earnest and trusting looks of the animal.

"Honest" responded to the flattering remark by a significant wavy motion of his tail.

"I can trust you, my dog; yonder biped I would not trust with a single farthing, if anything of importance was staked on his faithfulness."

"Honest," by various modes of expression, known to the canine race, indicated that he was fully of his master's opinion.

While Harper was interpreting the language of his humble friend, a finger was placed lightly upon his shoulder. Turning with a start, he beheld a tall and dignified figure, whose countenance and costume betrayed him of another type of men.

"White hunter must watch—his ears must be open—his eyes must not be shut. He must hear the leaves when they rustle, and the winds must bring to his nostrils the scent of his enemies," said the son of the forest, with emphasis.

"True, red man, very true: I should not suffer myself to be thus surprised: 'tis a stain on my knowledge of woodcraft," replied Harper, coloring.

"The bird of war hovers over the border. The Camanches lie in wait for white scalp-locks. The pale face must look well to the path which he treads, or the rifle ball may sing in his ears, and the knife may flash before his eyes."

"My red brother speaks like an experienced warrior. What may I call his name?"

"I am called Warpath by my people, because my foot is sure on the trail of my enemies."

"I have heard of your deeds. Baptiste, the trapper, has often extolled your bravery and address. You are chief of the Lipans?"

"Yes, white man, I am the chief of the Lipans. We have dug up the hatchet, to wipe out the wrongs which we have suffered at the hands of the Camanches."

"The Camanches outnumber you, and war must eventually end in disaster to you and your people."

"Let it be so, if the Great Spirit wills. It is the red-skin's nature to resent and revenge injuries, and he cannot learn to do otherwise. Every drop of blood in our veins tells us to fight when we are wronged. If it pleases the Master of Life, we will die as we have lived—with weapons of war in our hands. The happy hunting grounds are ever open to all true souls."

Harper made no answer, for he knew that the voice of nature was stronger with the red man, than the voice of argument uttered by human lips.

"My brother is full of thought; he has met the big moccasin snake," added Warpath, at length.

"You mean the man that has just floated down the river in the boat?" said Maurice, turning to Warpath, inquiringly.

"He is a serpent that crouches in the breaks and in the reeds, and stings and then runs into his hole where he cannot be found. Hunter, walk carefully when you move through the tangled grass, and always be ready to spring aside, that the deadly reptile may be foiled," continued the Lipan, earnestly.

"I will treasure up the wisdom of Warpath, and it shall not be lost."

"To-day I saw the trapper—he will kindle his fire to-night at the foot of a hill yonder in the direction of the setting sun; white brother, you'll find him there. He can speak to you of this fine moccasin snake, and his words will be wise. He has a white skin but his heart is red. His aim is sure; the voice of his war-cry is the shout of death. He can learn my white friend much. He can show him how to read the signs of an enemy, and how to follow a trail through a chapparal, the swamp of cane, and the tangled thicket."

Warpath waved his hand, tightened his belt, and walked hastily into the dark forest.

Harper stood in deep thought, then shouldered his rifle, and followed by Honest, pursued his way along the bank of the Brazos. For an hour or more he moved on without stopping; but not without the observance of caution. Suddenly the dog paused and indicated by actions that an object attracted his attention. He did not appear alarmed or excited, but gazed steadily towards a small thicket of post oak that grew down to the river's bank.

"It can be nothing very dangerous, or Honest would not remain so passive," thought the hunter, bringing his rifle into a position to use it if necessary. He advanced noiselessly towards the thicket, and separating the branches of the trees, looked in among the dense umbrage. He saw neither deer, panther nor Camanche; but a female of some seventeen or eighteen summers, seated upon a mossy knoll. Her right arm rested upon the verdant eminence which arose in a gentle swell beside her; and her finely formed head was supported by the corresponding hand. The whole attitude was thoughtful and graceful. In the

left hand she held an open book; but it was evident that she was not reading: her full, pensive eyes were fixed dreamily upon vacancy. Her dark and redundant hair fell with native freedom over her white neck, and curled with bewitching grace. Her features were somewhat oval in outline and studiously regular.

Maurice Harper gazed at this singular aggregation of female charms with an admiration so genuine, that no interpreter was required to explain his emotions to a third person. He placed the breech of his rifle softly upon the ground, and made a motion to Honest to the purpose that he should lie down and keep still; and he was too sensible and honorable a dog to demur at so reasonable a demand upon his obedience. He stretched himself upon the ground wondering, doubtless, what kind of game his master had started now, and querying whether he was not losing his precious time with no prospect in view of trying his skill as a hunter.

Harper knew the young lady who had chained his attention and dazzled his eyes with her beauty. He had seen Iris Rathburn at the "Rathburn Rancho" (as it was called), a few days before. On that occasion, however, he had obtained but a passing glimpse of her person, and only a momentary view of her features, afforded him by her while casually passing through the corral, where he was conversing with her father. He made the discovery that her face and figure were uncommonly attractive; and felt a strong and almost irresistible desire to see her again, and with that object in view, had visited the rancho several times afterward, but without success.

Her sister Ramona, he had met and conversed with: and though not wanting in beauty, she had failed to make that impression upon him which the momentary appearance of Iris had done.

He was much gratified that chance had finally given him an opportunity to see the maiden who had so strangely excited his curiosity. When the first surprise had passed, he began to have some misgivings in relation to the propriety of intruding upon her moments of retirement, and taking advantage of his present concealment to watch the play of her features, and read, as it were, upon her ingenuous face the pages of thought passing within. It appeared to him like a breach of etiquette, although his approach to that position had been totally accidental. Harper gazed a second more at the sylvan beauty, and then with reluctant steps glided away.

He did not go far, however, but threw his manly figure upon a grassy hillock near the river, and tried to employ his mind by watching the movements of a young alligator that was rolling lazily about in the water. Honest took his post beside his master with characteristic quietness and docility. The young man looked at the amphibious and awkward monster until it became monotonous, for his thoughts were really in the oaken growth just above him. He was on the point of rising to leave the spot when a sharp cry, as of fear, reached his ears. Snatching his rifle instantly from the ground, he ran towards the thicket. Honest was equally active, and bounded with a threatening growl in the same

direction. With light and agile steps, Harper sprang through the cordon of trees that shut in the bower of the maiden, and was within a few yards of her before she had heard the sound of his coming.

Iris was standing a few feet from the spot where he had left her, in an attitude indicating much alarm. Near her was the object of her terror, in the form of a man, who, perhaps, might be thirty-five years of age, but whose visage was marked and rendered frightful, by the free, roving and dissipated life which he had led. His head covered by a cap of undressed skin, which, in conjunction with his long, unshorn beard and hair, gave his upper man an extremely wild and uncouth appearance. His *tout ensemble* alone might have been an excusable object of terror, setting aside all else. The rest of his apparel was strictly in keeping with what we have described—part savage, part civilised.

His neck was guiltless of a handkerchief, or collar, and in fact there would have been but little room for either, on account of the redundant shrubbery of hair that adorned the particular region where those articles are generally applied to the human body.

He was about six feet one in his stockings. His arms consisted of a double barrel carbine, a brace of pistols, a bowie-knife, and a hatchet. All but the first weapon (and that he held in his left hand) were stuck into a belt which he wore around him.

When Maurice Harper reached the scene, this singular specimen of humanity was staring at Iris, with a malicious grin, apparently highly delighted with the contemplation of the emotions of fear which his appearance had excited in the girl.

"What may be your particular business with this young woman, sir?" asked Maurice, calmly, at the same time, pressing close to Iris, whose now changed expression told what a sensation of relief his presence had brought her.

"I'm a Texan cub," said the intruder, with a swaggering air, intended to intimidate.

"If you are ambitious to become a full grown bear, you had better be seeking the paternal den?" rejoined Harper.

"You're thar, are you, my northern chicken? You havn't been long in these parts, I reckon. Was you ever swallowed by an alligator, or pawed by a catamount?" "If you wasn't prepare to be chawed in a few seconds less than no time. Stranger, I'm a heap of wild cats and other voracious varminits. Thar is your road—*vamos the ranche*!"

"*Vamos the ranche*" is a famous phrase in Texas, and signifies that the obnoxious individual to whom it is addressed should absent himself as speedily as possible, or suffer the consequences. The meaning of the "Texan cub," as he had chivalrously styled himself, was perfectly apparent to our hero; but he was not in any manner disposed to abandon his ground.

"Do not provoke him, I beg of you, but let us leave the spot," said Iris, in a low voice to Harper.

"Stranger, perhaps you didn't hear what I said to ye. If you want to save your har, step and be movin'," said the fellow, examining his carbine, and blustering considerably, with an air of intimidation.

"Do not fear, Miss Rathbun; I think nothing serious will occur. Since you request it, we will walk towards your father's ranche," still unmoved by the menaces of the desperado.

"I s'pose you've made your will and testament, haven't ye, mister, so thar wont be no disputes about your personal property and other plunder? I hope you have, because to the best of my weak judgment, you're pretty near the kingdom, about this perticuler period."

"Would you injure an honest young man for protecting a defenceless girl?" interrupted Iris, earnestly.

"I couldn't stop to talk with you on that subject, young woman, but I know what I like, I calkerlate. If you don't keep about seeing a chicken killed, you'd better turn your face tother way."

"This is a game two can play at!" exclaimed Harper impatiently, at the same time displaying in a significant way, his double-barrel rifle.

The desperado was in the act of levelling his carbine, when Iris stepped between him and Maurice, and thus covering the latter with her person.

"If you must have a victim, let it be myself," she said, firmly.

"Ah, you mean to take care of the boy, do you? Well, that's rather a lucky circumstance for him, I reckon!"

Harper put the maiden gently aside, and looked steadily into the face of the Texan. His manner had changed greatly; for now his face was crimson with anger, and his eyes sparkled with excitement.

"Lawless and gasconading villain, you are beneath the chastisement of my own personal arm; you are fit to be dealt with only by dogs. Receive the reward of insolence. *Take him, Honest!*"

As he pronounced these words, he made a motion to the dog, who had been watching his master's movements with an intelligence half-human. Immediately the animal uttered a warning growl, bounded high in the air, and the next second came down upon the ruffian's head, an overpowering mass of bone and muscle, excited with strength, and quivering with rage.

Closing his great mouth like a vice upon the neck of his victim, with one gigantic wrench he brought him to the ground, conquered, helpless, and struck to the heart with the fear of instant death.

"Hold him, but don't tear him," said Harper, and by a motion of his tail, Honest signified that he knew his duty; but he still kept his monstrous jaws shut firmly upon the Texan's neck.

The young man then took up the carbine which had fallen useless from the desperado's grasp, and discharged both barrels into the air, after which, he deliberately drew the pistols from his belt and fired them in the same manner.

"Do not let the dog kill the poor wretch," said Iris, whose sympathies were now excited for the sufferer.

"Let go—that will do," added Harper, who, glancing at the fellow's face, perceived that it was going hard with him.

The faithful creature was not quite pleased at this command, and by a wishful look seemed to ask permission to continue his efforts; but he reluctantly relinquished his hold, and the outlaw inhaled a long breath, and made a disagreeable rattling in his throat.

"Will he die?" asked Iris, with a shiver of horror.

"Trust me, he will not; bad men do not die so easily; they cling to life to the last, for they fear the future, and would live on any conditions, however miserable. He's only somewhat cramped for want of breath, and slightly wounded about the neck. He will soon be upon his feet again."

Harper was right; the injury which the man had received was not serious. In a short time his respiration became regular, and he appeared entirely conscious of his position.

"Come, sir, get up and take the trail," said Maurice. "Your presence is not wanted, as you must now realize. Don't let him attempt mischief, Honest."

The "Texan cub," now pretty well tamed, slowly assumed the position natural to human bipeds, while the dog, by sundry low growls advised him that he was watching him closely, and should punish any rebellious acts on the spot.

"You can fight with your imp of a dog, but you can't fight like a man!"

He exclaimed, while his shaggy chin quivered with passion. "This won't be the end of it! the end will be a different thing altogether. I shall fix you, I won't sleep sound till I fix you," he continued, speaking with extreme difficulty, and pressing his hand to his lacerated throat, still smarting with pain.

"How frightful!" cried Iris, turning from the scene with a feeling of faintness.

"You shall hear of somethin' more frightful than this bit of a skrimmage, or my name aint Jack Lawless, young woman. You've had a hand in this business, and I sha'n't forgit ye. We shall meet one of these days, when the power will be on my side, and I'll use it. I'm a Texan cub!"

Without making any rejoinder, Harper and Miss Rathbun walked from the spot towards the Rancho, leaving Lawless pouring forth the most bitter invectives and direst threats of vengeance.

But few words were spoken by the parties as they moved away. Occasionally, Maurice cast a furtive glance at his fair companion, but could at that moment think of no fitting words to address to her. He walked by her side until they reached the corral.

"Here you are safe," he said, pausing.

"Will you enter and receive the thanks of my friends for your disinterested and timely services?" returned Iris.

"I require and desire no thanks. The reflection that I have perhaps saved you from something very unpleasant, is all the reward I deserve or aspire to," he replied, respectfully.

"It would certainly give me pleasure to have you enter and partake of our

hospitality; but like all hunters and foresters, I suppose you are extremely wayward, and will do as you please. If you will not accept my invitation for this occasion, accept it as extending to an indefinite period, and consult your own convenience, added Iris, gracefully.

"Be assured, Miss Rathbun, that your kindness shall not be forgotten. I will avail myself of your generous invitation, as soon as circumstances will possibly permit; until that time, allow me to say *adios amigo*."

"Adios," said the maiden, in a sweet voice. So the youth and Iris parted.

CHAPTER III.

THE COMPACT. MELTIAH MOSS.

AFTER leaving Rathbun Rancho Maurice Harper turned his face in the direction of the setting sun, in order to join his old friend, Baptiste Lorrimer, at the spot indicated by the Lipan. He made determined efforts to think of everything but Iris, but instead of succeeding, could not, for five consecutive minutes, fasten his mind upon any other object.

Our hero was one of those persons who fancy that they can come in contact with the loveliest portion of creation, without experiencing any deeper emotion than common friendship. He imagined, in short, that he could control the current of his affections, and place them where he saw fit. But when he had argued himself into this belief, he had not seen Miss Rathbun, and consequently had no means of judging of the effects of beauty like hers. He mentally confessed that she was very agreeable, and concluded that he should call at the Rancho and see her again when it was quite convenient.

The report of a rifle caused him to pause. Looking rapidly around him, he perceived a man leisurely advancing. He was young, well-formed, and clad in hunting guise.

"I fired at a deer, but the distance was long, and I believe I missed my mark," he said, observing our hero.

"One cannot always be successful," replied Harper.

"It cannot be expected when one fires so far; but I seldom throw away a shot. You must understand, stranger, that my nerves are steady, and my eyes are used to lookin' through the sights," added the other.

"You have been long used to the woods, I suspect?"

"You may well say that; for I took naterally to the timber when I was a mere lad, no higher than my ramrod; and I've been in it off and on ever since. I take it you are fresh in these parts?"

"I have not been in this particular locality long, I'll allow," returned Maurice, who began to be already interested in his new acquaintance.

"It's rather a lawless place, take it altogether, and it's sometime before strangers can get the hang of the country."

"As near as I can learn, many people get more of the hang of it than they like, owing to the agency of Judge Lynch."

"That's the truth! Between the Regulators, Moderators, Indians, gamblers, horse-thieves, and Santa Anna, Texas has rather a tough time of it."

"I have frequently heard about the Regulators and Moderators. Are they of any service to the country?"

"I aint much of a politician any way, but I should say that both parties are a curse to it. It's true, that the idea of regulating the country was, in the first instance an honest one; but it soon degenerated. The Regulators originally comprised the respectable portion of community. They administered justice with a rigid hand. Disguised in some manner, they would pounce upon the offender and hang him, or administer some terrible punishment. Well, this alarmed the rogues, and they lost no time in joining the Regulators; and Regulating soon became a species of outrage and wholesale killing; for, you see, stranger, that whenever a villain had a little spite, he would be sure to be down on the luckless fellow with a posse of his fellows. The people became alarmed, and well they might, for the country was then more unsafe than ever; and the consequence was, they formed another party, called Moderators. What was the result? Why all the rest of the scoundrels, gamblers, thieves and murderers generally, rushed into the ranks of the new association. The moment there were two parties in the field, things went on from bad to worse. Collisions took place almost daily, and blood has been spilled like water. Stranger, I allow there has been some of the hardest fights between the Regulators and the Moderators that you ever heard of. The Regulators in trying to regulate the Moderators, and the Moderators in trying to moderate the Regulators, have turned the country into an arena for wild beasts. So that is the present position of affairs."

"Will not this Mexican invasion serve to turn the attention of all parties in another direction, and keep them from rending each other?" asked Harper.

"Perhaps so, sir; I hope so, at least, for as it is, no one can tell when his hour cometh. A person may go to bed in apparent security, with the prospect of a long life afore him, but be called up in the middle of the night with a pressing invitation to be hanged."

"You draw a gloomy picture, my friend?"

"There's a heap of widders that could paint a more awful one, stranger.—There's a place called 'Widders' Creek,' whar there's twenty-five all told, whose husbands' where regulated and moderated out of the world."

"I presume, my friend, that you do not belong to either of these clans?" said Harper, with some hesitation.

"Not I, sir—not I! I profess to be an honest man. I don't wish to be controlled by nobody, neither do I wish to control nobody. I want the woods—the river, air, sky—nature. Let me have these, and the government of my own actions, and I ask no more."

"Your language pleases me, sir. I also admire nature in all her varied dev-

elopements. My name is Maurice Harper, formerly a native of old Virginia."

"I aint greatly larned in the fashions of the world, but I take it that's equivalent to asking whot I'm called by? Noel Noon is the beginnuing and ending of my name, so far as white folks are concerned. The Injin critters sometimes call me 'Open-Hand,' 'True-Tongue,' and sich like; meanin' in their flatterin' way, that I aint given to deception, and that kind of thing."

"The Indians are marvellous readers of character, and appellations of that nature are as good as a letter of recommendation. It's my opinion, Mr. Noon, that those names are well applied."

"Don't, if you please, call me mister—for I couldn't think of answerin' to anythin' short of Noel Noon."

"If you will admit me among your friends, I will certainly speak to you in that familiar way."

"There's a difference between us, stranger; you've got larnin' and I aint got any to boast of; only enough to be an expert backwoodsman. I really don't think you'd care to reckon sich a rough, uncultivated individual in the number of your friends; it don't seem exactly likely."

"You are gifted with an honest heart, Noel Noon, and that makes you as good as the best man that walks the forest. I like you; there's natural and true manhood in you. Here's my hand—take it, and hereafter let us be true friends."

Noel fixed his large, black eyes searchingly upon Harper, and after the lapse of a few seconds, slowly took the young man's hands in his.

"Maurice Harper," he said, in a serious, earnest tone of voice, "friendship is, with me, a sacred word. I can't call a man my friend, and forsake him afterwards, under any circumstances, when he's in trouble. If I say I will be your friend, I am bound to stand by you in every emergency whatsoever. Them's my notions of friendship; perhaps yours are different; if they are, we'd better take different trails, and let the subject drop."

"Friendship, in my opinion, will bear no other construction than what you have given it. I agree with you fully and heartily; and in future an insult to Noel Noon will be an insult to Maurice Harper," added our hero, shaking the backwoodsman's hand.

"It's a compact—a long and solemn compact to continue till one or both gives up everything of a sublunary nature. When death and danger are on your trail, it's highly probable that this uncultivated critter wont be far off."

The two young men wrung each other's hands in silence; and looking, as Harper did, in to the clear, misty depths of the forester's nature, he could not possibly prevent the moisture from gathering in his eyes.

"Yonder rising water, these kingly trees, this sheltering foliage, the blue sky above us, and He that made all, shall be our witness to this life-long agreement; and may all the influences of earth and air prove auspicious," resumed Harper.

"May the waters drown me, the trees fall on and crush me, the foliage no

longer shelter me, and the sky and the stars, and the great soul that dwells in them no longer smile on me, when I betray my friend," replied Noel, impressively.

"Good! The Master of Life is pleased!" said a voice near them, and the stately form of the chief of the Lipans approached.

"Union makes strong—gives one arm the power of two. The bird of war is screaming on the border. There is danger in the cane-swamp, and in the cypress-brake; in the valley and on the hill-top on the mountain and in the prairie; at the ranche and in the wigwam; in the white clearing and in the wild woods. Therefore, true hearts should be bound firm together like a quiver of arrows," added Warpath.

"Is there any new feud?" inquired Harper.

"He means that there are dangers on the border and within the border—from civil feuds and from foreign invasion," said Noel.

"The unsettled state of the country generally, is as serious in its aspects as it can well be, if I rightly comprehend the matter. Every man here appears to let his passions run wild, and deals out justice as it suits him. No longer ago than this morning, by the merest accident, I involved myself in a quarrel which is probably not ended yet," continued Maurice.

"The Moccasin Snake will not forget," said Warpath.

"That's Manuel Hart, you mean, I take it, Warpath?" replied Noel.

"Wa, wa! it is him," replied the Lipan.

Harper hereupon gave a simple statement of what had occurred in relation to Manuel Hart; after which, he narrated the incident which had transpired in the forest of oak, wherein Iris Rathbun had been concerned.

Noel listened with a respectful attention, occasionally shaking his head and looking serious.

Warpath stood motionless as a cypress at his side, apparently absorbed in his reflections on some topic more interesting.

"I'm sorry for you that these things have happened, for you have made two dangerous enemies, who will be content with nothing short of your blood. I know Manuel Hart. We never got along very well together, though we've had no open quarrel. He is too much of a coward to quarrel above-board; he prefers to work in an underhand way, and strike like a serpent when you don't expect it. Lawless is rather a different kind of chap—more of a game bird than Hart. He has some courage, while the other aint got an atom. Between them, they'll do you mischief enough. I have my suspicions that they have dealin's with the Moderators and Regulators; and what they can't do themselves, they'll have done for them in some shape or other. You'll be tracked like a fat buck, and be shot down on the first occasion that offers. What do you think, Warpath?"

"Bad men—don't come out in sight—keep in grass—creep along—hearts very small—full of hate. Our white brother must have eyes on all sides of his head," returned the Lipan.

Noel Noon kept his eyes fastened on our hero's face as he spoke, although without the appearance of watching him.

"Does the coward presume—"

Maurice suddenly checked himself, and finished the sentence in a more calm and commonplace tone, while Noel and Warpath exchanged significant looks.

"Does the coward presume to think of one so far his superior?"

"I may safely say that he does."

"And is Miss Rathbun aware of it, do you imagine?"

"Well, if I was to tell my thoughts and suspicions, I should reply in the affirmative."

"Does she encourage him?" demanded Harper, in a hurried tone, intended to be very indifferent and ordinary.

"I should do wrong to throw out any hints to that effect. There's somethin' atween Hart and the girl's father that I can't fathom, and which, I fancy gives her some oneasiness; but what the natur of it is, I have no means of knowin'."

"Perhaps she fears this boorish and heartless woodsman?"

"It wouldn't be strange. I shan't on no account say anythin' agin that view of the case. If there is some kind of a mystery which gives Hart power over Rathbun, I've only to remark that I wouldn't be in his place for any consideration. In my weak comprehension, there's somethin' naterally shockin' in bein' governed by an unprincipled critter like him, without the means of helpin' one's self; and it would place Iris in an onhappy position."

"I trust that you would not scruple to assist her, or her sister, if you discovered that they were being wronged or rendered wretched?" added Harper, earnestly.

"If it should ever come to pass that the efforts of rough Noel Noon can make either of them young women—God bless 'em—any happier or more comfortable-like, he won't probably be far off! That's the way I stand in that respect at the present time," replied the forester, in his own honest style of speaking out.

"I should much like to converse with you on these subjects again," resumed Maurice; "but now I must hasten to join Baptiste Lorrimer. Will you go with me? I can warrant you a welcome; and not only you, but the chief."

"Not now; I've got some matters to talk over with Warpath, but I will be with you probably, before many hours pass. Be watchful, and remember that you have a friend in Noel Noon."

Shaking hands once more, the young man hastened away towards a low range of hills that were visible in the west. He smiled, and seemed in better spirits as he walked on.

"Ah," he said to himself, "they think that the prospect of danger will make me sad and fearful; that proves that they do not know me yet. Things just begin to assume an aspect to suit my somewhat wayward fancy. To dwell in a spot like this without adventure, would be dreadfully monotonous. Let the peril come as quickly as it may; it will afford me amusement, and prevent me

from growing too indolent. This hardy forester thinks lightly of my knowledge of woodcraft; well, that is natural and excusable; time will show whether he is right."

"In this frame of mind was our hero, when he was accosted by a man unknown to him, in that free and easy manner that can be appreciated only by the western trapper and hunter.

"Fine kind of weather this, stranger. Nice dog that at your heels—mighty smart, I should say at a tattle."

"The weather is very good, and my dog very honest," replied Maurice, very carelessly.

"All right—no harm done, I allow. Any of the weed about your clothes?" continued the man.

"You mean tobacco, I suppose; I do not use it."

"Sorry to hear it; most all men of spirit use it, in some shape or other."

"Then I must learn the habit."

"Best thing you can do. I learned when I was a mere brot of a lad—did me a heap of good; a comfort to me all my life. From the States, I presume?"

"From Old Virginia—the most chivalric State in the Union," replied Harper.

"That's a blessing! I was born and eddicate there, and I allow I'm glad to see your honest face, Mr.——"

The backwoodsman paused, but Harper did not fall into the trap and supply the name.

"Well, if I haven't forgot the name!" he added.

"Never mind; don't stand on ceremony with me. Call me Briarwood."

"I know the original stock of Briarwoods in Varginny State," continued the hunter, with unblushing effrontery. "I think you resemble the family—especially about the hair and eyes."

"Really!"

"Fact, every word of it—great memory I've got. I astonish myself sometimes—remember things I never thought of, and everybody else has forgotten. My name is recorded in the family Bible as Meltiah Moss. You've heered of the Mosses, if ever you hung out in Old Varginny."

"The name is certainly familiar to me," said Harper, much amused at the readiness of his new acquaintance at a prevarication.

"It ought to be, for the Mosses are all of noble descent; and some of 'em have been to college and other places of general information. But I never took pertinently to law, physic or divinity, although I could have done well at all of 'em, if I'd been so minded. I scorned sich trifles, jest as a man of genius ought too."

"You became a Nimrod, which was much better. What kind of game are you in quest of now, if I might make so free?"

Meltiah Moss paused and cast a singular look at Maurice, which the latter did not observe, or at least, did not appear to. But he rattled on as carelessly as ever.

"What kind of game you ask? Well, sir, I'll reply with a frankness worthy of Meltiah. I'm huntin' that sort of game which other people pass by without noticin'."

"Strange game, I dare say?"

"Yes, and you'll say so with more emphasis when you know more about me."

The same mysterious expression played for a moment over the man's countenance that had appeared there once before, and was still unheeded, apparently, by our hero.

"My trail runs in this direction; I suspect we must part here," said Harper.

"If you go that way, I should say yes, because my path strikes off to Old Lorrimer, the hunter, will cook his supper over there in the neighbourhood of them tall trees, and I've got business with him."

"Why do you think he will be there?"

"I met him this afternoon; we happened to be creepin' after the same deer. Jest as I had got within gunshot, I looked up and who should I see but Lorrimer, jest agoin' to pull trigger at my game."

"It was then that he informed you that he should camp at the spot you have named?"

"You're right, Mr. Briarwood. That's the explanation of the affair, and you see I can't consistently go on that trail, for I want to have a few words of talk with Baptiste."

"I was expecting to meet Lorrimer myself at the base of yonder ridge of hills, added Maurice, with some hesitation.

"It's lucky I tumbled upon you, then, for it's saved you a long tramp for nothin'. Come, let's be a movin'."

Harper did not stir; he remained standing in a state of indecision, leaning upon his double-barrel. He was in deep cogitation—endeavoring to study and understand the man who called himself Meltiah Moss.

Maurice was naturally quick and shrewd, but now he confessed himself at fault. Was his air of frankness genuine, or was it assumed? Was he playing a studied part, or acting out his own nature? He asked himself what object Moss could have for deceiving him, and could think of no reasonable answer.

"The times are dangerous, I am well aware," he said to himself, or rather thought, "and I will watch this individual. If he proves treacherous, let him look to it."

"If you stand there like a tree, it'll be dark as ink afore you reach the camp," resumed Moss.

Harper stooped down and stroked with his hand the large head of Honest, and then, straightening up, said, in a voice from which all traces of indecision had vanished:

"Lead on, sir—I will follow."

CHAPTER IV.

BETRAYED.

The person addressed favored Maurice with another searching glance, and then shouldering his rifle, took a northeasterly course, and put his moccasined feet in motion. For some moments the parties walked on in silence, Harper keeping a sharp look-out in every direction, and Honest treading close at his heels, with his glowing eyeballs fastened upon the stranger, occasionally placing his nose to the ground, and then raising his head, snuffing the air as if to take any strange scent that the gentle winds might happen to bring.

The sun sank lower and lower, and finally went down, leaving a sky without a star or a moon.

The darkness drew deeper, and Meltiah Moss walked with less assured steps.

"I reckon I've got a trifle bewildered," he said, pausing and casting anxious glances around him.

"You have been diverging from the course which you at first indicated as the true one, for half an hour," replied Harper.

"I allow that it isn't easy to navigate these parts when it's so uncommon dark, but it's very seldom that I lose the pints o' compass."

"The moon will be up soon, and perhaps we had better remain where we are until it appears."

"I was jest turnin' that subject over in my mind, stranger, for it seems like workin' agin' natur tryin' to get through this chapparal while the night is so black and heavy."

"I shall endeavor to get a little sleep," said Harper.

"What, sleep here, among the reptiles, copperheads, and other poisonous varmints! You must be sum'at wild in your notions, I take it."

Harper stretched his athletic person at the foot of a cypress, called Honest, bade him lie down, and then placed his head upon the dog's shaggy shoulders.

"Perhaps that curus critter'll keep off the noxious perductions of this sile?" remarked Meltiah, looking fixedly at the dog, whose eyes were glowing brightly through the darkness.

"It's very possible," returned Maurice, quietly.

"Smart lookin' rifle, that of yours! Must be rather heavy, I reckon." While Moss was speaking, he stretched out his hand carelessly, and took Harper's rifle which he had set against a tree near him. A deep, angry growl admonished the backwoodsman that his movements were watched.

"What's his name?" he asked.

"Honest."

"Will the varmint bite?"

"It wouldn't be strange."

Meltiah scowled, and evidently wanted to send a ball through the mastiff's head, but determined on a pacific course, at least for the present.

"Honest—Honest! good feller!" he said, in a tone intended to be vastly conciliating.

A more savage growl warned him to relinquish his hold upon the gun altogether, which he was prudent enough to do. He retreated a few paces, and seated himself sullenly upon the trunk of a tree which the winds had overturned. Resting his chin upon the palm of his right hand, and his elbow upon his knee, while his rifle, with the breech upon the ground, was supported by his left arm, he gazed intently through the gloom at the dim outlines of Harper and his dog. This position he maintained for some minutes, and changed it only to cast uneasy glances about him, or to play with his rifle impatiently.

"If ever a person meditated villany," thought Harper, "Meltiah Moss is the man."

Half an hour elapsed, which evidently seemed a long time to our hero's new acquaintance. At the expiration of that period, the latter arose, produced materials, ignited a flame, and applied it to the bark of a dried cedar.

Instantly it was a-blaze, and the fire ran, crackling and leaping, in glowing wreaths to the top. This act confirmed the suspicions of Harper, and he began to experience a feeling of insecurity quite uncommon to him.

"It seems to me somewhat imprudent to light such a beacon as that," he said, with some asperity of tone.

"For what reason?"

"It might attract a war party of Camanches upon us."

"Let 'em come, stranger. I'm never afraid of dying afore my time comes though I've seen some folks as is, and can't never make themselves happy under no conditions, whatsoever."

"Words are very cheap, my fine fellow, but they do not go far with me. I have always observed that those who talk the most bravely in moments of security, display the least courage in time of danger."

"I hope there's nothing personal in that remark o' yours, mister, because as how, I shouldn't want to offer any uncommon violence to an indervidoval from Old Varginny. But cypress brakes and copperheads! if you should go on in that way scarcely no time at all, I should be obligated, on account of my own honor, to put you through a course of sprouts, as we young alligators say."

"What's that?" inquired Maurice.

"It's what you can't know till you experience it. Fifty galvanic batteries, all let loose on you at once, wouldn't be nothin' to it."

"It must be dreadful!" said Harper, quietly.

"I'll allow that it is," pursued Meltiah, impressively.

"You've no fear of anything of that sort, yourself, I suppose?" added the young man, in the same tone.

"Not in the least; because you see I'm posted up in these things, and am uncommon hard to beat."

"It will be well for you to bear in mind, sir, that if you attempt to play off any of your tricks with me, I will give you good cause to regret it to the last hour of your existence. You fancy you are deep, shrewd, cunning, and cannot be out-witted or over-reached; but I have sounded you, and know your mental

tennage, and how much sail you can carry without straining your masts. You are a craft that can sail in shallow and muddy water; so look out for breakers when you navigate with me. I am watching you, and it will be extremely hard for you to readily discover when you are safe."

"O, don't be scared, mister! I shall lay any impudence like that you may be guilty of, to your inexperience. I shan't be hard on you, seein's you ain't used to the manners of these Texan alligators."

"What's that?" exclaimed Harper.

"What's what?" retorted Moss, whose features could now be plainly seen in the glare of the blazing cedar.

"I thought I heard a noise."

"Very likely; beginners in this sort of life are very apt to hear noises. But they aint so sneaky when they git older."

Honest sprang to his feet, and his erect ears and listening attitude attested that his master was not the only one who had heard sounds.

"Better keep that quadrepid animal still, if you don't want him hurt by some wild critter," said Meltiah.

"He'll take care of himself; don't fear on his account," replied Harper.

"Honest! look sharp—go in there—be quick!" he added, patting the dog on the head, and pointing into the swamp.

Instantly the mastiff bounded off like an arrow.

"Wish I'd shot him!" muttered Moss.

"What did you say?" inquired Maurice, who had heard enough to get the purport of the sentence.

"It's a catamount, likely as not, and you'll lose your dog," replied the backwoodsman.

"He knows as much about the nature and habits of that animal as you do."

"Ah! there's trouble!"

While Harper was speaking, the sound of a sudden onset and a fierce struggle reached his ears. The features of Moss grew pale, and for a moment he appeared at a loss how to act.

"I'll risk the dog, if you will the catamount," said Maurice, eyeing his new friend closely.

"Help—help—murder!" cried a voice from the swamp in stifled tones of agony and terror.

Maurice darted into the thick growth without a second's delay. When he reached the place of conflict, he discovered Honest keeping guard over a man whom he had brought to the ground by a single tug at his throat. Our hero assisted him to arise, and was leading him towards the light of the burning tree; but to this proceeding he was evidently averse, for he struggled and held back.

"Come; walk on; let us see who you are, how much you are injured, and what reparation I owe you."

"No, no! I am not seriously hurt—call off the savage beast, and let me go," said a voice which Harper fancied was not wholly unfamiliar.

"Yes; let the man have his own way—'tisn't your business, I take it, to meddle with other people's concerns," said Moss, who was by this time at his side.

"I must see who he is, and *will!* at all events!" returned our hero, firmly, tightening his grasp on the man's shoulder, and dragging him along by mere physical strength.

"I reckon as how that sort of thing wont do in this land o' liberty and equal rights," cried Meltiah, aiming a blow at Harper's head, which the latter had the adroitness to parry, and the good fortune to give one in return that felled the aggressor to the earth, where he was immediately pounced upon by our hero's unfailing coadjutor, Honest; but in dealing this effectual punisher, Maurice had partially relinquished his hold upon the unknown, who, profiting by the same, took to his heels and ran off with desperate speed.

"Get up!" said Harper, to the backwoodsman.

Moss recovered his feet without a word, looking cheap and crest-fallen.

"What do you think of yourself?" asked Maurice.

"I haven't made up my mind. What's your opinion?"

"That you are a villain of the first water; that you intended to betray me into the hands of Manuel Hart, when, between you both, I should have been murdered."

"You're a queer chap, you are, and I allow I don't know jest what to make of you. I'd advise you as a friend to kill that ere dog, he's so rude to strangers."

"If you were half as honest, you would be a better man; it would be less a crime to kill you than him. He is true to his nature, while you are false to yourself and everybody else," answered Maurice.

"Such remarks aint pleasant to hear, but it strikes me there's some truth in 'em, and I can't feel it in my mind to hit you for it."

"You would like to, no doubt; but persons of your ilk are apt to be cowardly. Meltiah Moss, your safety depends entirely on your good behavior. What prevents me from despatching you, and sinking you in the first bayou I can find? Who do you suppose would inquire after you, or even regret your death?"

The moon was now up, and her beams shone brightly upon the parties. Moss stood before Maurice unarmed, the latter having secured both rifles; and Honest sat at his feet ready to leap upon the former whenever bidden.

"There is no good reason why you should live," resumed Maurice, seriously. "You do no one any good, but injure all with whom you come in contact. Now the question arises in my mind, if it be not my duty to shoot you on the spot, and rid the earth of a bad man."

The ruffian's face began to take on a deadly palor.

"All things considered, you deserve to die. What have you to say for yourself?" continued Maurice, in the same serious voice.

"I aint prepared to die," said Meltiah.

"Neither are you prepared to live."

"You couldn't think of killing a fellow in this cold-blooded sort of a way! Come, you're only banterin' like," resumed Meltiah, in an unsteady voice.

"Have you anything particular to say before taking a leap in the dark?" continued Maurice, more impressively.

"Now don't talk in that way! You make a fellow feel uncomfortable. The fact is, it's all owin' to Manuel Hart, this scrape is, and I shouldn't have been in it, if it hadn't been for his meddlin' disposition."

"I had already made up my mind that Manuel Hart employed you to aid him."

"Yes, 'twas him as told me how to act. I've watched you all the arfternoon. This mornin' you know you had a quarrel with Hart."

"You were to be well paid, I suppose?"

"Nothing to brag on, for that matter. Manuel aint over and above liberal—'tisn't in him to be. If I'd known fully the natur of this anermal, I shouldn't been catchhed in this here onpleasant fix."

"The excuses of bad men when detected in crime, usually come with an ill grace. You cannot well extenuate your fault. Had you borne the reputation of an honest man, Hart would not have attempted to draw you into his nefarious schemes."

"That's ryther philersophical, I take it."

"So that was a fabrication about Lorrimer's being on the spot you indicated?" pursued Maurice.

"I should say it was, 'cordin' to my weak comprehension."

"Here's your rifle, Meltiah. I hope you'll live to be a better man. If you wish, you can accompany me to old Lorrimer's camp."

"I knew you wasn't so bad as you pertended," said the backwoodsman, evidently much relieved. "Seein' you're so kind and obligin' as to ask me, I'll go with you."

Maurice now changed his course and walked rapidly towards the spot where he had good reason to suppose that Lorrimer was expecting him, followed by Meltiah and Honest.

Whether our hero felt perfectly secure with this singular being close at his heels, we will not pretend to say; but we will venture to affirm that he turned his head with an expression of considerable surprise, upon hearing the sharp snap of Meltiah's rifle. So quickly did Maurice turn towards the woodsman, that his piece was still levelled at him, and his finger on the trigger. For an instant the young man's eyes flashed with anger, but the excitement passed as rapidly as it came.

"I took the precaution to take the cap from your rifle, and put a damaged one in its place. To that device, I probably owe my life. I see plainly that you are not to be trusted. Some men would shoot you down upon the spot; but I can't find it in my heart to kill you."

"I only meant to give you a start," said Meltiah.

"Yes, a start to the next world, and would then have been obliged to have

settled the matter with Honest. Come, let us change the order of march; lead the way towards yonder range of hills, and don't attempt anything more to-night as you value your life!"

"I'm afeared you'll let me have the contents of the double-barrels when I aint expectin' it," replied the ruffian doggedly.

"I give you my word that I will not; so go ahead," returned Maurice.

The proposed change was quickly made, and the parties pursued their lonely way towards the camp of Baptiste Lorrimer.

CHAPTER V.

AN INTERVIEW

A few days subsequent to the scenes narrated in the foregoing chapter, Iris Rathburn, while walking a short distance from the Rancho, was unexpectedly accosted by Manuel Hart. The circumstance of meeting him alone was not at all agreeable to her feelings, for reasons which may perhaps appear as we proceed. With all his roughness of manner, the hunter was shrewd, calculating and persevering; qualities highly dangerous when characterizing a bad man.

Having, as the reader is aware, a given purpose in view, so far as our heroine was concerned, he commenced operations with considerable skill, disguising as well as he could his real object. At first his remarks were of a general and commonplace kind, and made with more than usual courtesy; for even Manuel, as clownish as he was, felt a rational desire to please such a maiden as Iris, so far as it could be done in the way of mere words.

But the backwoodsman was not, unfortunately for him, highly gifted in the divine art of expression any more than he was in the graces of deportment. After alluding to several things in which he felt no real interest, he approached the subject uppermost in his thoughts, as follows:

"I've heered that you got quite a fright tother day, all on account of that wild-lookin' chap as is coastin' hereabouts."

"I was somewhat startled by the rudeness of a stranger, I confess," replied Miss Rathburn.

"I don't know the particklerlers of the case, miss; how was it?"

"Simply this; while enjoying the luxury of solitude in yonder growth of wood, I was terrified very much by the rude conduct of a wild-looking man who unexpectedly intruded upon my retreat."

"How did you get away from his impudence?" asked Manuel, giving his fair acquaintance a searching look.

In making the statement as above, Miss Rathburn had not been wholly free from embarrassment, for she intuitively guessed Hart's object in drawing from her the details of her adventure; and when he proposed the last query, she could not refrain from manifesting more marked evidences of confusion. She did what ladies are apt to do when obliged to speak of certain persons—blush—
—at the same time trying to display the utmost nonchalance and indifference.

"I may justly say that I owe my delivery from insult partly to a dog," she said, with a smile.

"A very honest critter, certainly! Didn't he have no master?" resumed Hart, with another searching glance.

"Of course he had a master; and the master was as efficient as the dog," added Iris, still smiling.

"If you wouldn't be put out, I'd like to ask his name?"

"It was—I think it was Harper, or some thing like that," returned the maiden, a red spot appearing upon each cheek.

"Ah, 'twas him, was it?"

"Do you know him?"

"Better nor I do you, miss."

"A gallant young man! Don't you think so, Mr. Hart?" asked our heroine, somewhat maliciously.

"I don't never like to differ with females," replied Hart, drily.

"I am shure there is no need that you should differ with me on the subject."

"Perhaps not, miss; but I am older than you, and a man as used to know this Harper afore he left Varginny."

The serious tone in which Manuel uttered these words gave Iris a feeling of uneasiness; for, truth to tell, she was unwilling that her hero should sink in her estimation the merest trifle.

"He bore a good character there, I dare say?"

"Perhaps we'd better change the subject to sumthin' else, as I never like to speak agin any person that I can't say any good of."

"You really startle me, Mr. Hart. What do you know of the gentleman that is derogatory to his character?" inquired Iris, with real earnestness.

"Don't ask me, because I know too much to say anything but the naked truth, if I express my feelings about the matter. And, as I said, I don't want to run nobody down. The feller as goes by the name of Harper, aint what he'd ought to be, by no means. He left Varginny in a hurry, and wont be very likely to go back, unless he's carried."

"You must be deceived respecting the young man!" cried Iris, earnestly.

"You have confounded him with some other person."

"I wish I might confound him with some other person!" retorted Hart, rather ambiguously, and with something much like a scowl.

"I am not ready to believe anything derogatory to the character of Mr. Harper, although he is comparatively a stranger to me. The tongue of detraction is easily set in motion, Mr. Hart."

"It's not my business to look arter things o' this sort. If the State of Varginny is interested in the chap as calls himself Harper, why let the State take care of it in the proper way. I picked up an old newspaper awhile ago, that had somethin' to say about this particular case. It's possible I can find it about me."

Manuel felt in his pockets, but could not produce the document in question.

"I've got it somewhere, but don't happen to have it about me now. Howsomever, it's no consequence; I don't apose yon care to hear about it?"

"On the contrary I am exceedingly interested in what you are telling."

"Well, the paper only made a few statements at the State's expense, offerin' a certain sum of money for somebody's body," returned Hart, carelessly.

"You mean to say that Mr. Harper is a fugitive from justice, and a reward is offered for his apprehension?" rejoined Miss Rathburn, growing pale.

"I don't mean to say nothin' at all, but jest repeat what I read. I aint one of the sort that goes for to condemn others without judge or jury, though I'm rayther friendly to the Regulators, as a general thing."

"I dare say not," answered Iris.

"You don't do me no more nor justice in sayin' so, and hardly that. It alters goes agin the grain, to use a figger, to injure the character of a feller-critter—but atween you and I, Miss Rathburn, this chap had better keep clear of the Regulators."

"Indeed! you fill my mind with wonder and alarm."

"Some confidential friend ought to advise him to leave the country as fast as three horses can carry him!" said Manuel.

"Is the danger really so imminent?"

"If the Regulators should light on him, his life wouldn't be worth praying for."

"Can this be true?" asked Iris, earnestly.

"I'll go further, and tell you that the Regulators are already on his track, and they'll have him afore a week goes over his head," continued Manuel, emphatically. "Of course you know what'll come of it," he added, significantly.

"May heaven—"

"What did you remark, miss?"

"Nothing of consequence. This is a very singular story."

"Oncommon singular like; but then the world is full of strange things. It don't do to be surprised at nothin' that may happen now-a-days. Human natur seems to be goin' down hill, as 'twere."

"Good morning, Mr. Hart."

"Don't be in a hurry, Miss Rathburn. I have't seen much of you, lately."

"That's not my fault, you know. I have duties that call me home."

"No hard feelin's, I hope?"

"Certainly not," returned Iris, quietly, and turning from the spot proceeded thoughtfully towards the Rancho, reflecting upon what she had heard. Although she reposed but little confidence in the word of Manuel Hart, she could not help feeling unhappy at the subject of his communications. Maurice Harper had pleased her maiden fancy by his affable manners, manly bearing, and handsome figure. She was grateful for the service he had rendered her, and hoped to listen often to his refined conversation; for the reader is aware that society for the pure and guileless was seldom found in that wild region. Miss Rathburn was interested in the young stranger—nothing more—and to hear such astounding disclosures relative to him, quite overcame her.

As she approached the Rancho, she saw Noel Noon near the corral, conversing with Ramona. She slowly advanced and joined them, which circumstance appeared to be a great relief to the hunter, who was evidently much pressed to find suitable subjects of remark.

"I am glad to see you, Mr. Noon. What have you to communicate that is new?" she asked, familiarly.

"Nothin' very cheerin', Miss Rathburn. There's trouble all around us, at present. General Cos continues to advance, and the Regulators and Moderators are fightin' among themselves in a way it isn't pleasant to think of."

"What do you contemplate doing?"

"A few of us hunters and woodsmen have concluded to meet the enemy, and let 'em know what kind of stuff we're made of. You see, Miss Rathburn, there's fighting to be done, and I must do my part on't. This country belongs to us, I take it, and it's our duty to defend it. Santa Anna's roused, and means mischief, you may depend. Baptiste Lorrimer, young Harper, Warpath, the chief of the Lipans, and others, are of my opinion, and are ready to arm and meet the Mexican wolves. We shall get the best and strongest horses the country can afford, and when once on the trail of the uncultivated, copper-faced varmints, the words 'right about face' won't seldom be heered."

"You are very much in earnest, friend Noon. Such a band of men as you propose organizing, ought certainly to have a distinctive name."

"So they had; and you and Ramona must give us one. Don't take it amiss gals, nor color up so like the mischief in consequence, but give our company a proper name. And I have a presentiment that if lips like yours—beggin' your pardon allers—give us a name, it will be a sort of charm or talisman, as some folks say, to protect us in the hour of danger."

"A high and real compliment, Noel Noon, and we were ungrateful did we undervalue it. Come, Ramona, assist me with your ready wit to find a fitting appellation for this chivalrous band of heroes."

"I am not quick at originating, or very ingenious; but I'll make an attempt. How would it do to call your company by the plain name of 'The Hunters of the Border'?"

"That's very good," said Noel; "I like it."

"So do I, Mr. Noel," added Iris, "and so success to 'The Hunters of the Border,' who, mounted upon fleet and hardy horses, will dash upon the enemy, and scatter his forces to the winds in a moment of time, after the style of Francis Marion, one of the heroes of the southern campaign."

"Hurra, for 'The Hunters of the Border!'" shouted Noon, enthusiastically.

"How do you progress in raising recruits of the right stamp?" inquired Iris.

"Better than we expected, and it's probable a good many will join us on our way down to Bexar."

"Mr. Harper, you observed, was one of your number?" she added, with a faltering voice.

"He's more than one, Miss Rathburn—he's a host in himself! I haven't seen nobody equal to him yet, for real grit, as one may say."

"Manuel Hart counts another in your ranks?" pursued our heroine.

"I'm sorry to say that he doesn't, seein' he's a particular friend of yours, Miss Iris?" said Noel, gravely.

"What are his reasons for declining to join you?"

"I think because he's afeared of close questions, and had rayther stay where he wont get no hard knocks. I hope there's no offence in sayin' so?"

"None to me, at least, Noel. Another question I wish to ask. Have you ever heard any accounts prejudicial to the character of Mr. Harper?"

"I've heered things within a day or two which wouldn't be to his credit, if true, but not from a source I can rely on for honesty. And I want it to be understood, once for all, that any person as tries to injure Maurice Harper, by circulatin' bad reports, has got to deal with me for the same."

Noel gave considerable emphasis to his words, for he meant that it should be felt that he was in earnest.

"That's a very good principle to act upon, and I'm glad to hear you speak so frankly on the subject," replied Iris, with warmth.

"I didn't know as it would be pleasin' to you, seein' Manuel Hart is hereabouts so much; but I'd advise you not to heed all that you hear, no matter where it comes from."

The moment Noel Noon ceased speaking, the rapid discharge of fire-arms was heard in the direction of the river, mingled with loud shouts and discordant yells. Both the maidens grew pale and looked anxiously at Noel for explanation.

"I suspect," said he, examining his rifle, "that the two great curses of the country—the Regulators and the Moderators—have met and are killin' each other like unnatural savages. I'll go down the river a little way and see what the trouble is."

"Stay, Noel—it won't be safe!" cried Ramona.

As Noel was turning from the maidens to put his purpose in operation, Mel-tiah Moss made his appearance, running with all his strength towards the scene of tumult.

"That's a fight somewhar, an' I'm bound to go in for it! Hurra for Davie Crockett and the gouging system!" shouted Mel-tiah, as he passed the parties.

Just behind Moss came another personage whom Iris recognized as Jack Lawless. He brandished aloft a bowie-knife, and a double-barrel, and appeared half frantic with delight at the near prospect of a conflict. Hollowing and screaming wildly, he disappeared in the thicket, and his shrill voice was heard a moment after in the small plateau beyond.

CHAPTER VI.

INCIDENTS OF THE CONFLICT.

LEAVING his fair companions, Noel Noon approached the scene of discord. This was not a very safe movement, but he was confident, with the exercise of prudence, he should be able to keep himself aloof from the combatants. We have stated that the conflict seemed to be going on in a plateau a short distance from the river, and this statement proved to be correct.

Noon entered the wood surrounding the spot, and was able to get a fair view of what was going forward. As near as he could judge, about thirty Regulators were engaged with an equal number of Moderators. Some were struggling in a close encounter hand to hand, while others partially protected by the surrounding trees, were using their fire-arms with all the skill and certainty of which they were capable. Every moment the ferocity of these misguided men increased, and the thirst for mutual destruction grew more insatiable. Several had fallen, others received frightful wounds, and still the unnatural conflict went on.

While Noel stood gazing horrified at this sanguinary scene, he heard some one advancing, and turning beheld Maurice Harper and Baptiste Lorrimer.

"This is a dreadful sight," said the former.

"But we can't help it," replied Noon.

"Strange that the passions of men when allowed full play, will so degrade and brutalize them," added Maurice.

"Them isn't altogether my sentiments, young man. These creturs don't cultivate nothin' but the lower passions, and therefore a large crop of evils must be expected. A man's natar may be compared to a garden—he can cultivate useful plants, or let it grow up to vile weeds and sich like. That's the way I look at it, and I've made some observations in the course of my life."

"Cannot this shameful sacrifice of life be stopped? Is not the government strong enough to put an end to all such violations of nature and human rights?"

"The fact is," answered Lorrimer, "we haint got no government. We're cut loose from Mexico, and haven't got organized among ourselves. Everything is at loose ends, and we can't hope for anything better until we have whipped Santa Anna, hanged our own rogues, made wholesome laws, and purified the country generally."

"How they fight! The Regulators seem to be havin' the best on't," said Noon.

For the next five minutes there was an incessant rattle of fire-arms. The voices of the different leaders were heard cheering their followers to renewed effort. The execrations, groans, and shouts of rage and defiance increased to a din most shocking to hear. Bowie-knives flashed in the sun, and an instant after were stained with the blood that had warmed a human heart.

"This is Pandemonium let loose!" exclaimed Harper.

"Look! there's your old friend, Manuel Hart," resumed Noon.

"Where?"

"Yonder; but he's taken good care to screen himself behind a large cypress—the coward!" resumed Noel.

"And a little to his left is another of your acquaintances—Meltiah Moss," said Lorrimer.

"Ah, yes! I see the villain! He also has taken excellent care of his body, but seems to enjoy the fight wonderfully. And now I have made another discovery. Jack Lawless sustains them on the right. A worthy trio, truly!"

"And it will be well for you to keep out of their way, as they don't appear to have no great friendship for you. Such an opportunity as this is too good to be lost, providing they should see you," added Noon.

"Did you ever suspect that Hart belonged to either of these parties?" inquired Maurice.

"I've had my suspicions sometimes, but never knew nothin' certain about it."

"I've a mind to give that cowardly critter a fright," said Lorrimer. "I don't like to see a man firing out from behind the trees and keepin' himself so covered that there's no chance for a return shot to come within two feet of him. You jest drop down here out of sight, and I'll make this here holler bit of steel speak to him in a kind of admonishin' way, to stir up his ideas like."

"You ain't intendin' to shoot him, I s'pose?" remarked Noon.

"Not at all—I've got nothin' agin Manuel Hart, that I should want to injure him bodily, but it put me in pain, as 'twere, to see him lettin' blaze at human critters who can't return the complement. So lie close, boys, and I'll give you a specimen of shootin'."

Harper and Noon both secreted themselves more effectually behind trees, and watched the motions of Lorrimer. Hart was preparing to discharge his rifle again. He had rested it against the trunk of the cypress and was watching for a victim.

Old Lorrimer raised his rifle quickly to his face and held it with firm and steady nerves; in an instant it darted forth its flame, and cracked with whip-like sharpness.

Hart dropped his rifle and recoiled in genuine alarm, casting his eyes hurriedly around to learn from what direction the shot had come.

"He can't shoot much more to-day, I reckon," said Lorrimer, coolly.

"What have you done?" asked Harper.

"Shot off the hammer of his rifle."

"A happy thought and nicely executed. You may have saved more than one life by so doing."

"It strikes me very forcibly that smthin' more might be done in that way. There's Moss and Lawless both doin' mischief. Maurice, let's give 'em a start."

"Agreed; I'll send a messenger through Meltiah's cap."

"He would have sent one lower than your cap, if he'd had his wish," returned Noon. "But I won't meddle with Lawless's head-piece. I'll just cut off a lock of his beard; that'll give him to understand that there's somebody in the vicinity that can look through the double sights."

The reader may possibly imagine that feats of this kind cannot well be done by the sharpest shooters that the country can produce; but it is a fact that much more skillful shooting than this has been accomplished by practiced riflemen with American rifles, on various occasions. Western and Southern hunters take much pride and experience much satisfaction in deeds of this bold and daring nature.

Our hero was not unskilled in the use of the rifle. He had been familiar with it from childhood; and therefore when he levelled the sights upon Meltiah's cap, he felt no fear that he should miss his mark and injure the woodsman. He fired, and the report was instantly followed by that of Noon's rifle. Both Moss and Lawless stood irresolute and silent; then the former pulled off his cap and the latter felt his beard—the shots had proved true to their aim.

Manuel Hart had already thrown himself upon the ground close to the roots of the cypress, and now his comrades in sin followed his lead with unexampled celerity, crouching so low that their bodies were concealed by the surrounding brakes.

"You see what sneakin' villany is," said Lorrimer. "It's afeared of everythin', and yet cruel and revengeful, and can't never, under no circumstances, be trusted. Now all these men ought to be fighting the common enemy of Texas, instead of killin' each other. Isn't it a pity they won't unite to fight the Mexicans?"

"It is indeed; but see, the Moderators are prevailin'. They are pressing upon their foes, hoping to drive them into the river. If there were no braver men among them than those ere fellers yonder in the brakes, the fight would soon end."

While the parties were mutually hoping that something would transpire to end this combat, the Regulators recovered their lost ground and pressed hard upon their opponents, unexpectedly bringing our friends within the range of both fires.

The leader of the faction now in the ascendant—a tall, ferocious-looking man with a broad chest, and great power of lungs, seeing Maurice and his comrades, hailed them, desiring to know whether they were friends or enemies.

"Neither," replied Maurice; "we are neutral."

"That means neither on one side or t'other, I take it," returned the captain, for he was thus distinguished.

"That's the signification of it, precisely, and I want you to hold on, a little, and listen to reason," replied Lorrimer.

"Reason ain't what we want, old feller, so stand out of the way, or I allow we shall pepper you! People as can't fight aint good for much, no way. Come on, boys! Hurra! At 'em agin—drive 'em into the river!" shouted the leader.

The combat was being renewed with fresh malignity, when Warpath suddenly ran in between the contending parties, crying:

"A war party of the Camanches are coming; white men! Cease to kill each other, and turn your arms against the old enemies of your race!"

"What's that you're sayin'?" cried the captain of the Moderators.

"The Camanches are close at hand, and their numbers are many. They will cut you down like grass. They are coming like the winds—there is no time to be lost—who among you will fight?"

"Are there any Mexicans with them?" asked Lorrimer.

"White men, yes; there are many Mexicans with them, and the thunder of their horses and mustangs will soon be heard. Make ready your weapons—sound the war cry—victory, or the happy hunting grounds!"

Harper instantly leaped upon a rock, and swinging his cap, took up the cry and shouted at the top of his voice: "victory, or the happy hunting grounds." Lorrimer and Noel echoed this sentiment, and many of the Moderators and Regulators caught it up and re-echoed it earnestly; while others sullenly gazing at each other, panting with exertion.

"You have heard what our red brother has said," continued Maurice. "Be men, and let this unnatural conflict stop where it is, that you may turn your arms against real foes. Mexico is sending forth her legions—they come—they incite the restless Camanches against you. Your wives and children will be slain, and your homes left desolate. Arouse! awake! no longer be blinded by partisan feelings. Form into order of battle, and await firmly the approach of the enemy."

While Harper was speaking, a rifle ball passed through his coat sleeve, and another grazed his left cheek. When he ceased, some cheered him, others remained silent and moody, either indifferent to what might come, or still too full of rancor and hate to care for foes other than those before them.

"I'll go after such of our men as I can find," said Noel Noon, "and bring 'em to the rescue."

"Too late! too late!" cried Warpath. "In a moment you will hear the terrible war-cry of the Camanches, and the carbines of the Mexicans."

A great calm had fallen on the disturbed human elements, and leaning on their arms, the combatants awaited they knew not what. Nature also was calm. Not a breeze stirred the leaves, or ruffled the waters. The wounded, apparently, suppressed their groans with a strong effort. The smoke had lifted, leaving the quiet air impregnated with a sulphurous smell.

Suddenly the stillness was broken by an awful din. Unseen enemies shouted their battle-cries, and a rattling volley poured like a storm upon those who were busily engaged in destroying each other a few seconds before. Harper saw two or three drop dead, and others receive wounds.

"Each man to a tree!" shouted Lorrimer.

"Yes, every man to a tree!" cried the leaders of the respective parties.

"And don't yield an inch while you have strength to load and fire!" added Noon.

"Whoop! death to the foes of the white man and the Lipan!" cried Warpath.

"Be on your guard against Manuel Hart and his two villains," said Noel to Maurice, as they took trees near each other.

"They'll be likely to get out of this business as soon as possible, or I don't know nothin' of their nature," answered Lorrimer.

"I have already heard from two of them. See! here are their marks on my cheek and in my sleeve," replied Maurice.

"I heard their rifles crack, and tried to get sight of 'em, but they kept close; and it was well for them that they did, for I might have done 'em mischief," continued Lorrimer.

A hot conflict ensued. While the Indians kept under cover of the trees on one side, a party of Mexicans, greatly exceeding the whites in numbers, mounted upon mustangs, gained courage to take possession of the plateau on the other, intending to charge them and drive them from their covert. The moment, however, they entered the open space, the Texans turned their rifles towards them, and each singling out his man, a most destructive fire was the immediate result, causing the assailants to break and retreat in confusion. Not wholly disheartened by this failure, the officers cheered their men once more to the plateau.

"Now there's what I call a fair chance for you, boys! Take good aim, and pull on 'em all at once," said Lorrimer.

"Now, my lads, is your time. Be cool—now we have 'em—blaze away."

At the second fire the Mexicans fled in utter dismay, for every other saddle was emptied, and the mustangs that bore them went riderless away. They attempted to rally again, but the men were disheartened, and the officers could not force them into the plateau for the third time; and indeed it is doubtful whether they strove very hard to do so.

They learned, to their cost, that mustangs in such a locality were of little use, and withdrew out of reach of Texan rifles.

Pressed no longer by the Mexican horse, they now turned their attention exclusively to their red enemies, who continued to attack them with great fury. Before their persevering assaults the Texans were forced to yield, and now gave back, step by step, using their weapons with effect whenever opportunity offered.

The Camanches seldom showed any part of their bodies, but when they did, even if it were the smallest part of them, they were sure to receive a wound which was generally mortal.

"This won't do!" cried Lorrimer, when he saw that they were losing ground. "We must drive 'em, or there won't be one of us left to tell the story."

"If we can force them from their covert into the open prairie in their rear we shall be victorious, if I know anything of Indian warfare," returned Harper.

"You're right, young man; so let's push 'em hard," replied Lorrimer. "This way—this way!"

While they were pressing gallantly upon the savages, Maurice beheld Noel Noon fiercely attacked by two powerful Indians. Our hero would have speedily rushed to the assistance of his friend, had he not at that moment been himself assailed by a chief whose voice had often been heard in battle, cheering his warriors to the work of destruction.

Harper was very muscular and active, but his red foe was lithe and strong, and he could not easily dispose of him. While striving to throw him to

the ground in order to despatch him, he perceived that Noon was fast losing his strength, and could not much longer contend with two such athletic enemies. Concentrating all his powers, he cast the Indian from him with such force that he fell at the foot of a tree, striking his head heavily against the gnarled roots.

Without stopping to give him the *coup de grace*, Maurice sprang to the assistance of his friend, nor reached him an instant too soon, for he had already sunk to his knee and a hatchet was upraised to give the fatal blow. Harper caught the uplifted arm with his left hand, and dealt the savage a blow between the eyes with his right fist that knocked him down. Wrenching the tomahawk from the loosened grasp of the fallen foe, Maurice sunk its bright edge into his head, and the stout limbs lying still and stiff, told how easily the soul of the warrior had passed.

Noon sank exhausted to the earth, and Maurice renewed the conflict over his body with the surviving Camanche. Unfortunately while thus engaged, the savage who had first assaulted him, recovered his sense and his feet, and came to the assistance of the other, so that Maurice had two enemies to contend with, and Noon unable to assist him.

Our hero was now in fearful peril, for the attacks of his antagonists were furious and well directed. At the critical moment when his fate appeared on the eye of being decided, Honest, who had been left at the camp on account of having been slightly wounded by a buck, came bounding to the scene and with a loud yell of rage, leaped at the throat of the foremost savage and dragged him to the ground, while in the act of striking with his tomahawk.

Encouraged by this unlooked for and providential assistance, Maurice seized his remaining opponent around his body, and lifting him up cast him to the earth, falling with all his weight upon his chest, driving the breath from his lungs, and for a moment paralysing all his faculties.

Maurice glanced about for a weapon, and seeing a hunting-knife near him, sheathed it in the breast of the Camanche.

Meantime, Honest had been struggling with the other, both rolling about among the dry leaves and exerting all their strength. For a time Maurice stood watching them, unable to assist his faithful canine friend, so rapid were the evolutions of the combatants. Soon the Indian ceased to writhe and roll; his limbs straightened out, quivered an instant, and then remained quiet.

Harper turned his head from the spectacle with a shudder, and a sigh of regret.

CHAPTER VII.

OUR HERO BECOMES UNPOPULAR.

It was quiet evening hour. The fight had ended. The foe had been repulsed, and the survivors were resting after the fatigues of the contest. Harper was alone, not far from the place where the new company was to rendezvous.

The day just ended, had furnished his first experience in warfare, and he naturally dwelt on the scenes through which he had passed. He had shed blood, and his better thoughts instinctively shrank from the memory of what he had done. He had fought in self defence, but even that reflection failed to make him feel quite at ease. Some internal monitor seemed to tell him that it was wrong to take life under any circumstances, although the whole civilized world would justify him in doing as he had.

He was absorbed in meditations of his nature, when the restless movements of Honest advised him that some person was approaching. Looking between the intervening trees, Maurice beheld an individual of erect carriage and assured bearing, deliberately advancing. Honest walked towards the intruder, growling, but he spoke to him in a conciliating tone, and the animal eyeing him sharply, made no farther hostile demonstrations.

"Your dog is trying to read my character, I perceive, sir," remarked the stranger.

"And I believe he has succeeded before this time," replied Maurice.

"Wonderful instincts have dogs. I some times wish I was a dog myself," returned the other.

"A singular fancy, truly," observed our hero, with a smile.

"I will tell you why I have had such a strange whim. It is because dogs are capable of acting disinterestedly. They can feel a friendship which death only can extinguish. They are faithful creatures—they do their best, and those that do their best, man or beast, do their duty, and all that can be required of them."

"There is reason in that."

"So there is in your dog. Just look at his large eyes; are they not half human in their expression? He's worth a king's ransom!"

"More than that, to me," said Maurice.

"By the way, I have heard rumors of a fight."

"There has been one; yes, two, for that matter."

"And—"

"The Texan rifles have been victorious."

"I am glad to hear it. You perhaps saw something of the fray. How was it?"

Harper stated what has been described, to which recital the stranger listened with deed interest.

"So you have been engaged for the first time. What do you think of it?"

"I regret the necessity that compels men to slay each other, be they red or white," returned Maurice.

"A proper feeling; but stern necessity compels us to fight, at the present crisis. I have heard that the hunters up in this region were raising a band of brave lads to oppose the march of the myrmidons of the Dictator of Mexico?"

"True again. Fair lips have named them; they are to be called, 'The Hunters of the Border.'"

"A smoothly goin title, really; it sounds feminine, and I hope the boys who

bear it will not dishonor themselves by an act of cruelty or cowardice. Who is to lead this redoubtable band?"

"Your humble servant has been talked of," replied Maurice, coloring; "but I think I shall decline in favor of one older, and more experienced."

"Yes, experience and courage are two requisites to be combined in a military leader. Veterans are needed, no doubt, to fill responsible offices."

"I intend to win my position, before I accept any place of trust, be it high or low," returned Maurice, somewhat proudly.

"Quite right. I respect the feeling that prompts you to take such a course."

"May I ask who you are?" inquired Maurice, now turning full upon the stranger, and regarding him steadily.

"It's an honest question, and deftly put. I am called Dorville."

"Dorville; I don't remember to have heard it; but I daresay it's a very good name. You carry a rifle, and appear to be rigged *cap-a-pie* in hunter's garb."

"Which, being interpreted, is equivalent to asking what my business is? You have guessed it; I am a hunter. Come, lead the way to your camp. I should like to see some of your fellows."

"You are a true man, I suppose?"

"That remains to be proved. There can be but two ways about it—I am, or I am not; let time show. You carry a rifle, also, and are dressed in the style of the backwoodsman?"

"I am what you see."

"Not a native of this part of the country?"

"I am not."

"From Virginia, perhaps?"

Maurice paused, colored slightly, and looked at the stranger before replying.

"Yes, Mr. Dorville, I am from the State you have mentioned."

"Perhaps your name is Harper?"

"That's what I answer to. I shall begin to suspect that you are a conjurer, soon."

"News always flies rapidly, especially bad news. I am somewhat ubiquitous, Mr. Harper."

"And ambiguous, too, I should say."

"Possibly."

"I cannot say that I understand you."

"Well, I am in the habit of travelling through this portion of country, and hear pretty much all that transpires; so your name is not unknown to me."

"Not discreditably known, I hope?"

"You probably best know whether you deserve to be known favorably or otherwise," replied Dorville, somewhat drily.

"I certainly do, and pardon me if I choose to consider it a matter relating exclusively to myself."

Dorville made no reply, and the parties walked slowly towards the encampment.

"Do you know Rathburn?" asked Dorville, abruptly, at length.

"But slightly; I have met him only a few times."

"And his daughters?"

"I have seen them."

"And so have I, and they interest me exceedingly."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, I assure you. I love to be near them, I know not why. There is music to me in the tones of their voices."

"Have you any preference for either of the two?" asked Maurice, frowning and casting a restless look at Dorville.

"I confess I have. Iris pleases me best. I am instinctively drawn towards her; yet I have seen her but a few times."

"I suppose you are old enough to fall in love?"

"Old enough? Yes; I'm past forty. My young days have gone, and yet I feel young when I listen to the musical voice of Iris Rathburn."

Our hero, who had at first been considerably impressed in favor of the stranger, soon began to feel differently towards him. Miss Rathburn was nothing to him, it was true, but he did not like to hear him speak of her in such a familiar way, or manifest such a decided preference for her.

"Perhaps you had better speak to the young lady's father," he added, with quiet sarcasm.

"That might do for you, young man, but I prefer to address myself to the lady herself."

Harper felt that his face was in a glow, and for a moment he fervently wished that the assured and urbane Dorville was in some distant locality. Still the stranger interested him. There was something about him that was pleasing, notwithstanding his presumption; for presumption our hero esteemed his conversation concerning Iris Rathburn.

But there was another thing to be considered; would not this pleasing something about the man Dorville be likely also to attract the attention of the fair maiden in question? Certainly! nothing more probable. The girl saw but little society, and the appearance of such a person as Dorville would obviously produce an effect on her youthful imagination. Indeed, such a result might reasonably be looked for; and perhaps he had already dazzled her girlish fancy. What if he had? Had he any claims on Miss Rathburn? No. Had he ever made a single effort to win her affections? He had not. Why then did he feel uncomfortable? Was he jealous?

Our hero would not confess to himself that he was; but others are at liberty to form a different judgement.

The parties reached the encampment. It was a spot near the river, on an

open piece of bottom land. Several small huts or camps had been erected for the accommodation of those who were willing to unite to meet the common enemy. By the joint efforts of Noel Noon, Lorrimer, Harper, and others, quite a number had already gathered. Those that had horses had ridden them to the encampment, and such as had none managed to purchase them. Several persons who had formerly belonged to the Moderators and Regulators, had joined this little band, and were now ready to be led against the force of Santa Anna.

A leader had not yet been selected. Harper had been talked of to fill this office, principally through the instrumentality of Noon and Lorrimer. But the young man was a stranger to most of them, and it seemed, also, that reports not very favorable to the character of Maurice had by some means, and through some channel, reached the ears of the men—Noon among the number, as has been noticed in another place.

When Harper and Dorville appeared, the recruits were gathered in groups in various spots, conversing upon this subject. There was much talking, gesticulation, and grave shaking of heads in relation to the matter. Noel Noon stood a little aloof, regarding the proceedings with a serious and troubled expression. Lorrimer approached him, having the same uneasy look.

"They're goin' to vote," he said gloomily. "How will it go, think you?"

"Agin him."

"I think so, Lorrimer, and—and I'm sorry. He's a fine appearin' lad, and would make a good officer."

"Yes, but the men have been influenced. They want to know if you'll stand as a candidate?"

"No, I couldn't," said Noon, thoughtfully. "I've promised that young man my friendship, and I can't think of goin' agin him."

"Better have you than a worse man, friend Noon."

"I can't do it, and you may tell 'em so. If they'll choose him the first officer, I won't greatly object to bein' second. But I won't do nothin' different. He may be to blame, but I'll stick to him; that's my natur, and I can't get over it."

"It's a true, manly, sort of senterment, I know, but then Manuel Hart aint the man to lead me agin' the Mexicans."

"Manuel Hart!" exclaimed Noon, with a start.

"That's the name that'll be afore 'em, if you decline."

"Lorrimer, you're the oldest—you're the man as can best lead us to battle. I'll speak of it, and you mustn't, on no account, say nothin' agin it."

"I can fight well, perhaps, Noel Noon, but I can't do much in military way. I'm afeared. I know my own duty, but I don't know that of other folks."

"That's what we want—*example*, and not talk. If you ride up to the enemy boldly, others will ride after and imitate you. So say no more."

"But I'd rather foller you or the young man, Harper."

"Ah, there he comes! I'll go and speak to him about this unpleasant matter and kind of prepare him for the disappointment," said Noon.

"Break it to him kind of gentle like," added Lorrimer.

Noel advanced to meet Harper, who was already coming towards him with Dorville.

"How do you do, Noel Noon?" said the latter.

"We've met afore, I believe," returned the hunter, scanning him closely.

"Yes, several times; but my memory is better than yours, it seems."

"Now I remember; your name is Dorville. Glad to see you among us; that is, if you come with the right kind of feelin's."

"We shall see, Noon, we shall see why and for what I come, all in good time. Perhaps you want to speak with Mr. Harper?"

"Yes, I have got a few words to say to him. This way, friend Harper, if you please. The fact is," he continued, taking the arm of Maurice, "affairs are taking a strange turn agin' you. There seems to be some secret undercurrent at work, carryin' you down stream, so to speak as 'twere."

"I know it—I feel it, friend Noon," said our hero, earnestly.

"They're throwin' you overboard, I'm afeared. I thought I'd warn you of it, so you needn't feel too much disappointed when you come to hear on't."

"My good Noel, I shan't be much disappointed, for I've already made up my mind to give up all thoughts of being a leader, at present. I mean to win my place, before I am elevated to any post of trust and honor. You must be our captain."

"Me! rude Noel Noon! No! I'm firm on that pint. If you was to be first, I'd be second with pride and pleasure, but on no other conditions."

"This sacrifice you are making for me. Pray don't; change your mind. I want no better, bolder, truer leader than yourself."

"I'm jest like a rock, Maurice Harper; it's of no use for you to keep hammerin' at me, expectin' to change my mind, for it can't be done."

"Brave Noel!" exclaimed Harper, and then relapsed into silence. At the expiration of a few seconds he roused himself and asked:

"Do you know the reason of this sudden change of sentiment among the men?"

"I couldn't say as I'm altogether ignorant of it. It's some kind of rumor or another that's got afloat."

"I should like to know what it is," returned Maurice, earnestly.

"Perhaps you'll know some day or other," rejoined Noel, hesitatingly.

"I see one yonder who looks like Manuel Hart," said the young man quite abruptly.

"He's among us, and I'm sorry for it, for he'll never be a good friend of yours."

"He won't fight, Noel; there's no true courage in him."

"That's my opinion; but he can make mischief."

"Well, let things take their course; be assured that I have nothing to fear. The rule of eternal rectitude will prevail. The guilty, the false, the cowardly, have reason to anticipate defeat and ultimate disgrace; not the honest, the truthful, 'be just."

"Just so."

"I have observed that there is a discordant element at work—that an influence hostile to myself is rife among those with whom I had hoped to associate on the best of terms—as brothers in arms. If Manuel Hart slanders my name—if he places a false mark of calumny upon me, let him look well to it, for I will track him out and punish his baseness. I could even now justly accuse him of a serious crime—that of attempting my life, as he did through the instrumentality of Meltiah Moss. But, as you know, I have been silent on that subject, choosing to hide my time, and permit him to lay his schemes, and go unwhipt a little longer. Believe me, I am watching yonder backwoodsman, and the time approaches when I will unmask him. His audacity in appearing here in my sight, and among persons collected partly through my influence, is astonishing."

"I wonder at it myself; but see, they are voting."

"I care but little how this affair turns, so far as the desire to be a leader is concerned; but I should not like to be defeated by unfair and underhand means."

"Here comes Lorrimer and Dorville. Now we'll learn how it's goin'."

"Who is this Dorville?"

"That's what I should really like to know myself."

"Then you have no knowledge of his character, residence, or pursuits?"

"I couldn't say that I have; I've met him, and that's all. Here they are. How goes the battle?"

"They'll come themselves and tell us. I've no heart to talk about it."

"Then it's gone against our wishes?"

"Yes," said Dorville, "I presume it has, in some respects, although you will doubtless be pleased to hear that our friend Lorrimer is to be your captain."

"That pleases us," said Harper, with a smile.

"Who is second in command?" inquired Noon, anxiously.

"Manuel Hart," rejoined Dorville, fixing his eyes steadily upon Maurice.

"That's bad—bad enough! I wonder who had the chief agency in his election?"

"Rathburn."

"Rathburn!" exclaimed Harper, blushing to the temples.

"The same—the young lady's father whom we recently talked of," returned Dorville, calmly.

Noel and Maurice looked at each other, and both appeared confused.

"There's something wrong here, and I half wish that 'The Hunters of the Border,' had never been raised by our agency."

"Do not entertain such feelings on my account, but think only of the high object which we have in view—the rescue of this unhappy and distracted country from Mexican thrall."

"A worthy sentiment, certainly. I applaud your motives," resumed Dorville.

"I trust none of us have any selfish incentives to seek the field. At least, I can speak for my two friends here," replied Harper.

Noel here intimated to Maurice that he should like to have more conversation with him, and arm-in-arm they walked away.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE ADVENTURES OF THE NIGHT

"I HAVE been thinking," said Noel, "that it won't be quite safe down at Rathburn's to-night."

"Precisely my own feelings," rejoined Harper.

"Perhaps a few of us ought to go down and keep guard there. Small squads of Mexicans or Camanches may be lurkin' about the vicinity, who won't mind doin' a little mischief if they can get a chance."

"We had better speak to Lorrimer about it, and then steal away to the Rancho without attracting observation."

"And I will tell him, if he hears us fire, to come to our assistance immediately, with a dozen men or more."

"That will do well. Go and arrange it with the captain, and I will await your return."

Noel having attended to this part of the business, our two friends directed their steps towards the Rancho, to keep unseen vigils over the maidens, in whom both felt a deeper interest than they were willing to acknowledge.

"We'll take different stations," said Harper. "Myself and Honest will post ourselves yonder on the most exposed side, and you, if so disposed, can be on the alert here, or anywhere else that your good judgment may dictate."

Maurice took a position among some black oak and ash trees, a few yards from that side of the corral towards the river. Signifying to Honest in a manner perfectly comprehensible to him, that he was expected to be silent and watchful, our young soldier leaned musingly upon his rifle, and watched the lights dancing by the window within the dwelling.

It is more than probable that he wished that he might see the graceful figure

of Iris flit past the transparent panes, or stand a moment behind them with a view of looking out upon the surrounding scenery. Maurice felt sad. A presentiment of evil harassed him. The fact that there had been such a sudden revolution in the sentiments of The Hunters of the Border, surprised and pained him. So far as his honor was concerned, he was exceedingly sensitive. He was anxious to sustain a good name every where, and under all circumstances. Although he had resolved to decline leading the new company, as a captain, he was notwithstanding extremely mortified and wounded in his feelings, on account of his ignominious and unaccountable rejection.

He knew that Iris Rathburn would hear of his disgrace, and the idea affected him more unpleasantly than he had supposed it possible. He hardly knew the meaning of it, but thus it was, and he had not the philosophy to think what might be the effect upon her, without painful emotions. For some reason he desired to stand well in the estimation of the maiden.

Meditations of this character had occupied the mind of our hero for half-an-hour, when the restlessness of Honest induced him to suspect that some one was near. Following the direction of the dog's earnest looks, Harper soon perceived a figure emerging from the trees, a short distance below him, and approach the Rancho without noise.

With feelings not of the most pleasant description, the young man recognized Manuel Hart. It appeared also that his canine companion made the same discovery, for it was with much difficulty that he could keep him quiet; he wished to spring upon the intruder.

Hart advanced to the window where the light had been reflected most palpably. He paused, listened intently, and then tapped gently upon the sash. There was no response and he repeated the operation. Presently a female form appeared, and the window was cautiously raised a little.

Harper stood so still that he could hear his own heart beating with unnatural vehemence. He was thinking that maidens did not have young gallants tapping at their windows without previous agreement. He bent forward to catch the tones of her voice, if she should speak. She spoke, but so low that he could not understand what she said. Hart replied in the same key, and a hurried conversation was carried on.

Then Maurice caught a few words. He heard Manuel say something in relation to a "defeat," and had no doubt that he alluded to his own rejection by the borderers. Immediately he added:

"All are convinced of it. The proofs are positive and can't be doubted, no how. Your father's down hard on him."

Some exclamation of surprise escaped the lips of Iris, and Hart resumed:

"There can't be no mistake. He's attempted the same thing here twice, to my certain knowledge. He'll have to leave the country, can't be trusted, and Rathburn agrees with me about it."

"Is the danger past, for the present, do you think?" inquired Iris, earnestly.

"Tis in that quarter. We whipped 'em thoroughly. Some folks ran away though, on the first fire."

"Such fights are dreadful to think of! Why do the Moderators and Regulators assume such a hostile attitude towards each other?"

"Because the Regulators need to be *regulated*, and the Moderators mean to do it. It can't be helped."

"When will the hunters of the Border march down the Brazos?" added the maiden.

"Right away. Old Lorrimer—not a fit person for a captain, by a great deal—is bent on goin' arter the Mexicans; but it seems to me there's fightin' enough nearer home to keep us all busy. For instance, in confarence atween you and I, the country ought to be cleared of the Regulators and this floatin' population comin' in from other States to escape their desarts. But I must be goin'. Be careful of yourself, keep clear of strangers, and remember there's worse enemies nor Camanches and Mexicans, without goin' a long distance to find 'em either."

Other remarks followed which did not reach Harper's ears, and then Hart glided away as he came. What Maurice had heard did not increase his happiness, having a pretty well-founded suspicion that it, in some way, had relation to himself. He waited until ten or fifteen minutes had elapsed after Hart's departure, and then he proceeded to the window which had been the scene of the recent interview. He was not quite so assured and bold, however, as his predecessor had appeared, but nevertheless he tapped upon the sash in the same manner.

There was a momentary pause, then he heard a light step within. The window was not raised, but a voice inquired who was there?

"Maurice Harper," returned the young man.

Iris recoiled a step, and was obviously surprised and disconcerted.

"I have not come to harm you," said Maurice, calmly.

Iris hastily raised the window, as if ashamed of her embarrassment and distrust, if indeed she had felt anything of the latter.

"Thinking that you might very naturally experience feelings of uneasiness, knowing that enemies are in the vicinity, my friend, Noel Noon is keeping watch near the Rancho, in order to secure your safety. I thought this information might make you happier, and secure your rest through the night," said Maurice, respectfully.

Iris colored. "Is he alone?" she inquired.

"No; a young man is with him," replied Maurice.

"May I ask his name?"

"Really, I do not happen to recall it, at this moment, but you will certainly be warned, if danger approaches."

"I thank you, Mr. Harper."

"No thanks to me, Miss Rathburn. Noel Noon alone deserves them."

Iris Rathburn looked earnestly at Maurice, but his face did not express any peculiar emotions; it was placid and even cold in its expression.

"So Baptiste Lorrimer is your captain?" said Iris, as if to prolong the conversation.

"Yes, Miss Rathburn; I was rejected as a candidate, almost unanimously."

Again the maiden scanned the features of Maurice. She wondered to hear him talk of the matter so quietly, and with the manifestation of so little disappointment. She had thought that he would probably speak of it with considerable bitterness.

"Captain Lorrimer will make an excellent officer. I shall gladly follow him to the field, to battle, and through danger," he resumed.

"And how are you pleased with your second officer?" asked the young lady, with an effort.

"Excuse me, Miss Rathburn; do not press me to express my opinion. I prefer to think of the gallant name you have given us—The Hunters of the Border."

"You owe that to my sister Ramona—not to me."

"I will owe it to both, if you please."

"As you will. May you all display courage and fidelity in the discharge of duty."

"I shall prize those qualities more since you admire them," returned Maurice, with more warmth.

"Express my obligation to Mr. Noon and the young man with him, whose name you do not happen to recall," said Miss Rathburn, with some trepidation. Maurice bowed.

"It is singular that father has not returned before this time," added Iris.

"He has been busy with the men, I believe, since the battle," returned the young man.

"In relation to the choice of leaders?"

"I think so, although I have taken so little interest in the matter, that I cannot be confident on that point."

"Was he in favor of those who were chosen?"

"Really I am not qualified to say, but perhaps Mr. Hart will be able to give you definite information," rejoined Maurice, in tones that appeared to Miss Rathburn to be slightly sarcastic. She had entertained an uneasy suspicion that Maurice had been a witness to the interview between herself and Manuel Hart, and his last answer confirmed it. She was too much disconcerted to make an immediate reply, and her face and neck were suffused with a crimson glow.

Maurice instinctively fathomed her thoughts, but made no efforts to remove her suspicions, or exculpate himself from the charge of being an inquisitive, deliberate listener to matters that did not require the presence of a third person.

"I think I understand the meaning of your last remark. What has transpired, I could not prevent; and," she added, in a lower voice, "am I not mistress of my own actions?"

"You have discretion enough to be, certainly, Miss Rathburn. I hope a mind like yours will never be forced to act otherwise than voluntarily."

"I see how I am misconstrued, Mr. Harper; but, pardon me, I do not—do I choose to be watched in an unkindly manner."

"Watched?" repeated Harper, in a deprecating tone.

Iris was now weeping, and could not answer.

"Will it give you pleasure to consider me as a prying eavesdropper, experiencing satisfaction in lurking around peaceful dwellings for the purpose of witnessing stolen interviews between youthful maidens and their lovers?" asked Maurice, in a voice gently reproachful.

"No more, Mr. Harper: I had expected something different from you," returned Iris, with dignity.

"Do we part with unkindly feelings?"

"Good night, Mr. Harper."

"Farewell, Miss Rathburn," said Maurice, mournfully.

While Iris was slowly closing the window, Honest placed his large paws upon the sill, and licked her hand half to solicit her attention. She saw his intelligent eyes beaming kindly upon her, and instantly the service he had rendered her a few days previously was recalled, and a pang of reproach shot through her mind, accusing her of ingratitude and severity. She stooped until her dark curls rested upon his head, thanked him in whispers, and caressed him with her soft hand.

She felt that she had perhaps wronged his master, and she resolved not to be ungrateful to the brute. She had about her neck a wide and handsome ribbon, secured by a small, neat pin; unfastening this, she at once transferred it to the neck of Honest, who remained perfectly quiet until the operation was completed, then expressing his satisfaction by motions of his shaggy tail, and the eloquence of his eyes, leaped away after his master.

Miss Rathburn shut the window, and sitting down near it, wept profusely.

Harper walked some considerable distance before stopping, not wishing Iris to know that he intended remaining in the vicinity. He seated himself on the bank of the river, and by some mental algebra, arrived at the conclusion that he was unhappy. If any person had asked him why he was so, it would have been exceedingly difficult for him to have made the matter perfectly lucid. And yet there he was miserable enough for *two*. Had he been accused of being in love he would have denied the charge promptly and with much spirit. So he watched the turbid waters of the Brazos, thinking how much injustice Miss Rathburn had done him, by intimating that he had exercised unmanly curiosity, or was there for any other purpose than a good one.

Honest laid his cold nose against his master's cheek, and tried to attract his notice, but it was long before he could elicit any mark of attention. At last the ribbon upon his neck caught his eye, and he examined it with much curiosity and not a little surprise.

"Ah, my good friend, where did you get this pretty souvenir?"

Honest did not speak vocally, but he looked towards the Rancho.

"And she gave you this?" he said, musingly.

"She has bestowed upon you greater marks of friendship than she has deigned to honor me with," he added, still examining the ribbon upon which he had discovered the initials of the fair donor's name.

It looked rather out of place on your large neck, nevertheless I will not rob you of it. Wear it and welcome, Honest, and show the person who attempts to take it away the quality of your teeth."

Harper arose and went back to his former station. He reached it just in time to see Dorville reconnoitering the premises. This was another new, and to Maurice, unpleasant development. What possible motive had that individual for prowling (that was the word he used mentally) about the building at that hour? He was really at a loss to divine the occasion of Dorville's appearance there.

And it is not wonderful that suspicion of his new acquaintance should awaken a slight twinge of jealousy in his mind.

He restrained his displeasure, and remained passively at his post, awaiting the denouement, whatever it might be. But nothing uncommon transpired. After walking noiselessly about the place for a short time, he turned on his heel and went away.

Maurice rejoiced at his departure, and asked himself who would next appear, and how many lovers Miss Rathburn had? He was destined to keep guard an hour before the first of these questions could be answered.

At the expiration of that period, a more startling manifestation occurred. A party of six persons, mounted upon horses, rode up to the corral, when one of them dismounted and approached the window which had already been the scene of two interviews. Harper thought he recognized the figure, but resolved to await the unfolding of the plot.

The man, instead of knocking, raised the sash without that formality, and thrusting in his head, said:

"Are you here, gals?"

There being no answer to this salutation, the intruder spoke in a louder key.

"I say is anybody in these here diggins?"

"Who speaks?" said a voice which Harper recognized.

"An indervidoval," returned the first speaker.

"What do you want?"

"I reckon you're sent for."

"By whom, and for what?"

"Your father, I rather *allow*, wants you to go with us, to some place or other whar you'll be sort of safe."

"And you have come for us?" said Iris.

"It amounts to that exactly, miss," added the man, clambering in at the window.

"What is your name, if you please?"

"Well, it don't matter greatly what my name happens to be at this time, but for the sake of bein' accomoderatin', I'll inform you that it's Moss—a good friend of your friend—Manuel Hart."

"Why do you come in without invitation? Stay where you are—come no nearer—I wish to question you before I consider your errand seriously."

"Better git ready to go, nor lose no time. Expect that the Indians will be down on the Rancho every minit."

"I am afraid to go with this person," said Ramona, promptly.

"So am I, and I refuse, without further question, to leave home," added Iris, firmly.

"There's six of us all mounted, with two spare bosses, and you may depend on't we can protect you, ladies," resumed Moss.

"Where do you expect to find a place of greater security than this?" asked Ramona.

"Well, somewhar or other, I can't jest tell whar, but Manuel Hart—that is I mean your father, knows all about it, and he'll jine us a short way from here.

Here the two girls evidently consulted together in whispers, and then Iris spoke for both.

"Mr. Moss, if you have come on a good and worthy errand, we thank you; but we prefer to remain where we are."

"Then we shall be obleeged to carry you by main strength, gals, which wont on all accounts be pleasant."

Meltiah Moss coolly stepped to the door, opened it, and called to three of his associates to come in.

CHAPTER IX.

OCCURRENCES AT THE RANCHE.

THE three persons indicated, threw their bridles to their companions, and dismounting passed through the corral to join Meltiah. Harper perceived at a glance that Jack Wild, or Jack Lawless, as he was indiscriminately termed, was one of the actors in the scene.

He now deemed it time to interfere, in order to prevent the contemplated outrage upon the personal liberty of the two maidens. As he advanced quickly towards the window, he heard the young ladies utter cries of alarm, and with a bound he sprang through it and stood in the midst of the parties. Honest, who never was a laggard in a good cause, followed close at his master's heels. Considerable astonishment was depicted on the countenances of these four worthies at the unexpected debut of our bold Virginian.

"You're thar, ar ye?" exclaimed Lawless, with a wicked leer of the eye.

"You've come without an invite, I take it, sorter," said Meltiah, in his careless way.

Grasping his double-barrel rifle firmly, Maurice stood erect and silent, regarding them without quailing, deigning no answer, while Honest sat watchful by his side.

To the left of the parties, and clasping each other by the hand, stood Iris and Ramona, tremblingly awaiting the issue of the rencontre.

"Young ladies," said Maurice, "is it your wish to go with these men?"

"No, No!" cried both in a breath.

"Then you shall no," replied the young man.

"That's puttin' it rayther strong, I reckon," added Moss.

"I allow," said Lawless, raising his carbine and leveling it at Honest, "that it's time for that four-footed panther to go under."

Maurice instantly stepped before the dog, and drew from his hunting sack a six barrel revolving pistol.

"Fire, and it will be the signal for your own death!" he said, sternly.

Lawless dropped the butt of his carbine sullenly to the floor, muttering:

"Thar agin; allers thar! But the time'll come when I'll see both of ye kick the bucket, and knock under in a way as'll be uncommon."

"I calkerlate as this here business musn't be interrupted," added Meltiah.

"We've come arter these gals," resumed Lawless, in a swaggering tone.

"You can't have them," rejoined Harper, firmly.

"Seein' there's six to one, I'm decided that we can," said Moss.

"Here are six barrels, not mentioning my double rifle and Honest," returned Maurice, unmoved.

"I've a notion that we've got more nor six barrels among us, and it's my private opinion expressed in this here public manner, that we shan't stand and be shot one after tother in the way you talk of," continued Meltiah.

"Close up round the fermernines, my lads!" cried Lawless.

"Keep as near me as you can," said Harper, to the affrighted girls.

When Maurice had given this direction he fired one barrel of his revolver out of the window. Taking advantage of this movement, Meltiah extinguished the light, leaving the room in total darkness. With a quick perception of his danger, Maurice instantly changed his position, thereby avoiding a crushing blow aimed at him by Lawless with the breech of his carbine.

It was now difficult to discover friend from foe, but knowing the exact position of the maidens, two of the fellows had sprang towards them and were now striving to drag them to the door. Maurice seized one of ruffians by the collar, and struck him upon the head with his revolver, a blow that caused him to drop to the floor like a dead man.

Honest, meantime, perceiving that violent hands were being laid upon Iris, seized the other rogue and used him so roughly, that he began to think more of saving his own life than carrying off the females. Two were now down and Harper discharged his pistol at random at Moss and Lawless, who had hitherto restrained their fire lest they should harm the girls, or alarm those who might be in the vicinity, and thus produce a rescue.

In the midst of this excitement and confusion, Noel Noon burst open the door and appeared among the combatants. The door being open, sufficient light was admitted to allow the respective actors in this scene to be visible. Both Lawless and Meltiah now thought it time to attend to their personal safety, and dashed out of the window, followed by their comrade who had been prostrated by a blow from Maurice's revolver, and who had sufficiently recovered himself to make good his escape. Only one of the belligerent party remained, and he could not so easily extricate himself from the difficulty in which he had become involv-

ed, Honest having worried him unmercifully, and still continuing to panish him in a manner that threatened the final extinction of life.

The first thing to be attended to, therefore, was to call off the dog, inasmuch as it seemed unnecessary and cruel to permit him to pursue his advantage longer. After a little time, the man arose to his feet, panting, terrified and torn.

"It's pretty sure that you've had the worst of it," said Noon; "but those folks as engages in dishonest practices, must expect that justice will overtake 'em sometime or other. You look to me amazingly, as though the best part of your natur had been worried out of you by this extraordinary animal."

Turning to Maurice, he added:

"There's been an uncommon fracas here, and I should like to know what it's all about?"

"These young ladies can tell you, perhaps, better than I; but the sum and substance appears to be, that the worthy gentlemen who have just left so precipitately, were desirous to carry away our friends here. The latter being unwilling to consent to this one sided arrangement, I presumed to interfere in the premises; the result is as you see."

As Maurice reached the close of the sentence, Iris uttered a piercing cry, there followed the report of a carbine, Maurice recoiled a few steps, and would have fallen, had he not been caught and supported by the strong and steady arms of Noel Noon.

"He is wounded—he is slain!" cried Iris, in accents of genuine alarm and anxiety.

"Are you hit—are you hurt—are you sped?" exclaimed Noel.

Harper pressed his hand to his chest but could make no answer.

"Don't say it goes hard with you—don't say you are killed!" continued Noon with a countenance expressive of unfeigned grief; "because I couldn't think of your dying in this underhand way. When you get ready to give up your hold of aithly considerations, I want to see one like you knock under in some glorious battle with the enemy, where you're pressed upon four to one. For heaven's sake, rally, and don't let your life be wasted, and the breath slip out of you, in an ugly brawl like this."

Harper grasped Noon's hand and smiled faintly.

"Ah! that does me good—it does us all good. I have never seen you look so well afore! It shows there's sense and life in you yet," resumed the hunter.

"I'm struck—"

"No, don't say you're struck!"

"I'm struck, but not dangerously wounded."

"God be praised that it aint no worse!" added the forester.

"The ball struck," continued Maurice, with less exertion, "upon a copy of Cowper's Poems in the left pocket of hunting frock, just here, and glanced off, producing only a slight abrasion of the skin."

"Better than I thought it was," said the woodsman, fervently.

Iris, who had been regarding the handsome adventurer in painful suspense

and with pallid cheek, now sank insensible into the arms of her sister, whose emotions were but little less marked than her own.

During the excitement of the incident, the fellow whom Honest had dealt with, abruptly took his leave, and as his conqueror had no orders to detain him, he was suffered to depart unmolested.

At this interesting crisis, Baptiste Lorrimer and Dorville made their appearance. A few brief words from Noon explained what had transpired. Maurice now felt quite recovered from the shock, and while others were offering their attentions to the unconscious Iris, glided unnoticed from the house, full of thought, and agitated by conjectures in relation to what had happened, sought the encampment, Honest walking leisurely and contentedly by his side.

He had not staid to receive thanks or congratulations, because, under present circumstances, he was not ambitious to be thus noticed. He could not forget the unjust insinuations of Miss Rathburn, in regard to the motives that had induced him to be near the Rancho. He was not angry but sorrowful, for he felt that his conduct had been entirely misconstrued. He did not attach any blame to the maiden, for it appeared to him that she was laboring at the time under misapprehensions, of some kind, in relation to him.

When Iris had regained her consciousness, she was the first to remark the absence of the brave Virginian.

"He never stays after work's done, I take it," said Noel Noon, in reply to her inquiring looks.

"What, gone?" asked Ramona.

"It rayther has that appearance, now," Noel replied.

"Gone, and we have not expressed our gratitude!" exclaimed Miss Rathburn.

"I'll say to him whatever you think is right, be it more or less, common or uncommon, ordinary or extraordinary," added the forester.

"Perhaps she prefers to deliver her own messages," suggested Lorrimer.

"I wonder who could have been at the bottom of this transaction?" said Dorville.

Neither Lorrimer nor Noel made any answer to this interrogatory. "Come, men, give your opinion," added Dorville.

"Opinions are like the truth; not to be spoken at all times," answered Lorrimer.

"I'm not afraid to speak mine, generally," rejoined Dorville.

"Nobody said anything about being afraid, Mr. Dorville," replied Lorrimer drily.

"It seems to amount to that. When people refuse to speak out frankly and boldly, in a case like this, the idea always occurs to me that they are afraid to; but perhaps I am wrong," rejoined Dorville.

"I suppose Lorrimer is thinking of expediency," said Noon.

"And you are in the same train of thought, doubtless. Well, I see which way the wind blows, and will not at this time boast my own superior courage, yet it is evident to me that a gross piece of knavery has been attempted, and that Meliah Moss and Jack Lawless are not at the bottom of it."

Ramona and Iris looked at each other inquiringly, as if to read each other's thoughts, and ask what might be the nature of their friends' reflections.

"I think," continued Dorville, fixing his eyes earnestly upon Iris, "that this matter ought to be inquired into. That there has, in this case, been an unlawful attempt to abduct these young women, cannot be doubted. If there has been such a design, there must necessarily have been a designer; and it is the latter that we ought to seek out, unmask and punish. If no other person feels disposed to this duty, I shall take it upon myself."

"Your ideas are similar to my own. I shan't by no means allow you to be the only one to do this business. I shall on all proper occasions, be tryin' to ferret out the mystery. That Mr. Rathburn sent them ruffians here to conduct his daughters to a place of safety is highly improbable, and sunthin' like settin' a wolf to catch a lamb," said Noon.

"Here comes Rathburn; let him speak for himself," said Lorrimer.

Rathburn entered the house, apparently somewhat excited.

"I have just learned," he said, "from the Virginian, that there has been villainy attempted here. How is it? Are you uninjured, girls?"

"Yes; thanks to Mr. Harper and Mr. Noon," replied Ramona.

"We were pretty certain that you hadn't given any orders to have the gals removed," said Lorrimer.

"Of course not," added Dorville, fixing his penetrating eyes upon Rathburn.

"Being so near, what need had I to send when I could come myself, and the danger being comparatively little?" he answered.

"What more natural than that a father should desire to be with his children when danger menaces? No honest man—nobody but a mercenary hireling would entrust even his dog to the care of such worthless knaves as have this night invaded his dwelling," continued Dorville, still looking at Rathburn.

The latter slightly changed color and turned to Noon with the inquiry, "If he knew any of the parties?"

"They had all fled but one when I reached the room, and I can't say that I know much about him," rejoined Noel.

"We owe our safety to the brave young man," remarked Iris.

"I must speak to him on the subject," said Rathburn, now considerably embarrassed.

"If Mr. Rathburn had not been kept away by business of vital importance he would unquestionably have been here to defend these fair creatures from outrage and peril," resumed Dorville, in the same measured tone, and with the same fixed gaze at Rathburn.

"You are right, sir—my heart is always with my dear girls," returned Rathburn, in a more earnest voice.

"We shall march down the Brazos to-morrow or the day after, and I've been thinking that this will be rather an exposed situation for you," said the captain.

"It might be unsafe here for most settlers, but with me the case is rather different," rejoined Rathburn. "You see I've got quite a number of friends among

the Moderators and Regulators that wont forget me, but I'll be on hand if danger lurks about the Rancho."

"Wont that be rayther an onsartain dependence?" asked Noel, quickly.

"No, far from it. I've lived herenow going on four years, and have never had any trouble to speak of."

"But there's never been a war with Mexico before," remarked the captain.

"I know it, but there wont many of the enemy get up so far as my Rancho. It's an out of the way place, you see. What do the Mexicans want up here?"

"You might have asked 'em that question a few hours ago when we was fightin' 'em out yonder, not a mile from here."

"But they are so thoroughly whipped, they wont come again. I'll remain where I am. What else can I do?"

"You might go with us to some of the larger towns, where there is but little danger of the approach of an enemy."

"It wont do—there's as much chance of safety here as anywhere. Texas will be trodden under foot by the troops of Santa Anna, before a year goes over our heads, and the most obscure places will be safer from plunder and violence. A few of us can defend this spot against almost any number of Mexicans. You see they are afraid of the American rifles."

"Well, turn it over in your mind, friend Rathburn, between now and to-morrow noon, and if you conclude to go with us, depend on't, not a hair of the gals' heads shall be harmed, though we should meet the Dictator himself, at the head of an army."

"It's a kind offer, father," observed Iris.

"Yes; I'll reflect upon it, Captain Lorrimer."

"You'd better. But it's getting late, and I must return to camp. We'll all remain, however, if you think it best."

"We shall not probably be disturbed again to-night. So you can go, gentle men, with clean consciences," replied Rathburn.

As they were preparing to depart, Iris stole to the side of Noon, and asked the name of the young man who was so good as to keep guard with him, and where he was that he did not appear when the disturbance occurred.

"Who said there was a young man with me?"

"Mr. Harper informed me, but could not recall his name," added Iris.

"He said that, did he? Well, Maurice Harper was the young man, and nobody else, and you see his native modesty wouldn't let him tell you," returned Noon.

"How stupid and unjust!" she exclaimed, blushing with regret at the remembrance of what she had said to him.

"Mr. Noel," she hastily added, in a low voice, "I've wronged your friend."

"Sorry for it, Miss Iris! He's under the cloud, as t'were, now, but you see he wont allers be there, I expect. He's got enemies that mean to crush him; but I for one shall stand by him, notwithstanding all that malice and envy can do to blight his prospects."

CHAPTER I

DORVILLE.

When Lorrimer and Noon had left the dwelling, Dorville lingered on the threshold. Iris and Ramona were near him. He took the hand of the former in his.

"I scarcely know," he said, in a suppressed tone, "What impulse draws me towards you, and yet I confess myself deeply interested in your welfare. Pardon me for this freedom of speech, for my words proceed from the heart, and not the head. I wish you to learn not to fear me—to confide in me—to speak to me as a disinterested friend. Please step into the corral with me a moment—just out of earshot—thank you. Now no one can hear me. Does this air chill you?"

"No."

"You tremble?"

"Not with cold."

"Fear?"

"No, why should I fear?"

"You should not when with—but no matter; what I was going to say might sound like self-adulation, so it remains unspoken. See the moon, Iris. Is it not beautiful—so placid, so silvery, and yet so cold. For me, the moon and stars have voices that speak to the inner life."

"I often have such ideas and emotions, but I do not utter them, save to Ramona. I suppose they are too wild and vagrant to be felt by others. I fear I am inclined to be a visionary. Father says I am not so practical as Ramona; but I can be practical."

"There are striking points of agreement between us. I can be enthusiastic and dreamy, and I can also be a strict utilitarian. But I digress. You somehow unlock my finer sensibilities, and make me wander on at random. You seem to be strangely circumstanced and surrounded. You are like a desirable flower growing wild in the garden of nature, while many rude hands are stretched forth to pluck it. You are trembling—be quiet."

"I'll be very quiet."

"Ramona is less sensitive, but very charming. As I was saying, you are singularly placed, and strange elements are in motion around you. You must be watchful. Keep all your perceptions about you, and strive to penetrate the motives of all who approach you. Learn, if you can, to discriminate a worthy from an unworthy man. Your father is unlike you in all respects; I perceive that no responsive sympathies are lodged in his breast. You and he are and must remain strangers. Forgive me—But it is true; you know it—the tremor that shakes your nervous system attest to my words. Iris and Mr. Rathburn can never be united in soul."

"Be silent, I beg of you!"

"I see I am right; you fear him?"

"Desist, for friendship's sake!"



ONSET OF THE CAMANCHE.

You tremble lest he should hear a word. His nature is suspicious."

"Yes—but don't speak of it; it would be so unpleasant for me, if he should hear you."

"No, the winds shall not hear it. Will you watch everybody around you? Promise the stranger, Dorville, that you will."

"I will."

"Do not suffer yourself to be inveigled into an alliance that your heart has no interest in. Do not associate with those who naturally repulse you. Mistrust those most who appear the most selfish. There are men around you who will fail to make you happy, and who seek to attain only their own ends."

"Will you not mention names?"

"It will hardly be prudent; and yet why should I not? I will speak the name of Manuel Hart."

"Do you distrust him?"

"More than that. We cannot walk together in the same path in life. If he is not a bad man, my own instincts are false, and all my observations mislead me. Fear him as you would the filthy, slimy, poisonous moccasin snake that low and hidden but strike and destroy."

"You use strong language."

"And does not your own heart give back a response?"

"Do not question me, I do not know myself—I distrust myself—I fear all who approach me."

"Not all; there is one whom you do not fear."

"You mean yourself?"

"No; a younger man. But no matter; you need not redden so much—I have not spoken his name."

"Are you not very presuming, Mr. Dorville?"

"I think I am, in this case; and yet I feel that I would not be impertinent, for the world. The fact is, I almost love you."

"Will you be reasonable, Mr. Dorville?"

"Time is passing. I am wasting these precious moments in idle talk. Let me be serious. Many perils are lurking unseen and unsuspected about you. Again permit me to say, be observant—observant of those whom you ought to trust. I shall see you again—I can not stay away from you, for I experience an indefinable satisfaction in being near you. You perceive that I am much older than you—too old to be a lover."

"I will endeavor to follow your injunctions, however mysterious they seem. I will watch all—even you."

"Do so; that will please me; and you may call my motives in question, if you will. You may go farther; accuse me to my face of what you like, and I will try to take it patiently."

"What a paradoxical character! You quite confuse and bewilder me. Here comes Ramona; speak to her," added Iris.

"Ramona, I have been talking to your sister concerning subjects of deep interest. I have been prognosticating evil, and hope I shall prove a false prophet. Certain facts have fallen under my observation that make me sure that you are both exposed to great danger, Iris in particular. You are a girl of courage, decision and foresight. Be on your guard, and do not suffer your sister to fall into the snares that may be laid for her feet, but make a faithful attempt to save her and yourself."

"But who are you, that take so much interest in two maidens, almost strangers to you?" asked Ramona.

"I am Dorville."

"And is that all you can say to entitle you to our confidence?"

"All, young lady—all, at present. Judge me as you find me. When oppor-

tunity offers, weigh me by my works, and not by my words; the latter are so cheap."

"Very good. I will not be over-suspicious. Say on, if more remains to be said."

"Iris can tell you what I have said when I am gone. I hear your father's step—Dorville goes—adieu, adieu?"

When Dorville reached the encampment, the fires were burning dimly, and the wing of sleep hung silently over the scene. A little removed from the spot two or three sentinels kept sleepless watch. Instead of entering one of the huts, Dorville wrapped his blanket about him and laid down upon the earth as contentedly as one might seek his dreams in a bed and under a sheltering roof. He was sinking into a quiet slumber, when he was disturbed by the footsteps of some one more restless than himself. Opening his eyes he beheld Maurice walking slowly past him.

"Is that you, Mr. Harper? Can you not reconcile your conscience to sleep?" said Dorville.

"I have few antagonisms of that nature to reconcile," returned Maurice.

"Then why not go to rest? The night is fast waning; the small hours have come."

"Well, let them come and go; I care not."

"Come, don't be disheartened. There's a tide in human affairs, you know? You can find a couch sufficiently soft in some of the camps, I dare say."

"Sufficiently soft? this soil is soft enough for me."

Harper stretched himself upon the ground, and placing his rifle carefully by his side, indicated plainly that he thought of going to sleep. Honest followed his master's example with an equal manifestation of indifference.

"I shouldn't care about sleeping with no blanket between me and the soil," observed Dorville.

"I like mother earth; she strengthens me. I receive quiet dreams and refreshing sleep from her bosom. Don't disparage her."

"Heaven forbid that I should speak lightly of mother earth, or any part of nature. I have too long been the subject of her ministrations to be ungrateful and captious."

"Who goes yonder, I wonder?" asked Harper.

"It is one who treads softly as if he did not wish to attract attention."

"Yes; so I perceive."

"It is Manuel Hart, I think, Mr. Harper."

"You are right, Dorville. Where has he been, do you imagine?"

"I don't always tell what I imagine; so good night."

Harper closed his eyes and soon appeared to be sleeping; but partly unclosing them awhile after, he saw Dorville with his head turned a little, looking at him.

Harper there upon began to ask himself what kind of an opinion he had formed of this stranger, and what influence, if any, he would exercise upon his destiny—whether for good or for evil. Of course he had no means of deciding this question, and he tried to dismiss it altogether as idle and even whimsical.

When at length sleep overpowered him, he was thinking of Iris Rathburn, and regretting that she had misunderstood him. Her idea followed him into his dreams, and lent them varied hues. He fancied her in danger, and surrounded by evil influences. He pictured her in distress, and in the power of designing persons, until the beating of the reveille put an end to his slumbers.

CHAPTER XI.

THE BATTLE OF THE HORSE SHOE.

THE Hunters of the Border had moved down the Brazos and were near San Antonio. They had joined a small detachment under Colonel Bowie, and were soon watching the movements of the enemy who were hovering about Bexar like birds of prey ready to pounce upon any party of Texans less formidable, numerically, than themselves. The hunters had found an excellent camping ground in a bend of the river, distinguished, on account of its peculiar shape, as the "Horse Shoe."

Colonel Bowie surveyed the spot with delight.

"What a fine place for a battle!" he exclaimed, turning to Captain Lorrimer.

I was jest havin' such notions pass through my head," he replied.

"The prairie rising round the bottom land like a high wall, would form a capital breast-work for the men, and we could whip the blanketed fellers four to one without putting ourselves out a great deal, either. I wish there was some chance of their coming down upon us."

"There's no doubt but they will, for they outnumber us six to one," observed Harper.

"How do you know?" asked the colonel.

"By the best kind of evidence, I take it—actual sight," said Noel Noon.

"Explain," added Bowie.

"Why, it is simply this; Mr. Harper and I have been out scoutin' about a little, watchin' the movements of things. Bexar is literally swarmin' with enemies."

"I'm glad to hear it, for I feel anxious for some kind of a scrimmage."

"I'll tell you how I think you can bring 'em; jest build up one or two large fires hereabouts, and they'll be likely to attract attention. Some of the women folks will come right down to trade with us, count us, and then carry back the news to the men, who don't relish a fight with equal numbers, but are always on hand when the advantage is on their side."

"His advice is good, Captain Lorrimer—order some fires to be built."

Manuel Hart, who had been near the parties, and heard this conversation, now stepped forward and said:

"I don't think it'll be safe, colonel, to tempt the enemy upon us in that way, seemin' as they are six to one."

"If they were ten to one, I shouldn't fear 'em in a place like this," returned Bowie.

"They aint such feeble fighters as they might be, if I've any knowledge of the subject," added Hart.

"I've met 'em in the field, sir—I've fought 'em—exchanged blows with 'em—know what they can do, and don't fear 'em. Let 'em come."

"There won't be one of us left, colonel—we shall be cut off to a man."

"So be it, then, so be it! I for one expect to die fighting, and I suppose it won't make a great difference to me when I go, if I only go as a brave man, resisting oppression and doing my best."

"You may want to go under in that way, but perhaps the rest of us would rather live a spell longer," continued Hart.

"Light the fires, Captain Lorrimer, light the fires, and make a beacon to invite the rascals down here," said Bowie, decidedly.

Harper smiled contemptuously, and Lorrimer went to give the necessary orders.

"These Mexicans never give no quarter," said Noon, in a voice sufficiently loud for Manuel to hear.

"That's pretty well known, I expect," retorted Hart sullenly.

We shall be likely to do some damage among 'em, at any rate, afore we go under, perwidin' worst comes to worst," added Noon, looking slyly at Harper.

Hart made no rejoinder, but walked to his tent, looking scowling and dissatisfied.

"You see he's afraid of gunpowder," said Noel.

"I've long had that opinion of him," replied Harper. "I'm eager for the time to come when his courage can be put to the test."

"He'll keep out of the action as long as he can help it, but the chances are that we shall have work to do afore mornin'."

Two large fires were made, and as had been anticipated, after a due lapse of time, some Mexican women came into camp, bringing various articles of traffic. Having disposed of their goods, and noted everything that they saw, they went back to report, as the sequel proved.

Captain Lorrimer immediately paraded his men, and in his rough way exhorted them to prudence and courage. He told them it was incumbent upon them to earn the name which had been given them by the two maidens. He wanted the Hunters of the Border to win an enduring fame, and never to turn their backs to the foe. They were battling for liberty and human rights, and not for plunder. They were not land-pirates, but soldiers, and ought not to forget it. They were going forth to give tyranny a check, and to stay the progress of a heartless ruler. Those who were not resolved to fight to the last, had better step out of the ranks and go home; they didn't want cowards to go with them, to show their back to the foe.

All this and much more Lorrimer said to them, in language most natural to him. Lieutenant Hart was in his place, but did not venture to make a speech, and his countenance did not betoken a great degree of satisfaction. But the men were evidently eager for a fight, and were disappointed when the night set in and the enemy did not appear. The evening passed without disturbance.

At about ten o'clock a half-breed came into camp, bringing the report that the Mexicans had gone to attack General Burleson, who was encamped higher up the river. This news was doubted by the more knowing ones, but credited by the less experienced.

Bowie and Lorrimer allowed the men to lie down and sleep as usual.

"We'll warn you in time to make a defence, if the enemy should attempt a surprise," said the colonel. "I've seen some service, you know, and understand just about what these fellows mean. They're sly and need watching, but let 'em catch me napping, if they can."

Before eleven, the Hunters of the Border and Bowie's detachment were locked in the arms of sleep. No extraordinary vigilance about the precincts of the Horse Shoe indicated that any danger was apprehended, or that there was an enemy within a dozen miles.

"This might look to some persons, like a want of discipline," Harper observed to Noon; but I presume the colonel knows what he is about?"

"You may depend on't he does. He'll scent the enemy if they come within rifle range, I'll warrant," said Noel.

"Look! there comes Dorville. Strange that he should follow us."

"He's a queer genius—allers on hand when you don't expect him."

"Is he a brave man, think you?"

"That's what I can't say for certain; but he doesn't appear like a person easily frightened."

The subject of this conversation approached.

"Good evening, lads—a fine camping ground is this—excellent spot for a new little fight. Placing ourselves behind this wall that the prairie has built round the bottom land, we can keep back any number of the enemy," he remarked.

"We have had the same thoughts," returned Noon.

"Ah, here's Honest! Mr. Harper what will you do with him, if there should be an engagement?"

"He'll do very well; he'll take care of himself."

"What is that upon his neck? Something that has a feminine look, certainly. Come here, Honest, and let me see."

Honest looked at his master's countenance and then walked up to Dorville. While the latter simply looked at the ribbon without touching it, the dog remained passive and amicable, but the moment he placed his hand upon it, a growl of displeasure warned him to desist.

"It is the gift of a fair damsel, no doubt, and he is in honor bound to keep it. Here are the letters I R. upon it. Presumptuous dog! I shall be jealous; you wear the colors of my own enchantress. What do you suppose Manuel Hart would give for that flimsy gaud?"

"His lieutenantcy," replied Noon.

"It is possible that he could procure a similar mark of favor without any such sacrifice," Harper remarked.

"That's very doubtful!" exclaimed Noon.

"Come, boys, lie down and get your rest," said Captain Lorrimer, who approached at that moment. Rayther expect there'll be somethin' to do afor mornin', and you must be fresh for a scrimmage."

"Honest and I will pass the night here," rejoined Harper, spreading his blanket upon the soft, grassy bottom-land.

"And I shall keep you company," said Noon.

The place our two friends had selected was on the right of the bend, and about an hundred yards from the main body of the detachment.

Harper had just sunk into a sound sleep when he was awakened by Honest, who had scented the approach of some one. Maurice arose to his elbow, and saw, much to his surprise, Warpath approaching. He motioned our hero to be silent as he drew nigh.

"Wake up, Open-hand," said the Lipan.

Harper touched Noon lightly, and he sprang to his feet.

"Open-hand, 'tis I—be silent. This way, follow—step softly—don't wake the big moccasin snake!"

Warpath leaped noiselessly from the bottom-land to the prairie, and Harper and Noon did the same. The Lipan crouched until his tall figure was almost concealed by the grass, and his companions imitated his example. The red man did not assume an erect position, until they had left the Horse Shoe several rods behind. He then approached the river. A canoe was hidden in the bushes near the water. The Lipan launched it, Maurice and Noon stepped in and then taking the paddle, Warpath propelled it dexterously across the San Antonio. On the shore it was dragged up and hidden as before.

The Indian took the direction of Bexar, and kept his intentions to himself with strict fidelity to native character. He paused not far from the town, and changed his mode of approach—going forward with much greater caution. Harper and Noon imitated all his movements until at last he made a full stop, and motioned them to come and stand by his side. They obeyed his mute mandate, and the Lipan pointed with his finger.

Following the direction of his hand, they perceived a large body of men holding their horses by the bridles, ready to mount at a moment's warning.

"Look to the right, white men," said the Lipan.

They turned their eyes as indicated and beheld several pieces of artillery. The wheels of the carriages were covered with blankets, that they might roll softly, and the horses were already attached.

"That means a surprise," said Harper.

"When the moon reaches that point in the skies where you see the dark cloud hovering like the bird of war. Their hearts are big with courage, and their great guns are full of thunder. Let the white men be ready."

"They greatly exceed us in numbers," remarked Harper.

"Six to one," returned Warpath.

"That's none too many," added Noon.

"Too many, if they find you sleeping," rejoined the Lipan, sarcastically.

"Very true," said Maurice.

"Have you looked enough?" asked the chief.

"Yes," rejoined Noon.

"Then we'll go back," returned the Lipan.

Warpath conducted the two young men to the Horse Shoe, in the same way that they came.

"Last night," said the chief, addressing Maurice, "I dreamed that I saw a moccasin snake crawling after you as you walked through a cypress brake. His mouth was open, and he was all ready to strike when I awoke. I laid awake and thought of it a long time, and the Manito of dreams seemed to tell me it meant evil to the young white hunter."

"I believe the Great Spirit sometimes speaks to me in dreams and visions of the dark night," said Maurice.

"The Great Spirit is always speaking to his red children. He speaks to him in the day as well as the night. Sometimes I can hear his voice when the wind blows, and when the thunder shakes the clouds. Sometimes he makes me a prophet, so that I can tell the future by the past. I know that the copper-head has stung, and that he will sting again."

"That is wise—the past is the key of the future," remarked Maurice.

"Then may men be prophets according to their knowledge of the past. I have spoken and have no more to say. You can tell the chiefs what you have seen."

With these words, Warpath stretched himself upon the ground to await further developments of the night, while Maurice sought Bowie and Lorrimer to communicate what he had seen.

Neither of the parties appeared much surprised, for they had anticipated a movement of that kind, and were watching with open eye to detect any indications of an attack.

"They will cross the river just above us, and the attack will doubtless come from the prairie," Maurice remarked.

"Yes, that's the quarter from which we may expect the mischief," said Bowie.

The night wore on, slowly enough according to our hero's ideas; but as he could do nothing to facilitate the matter, he remained at rest as patiently as possible, listening intently to hear the tread of the advancing foe.

It wanted about an hour to the break of day, when Maurice noticed that Honest, with ears erect, was looking eagerly up the river.

"Listen, colonel!" said Maurice. Bowie put his ear close to the ground.

"What do you hear?" Maurice inquired.

"A dull monotonous sound. They are crossing the river. I hear the discordant creak of a wheel. Now it has stopped; we shan't hear it again. Now, captain, we must wake up the boys. Go round among them softly, lads, and let's have no noise. Just whisper to 'em that there's a prospect of a scrimmage, and they'll be on their taps in no time."

Accordingly the men were aroused from their slumbers and fell quietly into the ranks just under cover of the wall of the prairie.

"They've made up their minds for a surprise, and there's no doubt, but they'll have one," Bowie observed, as he contemplated with a satisfied air the arrangement of his forces.

Moments of intense suspense followed. A thick fog which now prevailed, disconcerted the plans of the enemy. They drew up on the prairie, and waited for the dark vapor to lift. They were within reach of the Texan rifles, but not a man could be seen, so dense was the intervening fog. The minutes seemed terribly long to the eager patriots.

The morning dawned at length, and as the thick atmosphere grew lazier, the outlines of the Mexican columns began to be visible. They were all ready to charge and annihilate the small band of Texans. Higher and higher arose the fog—the horses and their riders were revealed, and men with torches stood by the threatening cannon.

The decisive moment had come—a moment fraught with momentous consequences to the actors in the scene. Every rifle was levelled, and Bowie gave the word to fire just as the trumpet gave the signal to charge.

The effect was tremendous. Horses and riders went down, and the columns rolled back from the field scattered and dismayed.

But the enemy was not yet beaten. They knew the numbers engaged on the Texan side, and their own great advantage in that respect. They formed and came on again, determined to work the artillery with vigor to the last. They

advanced and a body of picked men manned the guns, which in their precipitate flight they had not dragged out of range. They manifested much courage, but before they had driven home a single ball, a discharge from Bowie's detachment stretched them beside their companions whom the first fire had slain.

Again there was a terrible stampede to get out of the way, but many poor fellows finished their earthly warfare on the spot. Some of the Texans wished to follow up the advantage by pursuit, but the officers, more prudent, would not permit them to do so.

Various conjectures were now indulged in relation to another attack, but that question was soon decided, for the enemy advanced once more for the purpose of dragging off the cannon.

"Now, my lads," cried Lorrimer, "prepare to serve them worse than before. See! they are at work with the guns, and are really going to give us a salute."

While the captain was speaking, there came to their ears a roar of artillery, and grape shot and ball went whistling over their heads.

"Pay 'em in different coin!" exclaimed Bowie, and but too faithfully was he obeyed; for all who are acquainted with the details of the battle of the Horse Shoe, know how awfully destructive was the fire poured in upon the enemy from the Texan rifles. The guns were left without men to work them, and the cavalry fled in utter disorder. The Hunters of the Border could no longer be restrained, and dashed after the flying foe with an ardor not to be held in check.

During the engagement several watchful eyes were upon Manuel Hart, to note his conduct. But little was seen of him by those most interested to witness his bearing, and it was pretty evident that he was safely ensconced behind a large tree during the battle. He did not join in the pursuit, and it was observed that he had a handkerchief wrapped about his left arm after the skirmish was over. Upon being questioned, he said that he had been struck by a spent ball.

Thus ended the battle of the Horse Shoe, which had quite an effect to dampen the ardor of the Mexicans, and to encourage the zeal of the Texans.

CHAPTER XII.

THE AMBUSCADE.

AFTER the battle the detachments fell back upon General Burleson's position, who was intending to make an attack upon Bexar, which was now in possession of the Mexicans. To attack a town so well supplied with provisions, and containing so many of the enemy, was an undertaking of considerable magnitude, and likely to be attended with much hard fighting and loss of life. Many of the houses in the town were fortified, and even should the Texans effect an entrance, they might expect to receive a destructive fire from the dwellings on both sides of the streets.

Several days were spent in considering the project, and making arrangements for the enterprise. During the time the Hunters of the Border were often in the saddle reconnoitering the adjacent country, and skirmishing with parties of Mexicans.

While the subject of retaking Bexar was under consideration, it must be remarked that Manuel Hart, on account of his wounded arm, was seldom on duty, and absent so frequently and so long, that it was a matter of observation among the men. Dorville also continued to be as eccentric as ever, sometimes disappearing for two days at a time, and then returning in a manner equally as abrupt and unanticipated.

One day after such an absence, he appeared and called Maurice aside with an anxious expression and a troubled brow.

The news which he communicated was to our hero deeply interesting. He informed him that he had visited the Rancho, that the Rathburns had gone, and that he could gain no clue as to the place of their destination, or the direction of their flight.

This intelligence affected him unpleasantly, for Iris Rathburn had seldom been long absent from his thoughts, since the period of his first meeting with her. He hastened to inform Noon of what he had heard, who shared largely in his anxiety, it being well known that he was much interested in Ramona. Both of the young men were just preparing to go out and reconnoitre the enemy, when this news was received, and with thoughtful faces they mounted their horses and rode toward Bexar.

The mind of each was busy with the intelligence which Dorville had brought, and for a long time they went forward in silence. Noon was the first to speak in regard to the subject uppermost in their thoughts.

"I feel uncomfortable and disturbed about this business. I can't see any good reason for Rathburn's leaving the Rancho in this strange way."

Harper acknowledged that he had entertained similar sentiments in regard to the matter. Noel then, in his own blunt manner, demanded to know what was to be done, or if anything could or ought to be done in the premises.

"If," replied Maurice, "all parties were agreed to the project of leaving their former place of residence, I cannot see that anything remains to be done; but if, on the contrary, there has been any compulsion or unfair dealing, that puts a new aspect upon the case. Do you suspect that anything wrong or compulsory has been going on? If so, be frank."

"I've called you my friend," returned Noon, "and I'll be free with you. You know, perhaps, that I think a great deal of Ramona, and used to visit the Rancho often. Well, I've seen enough first and last to make me suspect more than I feel disposed to mention. It's my opinion the gals have been unjustly dealt with. I hate to say it, but it appears to me that Manuel Hart has more influence over Mr. Rathburn than he ought to have, and that the latter fears him, or isn't over and above honest himself. The fact is," added Noel, emphatically, "there's bad influences at work there, and Rathburn needs to be watched as close as Hart."

"My own thoughts precisely. I am glad you have spoken so freely," said Maurice.

"It's time to speak and to act, too. No doubt but the young women are in trouble afore this time, and need somebody to look arter them and speak a kind word."

"I am at your service, Noel. You shall have my hearty co-operation in whatever you may propose," responded Maurice, with earnestness.

"I thank you," said the forester, warmly, "I thought you'd be willin' to lend a helpin' hand, especially when such a female as Iris may need assistance."

By this time the hunters had reached a musquit growth not far from Bexar. Dismounting, they fastened their horses in the thicket and proceeded towards the town on foot, leaving Honest with the animals.

As they walked cautiously on, they conversed more freely than they had ever done before in relation to the two maidens and Manuel Hart. Noon did not hesitate to pronounce the latter a villain of the darkest character, although on that particular point he had hitherto been quite reserved. While talking in this amicable and confidential manner, they reached a spot in the vicinage of Bexar where there was a light growth of post oak and ash. Here they paused a moment to arrange their plan of operation more perfectly.

They were conversing in suppressed voices, when certain sounds on their left made them aware that other parties were advancing. They immediately secreted themselves behind trees, for war teaches all men to be cunning and cautious inasmuch as it transforms brethren of the same great family of man into deadly enemies.

The intruders approached and proved to be two men. As the distance decreased between them, it was plain that one was a Mexican officer, and the other an American. They stopped within pistol shot and conversed earnestly. Though the features of neither were revealed perfectly at first, the voice of one was sufficiently distinct to betray him to the listeners; both being assured that Manuel Hart was near them.

With eagerness quite natural to the peculiar occasion, they awaited the denouement of the singular interview. All that they said could not be heard and understood, but enough to give them an insight into the villain's schemes. He was obviously tampering with the enemy, who was holding out to him a golden bait. His own treacherous disposition needed but an inconsiderable incentive to make him a traitor. He was, to be brief, laying a plan with the Mexican officer to betray his company and countrymen into the hands of those who knew no mercy, and seldom gave quarter when victorious.

About half-way from Burleson's position to Bexar there was a long strip of timber, and a road traversing nearly its whole length. Into this wood the Hunters of the Border were to be decoyed through the instrumentality of Lieutenant Hart, where a large force of the enemy would belying in ambush, ready to greet them with two six pounders, rifles, carbines, etc.

With feelings of burning indignation, our two foresters listened to the details of this wicked and cruel plot.

"There are two persons," added Hart, in an earnest voice, when the other mat-

ters had been thoroughly discussed, "who mustn't survive the surprise, and I want that to be understood."

The Mexican officer inquired how he should know them. In answer to this query, the traitor described Harper and Noon minutely, not forgetting to mention the color of their horses.

"I insist upon this as a condition of the agreement." To an arrangement of this kind, of course, the Mexican had no sort of objection, and was so sanguine of success, that he gave it as his opinion that not one of the company would escape. He admonished the villain to concoct the scheme for decoying them into the ambushade with such ingenuity and certainty that there should be no fear of a failure. He then went on to speak of the facilities offered them by the length and density of the timber for secreting their forces, and pouring upon the advancing and unsuspecting band such a concentrated and continuous fire as should effectually cut them up and secure their utter defeat, if not their complete annihilation.

The six pounders, loaded with chain-traces cut into pieces, were to be arranged so as to sweep the road, and decimate both horse and rider.

To avoid this general destruction, Hart was to invent some pretence for loitering behind or remaining at camp. The Texans were to be led into this fatal trap by a small party of lancers who were to approach Burleson's position by the timber road, and then as soon as they had attracted attention and encouraged pursuit, to retreat with all convenient haste toward the spot which was to be the scene of the surprise.

This grand blow was to be struck without delay, and following day near dark was designated as the time for its execution. These necessary and indispensable preliminaries having being duly arranged, the parties moved from the spot a few yards, and the subject appeared to be changed. The lieutenant expressed himself evidently quite freely and interestedly concerning a theme of a different nature. Their words could not be distinctly and connectedly heard, but both Harper and Noon were certain that they heard Rathburn's name spoke several times.

As the conversation progressed, the manner, tone and gesticulation of the parties grew more earnest and impassioned, and their voices rising higher as they proceeded, the names of the maidens of the Rancho were pronounced so energetically, the neither of our listeners could longer doubt the nature of the subject now being canvassed. Many conjectures, coupled with startling conceptions and and vague apprehensions concerning Iris and Ramona, disturbed the thoughts of the foresters. Queries like these arose to be solved: Why were the names of the young women mentioned there, and under those circumstances? What common tie of interest existed between Hart and the Mexican officer relative to the maidens? Had the Mexican seen them? If so, where, and when, and what were his intentions concerning them?

The reader will bear in mind that it was much more easy to make mental interrogatories of this kind, than to give an answer to one of them. It was very evident that the hunters had incontinently stumbled upon a mystery which they wished much to unravel and understand; but to do so, was not a task to be accomplished without difficulty. Hart would doubtless keep his own counsel, and the only feasible way of tracking him in the winding way of his villany, was to watch silently and assiduously all his movements.

Important discoveries have indeed been made; unexpected revelations having a vital bearing upon the destinies of the Texan borderers, and also upon the Rathburn girls.

Still conversing earnestly, Hart and his companion moved off arm in arm, to all appearance the best of friends. Without speaking, Harper and Noon walked back to the spot where they had left their horses.

"What do you think of this, Mr. Noon?" asked Maurice, in a suppressed tone, that he might better conceal the agitation of his own mind.

"I think, returned Noel, gazing quietly up into the quiet skies, "I think that a good providence has directed our footsteps this night."

"What we have just heard is deeply suggestive of thought. You recollect the subject of our conversation when we left the camp? Now will not the strange conversation to which we have been a party, throw some light upon the mysterious disappearance of the Rathburns?" rejoined Harper.

"If it doesn't throw any particular light on that affair, it awakens many unpleasant suspicions, I reckon. To tell you the truth, friend Maurice, I feel amazin' uncomfortable like. I think more of the fate of the gals, than I do about the ambushade and surprize that is intended for us tomorrow night; because, you see, we are forewarned about the last, and if we can't outwit and circumvent them, we'd ought to be cut into inch pieces, by them ere uncommon swivels, loaded with mince trace-chains. If we don't make that plot lose all its romance like, for them critters, it will be for the reason that there's no such thing as Texan rifles and double-sights. That subject is all plain enough, and don't require no great amount of algebra tactics and that sort of larnin' to work it out; but about the Rathburns we're completely nonplussed, and don't know nothin' for sartin, only that some species of deviltry is on foot."

Discussing this absorbingly interesting topic, Harper and Noon rode into camp and hastened to communicate with Captain Lorimer. The plan of the ambushade was developed, but failed to produce those indications of astonishment which they naturally expected to see exhibited.

"I rayther thought 'twould come to this," he said, musingly. "There was allers a twinkle in the varmint's eye that I couldn't exactly overlook. I knew he was a coward, and it don't take much to make a coward a traitor. But he's in a fair way to be fetched up with a sudden jerk. I'll see that he's properly taken care of; and so soon as we have outwitted this idea of an ambushade, and punished the rascals for their presumption, Manuel Hart shall swing, if there's halters enough in camp to hang him! I can get along with a moccasin snake, a savage, or any kind of a heathen cretur, but a black-hearted traitor!"

Immediately there was a private consultation among the officers, and orders were at once issued to meet the emergencies of the coming day. Two detachments of riflemen were marched to the timber, to take a position in the rear of that determined on by the enemy; on either side of the road, where they were to lie perdu during the day. To the head of the timber toward Bexar, three field pieces were dragged and stationed ready for use. Besides these, and men to work them, was a company of riflemen. Both horses and men found ample means of concealment at a distance of some two hundred yards from the road, in a cypress growth, between which and the town was a dense, impenetrable chapparal.

To keep the animals quiet, they were fed plentifully with corn and newly cut grass. During these rapid movements and preparations, the return of Manuel Hart to camp was impatiently awaited. The detachments had marched before he appeared. As he walked toward his tent, he was arrested by a corporal and a file of men. The traitor's self possession well nigh forsook him. Taken wholly by surprise, and conscious of his guilt, he was unprepared to make any defence, or to put so good a face upon the matter, had such a turn in affairs been anticipated. He felt that in some inexplicable way his villany had been unmasked; and he was aware, furthermore, that the punishment of traitors was prompt and summary. The fear of death struck a mortal terror to his heart. Visions of a drum-head court martial, a short trial, prompt sentence, and speedy execution of the same, went whirling through his brain, making it faint and dizzy. How sudden was the downfall of his expectations! how irremediable the ruin that looked him in the face! The avenues of escape seemed closed up. No enlivening hope gleamed in upon him to render the future less gloomy.

Such were his emotions when he first found himself a prisoner, with a strong

guard posted over him, and hand-cuffs upon his wrists; but those feelings gradually gave place to others. Perhaps, after all, his traitorous designs had not been detected. Suspicion might have fastened upon him to some extent, enough to secure his arrest, but not his condemnation. It was possible that they had no witnesses to prove his guilt, and it was difficult to criminate a suspected person without proof.

Rallying somewhat, and recovering a portion of his wonted confidence, he questioned the guard relative to the causes that led to his arrest; but having been strictly charged to hold no conversation with the prisoner, they made no reply to his interrogatories, and so he was obliged to remain in total ignorance in regard to the precise nature of the charges to be made against him, and the evidence that could be adduced. In this uncomfortable state of uncertainty, he was obliged to remain, until it should suit the pleasure and convenience of those who had caused his arrest, to explain matters in a formal way.

The day which was anticipated by the Texans as big with events, dawned upon them bright and clear; but before noon the weather changed, and the sky became overcast and cloudy. The hours crept on at a snail's pace to the impatient senses of the Texans, and the approach of night was hailed with pleasure by the riflemen lying in wait, the company in the chapparal, which with slipped bridles, awaited the proper moment, and to the Hunters of the Border at camp, who were ready to spring into their saddles at the first appearance of the decoy party of Mexican lancers.

Harper and Noon were in the foremost rank, quite fearless of the coming contest, and the masked battery of the enemy. Captain Lorrimer stood beside a large grey horse, wearing not only the accustomed side arms of an officer, but grasping in his right hand his long and deadly rifle. His usually quiet and placid features were now stern and threatening, and his whole frame stimulated and nerved to deeds of patriotic daring.

The expression of Harper had also undergone a signal change. The ardor and courage inspired in the youthful breast by the near prospect of justifiable warfare, and honorable distinction won by undaunted bravery, imparted to his bearing more dignity, pride and firmness, than he had yet exhibited.

The Hunters of the Border, in this case, had voluntarily taken the post of danger. They were well aware that, if their plans did not operate precisely according to preconcerted measures, and they were drawn fully into the ambuscade, a destructive fire must sweep and decimate their ranks. But this was one of the emergencies of war, from which a true soldier would not shrink.

Honest came and licked his master's hand, as if asking permission to attend him; but patting him softly upon the head, Harper ordered him to remain behind, and he trotted off towards the tents with a low whine of disappointment, occasionally stopping to look back wistfully and deprecatingly at the author of this unwelcome mandate.

Dorville, whom Maurice had not seen since the previous night, now dashed up to his side, mounted upon a powerful black horse.

"This looks like a sortie," he said, "and luckily I am in time to go with you. What's on foot?"

Harper explained to him in a few words the cause of these demonstrations.

"Last night he evaded me, or I should have made this discovery myself. I knew that he was tampering with the enemy, and had had several interviews with a Mexican officer. I followed him as far as the timber, where I unfortunately lost track of him in the darkness; but possibly I have made some discoveries which will indemnify me, in some sort, for the failure. A strong party of Moderators are hovering about the camp. What their object is, remains to be more fully developed."

"Have you actually seen them?" asked Noel Noon, quickly.

"Yes; I was within sight of their camp-fires last night; near enough to inhale the odor of the venison which was cooking for their supper. I think I saw Rathburn among them."

"Rathburn!" exclaimed Noon, with a start.

"I fancied so, but I was not near enough to be wholly certain on that point; but providing I am right in my suspicions, what think you does it augur?"

Before Harper or Noel had time to frame an answer to this question, a party of Mexicans, with red streamers floating from the points of their lances, came dashing towards them from the timber. They drew up, however, before they came within rifle range, and turned their horses' heads for a scamper in the opposite direction.

Lorrimer gave the word to mount, and in an instant the entire company was thundering after the decoy lancers. On rattled the latter, congratulating themselves on the perfect success, thus far, of their stratagem.

They entered the timber at a gallop, pursued by the powerful Texan horses, whose weight and metal made the ground shake to their tread.

Possibly as the Hunters of the Border urged their fiery steeds towards the teeth of the concealed foe, they might have confessed a quickened beating of the heart, and sensations of unpleasant expectation; but there was no place in their determined souls for fear.

The lancers, with their waving pennons and gay colors, swept on through and past the ambuscade, and the Texans at full speed reached the spot that was intended to be the last scene in the changing drama of life.

While the heavy tramp of the borderers shook the timber, a deafening rattle of small arms saluted their ears, and a terrible shower of lead went whistling over and among them, emptying some saddles, and wounding many of those resolute men. This discharge was instantly followed by the Texan war-cry on either side, and the sharp, decisive and continuous crack of the Texan rifle. Spurring on out of the dangerous vicinage, the stunning roar of cannon made the woods give back deeper and mightier reverberations, and the lancers were suddenly checked, thrown back and scattered as though a tremendous billow of fire and flame had unexpectedly rolled up against and overwhelmed them.

The mounted riflemen had charged and taken the two ~~six~~-pounders, and turned their muzzles upon the decoy-party, literally cutting them in pieces. Horses and riders fell together in a bleeding and mangled mass.

The dismayed and horror-stricken survivors sprang from their saddles, and rushed into the timber for shelter, there, perhaps, to meet the unerring aim of the Texan rangers. The timber was now full of the tumult and dissonance of battle. The ambushed foemen, attacked furiously in the rear, were driven into the road, and the Hunters of the Border, turning, charged upon them like a thunderbolt, scattering them as the fierce winds scatter autumn leaves.

The other company of riflemen, at that crises now appeared in sight from the Bexar side, with the field-pieces, ready to open upon them, should they attempt to retreat to the town. But completely broken, disheartened and astounded, they threw down their arms and begged for quarter, which was cheerfully given.

If the men had not been tired with their day's vigil in the woods, they would have advanced upon Bexar; but it was considered best by those in command to defer the attack, and the Texans marched back to camp, carrying quite a number of prisoners, and in high spirits.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE COURT-MARTIAL, VISIT TO THE RANCHE.

THE treachery of Manuel Hart produced considerable excitement among Lorri-mer's men. Some of them could scarcely believe that he had really intended to sell them to the enemy, and were somewhat disposed to entertain the idea that Harper, disappointed by not being chosen to lead them, had concocted some ingenious scheme to ruin his successful rival. But such feelings and suspicion were by no means prevalent or popular, the majority plainly seeing his guilt.

Upon the following day a court-martial was called, consisting of General Burleson, Colonel Bowie, Captain Lorrimer and other officers.

Hart strenuously denied all the charges adduced against him, even when Noon and Harper testified to what they had heard. But the evidence was overwhelming; for the battle of the previous night, the disposition of the enemy, the appearance of the decoy party, and in fact, everything that transpired at the time, confirmed the testimony of Noon and Harper.

Dorville deposed and said, that he had followed him to the precincts of Bexar, three nights ago, where he (Hart) had been met by a Mexican officer, and the two entered a house on the outskirts of the town, where they remained for a long time. He did not deem it prudent to go near enough to the house to listen, but when they came out, he heard them make an appointment to meet the next evening in the growth of post oak, where the other witnesses had testified to seeing them.

Dorville also gave other evidence of a circumstantial kind, which went against the accused. Hart asked for time that he might bring rebutting testimony. He said that he could prove an alibi, and only wanted to get word to certain persons in whose company he had passed the first part of the night.

No doubt as to his guilt remained, but the court, willing to show all the fairness and clemency that was possible, gave him three days' grace, with the offer of sending a trusty messenger to any place he might designate, to bring in his witnesses to prove an alibi.

This was a concession which Hart in reality did not expect, and he embraced the conditions gladly, and a hope of escape wholly unknown to his judges, sprang up in his breast.

With a part of the appalling load shaken from his mind, he was re-conducted to his place of confinement.

Noel Noon, having obtained permission to do so, visited this prisoner, to gain, if possible, some information of him concerning the Rathburn family; but he could get no satisfactory answers. He was more confirmed, however, in his previous opinion that Hart had some knowledge of their present residence; and he did not even attempt to deny that such was the fact. He refused to hold any communication with him, in reference to the maidens, without a promise from Noel, that he would assist him to escape.

"Providing," he said, "that he (Noon) would exert himself strenuously to procure his liberation, he would impart to him all the information which he had relating to the maidens."

But a promise of this kind the honest forester did not feel that he could honorably make; consequently, the traitor's conditions were rejected.



'WARPATH' AND HIS VICTIM.

Having failed to make any discoveries in that direction, Noon and Harper resolved to visit the Rancho on the Brazos, and endeavor, by all feasible methods, to gain some clue to the sudden sitting of the Rathburns.

Their journey to that locality it will not be necessary to follow step by step; but suffice it to say, that they reached the spot near the close of the second day. Everything looked natural about the premises. There had been no change in the externals of the place. Some sheep and cattle were feeding, as was their wont on the prairie on the east side of the corral; and it was evident that the spot had not been visited by enemies, for in that case, the flocks and herds would have been driven off.

Dismounting, they turned their horses loose, of which liberty the jaded animals were glad to avail themselves. The gate of the corral was fastened, but Noel being acquainted with those matters, soon contrived to open it. The door of the

house was secured in a similar manner, but that difficulty was overcome as readily as the other. They entered, but all within was silent and gloomy. The cheerfulness of the place had departed. The graceful forms and pleasant voices of the maidens were not there to make it home-like and agreeable.

Both the young men sat down with feelings of sadness. Noon looked doubly disconsolate, and his eyes wandered restlessly about the room, as if he expected to see the tidy figure of Ramona starting up from some obscure corner.

"I can't think of stayin' here all night," he said, despondingly; "for it isn't the place that it used to be, by no means. Let's go to our old campin' ground, above here."

To this proposition Maurice was very willing to consent; for the dwelling appeared so utterly deserted, that he seriously doubted whether he could sleep there.

While they were passing from the corral, something white upon the ground, near the gate, attracted our hero's attention. He picked it up. It proved to be a linen handkerchief, to which was pinned a slip of paper, containing the following lines:

"My father has suddenly resolved to leave the Rancho, and will give no reason for this unanticipated determination. Manuel Hart has been seen in this vicinity, within a few hours. I fear that father has been unduly influenced, and is in some way in the power of this man. This mysterious movement fills Ramona and myself with alarm. We tremble with fear, and yet we know not why. I would write whither we are going, but do not know."

"P. S. Since writing the above, I have seen a Mexican officer with my father. They crossed the Rancho together, unconscious that they were observed by Ramona or myself. Perhaps we are to be conveyed to some place in possession of the Mexicans. Why I pen these lines I scarcely know; and I do so without any other than a vague idea that they may in some manner be of use to us."

Harper read this note aloud, and although it contained nothing definite in regard to the destination of the maidens, yet it seemed to revive the hopes of the foresters. The probability was now pretty strong that they had been taken to some town where the Mexicans were in possession, and Bexar might be that place.

The more Harper and Noon reflected upon the subject, the more they were inclined to this opinion. Earnestly talking the matter over, they reached their old camping ground, and proceeded without delay to kindle a fire and cook some venison which they had brought with them.

Having answered the demands of appetite, they wrapped themselves in their blankets and were soon lost in profound slumber, while Honest, as weary as they, stretched himself beside them and slept as soundly.

The sun had mounted high in the heavens when the foresters awoke. Noon, who had been suffering from a severe cold, had increased the difficulty by exposure and the morning found him quite feverish; so much so, that Harper recommended him to remain quiet while he went out in search of such game as would be best for him, under the circumstances.

He succeeded in procuring a few grouse and was on the way back, when he saw a figure walking among the trees beyond him. Curious to know who it might be, he hurried on in that direction, hoping to get a better view of the person whoever it might be. But the figure was no longer in sight, and thinking he was entirely baffled in his intention, he abandoned the thought and seated himself beside a cool spring to rest. He had sat there but a few minutes, when the man appeared in full view advancing towards him, evidently unconscious that his movements were observed.

Harper recognized him at once as Meltiah Moss.

"This way—this way, Meltiah! I have news for you," said Maurice, addressing him, "Your friend Hart is in trouble"

The latter stopped and surveyed our hero with an expression of genuine astonishment, not unmixed with fear.

"Sorry to hear it, stranger. What's the nature of the trouble?" replied Moss, when he had recovered a measure of his self-possession.

Maurice told him what had happened, which intelligence did not seem to affect him greatly.

"I s'pose bygones is bygones, and you don't hold no hardness?" said Moss.

"I shall not remember your evil designs to your injury, providing you do not give me fresh occasion to complain, in which event I will not be answerable for what I may do."

Harper then proceeded to question Meltiah in regard to the flight of the Rathbuns, but could elicit nothing of any importance. Moss was entirely ignorant, or feigned to be, of the whole matter; only knowing that they went down the river very suddenly.

"I've been thinkin'," said Moss, as Harper was preparing to go, "that my life hasn't been jest what it ought to have been. I have made up my mind to reform."

"The experiment is worth trying. You will feel better for it, no doubt; although, truth to tell, I have the smallest possible faith in your promises," rejoined Maurice.

"Just the state of things I expected; but havin' been pretty sick lately from a wound which you gave me at the Rancho, I have had time to reflect on my conduct, and see that it hasn't quite come up to what a human critter ought to be. I've been set on by others to injure you, and to balance the account, if the time ever comes when I can lend you a helpin' hand, I'll do it."

"Perhaps it won't be best to discuss the matter much," replied Harper, with an incredulous smile, "for you doubtless remember that we have met several times before, and not under circumstances to enhance my opinion of you. If there is any opening through which you can escape from the pollutions of your past life, I certainly hope that you may avail yourself of it; but if you don't wish to make me mistrust that you design to waylay me before I get back to camp, let the subject drop."

Harper gathered up his game and moved on. At the distance of a hundred yards, he turned and looked back. Moss was leaning on his rifle, gazing fixedly after him. Maurice wondered what he might be thinking about at that particular moment, or what new piece of mischief he was maturing.

When our young soldier reached the camp, Noel declared that he felt better and after partaking of some of the broth which Harper prepared for him, was anxious to turn his face once more in the direction of Bexar. Accordingly the horses were caught, and they left the Rancho, though not without sadness and regret.

They had proceeded about ten miles, when Noon became unable to go farther. They were in the heart of the forest, and not a human habitation was near. The forester did not complain, but a glance at his flushed face was enough to convince Maurice that he was very ill. What was now to be done? Prompt action was certainly demanded. Seating Noel upon a log, Harper with the point of his pocket knife opened a vein, and having taken as much blood as he considered judicious closed it up in a quick and masterly manner. Telling him to remain where he was, our hero then went in search of a camp which he recollected to have seen in that vicinity some months before.

He was fortunate enough to find it, and Noon was conducted to it. It stood close by the river, and hunters and settlers frequently made it a stopping place. Here they remained during that day and the next, waiting for a favorable change in the disease. The sick man was impatient of this delay to the last degree, and Maurice had great difficulty in keeping him quiet. But their detention was in-

dennified by finding between the crevices of the logs of which the camp was built a small piece of paper, with the following lines traced upon it, evidently by Iris, but without signature.

"We have come thus far on horseback. We have stopped here to rest, for this kind of exercise fatigues us exceedingly. We are still ignorant of our place of destination. Father is stern and silent, and sometimes harsh. Our minds are full of anxious forebodings. This note may possibly meet the eyes of Noel Noon, or some person interested in us."

This note had much to do with increasing the restlessness of Noon.

On the third day of their detention, while Maurice was hunting, he saw a man crossing the river in a dug-out. Although a considerable distance from him, he imagined that he had seen the same before. Full of this thought he walked down the river, concealing his person from view by keeping among the trees, with the intention of getting a nearer and better view of the individual who had excited his curiosity.

Unfortunately there was an abrupt bend in the river between him and the man in the dug-out, and before he had gone round it, the object of his scrutiny had crossed and disappeared. Going down to the water's edge, he discovered the dug-out drawn up into the bushes. Examining it closely, he perceived that a rifle ball had passed through one side, splintering it considerably. Instantly he recollected the incident that had transpired on his first meeting with Manuel Hart; viz, the unlucky shot, and the consequent bravado of the back-woodsman.

If the latter had not been left under arrest at General Burleson's camp, he would not have hesitated to say that he had just seen him crossing the Brazos. But the facts in the case were very much against this supposition; for he doubted not that Hart had expiated his villainies in a terrible manner. He knew the sentiments of the officers in regard to his guilt, and not one of them believed that an alibi could be proved, relative to his last interview with the Mexican officer, where the traitorous plot had been fully developed. It was proved that he had been there, as specified by two witnesses, and how could it be shown by any amount of rebutting testimony, that he was in another locality and otherwise engaged?

Harper pursued his way to the camp, deeply cogitating the subject. The sun was just going down, and the shadows of twilight were silently invading the forest. Our hero was but a short distance from camp, when Meltiah Moss suddenly glided from behind a tree, and stood before him, holding up his finger to admonish him to cautious utterance.

"You have doubted my professions about tryin' to do better and reform like, but I've come now to prove that I'm raaly in airnest. The Moderators got word that Manuel Hart was in difficulty, hovered about Burleson's camp like greedy kites, attacked the guard one night, killed several of 'em, and carried the traitor in triumph. He and a score of blackguards are now in the neighborhood arter you and Noel Noon. If you aint off afore mornin', you'll be dead men."

"Can all this be true, Moss?" asked Harper, looking searchingly at Meltiah.

"True as preachin', and more so; because I don't believe all preachin's true. This isn't quite all, neither. Jack Lawless, the chap as calls himself the Texan cub, is with him, as full of wickedness as ever a critter was. If you aint out of this place soon, your chance wont be worth a charge of powder."

CHAPTER XIII.

HOW MANUEL'S PLOT SUCCEEDED.

For a time Harper remained silent, reflecting upon the strange communication which had been made. The degree of importance to be attached to what Moss had affirmed, was something not easily determined; for, hitherto that personage had proved a most unconscionable rogue. But now his manner appeared much changed; the expression of his countenance was not so sinister, and his voice was more earnest and meaning.

"You speak advisedly in this matter, I trust," he said, resolving to test him, so far as he was able to do so.

"I have told you jest the truth and no more; but I don't much expect to make you believe it, because, as my reputation for veracity isn't uncommon, I rather expect that I have kept the company of Jack Lawless and sich kind of specimens of human natur so long, that I've larnt many things not necessary to my well bein'," responded Meltiah.

"There's no question about it in my mind," replied Maurice, with a smile; "but," he added immediately, in a serious tone, "if the marvellous tale that you have been telling me be strictly true, what course am I to pursue?"

"That's the very thing to be decided. I think if I was in your shoes, I should shoulder my shootin' stick and cut like a streak! I generally finds that there's nothin' scarcely, like a man's legs, when he's in difficulty. The way 'tis with me when I see anythin' like danger in the distance, I take to my taps kinder naterally, and leave it at a two forty gait. But as you are now situated, that doesn't appear to be altogether easy; for without the practice of unusual caution, you'll have Hart and his wolverines on your trail; and unless you're uncommon smart, they'll run you down for sartain, when you'll be worked off without the benefit of court-martial, or three days' grace. If you stay where you are, you'll have to bear a pretty hard siege, and I don't see how you're goin' to do that, seein' there's only two of you, and one sick in the bargain."

"To all human appearance our chance to escape will be small, if we adopt the latter course; and yet I do not know how to act otherwise, because Noon isn't able to bear the fatigue of rapid travelling, at present."

"I know it's a kind of hard case, but I don't see no way of helpin' it. I've done what I thought was right, and you can take what course you like the best."

Meltiah Moss said no more, but shouldering his rifle, stalked away, leaving our hero in a sublime state of doubt and uncertainty. He reached the camp in a condition of unpleasant anxiety, and he had no definite means of rendering his perplexities less harassing. Noon was worse than he had been hitherto, and Harper at first questioned the propriety of telling him what he had heard; more mature reflection, however, induced him to lay the matter before his friend, who listened attentively, and expressed his opinion to the effect that there was a strong probability of the whole being strictly true; that Hart was at large, having obtained his liberty through the instrumentality of a party of Moderators—the same doubtless spoken of by Dorville—and, stimulated, by a desire for retaliation, he had induced his friends to join in an enterprise against Harper, and himself. Nothing was more likely. Next to the love of life, the thirst for re-

venge is paramount with bad men. Hart had objects to gain, and putting them both out of existence, he doubtless considered it an important step in the consummation of his designs. They therefore might expect the worst, and the probability of falling into the hands of the traitor was indeed too strong not to excite real apprehensions.

The Moderators, many of them, were men aggregated from the floating population of Texas, fugitives from justice from other states, persons without moral principle, with few ties to bind them to any place, and with no visible means of gaining a livelihood. Therefore, an easy, vagrant life accorded best with their dispositions and previous habits. What are esteemed crimes among the healthy portions of community, were by them deemed matters so common-place, as to be of very little, or of no importance.

To fight the Regulators whenever opportunity offered, to appropriate any horses, which they might find, to their own use, or any other available property, formed distinguishing traits in their characters. Not that all who belonged to this restless faction were men destitute of honesty, and sold to the commission of crime, but there were too many of that stamp mixed up with it, to make it an agency of good to the country. The more peace-loving, quiet and conservative members of this organization stayed at home, minding their own affairs; and it was only such as we have described, who moved about in predatory bands, for the purposes named.

Noon proposed leaving the place as speedily as possible; having good horses, he believed they might be able to leave Hart and his fellows behind.

Harper thereupon reminded him of his illness, which in the excitement of the moment he had almost forgotten. Noel's countenance instantly lost its hopeful expression, and he acknowledged that to stay where they were appeared to be the alternative, although twenty to two were fearful odds.

Having decided relative to this point, Harper set about putting the camp in as good a state of defence as possible. He prepared barricades to fasten the door, made loop holes in various places, and put their pistols and rifles in proper order. Noel assisted him in this as much as his feeble condition would admit.

Until midnight they awaited the approach of their expected enemies with not a little anxiety, when they relaxed their vigilance, somewhat inclined to believe that the alarm had been entirely without foundation. Maurice persuaded the forester to lie down and attempt to get the rest which he needed; and while giving him a simple decoction of herbs which he had prepared, both were startled by a gentle knocking at the door. Instantly the hunters caught their weapons.

"Who knocks?" demanded Harper.

"Meltiah Moss," responded a voice without.

"Are you alone?"

Moss replied that he was, and if Harper had any doubt of it, he could look out and satisfy himself.

Our hero opened the door and Meltiah entered.

"Why do you come, and what news do you bring?"

"I come because two and one make three; and in a case like this, three might be a great deal better than two. I don't greatly like to fight in the open air, because I allers likes somethin' atween me and the enemy; and these logs have the appearance of bein' bullet proof. If Hart and his fellers should come up, you needn't say pertickerler that I'm here, because it might work agin me afterwards. If we should have to knock under, I've got some hand-cuffs in my pockets which I can jest slip on to my wrists, and make 'em think I'm here agin my will, and a prisoner."

Neither Noon nor Maurice could help smiling at the ingenuity displayed by their new ally, who seemed resolved to secure his personal safety in all cases where it was possible.

"I haven't told you the news, yet," resumed Moss. "I've seen Warpath, and you may expect him afore mornin', with several of his heathen critters as he calls warriors. If it hadn't been for that expectation, I raaly don't think you'd have seen Meltiah Moss in this here establishment; because as I've a constitutional weakness which allers make me jine the strongest party. I s'pose, however, it's somethin' a kind providence has gifted me with, to keep me out of danger; and notwithstandin' I've got that blessin' so abundantly, I aint sinfully proud of it, by no means, because everybody has some distinguishin' virtue that shines brighter than others."

This time Meltiah Moss was indeed the herald of cheering news, although neither of the foresters were yet disposed to rely implicitly upon his asseverations.

This conversation had scarcely ceased, when Noon descried a man approaching the camp from the river. The parties watched his coming with much interest. He announced his arrival by a peremptory knocking. The foresters allowed him to repeat this demonstration several times before giving any indication that he was heard; and then Harper demanded the business of the intruder.

"I've come to see if thar war anybody here. Thar's a feller critter down below that's shakin' his clothes off from him with the fever and ager."

"I regret to hear it," replied Maurice. "Better give him some quinine." "Must give him somethin', I reckon, stranger, or he'll shake himself into futurity almost directly. Want to get you to go down and help bring him in."

"That's humbug stuff!" muttered Moss, in an under tone.

"Take him on your shoulder and bag him right along," returned Noon.

"Couldn't think of it! Weighs two hundred and fifty," replied the man.

"I know the varmint—don't trust him," added Meltiah.

"Aint you comin'?" continued the applicant, impatiently.

"Wait until morning," said Harper.

"What! and let a feller critter die! That isn't the nature of my bringin' up. It allers puts me in pain to see a poor man die for want of a little attention. I never could bear to see an individual shakin' himself away to kingdom come with the ager."

Harper thereupon assured the fellow that he did not see fit to comply with his request; upon which, with some farther importunity, he went away, apparently highly indignant at his ill success.

At the expiration of a quarter of an hour, three persons appeared bringing what appeared to be a heavy burden. As they drew nearer, it proved to be a man.

"More gammon!" said Meltiah.

"Stay where you are—don't come any nearer!" shouted Noon, through a loop-hole.

"We've got the man with fever and ager, and he shakes so that it takes two of us to hold his har on."

"Approach at your peril!" replied Noon.

"You can't be so onhuman as to deny shelter to a sick person," retorted the spokesman of the party.

"Put him down and let him come along, and we'll take care of him," returned Noel.

"Can't walk a step, the travel is all shaken out of him," was the rejoinder.

"You're sure he can't walk?"

"Not if all the Camanches were after him."

"I'll test that," said Noon, in a low voice to Harper, and immediate discharged one barrel of his pistol.

The effect of this harmless shot was instant and wonderful; they dropped the sick man, who, the moment he had recovered from the shock of his unexpected fall, scrambled to his feet, and scampered away after his companions, without giving any particular indications of the shakes.

"Now they'll have to unmask their battery, I take it," observed Meltiah, and he was quite correct; for in a few moments a party of eighteen or twenty persons appeared in sight, headed by Manuel Hart, who insolently ordered Harper and his friend to come out to them, stating that refusal would be attend with prompt and summary punishment.

To this demand, our friends of course paid no attention. Manuel stormed and threatened, and advanced as near the camp as he dared. Noon assured him that if he fired upon them, they should return the compliment, and admonished him to keep off; but he refused to listen, and after consulting a few moments with Jack Lawless, told some of his coadjutors to commence hostilities by firing upon the camp, when several balls perforated the door, and lodged in logs at the opposite side.

Both Harper and his friend were at loss how to act under the circumstances. The idea of shedding blood was repugnant to their feelings; and yet there appeared to be no other alternative. Stern necessity bade them retaliate and defend themselves to the last. They deplored the urgency of the emergency which compelled them to turn their arms against those who ought to be neighbors and brethren.

"We must return the fire," said Maurice, "but for one, I will endeavor to wound without destroying life."

"I haven't been gifted with no such nice scruples as them," said Meltiah, "and I won't say that them as I hit 'll live."

Harper discharged one of his barrels, and the right arm of a fellow reloading his rifle, dropped powerless by his side. The ball had passed through it breaking the bone. Noel and Moss both followed his example in firing, and their shots took effect, inflicting apparently serious injuries.

Intimidated by this unanticipated demonstration, the parties fell hastily back, taking shelter under the bank of the river from whence they continued to fire at random taking good care to expose their persons as little as possible. Knowing that this mode of warfare would not effect their object, unless some chance shot should pass through a crevice or the door, and do the bloody deed which was in contemplation, Hart incited his companions to make a sudden charge and perform the work at once.

This they attempted, but met with a reception that repulsed them, with the loss of two of their number, while at the same time Hart was wounded in the shoulder.

Men of real resolution and courage would certainly have pressed the attack without once thinking of failure or retreat; but this faction not been engaged in a worthy cause, could not summon to their aid those high qualities which always ensures victory; and after some consideration, withdrew, taking with them their wounded. What their object was, the next chapter will more fully develop.

CHAPTER XV.

THE LIPAN CHIEF.

SMARTING with the pain of his wound, chagrined by his want of success, and thirsting for vengeance, Manue Hart prepared to make a more bold, decisive attack. In carrying out his purposes, he had not anticipated any resistance, supposing that Harper and his friend would at once succumb to his demands, and awed by numbers, not be presumptuous enough to offer any resistance.

Having been so much disappointed in this expectation, he was now more than ever desirous to put his original intentions into execution. His coadjutors, also, on account of the punishment which they had received, were impatient to make a more effective demonstration. The faction was divided into four parties, who were to advance upon the camp in different directions; and as they believed there were but two persons to oppose them, they could not well resist an attack made at so many points.

Another ingenious device was resorted to, to secure their personal safety in this unequal warfare, and was an expedient which brave men, would have scorned to adopt, under the circumstances.

They felled a large cypress, cut it into lengths corresponding to the height of a man, and then split them in the manner that tiles are riven. These pieces were of sufficient width to cover a person advancing, and thick enough, as they believed, to be bullet proof. Each man was to carry one of these monster tiles before him, and thus advance with impunity upon their victims.

This scheme certainly looked very hopeful, and while they were maturing it, we will see how things are going at the little cabin, which was being besieged.

While they were gloomily listening to the axes of their assailants, Harper, who was looking from a loop-hole on the west side of the structure, fancied that he saw a figure creeping stealthily toward them from the cover of the trees. At first he could not determine whether it was really a person approaching, or some animal that was, perhaps, a nocturnal prowler about the premises. On this point his doubts were not of long continuance. The appearance advanced, grew more distinctly defined, and confirmed his first conjectures. It was a human being, whose object evidently was to approach the camp; but what his intention in so doing might be, was yet to be made apparent. Nor did that remain a matter of uncertainty. The little party was elated with hope, when at length, the form of Warpath, the Lipan chief, was sufficiently defined to be recognized.

Maurice instantly thrust his handkerchief through the opening and shook it to assure him that he was seen, and his motives appreciated.

Seeing this friendly signal, the red man glided quickly forward, and was instantly admitted.

"I have come," he said, in a low and impressive voice, "I have come to put my heel on the head of the big mocasson snake, and crush him into the ground. He shall crawl no longer among the sheltering brakes, nor crouch in the dark swamps. He shall strike no more with his treacherous fangs while he lurks in the bending grass. I have come with my braves to cut out his tongue, and destroy him, that my white brothers may walk among his favorite haunts without fear of being bitten by a serpent that never hisses before he fixes his fangs into the flesh of his victim."

"The words of the Lipan are cold water to one that is thirsty," responded Harper.

"Or like the voice of the Master of Life," added Noon.

"Or like a tree that shelters one as doesn't like to fight in the open air, with nothin' afore him," said Meltiah, sentimentally.

"I've just been to look at the white traitor," resumed Warpath. "He is preparing to pounce upon you as some foul bird upon his prey. Part of my braves will come into the camp; the others will remain concealed among the trees to attack them in the rear, and so cut them off."

Nothing could be urged against the wisdom and practicability of this plan; but Harper ventured to express an earnest hope that human life should be respected as much as possible. They were, he averred his countrymen, but men who were unhappily misdirected; they had fatally mistaken the way of happiness; bad influences were continually acting upon them; they were ignorant and perverted minds, and in fact, were more truly objects of commiseration than of vengeance.

Noon endorsed these sentiments to a certain extent, but expressed the idea that our hero was probably too lenient in his feelings, forgetting in his compassion, the claims of justice. A floating population of this kind he considered an absolutely curse to the country. Reform could scarcely be hoped for while such depraved consociations existed. He believed that they should be thinned out like noxious weeds in a garden. They needed something to startle them. Common-place warnings would not do; they must be made to contemplate death in its most sudden and appalling aspects, in order that they might pause and ask themselves if they were prepared for a similar fate. Men who associated for criminal purposes, in large bodies, he said, seldom reformed, but rather grew worse.

Warpath listened respectfully to these thoughts and suggestions, and then replied to the purport that he had taken the matter into his own hands; that he was a chief—should lead his braves where and against whom he deemed it wise. The responsibility, in this case, he gave them to understand, was his own.

"They have," he added, "wronged my people. They have spilled the blood of the unprotected Lipan, when they found him sleeping in his cabin, or hunting in the woods. They have slain our warriors, and insulted our women. They have no people and no country; they belong to nobody, they have no homes, no governments, and no love to bind them anywhere. They are unfit to live, and I have said that many of them shall perish. Do not speak; the anger of the Lipans is kindled, and burns with a fervent flame. It asks for victims to appease the manes of their departed braves. They shall have them!"

Noon and Harper made no reply. The proud dignity of the chief forbade rejoinder. They knew that his resolution was fixed, and could not be changed.

A band of dark and robust warriors came stealing into the camp. In the dim moonlight they were grim as war-paint could make them, and silent as spectres of the dead. The cabin was soon full of them, and iron barrels were bristling from every crevice and aperture.

Though truly grateful to Heaven for this providential rescue, Harper could not witness these preparations without regretting that the misdirected passions of men should lead to such results. He did not forget, however, to express in a dignified and feeling manner, his sense of gratitude to the brave Lipan.

Meltiah Moss was highly pleased with the turn affairs was now taking. He had hitherto entertained some serious apprehensions concerning his personal safety (a thing uppermost in his mind), but now he had the indescribable satisfaction of finding himself backed by the strongest party.

Meantime the decisive and eventful moment drew near. The Moderators approached cautiously at four points, holding up before them the cypress tiles which they had riven for the purpose.

"How much better 'twould be for them," said Meltiah, "if they would take that business altogether, and do nothing but make shingles."

Ignorant of what awaited them at the cabin, and of the danger that lurked around them without they advanced with a feeling of security and confidence which they had not before experienced. Protected by their wooden shields, they even jested and laughed as they approached. They were quite sure that they had circumvented the two foresters, and that they would surrender without farther resistance. It was a fatal mistake.

On came the assailants, and not a shot was fired. The Lipans were waiting the expected signal from their chief. It came at length like the shrill cry of the eagle, when he makes a swoop and bears off in triumph his struggling prey. The camp shook with the vehemence of the discharge that burst from it on every side, while the trees and the forest scenery were lighted up almost simultaneously with a continuous fire which poured its destruction upon the assailants in the rear.

The wall of wooden shields was beaten down, the hands that held them lost their strength, either by the power of the angel of death, or through terror; and soon the spot where Hart and his dissolute companions had stood was hidden from view by a dense cloud of smoke.

The leaden volleys did not cease; they continued to sweep the surrounding ground with rapidity. Presently the firing was suspended. The red warriors rushed as if by a common impulse from the wood and the cabin.

Maurice shuddered; for he knew their purpose; and while they were gone, he heard mingling with their shouts of exultation, hollow groans and sharp cries of agony. But the latter indications were soon hushed; a solemn silence brooded over the scene. The sulphurous smoke rolled away like dissolving mist. The rosy dawn reddened in the far off west, and struggling beams of light came to dispel the dominancy of night.

The Lipans erected a war-post in front of the cabin, and forming a circle about it, performed the scalp dance, while sundry red trophies of savage victory were seen suspended at their belts.

Harper and Noon did not examine the spot where the Indians had performed the last, and to them, important rite in the usages, of barbaric warfare. They did not ask how many had fallen, or the names of those who had been swept away by the besom of destruction. They did not inquire if the body of Manuel Hart had been recognized, or whether he had escaped the effects of this signal blow.

Meltiah, whose conscience was of a very complacent and yielding nature, did not trouble himself about these nice moral distinctions, but shouted, danced, menaced the war-post, and hacked it with his hatchet as bravely and vauntingly as the warriors themselves. Probably his reform notions had not had sufficient time to leaven the whole lump of his disposition.

Having shaken hands with Warpath, and thanked his braves in a becoming manner, our hero and his friend mounted their horses and left the spot, glad to behold new scenery, and to banish from view the evidences of human conflict which had been so recently presented on every side. The excitement which these stirring scenes had produced in Noel's system, had effected a happy result. A gentle perspiration was induced which the exercise of riding on horseback kept up, thus relieving the cutaneous vessels from obstructions, and throwing off the fever which had prevailed.

* * * * *

We must now request the reader to accompany us to another scene, leaving our two friends to pursue their way at leisure to Burleson's camp. We will go to a substantial dwelling situated on the Rio San Miguel, a little below San Antonio de Bexar.

The building alluded to, at the date of our story, was surrounded by a high

wall of considerable strength, and had formerly been a convent of some note; but had now fallen into decay and neglect, and had, of late years, been inhabited by a few sisters of charity, most of whom had left the place since the opening of the war. Our business being with other characters, we shall not particularly notice those two or three sisters, who are still seen occasionally gliding in and out of the premises.

Seated in a gloomy apartment of this time-worn fabric, are two females. They are our heroine and her sister. The former sits at an antique desk writing. If the conventionalities of civilized life will overlook the impertinence, we will venture to glance over the shoulder of the fair one who is putting her thoughts upon paper. The words which are traced read in the following manner:

"This uncertainty and mystery grows every day more insupportable. Why we are forced to make this long journey to this cheerless place, I do not know, and yet I cannot but suspect its object; for it involves the honor and probity of one whom nature should teach me to reverence and love. Alas! I fear I do neither. But is it my fault? Would not paternal care and tenderness on his part, meet with a proper response from me? I can remember when he appeared different; but now the influence of that bad man is upon him. My mind often reverts to that singular stranger, Dorville. I know not why I am so much attracted towards him. My thoughts fly to him as to a friend, while I am wholly ignorant of his character and history.—What shall I write concerning that gallant Virginian? What shall I say in extenuation of the wrong I have inadvertently done him? I sincerely hope that those dark rumors concerning him are unfounded—having their sole origin in the brain of an unscrupulous enemy. But why should I perplex myself with this subject? Why does my mind occupy itself with one who may be unworthy of my interest, and whom I may never see again.—Ramona is sad; she is doubtless thinking of honest Noel Noon, and the new alliance which father proposes for her with the Mexican officer—Captain Morales."

The reader will perceive that what we have read appears to be an extract from a diary, which is really the case; and upon looking at the preceding pages, we shall find records of an earlier date, having reference to the journey from our heroine's home on the Brazos to her present place of residence, but which we will not stop to examine. We will only make one more extract from the same page, and under the date which she is now writing.

"The whole plot is developed at last, and it is much worse than I had anticipated. My suspicions in relation to Manuel Hart have indeed been but too well founded. He seeks, by the practice of the most cruel duplicity, to make me his wife; and my father advocates his cause—nay insists upon my compliance, using language towards me which fills my mind with terror. Whither can I fly for relief? Who will espouse my cause, and protect me from oppression so unkind, so unjust, so repugnant? I have never before been truly unhappy, but now I am indeed wretched. The rude woodsman has been here with Captain Morales, and has declared himself in terms too plain not to be understood. I expressed my sentiments freely; he grew insolent, and left me in anger.

"This is perhaps the danger of which Dorville warned me. Strange Dorville! I wish I could see him. At present I may consider myself a prisoner. Ramona is equally unhappy, and we think of attempting to escape from this place. But where should we go for shelter and sympathy?"

Having perused the foregoing, the reader will be able to form a tolerable accurate idea of the situation of the Rathburn girls. He will understand what Manuel Hart was doing, while he was connected with the Hunters of the Border, and be able to account for his mysterious goings and comings, while at Burleson's camp.

CHAPTER XVI.

A STRANGE DISCLOSURE.

The maidens were daily allowed the privilege of walking in the garden within the enclosure, but Rathburn strictly enjoined on them that they were on no account to attempt to go beyond. The excuse which he made for this injunction, was that the country was in such a troubled state that it would not be safe to do so, for enemies might be lurking in the vicinity, from whom they might expect insult and captivity.

Although both the girls believed that this was not the real motive that influenced him, they were prudent enough not to express their sentiments.

On the evening succeeding the foregoing scene, Iris and Ramona wishing for fresh air, availed themselves of what liberty was granted them, and walked among the trees and shrubbery within the grounds attached to the house. Their surprise was great when they discovered that new and significant precautions had been taken. Two Mexican soldiers were keeping guard over the premises, and the points of their bristling bayonets could be seen above the walls, as they paced regularly their rounds.

Iris, who was the first to perceive this circumstance, immediately called Ramona's attention to the same, asking her whether she thought the sentinels were to watch their movements and prevent their escape, or to secure their safety, and warn them of the approach of those who might not respect even female helplessness and innocence.

Her sister was of the opinion that the first supposition was correct; for their father's manner had changed much of late, and it was evidently his intention to coerce them into alliances repugnant to their better feelings, and in directions where their affections were not engaged, nor could be on account of the disparity of taste, age and pursuits.

"I have been attempting," she added, "to analyze his thoughts and intentions—to gain a deeper insight into his nature. I know that he was ever irritable in disposition, and subject to fits of melancholy, but he never manifested that forbidding sternness that now marks all his conduct. There is a deep mystery hanging about his actions which remains to be fathomed. I sometimes fear that his reason is dethroned."

"He is absent minded, and often has to be addressed several times before making any answer. I have watched him during his solitary walks in and about this enclosure, and witnessed indubitable evidences of a mind suffering great anxiety and unhappiness, if not remorse. You know that our sympathies flow out in favor of the patriotic Texans, and father formerly was imbued with the same feeling; but how changed is he now! It is true (I speak it with shame and regret), that he holds correspondence with the enemies of Texas. You are aware that he talks much with Captain Morales, and is frequently with him. It fills me with sorrow to see him tampering with those seeking to enslave our countrymen, and place upon their limbs the shackles of bondmen.

"I have long observed his growing partiality and sympathy with the degrading policy of Santa Anna, but respect for the paternal character has hitherto prevented me from speaking to you so freely on the subject. There is one thing perhaps that you may have remarked," she added, in a low tone; "that is, that our father has an inordinate thirst for gold. I fear it is his idol—the ambition of his life—the predominating idea that haunts him, always. It pursues him during the day, and disturbs his dreams by night. I have noticed the mental pain which he appears to suffer, and though he never realized to me my highest conceptions of a parent, I behold, with secret dread, his increasing sternness. Shall I say it, Ramona—he never was to me a father, and the chords of my affections never responded to what few words of endearment he may have bestowed upon

me in happier days. There has been (why should I conceal it) an impassable gulf between us. I could not pass over to him, because the abyss intervening was not bridged over with gentleness. There is a part of my nature that still lies dormant within me, and his voice can never arouse it to action, and develop its beauties. You are his favorite; to you he sometimes opens his heart. There are evidently moments when he loves you, and I am really glad that there is even one being who can, at times, call out a spark of humanity from his bosom."

"Your observations are just," replied Ramona. "He has shown more kindness to me than to you. He says I am more like him in person, and reminded him more of our dead mother. Our organizations are dissimilar, in many respects. Your mind is of a finer texture, and your intellectual faculties more expansive than mine. I feel that you are my superior, and have stronger claims to favoritism than myself. But the season of his tenderness is past, and why should I speak of it?"

"Hush!" said Iris, in a whisper. "He is approaching, and Hart is with him."

The maidens instantly secreted themselves behind some dense shrubbery to avoid being seen. Rathburn and Hart approached conversing earnestly. Portions of the conversation the young ladies were able to hear.

Hart appeared to be in bad temper, while Rathburn was gloomy, and also somewhat irritable.

"I tell you I won't be put off," said Manuel. "I'm ready to do all I said I would. The gal is here, and there's nothin' to hinder."

"Try soft words," responded Rathburn.

"Dios! Much good they will do! I'd as soon think of coaxing a fox from his hole with corn, or catchin' a weasel asleep. I can tell by the flash of the girl's eye, that flatterin' ways aint of no use, whatevsomever. Nothin' but fear and force will ever bring her to it, and you might as well make up your mind to it first as last."

"Business enough! business enough! to marry off two young women against their wishes! I'm perplexed and harassed nearly to madness. Hart, you'll make me desperate."

"You know what I can do," rejoined Manuel, sullenly.

"Betraying our countrymen for money, is another thing I don't greatly relish."

"It'll always be well for you to bear in mind the perticlers of that *will* case, for fear your conscience 'll get too tender," added Hart, with a sneer.

"Maledictions upon you and the *will*, both!" retorted Rathburn, bitterly.

"What you're doin' aint no worse than what you have done; and a good pile of bank notes or Mexican dollars will make a good salve for your conscience. You know if I should only speak to the gal, and tell her what I know, you wouldn't be able, I take it, to exercise any more authority over her; and if the news should get to certain ears, you might be accommodated with lodgings in a habitation made of stone, and ornamented with grated windows."

"The old story—the old story!" muttered Rathburn, moodily. "I never shall hear the last of it. You always stand in my path like an evil genius, to pervert my better impulses with threats and—"

"Gold," added Hart, sarcastically.

"Well, if I must sell myself to the—what time will satisfy you?"

"A week is the longest stretch I can think of, but Captain Morales you can put off longer; and there won't be so much objection in that quarter, I take it."

Rathburn mused a moment.

"For Heaven's sake, Hart, can't you forget this, and be a man! he exclaimed, at length.

Manuel's brow grew dark, and a more sinister gloom gathered upon his countenance.

"I can go," he said, "to New Orleans, and tell that you have forged a *will*, cheated your sister's child of what belonged to her, and shut her out of your affections ever since."

A deadly paleness overspread the features of Rathburn. He pressed his hand spasmodically to his forehead, and seemed to stagger beneath the intensity of his emotions.

"For God's sake, Hart, don't speak so loud! Some one might hear—it might ruin me, you know, and I never could look the gals in the face again, if they should mistrust this. What misery it is to be a villain."

"You see how fast I've got you."

"Yes—yes; fix your time. It shall be done. I can be stern, harsh and decided, and I will be."

"That sounds better."

"How do you succeed with the captain?" added Rathburn, anxious to change the subject.

"Swimmingly! I have an appointment with him to-night, to finish up the affair. He's to pay me half of it down, and the rest arter the Hunters of the Borders are done for."

"It's a villainous transaction, and you may expect something worse than imprisonment, if you get detected."

Manuel glanced uneasily at Rathburn.

"I hope you don't think of informin'?" he said, quickly.

"Who thought of it?" returned the other, drily.

"No knowin' what people 'll do. Folks as 'll rob a friendless gal may be tempted to do almost anythin'. I dare say, I shan't never do worse than forgin' a will."

"No more, no more! Let it be understood between us, that you shall have her in a week."

"Yes, one week from to-night."

And with these words the two walked slowly from the grounds, leaving the two maidens agitated with emotions too painful to be described. They did not venture to leave their hiding-place for some moments. Claspin' each other's hands, they trod the gloomy walks in silence, neither being calm enough to speak of what they had heard.

The developments of that hour was indeed calculated to awaken strange sensations in the minds of the maidens. Was it possible for them to misapprehend the purport of what had been said in their hearing? Had they grasped the threads of the mystery and followed them to their termination? Was there any room for misconception? Who was the child referred to by Hart? What was the secret of the will?

These were questions of vital import. They presented themselves for solution with lightning rapidity, and though neither spoke them aloud, they were none the less distinctly defined. Singular conceptions and suspicions could not but be aroused, and they all pointed in one direction.

The young ladies went back to their room in a whirl of amazement and doubt, such as they had never before experienced.

They could not sleep, but remained acutely wakeful, meditating upon what they had heard. The mystery of Manuel Hart's power was now apparent. They had no longer cause to wonder why their father bowed to his influence, or why his brow was so often clouded with gloom, and his soul agitated with remorse.

In the morning, the sisters were able to talk with some degree of calmness upon the subject. They resolved to endeavor to persuade their father to fly at once from the companionship of one so depraved; to leave the country as speedily as possible, taking every precaution to leave no clue by which Hart could

trace his flight. They would accompany him, and cheerfully share his fortunes in any distant land whither he might go. Of their discovery they agreed not to speak, but to keep him in ignorance of their knowledge; but only pressing upon his consideration, that he could not be happy while exposed to the influences of Hart.

Soon after this conversation, the following was written in the diary which Iris kept.

"I put my thoughts upon paper, in order to relieve the burden which oppresses my mind. What wonderful disclosures have been made! I can scarcely realize that I am not the subject of some deceptive dream. I perceive what the truth must be, and yet I dare not speak or write it. I know why my heart has not turned to him with filial yearnings. The true instincts of nature have been obeyed. Where shall I look for that paternal tenderness which my being demands? Shall I ever fully penetrate the mystery which isolates me, and makes me one destitute of the common sympathies of life?

"Manuel Hart spoke of a forged will, a child robbed of her heritage, and treated with coldness and neglect. Who was that unfortunate child? My inner nature tells me who; it is as palpable to me as sunlight. Am I an orphan, and shall I be thrown upon the world without knowing more of my own history? Decisive steps must be taken. I had rather be a wanderer up and down the wide and unknown world, than to be linked with the degrading companionship of that unprincipled man. I will labor with my hands for those who will employ me, for all the necessities of existence. Yes, I will be the servant of servants, and think myself happy in being so, provided I escape the machinations of Manuel Hart.—If the man I have been taught to call father, will not listen to the voice of prudence and reason, and seek safety in flight, alope and unprotected I will steal from this place to encounter whatever fate may be reserved for one weak and friendless like myself.—Ramona had spoken to him in relation to this matter. His fears and suspicions are terribly awakened by the circumstance. He evidently would like to leave the country, but dare not; and Ramona's importunity has had only the effect to make him more wretched, and more watchful over us; so our condition is no better, nor our prospects of relief brighter. Sometimes I think I will throw myself at his feet and entreat him to tell me all; but his manner is so stern and repellant, that I cannot gain courage to do so."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE CONVENT GROUNDS.

DORVILLE stood upon the bank of the San Miguel. His brow was shaded with thought, and a melancholy expression played pensively about his lips.

"I'm full of perplexing thought," he said. "Strange suspicions agitate my soul. But I must be rational, nor permit fancy to usurp the place of reason. I must not suffer myself to be deceived with hope, or transported with vague expectation. I must find the thread of the mystery before I attempt to unwind it. Why am I attracted towards Iris Rathburn? Why have I been so deeply disappointed by her inexplicable disappearance? Is it simply because her spirit is congenial, and her face and figure resemble those of my sainted wife—or is it because my soul, made desolate by bereavement, seeks to indemnify its losses by gentle companionship? But I must not forget the true object of my pursuit. I have seen Rathburn but twice since I have been in this part of the country, and spoken with him but once, and then but briefly. It struck me that I had somewhere heard his voice before and seen his face; the thought was a transient one, and soon ceased to be remembered. I must endeavor to learn more of his history, and the internal monitor keeps assuring me that I ought to seek him out and study him."

Dorville ceased soliloquizing, and walked slowly up the river. He soon came within sight of a large dwelling, enclosed by a wall of considerable height. Curiosity prompted him to turn towards it.

As he approached, he was somewhat surprised to see a soldier's musket leaning against said wall. Impelled by the same feeling that had induced him to advance, he examined the premises more minutely. Passing the musket and nearing the angle of the enclosure, he beheld a Mexican soldier conversing with a female, whom he knew by her garb to be a sister of charity. Dorville turned to scrutinize the rear of the fabric, and discovered on the opposite side another soldier, who was walking to and fro, evidently performing the duty of sentinel.

Now these indications struck him as being very singular, and he queried in his own mind in regard to what the building contained. That it was a convent was the most natural thought. But what were the two soldiers there for? Were they to keep nuns from running away, or for the purpose of protection?

While these thoughts were passing through Dorville's mind, he saw a female figure at one of the lower windows. It was near night, but not dark enough to prevent him from seeing the figure quite distinctly, and he imagined that it resembled one whom he had seen. He at once formed the project of scaling the wall. Why he wished to do so, he could not well explain, even to himself; but he resolved to carry the idea into practice, which could not well be done while in such close proximity to the guard. What could he do to obviate this difficulty? Should he wait until it was darker, or commence operations at once? Should he attempt to bribe the sentinel from whom he feared the most danger of discovery? Should he try to elude his vigilance by the adroitness of his movements, or should he resort to less amicable methods, watch his opportunity to spring upon and disarm him?

He resolved to make trial of the second expedient, and climb softly and stealthily over the adjoining wall into the grounds. He placed his hands upon the barrier before him, and had already begun to mount, when the soldier who had been chatting with the nun, returned to his duty, and approached the spot leisurely, singing a national air.

Dorville instantly relaxed his grasp, and threw himself flat upon his face. The fellow came on directly toward him, and so near that he thought discovery inevitable, and was feeling for his pistol when the man turned and sauntered in an opposite direction.

Meantime the other sentinel advanced to the other angle, and called to his friend asking him, in a jesting way, how he sped with his wooing.

Dorville now feared that he would turn back to converse with his friend on this to him, no doubt, interesting subject; in which event he could not hope to remain undiscovered. Fortunately this did not occur; the soldier gave some evasive answer, and continued on as before, humming his song.

Seeing that his comrade was not in a social mood, the other imitated his example, turned upon his heel with military precision, and went whistling on his rounds, in defiance of discipline.

Now seemed a favorable chance for Dorville to put his intention in practice, and so arising from his rather uncomfortable position, he began to climb again; but unluckily a stone, loosened by time and storm, rolled from its place, making quite a noise in its descent. Instantly the sentinel who had refused to talk a moment before, shouted to his companion, desiring to know why he was tumbling down the wall.

The individual addressed promptly denied having any agency in the matter, insinuating at the same time that there must be somebody on his side trying to get in. This intimation, however, was received with great contempt, he averring that he had just walked the whole length of his round to the angle of the wall, which was not true.

Both the men moved on again, and Dorville proceeding more cautiously, suc-

ceeded in scrambling up the wall, when without difficulty he let himself down up on the other side. When he had performed this feat, he could not help asking himself why his curiosity had impelled him to such a procedure?

After lying quiet a short time, he was about to leave his hiding place to approach the window where he had seen the figure, when two females, walking arm in arm, entered the garden. - Conversing in low and earnest tones they drew near to the spot where he was concealed. His instinct told him who they were, notwithstanding the dimness of twilight prevented him from seeing them plainly. He experienced a genuine and indefinable pleasure in recognizing the Rathburn maidens. He was about to reveal himself, when a few words reached his ears that arrested his purpose.

They were talking upon a subject that enchained all his interest, and induced him to listen with intense eagerness.

"Father still continues stern and unsympathizing," said Ramona. "He is not yet ready to open his heart and take us into his confidence. In fact, he fears us, and is jealous lest we should discover things he would conceal from us. His suspicions are excited."

"What opinion have you formed in relation to the child spoken of by Manuel Hart?" said Iris, in a tremulous voice. "Have you ventured to think of the subject, or has any new light dawned upon your mind?"

"I dare not think of it. I know, I *feel* what the truth must be, and yet I have not courage to talk of it. Sisters we have always been in thought, affection and feeling, and we must ever be thus, in defiance even of the late startling development. I have long observed that we were unlike in personal appearance, and differed in mental peculiarities as widely: but I never had suspected that the natural relationship apparently subsisting between us, was not real. Within a few hours a new expedient for unravelling this mystery has suggested: or rather a brave attempt to do so, has been presented to my mind. You know that father has a small and singularly constructed box, which has often excited our childish curiosity, and which I am certain contains papers of importance; for he guards it with the greatest care, and I have seen him on two or three occasions examining its contents with much interest. My appearance in those cases, was invariably the signal for him to discontinue his operations, and return the box to its accustomed place. I propose that we avail ourselves of the first opportunity to make ourselves acquainted with the nature of the papers therein contained; for I have a strong impression they will throw some light upon this subject."

"The proposition startles me. I wish, and yet I fear to know the height and depth of this strange matter. I feel internally assured that when any new revelations are made concerning the subject, they will confirm all our suspicions."

"But in relation to this box, since we lost the Rancho I have not seen it, nor do I know where it is kept. I have not been so fortunate as to see what it contained, but I know that it opens by means of a complicated spring which has to be pressed in a peculiar manner; for I saw him open it once when he was not aware that I was observing him. He used, formerly, to keep it concealed in a portable desk."

"Yes, and that desk was brought here, and it is somewhere in this building. In accomplishing my design, two formidable difficulties will have to be overcome: First, to find the desk, and then to open it."

"I believe he was in the habit, formerly, of carrying the key about his person; in that case what can be done?"

"We will trust to circumstances and our own ingenuity. And now, let me ask, what means the protracted absence of our evil genius, Manuel Hart?"

"Upon that subject I have had various suspicions. Perhaps his traitorous designs have been discovered."

Before Ramona had time to reply, Dorville had left his concealment and ap-

proached them. They were about to retreat to the convent in alarm, when the sound of his voice assured them of the identity of the individual.

"How providential is this meeting," he said, grasping their hands warmly. "I am so superstitious that I am prone to think that Heaven has sent me here to work out its own good purpose."

"Was it honorable, Mr. Dorville," said Iris, "to listen to a conversation which you must have known was not intended for the ears of a third person?"

"Results may grow out of this circumstance of which you can form no possible conception. Be not indignant, for I could not but have listened, if every word had endangered my life. I will hasten to relieve a portion of your anxiety. You need apprehend but little from Manuel Hart. He has been detected, tried by a court-martial, finally convicted and sentenced to death, which adjudgment would have been carried into execution, had not the faction to which he belonged overpowered the guard one night, and rescued him from the grasp of justice."

"But where is he now?" inquired Iris.

"It is suspected that he has gone up the Brazos, for the purpose of taking vengeance upon Noel Noon and Maurice Harper."

"And why are Noel Noon and Maurice Harper upon the Brazos, and not with the Hunters of the Border at Burleson's camp?" inquired Ramona.

"They are trying to gain some clue to your sudden disappearance," returned Dorville.

Both the maidens colored, and Dorville resumed in a deeper and more earnest voice.

"I have heard, with singular emotions, your remarks concerning the subject now paramount in your minds. Hasten to carry out your design. Find the box of which you have spoken. If you cannot open it, take me into your confidence, and I will aid you faithfully and truly. Wonder not that I am interested, for time will explain the matter more perfectly."

"To us you are comparatively a stranger. We have no means of knowing how far you are entitled to our confidence. Accident has discovered what you might otherwise never have known. I trust you will at least respect our feelings enough to keep the subject a secret?" said Iris, somewhat reproachfully.

"Iris, ask your own heart if you can trust me, and see what it will say? If soul ever spoke to soul, you know that mine responds to yours. Betray you, you feel that I cannot; and yet common worldly prudence admonishes you to cautiousness. And now let me ask, why you are here, and if you are content and happy?"

"I will tell you frankly," replied Iris, after a pause, and then proceeded to relate all that had happened respecting Manuel Hart and Captain Morales.

"It is as I suspected," rejoined Dorville. "This is the danger of which I warned you; but the villain shall yet be baffled. Remain here and be calm. You are and shall be from this moment protected. Hard indeed shall it fare with him who presumes to harm a hair of your head. A shield of strength shall be thrown around you, through which your worst enemies cannot inflict a wound. And then," he added, addressing Iris, "let not the strange suspicions which some unexpected disclosure has aroused, make you wretched. Something tells me that you are nearer to a solution of the problem than you imagine. Be comforted, Harper has not forgotten you, and Dorville will be to you more than a brother. Pardon me for speaking of the Virginian, but I know that your heart confesses a tender interest in his welfare. Yes, you cannot much longer disguise it from yourself, and it is known already to the watchful eyes of Ramona. Nay be not confused, for it is nothing venial, nor worse than for your sister to allow her truant thoughts to cluster about honest Noel Noon."

"Beware, Mr. Dorville!" said Ramona, shaking her finger playfully. "You must not discover all our secrets at once."

"Although words like yours from other lips I might deem bold and presuming, from you they excite no feeling of resentment. You walk so naturally and so gently through the garden of my most sacred thoughts, that I almost feel that you have a right there."

Dorville made no rejoinder, but caught her hand, pressed it tenderly to his lips, and then turning, hurried from the grounds, leaped the wall and disappeared.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Our hero and Noel Noon, after a long and fatiguing ride reached Burleson's camp. Harper's first impulse was to inquire for Dorville; for his interest in that individual had increased much since the discovery of Manuel Hart's traitorous designs. He was about to seek him at his tent when he was luckily spared the trouble; Dorville unexpectedly made his appearance. He manifested an earnest desire to know the incidents of their journey to the Brazos, and the cause of their delay.

Maurice immediately gave a succinct account of what is already known to the reader.

"And you know nothing," said Dorville, "of the fate of Manuel Hart and Jack Lawless?"

Our hero assured him that it was out of his power to give him any information on that subject, for his better nature had recoiled from the contemplation of the field after the conflict, if conflict it could be called. He had chosen to remain in ignorance in regard to the extent of the destruction of life that must have resulted from the continuous volleys of the Lipans. He gave it as his opinion, however, that but few of the faction had escaped to tell the tale of their disaster.

"Bad men," said Dorville, "do not die easily, and I doubt not but Hart and Jack Lawless are still among the living, maturing plans of vengeance. But, to change the subject, I have important news for you. I have discovered whither your lady-birds have flown."

Noel Noon, who, hitherto, had not been giving much attention to the conversation, instantly manifested incontestable evidence of interest.

"Upon the San Miguel, just below, there is a convent much fallen into decay and disuse, and there Rathburn and his daughters may be found."

Having made this announcement, Dorville proceeded to detail with considerable minuteness the manner in which he had made the discovery; withholding, however, everything relating to the interview to which he had been a party in the convent grounds.

The strange suspicions that had so agitated his thoughts were not referred to, for he preferred that time should make its own proper developments without being anticipated. It is true that he had heard but a few words concerning the secrets that weighed down the spirit of Iris, but sometimes even a word may serve to unlock the profoundest mystery. That potent key Dorville now believed he had in his possession. Although matters of the most absorbing interest to him were involved, he kept, as he had ever done, the history of his fears, hopes and expectations deeply buried in his being. His strong and commanding mind, disciplined by vicissitudes and sorrow, had learned how to disguise its emotions, and conceal its thoughts.

As Maurice looked at his face, now more serious than he had ever before seen it, he fancied that its lineaments strangely reminded him of one upon whose beauty he had gazed with admiration; but he was far, very far from entertaining the most vague and distant suspicion of the singular conceptions and anticipations that were passing through his brain.

As our hero surveyed his manly figure and expressive countenance, a pang of jealousy disturbed the current of his reflections. Though feeling somewhat

grateful for the efforts he had made in behalf of the maidens, he could not banish all selfish considerations; for he had, in some inexplicable manner, made a discovery that Iris Rathburn was necessary to his happiness, and he feared that a man of Dorville's insinuating address, agreeable manners, and strong good sense, might prove a most dangerous rival, notwithstanding the disparity of ages.

Noon now inquired if it were practicable for them to visit the convent; remarking to the effect that Morales might give them farther trouble, and that Manuel Hart, if he had survived the vengeance of the Lipans, would still make efforts to put his villainous designs into execution. Dorville after meditating a moment expressed his willingness to accompany them to the spot, as soon as it was dark enough for such an undertaking.

Accordingly, all the preliminaries being arranged, when the proper hour arrived, they left camp to carry out their intentions.

When they had approached within sight of the convent, Dorville went forward to reconnoitre, and learn if any additional precautions had been taken since his last visit, and our hero and his friend patiently awaited his return. At the expiration of half an hour, they were alarmed by hearing the rapid discharge of five or six pistol shots.

"There goes Dorville's revolver!" exclaimed Noon, starting to his feet. "Let us run to his assistance."

Harper and Noel immediately ran toward the scene of the disturbance. Upon emerging from the clump of trees where they had taken shelter, the exact state of the case became apparent. A company of Mexicans had pitched their tents in close proximity to the convent, and Dorville had unfortunately been discovered by the guard, and it was now too late to rescue him, for he had already been overwhelmed by numbers and secured, while the soldiers were still pouring out of their tents like bees from an agitated hive.

"Too late! too late!" muttered Noon. "There is nothing that we can do now to help him, and I'm afraid that it'll go hard with him, for he has probably done some mischief with his revolver, which they won't feel disposed to forgive."

"I perceive," said Harper, "that we seem to be cut off from the possibility of rendering him any assistance, but it's against my nature to be compelled to abandon a friend to the cruelty of such enemies without making an effort to save him. I think we ought to remain here a short time and watch the progress of events." "We can't do no good," responded Noel, regretfully.

"We can at least assure ourselves if he is executed upon the spot or not." "That's true; but it wouldn't be strange if they marched him right out a few paces in front, and shot him down as though he wasn't a human creature."

"No," said Maurice, "they will not do that, according to appearances."

"There's no tellin'; you see they're consultin' about somethin' now, and I shouldn't wonder if that tall chap with the jaunty coat, was giving an order to that effect now."

"The merciful God forbid! I do not think that I can stand here and see him murdered, without making an effort to save him. See! they have drawn up twelve men in line, and in that prompt and decisive way that characterizes military executions."

"If there was time," said Noon, "to go after the Hunters of the Border."

"There's nothing like trying," returned Harper. "I will hasten back to the spot where we left our horses, mount and ride with all speed for assistance. Our brave lads will scatter yon fellows as the whirlwind scatters the dust."

"Perhaps it would be wise for you to try it, for you see they don't appear to be in any great hurry about doing their bloody work. If he was only shrewd enough to gain time in some way, how easy 'twould be to save him. Look! there goes a priest! Upon my soul, I believe he's playin' that game, and if he'll contrive to be long enough at confession, he'll escape the disagreeable ceremony that's intended to come afterwards."

Harper did not stay to see more, but hurried to get into the saddle as quick as possible. In a moment after, Noel heard the fierce clattering of his horse's hoofs. The forester remained a prey to the most cruel suspense. Time sped rapidly on. Sometimes he looked anxiously and nervously towards the scene in the foreground, listened intently for some indication of approaching aid, or bowed his head in his hands to shut out the contemplation of his friend's misfortune.

His mental agony grew every instant more intolerable. Still weak from his recent illness, his excitement affected him more palpably; his breathing became quick and labored, and the perspiration rolled in great drops from his forehead. Soon he dared not raise his eyes, and expected every instant to hear the discharge of fire-arms—the knell of Dorville's death; but the fatal volley did not burst upon his ears. He heard the low murmuring of the river, the birds improvising their songs, the fluttering of the leaves, and the distant hum of voices.

Unable longer to endure this suspense, he walked back to where his horse was fastened, without venturing to scan the proceedings at the convent. As he threw the bridle over the animal's neck, a dull, heavy, and singular sound sent a thrill of expectation to his heart.

He knew that the Hunters of the Border had been warned, and were now thundering to the rescue. The stout woodsman brushed an honest tear from his eye, and vaulted into the saddle. Spurring his horse down the river a few yards a glorious spectacle met his expectant vision. The Texan borderers, headed by Lorrimer and Harper, were advancing like the rushing winds. There was still a chance for Dorville. On and on they came with the impetuosity of the sweeping avalanche.

"Are we too late?" asked Lorrimer, checking his speed at the side of Noel.

"No, no, there is yet hope and an opportunity for vengeance. Advance slowly to yonder clump of trees, and then charge with all the speed and power that man and horse can put forth."

The arrangement is good," said Harper, whose face was very pale, although a moment before it was flushed with excitement.

We shall be obliged to leave it to the imagination of the reader to picture the sensations of the borderers as they fell into order at the position which Noel had indicated as being the proper one. The clump of trees shielded them from view—orders were given in whispers, and hurriedly executed. Each man holding the bridle firmly in one hand, grasped a polished blade in the other. All were ready for the onset. In the front of this phalanx of hardy and impatient men, were Lorrimer and our hero. The old hunter seemed well nigh transformed. Sitting erect upon his horse, he appeared a veteran warrior, with nerves as firm as steel, and arms clothed with an athletic strength. Nor was our hero less conspicuous for the boldness of his bearing, and the hunters could not help drawing comparisons between him and Hart, their traitorous lieutenant, whom they had unwisely been influenced to choose as an officer.

Glancing rapidly at his command, Lorrimer perceived that the decisive moment had come, and waved his sword as a signal for the charge. The Hunters of the Border struck their rowels home. The horses snorted, reared, and leaped forward in a body, making the ground tremble to their furious bounds. Immediately the Mexican camp was revealed, and but little order prevailed there. The scene in the foreground was one to madden the Texans. Dorville, with his arms pinioned, and divested of his coat, was the first object that naturally presented, for he occupied a position directly in front. Beside him stood a priest, with a cross in his hand, while a third person held a handkerchief, which he essayed to bind over the prisoner's eyes. The latter evidently was in the act of rejecting the overture, feeling, doubtless, that he had courage enough to face death with his eyes open. A few horses saddled, but with their bridles slipped, were seen in the rear of the encampment. The clatter of many iron hoofs was the first admonition to the Mexicans of an approaching foe. The Mexicans all

made a desperate rush to the horses. Captain Morales among the rest. But scarcely a man had reached the saddle, before the Hunters of the Border had struck the confused mass like a resistless hurricane that prostrates all in its way. The sound of conflict was brief, and died away as suddenly as it began. The living sued for quarter, and it was accorded. Harper was the first to leap from his horse to Dorville's side. With his soiled sword he severed his bonds, and congratulated him on his escape, without a single recurrence to those pangs of jealousy which had so recently disturbed him.

Noel Noon came and touched him upon the arm. "Manuel Hart," he said in a low voice, "and his reckless associate Jack Lawless will trouble us no more. The first is mortally wounded, and the last already dead. Hart says he can't die altogether easy unless he says a word or two to you." Without making any rejoinder, Harper, Dorville, and Lorrimer followed Noel. Manuel Hart was lying upon the ground, with a soldier's knapsack under his head, which was frightfully wounded by a heavy sword cut. He turned his glassy eyes toward our hero. "I escaped," he said, "the vengeance of Warpath, that I might fulfil my destiny and die here. You see that I have got my death, and can't stay long here. I feel that life is leaving me, and I haven't got any great expectations of a future state. I s'pose a good man might die very well; but you see with me it's a different thing. It's dreadful, very dreadful, for my sins come up like an army of spectres and stare me in the face. Don't wonder to hear me talk so much better nor common, because dyin' kinder sharpens my perceptions." Hart paused, and the last tears that he was ever to shed moistened his ghastly cheeks. "I want everybody to know," he resumed, trying to rise on his elbow, "how hard it is for a bad man to die. I think so fast that my whole life seems to stand out before me, and I can see all its acts. But I'm failin' fast, and mustn't lose the chance of sayin' what's uppermost in my mind. I've wronged you, Mr. Harper, and slandered you, and I hope you'll try and not think on it arter I'm laid in a traitor's grave. I have a revelation to make that'll kind o' counterbalance some of my plottin'. I shall astonish you with what I'm goin' to say, and when it's said, I hope it'll take off some of this load that's pressin' me down. The real name of the man who passes by the name of Rathburn, is Ritchings; and Iris is not his daughter, but his niece. Her own father was lost at sea while she was an infant, and her mother died before she was two years old. They lived in New Orleans, and I was there and knew all about it. Mrs. Dalton, the mother of Iris, was possessed of much property in her own right, and willed it all to her only child, appointing Ritchings her guardian and executor. I was a servant in her family then, and knew what happened, and what I'm goin' to tell. The man who calls himself Rathburn got possession of his sister's will, and altered it to suit himself, bribing the notary to assist him. I worked myself into the secret by listening at the key-hole of an adjoining room. I let the thing go on because I knew that Ritchings would be willing to buy my silence at a high figure. I was then but a mere lad, but old enough to be cunning, vicious, and unprincipled. I succeeded well in my plans, and extorted sums of money from him at different times. Soon after the reading of the will, gathering up all the wealth thus unjustly acquired, he left that part of the country, thinkin' no doubt to rid himself of me. He took Iris with him, and passed himself off for her father by the name he goes by now. But I tracked him, and he couldn't shake me off. His wife died about the time of his departure from New Orleans, leavin' one daughter, Ramona, about the same age of Iris. So there was nobody to meddle with his plans; consequently he was very successful, and the two girls grew up as sisters. The greatest drawback upon the happiness of Rathburn, was my continual doggings; for in fact I literally lived on him, and kept him in fear by repeated threats. When he settled up in Brazos river, he thought he had completely outwitted me; but I scented him like a hound, and Iris, havin' grown to a pretty young woman, I

resolved to marry her; and should have succeeded had not providence raised up friends to protect the helpless orphan. But it's all over now, and death is knockin' at the door of my heart."

Hart paused through exhaustion, and Iris and Ramona, attracted to the spot, desired to know the meaning of all that had transpired. The dying man slowly opened his closed eyes, when he heard the soft footsteps of the maidens.

"You must tell her," he added, speaking with difficulty, "that she isn't Rathburn's daughter." Before Hart had time to add more, Dorville sprang forward and caught Iris to his bosom. "My child! my child!" he exclaimed. "Nature has long asserted her authority, and she cannot longer be misunderstood. Look at me—recognize me—I am your father!" "Is your name Dalton?" asked Iris. "Yes, yes, my daughter! My name is Henry Dalton, and you bear your dead mother's name. The report of my loss at sea was unfounded. I was cast, however, upon an inhospitable shore, from whence I could not escape. When at length Providence sent a friendly sail to take me from hence, years had elapsed, working their various transformations. When I reached New Orleans, my wife was no more, and no one knew anything concerning the fate of my child. I succeeded, finally, in gaining some intelligence respecting the matter from a priest who had attended the death bed of the notary who had made out the will by which my wife had conveyed her property to our child.

"Strengthened by this information, I set out in quest of the villain who had wronged one so helpless, and to discover, if possible, my daughter. I cannot relate all my adventures; but this happy reunion testifies how complete has been my success."

While Iris lay nearly insensible in the arms of the parent, who had thus, as it were, arisen from the dead, Ramona went on to state that the box, to which references has before been made, had been opened, and all that Dorville had said was confirmed by the papers therein contained.

At that moment an expression of satisfaction passed over the features of Hart; he made a strong effort to speak once more, but his voice failed, and with scarcely a struggle he expired.

Kind reader, our story closes. It were a work of supererogation to dwell upon the happy scenes that ensued. The father and daughter became all in all to each other. Rathburn humbly confessed his errors, made restitution of his ill gotten wealth, and was forgiven. Iris and Harper concluded, after a due lapse of time, to travel amicably together life's devious road; and Noel Noon and Ramona, by some process probably well understood by them, arrived at precisely the same conclusion. Honest always occupied a conspicuous place at the domestic fireside of our hero, and is, in fact, a great favorite to this day; although he begins to give evidences of advanced age; but notwithstanding his fidelity and good nature never fail. The Hunters of the Border did good service during the struggle of the Texans for independence, and Maurice acted till the close of the war as one of their prominent and most efficient leaders. Warpath, the Lipan chief, remained a staunch friend to the characters who had figured in our story, and his memory is cherished by them with feelings of gratitude. Lorrimer continues to hunt on the Texan border. We cannot say that Meltiah Moss ever fully reformed; but he amended his life in many important particulars.

The Regulators and Moderators have long since ceased to afflict the country, and law, order and justice prevail universally in the regions of the Lone Star.

THE END.

