The Luck of Colin Charteris:
A Tale of Modern Mexico

by

Arthur O. Cooke

illustrated by
D.C. Eyles

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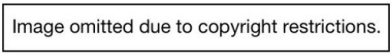

TREACHERY!

THE LUCK OF COLIN CHARTERIS

A Story of Adventure in
Modern Mexico

BY
ARTHUR O. COOKE

Author of "Stephen Goes to Sea"

Illustrated by D. C. Eyles

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&c. &c.

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CHAPTER I

Christmas at Meadowgrange

Colin Charteris settled himself snugly in his corner of a first-class carriage in the north-and-west express. The train slid smoothly from the platform, threaded with care the maze of points outside the station, and then gathered speed.

Had anyone been there to note him, Colin would have been remarked as a tall, well-built, pleasant-looking boy of perhaps seventeen—which was his age; clear-skinned and ruddy-cheeked, with keen intelligent grey eyes, straight nose, and dark-brown hair inclined to curl. The badge upon his cap proclaimed that his scholastic home was Clinton School. A close observer would not perhaps have set him down as being a "swot", but would have judged him as a likely member of the First Eleven and Fifteen; in both of which surmises the observer would have been correct.

But it so happened that on this December afternoon the boy was quite alone. Other Clintonians going north had travelled by a train which did not stop at Hereford, the nearest town to Colin's country home. He did not greatly mind his solitude; he had an evening paper, *Punch*, a book—ample provision for the short two hours' run.

A long shrill whistle roused him from perusal of the book. The Severn Tunnel, eh? Oh, bother reading; it was pleasanter to sit and think.

Bit of a nuisance if this frost should hold; it would put a stopper on the hunting. Rather a pity, also, that the Christmas holidays should be so short. Would the Pater have acted on that half-made promise of September to "see about" something for him in the way of a hunter—something better than the old cob Pedro who was getting decidedly stiff at his fences? Hardly to be expected perhaps, seeing how little of the hunting season Colin spent at home; but still, one never knew—the Pater was a real good sort. Those words "one never knew" went far to sum up Colin Charteris's outlook upon life; always cheerful, always optimistic, and prepared to take things as they came and make the best of them, even if they turned out inferior to his hopes. At any rate he knew that he might count upon the loan of Darkie,

Major Charteris's own crack steeplechaser, for at least one run, perhaps two. Jolly to turn up at a meet on Darkie—such a topping horse!

Dido. He'd take her with him; just to see the hounds throw off, at any rate; after which Millichamp, the coachman, could ride home with her. Not but what Dido, on her grey Welsh pony, Fairy, took her jumps quite well. A ripping kid, his sister Dido—her real name Diana—though she was but nine. She had the "go" of many a fellow twice her age, and took a bruise or tumble with a smile. So, after all, if the frost held and then perhaps turned to snow, why, he would make her a toboggan-track upon the slope of the Long Meadow, and they'd have a lot of fun.

The Severn Tunnel must be twenty miles or more behind by now. Yes, here was Abergavenny, with the hills lying round the town; the high-peaked Sugarloaf, the great bulk of the Blorenge, and the Holy Mountain, ghostly in the gathering dusk.

Enid no doubt would be at home from school in Paris. Quite a good sort Enid, just two years his senior; but not quite as much a "sport" as Dido was.

Would Gerald be across this Christmas? Gerald had been at Eton and Oxford, and now held a minor post in the Embassy at Vienna; quite a decent fellow, though a little lordly now and then, as elder brothers often were. Roger, the naval son, was different; much more "go", though no great things outside a horse. Well, whether the three elder ones were there or not, there would be Mother, Dido, and the Pater; it would be jolly to see Meadowgrange again. Thank goodness for the English climate, after all; no weather lasted very long. The frost would turn to snow, and he would have a day or two with Dido and her new toboggan. Then would come a thaw, and with the thaw a meet. Life was a pretty jolly business, take it on the whole.

Another whistle; then a jolting over points, the grip of brakes to check the heavy train as it ran down a long incline. Great Scott! At Hereford already! Colin had only time to thrust his book into his greatcoat pocket when the platform lights came flashing by, and he could hear the porters' old familiar strain:

"Hereford! Hereford! Hereford! Crewe and North express! Change for the Birmingham and Midland lines. All tickets ready—tickets ready! Next stop Shrewsbury—Shrewsbury next stop!"

There was his father on the platform.

"Hullo, Pater!"

"Well, Coll, old fellow! All serene?"

"Rather! Bit of a bore this frost though. You been out at all this week?"

"No, I've had other things to do; hounds met at the 'Green Man' on Tuesday, found among the gorse, and had a rattling fifty minutes' run, I heard."

Outside the station Colin looked about him for the car; but Major Charteris led the way to a mail phaeton, in the shafts of which was a dark chestnut mare.

"Oh, you've brought Psyche. Take us a bit longer, won't it, than the car? Well then, old lady, you know me?" For the mare whinnied softly, snuffed his coat-sleeve as he stood beside the boy who held her head. The lad was just a station loafer; funny for his father not to bring a groom.

"Like to drive, Coll?"

"Rather—if you don't mind."

"No, not a bit; my fingers are a little cold. Hop up; you'll find her rather fresh."

The chestnut sped away the instant that her head was loosed. A hairpin turn to cross the railway bridge; the hill beyond, though steep, was taken at a trot; the stretch of level at its summit flew beneath swift feet. Then came a sharp descent, and then four miles of level road until they reached the hills that formed the county's eastern border-line, among which, in a secluded valley, nestled. Meadowgrange, the Charteris's home.

"Mother and Dido well?"

"Yes, quite all right."

The elder children would not be at home, it seemed. Gerald could not be spared from the Embassy, nor Roger obtain leave from his ship; while Enid had an invitation to spend Christmas in the South of France. Questions were asked and answered, news exchanged; yet all the while there hovered in the mind of Colin something that he could not understand. Why not the car? Or, if the car were for the moment out of action, then why not the pair? When did his father ever drive to town with Psyche, and no Cupid on the near side of the pole? Nothing in it, very likely; still, it did seem funny, and, for some reason Colin could not formulate, he did not ask; nor did his father offer any explanation on the point.

Ah, Meadowgrange at last! The dark plantations sheltering the old house upon the east and north; the drive-gates open for their coming; and the single dormer window of the great Elizabethan dovecote peering at them

over the thick holly hedge as they drove by. Then the wide stretch of lawn; the moon just rising, sickle-shaped, above the dead trunk of the Wellingtonia clothed from head to foot in ivy—that was his mother's dodge to save the tree from being cut down. And there *was* Mother—she and Dido standing under the electric light that shone above the wide arch of the Tudor entrance-door. Gad, it was good to be at home!

A quick close clasp and kiss from Mother; then the throttling clutch of Dido's arms about his neck.

"Oh, Coll, you *dear* old Coll!"

"Dinner at seven," said his mother; "time for a cup of tea to warm you up before you change."

Everything just as usual—save for several little, in themselves quite unimportant, things. For instance, it seemed curious that Evans, the housemaid, who brought up hot water to his bedroom when he went to change, should also help Pritchard, the butler, to wait at dinner. Where, then, was the new parlourmaid who had succeeded Shaw when she got married in September? If she had left, why was there not another in her place? At every turn there was the air of "something" which was difficult to understand.

Dido sat down to dinner with them—as a special treat on Colin's first night home. And later, in the drawing-room, she was crouched beside him on a hassock, with her head—its brown hair short, just like a boy's—against his knee. "Just twenty minutes, Mummy darling," she had pleaded, coaxing with her smiling lips and dark-brown eyes. A happy evening—yet with that "something" in the background all the time.

Not till the following morning was the mystery explained.

"Come to my den and have a chat, Coll, will you," said his father as they rose from breakfast; "any time about eleven I'll be there."

"Right, Pater, I'll be with you," answered Colin. Then he caught his mother's eyes upon him, saw in them a look which startled him. Something *was* wrong, there could be little doubt of that. Well, his own conscience was quite clear; he had no hidden sins to come to light. But it was with a troubled mind that presently he sought his father's room.

"Sit down, Coll, will you." Colin took a seat. "There's no use in beating about the bush, old boy," his father went on; "I've got bad news for you. We've lost a lot of money and must change our way of life."

Colin sat silent. Certainly this sounded pretty bad; but as yet he hardly grasped what changes loss of money might involve.

"I don't suppose that you have ever troubled yourself much about money matters," continued the major; "but at any rate you know that Meadowgrange is my property, and that it has been in the family for several hundred years. But it is long since an estate like this has paid its way; if I depended on the rents of the three farms, of the houses and the inn in the village, we could not live as we have done. Taxes, repairs, and so on eat up a great part of the rents. What has largely kept us here in comfort is your mother's money—quite a decent little income in itself. Now, when her father, your grandfather Hamilton, died several years ago, her part of his fortune consisted of shares in a rubber plantation in the Malay States; you've heard us speak of that?" Colin nodded. "For years the rubber trade had flourished, and these shares paid well. Then came a 'slump', and dividends began to fall; but your mother was strongly advised against selling out, because to do so would have meant a serious loss. It was believed the rubber business would improve, and the shares rise again in value. This, we are now afraid, will never be the case. Last year there was a trifling dividend; this year there will be none at all."

"You mean that Mother has lost all her money, Pater?"

"Not perhaps for ever; I hope not, at any rate. But for the present—perhaps for several years to come—she will receive no income at all from her shares. The plantation is quite sound and in good hands; with a revival in the rubber trade things should look up again, though they will never be the same as they once were. Meanwhile we are without her income and shall have to change our mode of life—change it drastically."

"Not part with Meadowgrange—not sell it, Pater?"

"Not sell, if we can avoid it; but I fear that we shall have to let it, Coll, and live in a much less expensive place."

"It will break Mother's heart to think of anybody else being here."

"I'm glad that your first thought is of your mother, Coll; it is of her that I am mostly thinking too; but I can see no alternative."

"Could we not cut down expenses in some other way?"

"The 'cutting down expenses' on a scale that would allow us to remain at Meadowgrange would be a business, Coll; but I have made a start, as you may perhaps have seen. Cupid has gone, and I'm afraid the hunter I half-hinted at for you is 'off'. I'm trying to sell the car too; it's in first-rate order

and should fetch a decent price. I'm taking care of it meanwhile; that's why I didn't bring it in for you last night. If I can sell it and get hold of a cheap runabout, then Psyche will be sold. Enid will not go back to Paris for another year, as we had planned. We have dismissed a groom and a maid. But all this will not balance the deficit which we have to meet. Gerald naturally costs me a good deal; diplomacy is not a very paying profession, and there is a certain amount of style to be kept up.

"No, Coll, I don't see how we can keep on at Meadowgrange. Gerald, of course, will have the place when I am gone. Roger and you are younger sons, and English social custom takes but small account of them. For years we have been trying to lay by something for both Roger and yourself, but it does not amount to very much as yet; I am afraid that I have been to blame."

"No, Pater, you haven't," Colin broke in here; "you've given us a real good time and done the best you could, I'm sure. But won't it be frightfully expensive sending me to Sandhurst, and then getting me into the Hussars and keeping me there?"

"It will be rather costly, Colin, for the cavalry's not cheap; but everything possible must be sacrificed to your future. Gerald wished to enter the diplomatic service, and did so; Roger chose the navy for himself. It would be most unfair to treat you differently."

Colin sat silent for some moments, thinking hard. It would be uncommonly disagreeable to him to give up the cavalry, to abandon all hope of the career which had been his father's, and which he had looked on as being destined for his own. But Colin, as already stated, was a member of the Clinton First Eleven and the First Fifteen; and in Fifteen and in Eleven he had learnt a lesson which proved useful now—that personal distinction, a high batting average, conspicuous individual play, were all of small importance judged against the general welfare of the team. So, after a momentary struggle, Colin gave his family—his "team"—first place.

"Look here, Pater," he said, "if I cut out the cavalry and go for something cheaper, where I should not cost you money, or at any rate, not much—would that make up the difference? Could we stay on then at Meadowgrange?"

He heard his father give a sigh that sounded like relief.

"Well, yes, my boy, with care I think we might. You see, it's not entirely a question of the cost of your career alone, although the money saved would be considerable. But there are Gerald and Roger to be considered. Now if I

tell them that you are giving up the cavalry, they cannot—and I'm sure they will not—think it hard if their allowances are docked a bit. But you must not decide this in a hurry, Coll. Think the matter over carefully for, say, a week, and then we'll talk of it again."

"I'll let it stand a week then, Pater, but I shall not change my mind. I don't mean you and Mother to have any other home than Meadowgrange if it depends on me."

"Well, we will let it stand till after Christmas; but I shan't be vexed, nor will your mother, if you reconsider it. Now I must go across and talk to Barnett about something; see you later on at lunch."

Major Charteris took a step towards the door; then turned, took Colin's hand, and held it for an instant in a grip that sent a glow to the boy's heart.

If he could help his father in this trouble, keep his mother in this Meadowgrange which all of them—she perhaps especially—so dearly loved, his mind was quite made up. A fellow could not play for his own bat; to back the team up was a "sportsman's" duty, and that duty was now his.

To this decision he stuck steadily, unshaken by a long talk with his mother, during which she urged his right to think of his own future, choose the life he had been promised. Stuck to it still when, Christmas over, he again talked of it with his father. Finally the major, seeing the hopelessness of trying to alter his decision, said:

"Well, Coll, I shan't forget it, be quite sure of that. I have been going very closely into matters this last week, and find that, in that case, we need not leave this place. We have cut down expenses, as you know, and we shall do so more. I hope to do some 'schooling' of young horses into shape as hunters; that's about all I'm fit for in the way of money-making, I'm afraid."

"And what d'you think I'd better do, Pater?" Colin asked.

"Well, a chance offers which you may or may not care to think about. You know that your mother's half-brother, Alexander Hamilton, is at the head of a big London bank. He also has a considerable interest in this confounded rubber concern, and we have been in correspondence with him lately as to that. He offered to be of any service that he could, and in one letter asked me what I thought of doing with you. I have no doubt that, if you cared about accepting it, he'd make an opening for you in the bank."

"That would mean indoor work for life, I suppose."

“I am afraid it would; and indoor life is just what you and I don’t greatly care for, eh? But still, there’s money in a bank; and you might have—I dare say *would* have—better prospects with your Uncle Hamilton than as an ordinary clerk. He asked what you were good at, and I told him modern languages and maths.”

“I wouldn’t say too much about the maths; my French and German aren’t so bad.”

“Well, there it stands at present. He suggests that you should run up in a few days’ time and let him have a look at you; you know he hasn’t seen you for some seven years. I have just thanked him, saying we’ll let him hear in a few days.”

“Should you come too—or Mother?”

“No, Coll. There’s nothing much to take us up to Town just now, and every shilling counts. You’ll do quite well alone. Your uncle may perhaps ask you to his house; if not, I’ll send you to some rooms in Ryder Street, where you’ll be very snug. Well, Coll, you’ve earned our thanks for giving up so readily the thing you’ve set your heart on for so long. As I have said before, we shan’t forget it—any of us, Coll.”

CHAPTER II

Mr. Dickson—of Noo York

Colin felt far from cheerful as, on a raw and disagreeable January morning, he walked down Piccadilly from the Circus and turned into Bond Street on an errand for his mother.

"You might just call and pay this little bill of Madame Jacqueline's for me," she had said to him as he was leaving Meadowgrange the previous day; "it's only thirty shillings, and for you to pay in cash will save a cheque and penny stamp. Twopence saved is twopence gained, you know."

The glow of generous feeling with which Colin had volunteered to sacrifice his career in the army for the sake of his parents and Meadowgrange had now died down into a dogged determination to carry out his purpose. He had no intention of drawing back, nor the slightest wish to do so. He had done the right thing, and was glad to have done it; he was a younger son, and it was fit that he should sacrifice himself. But the probable consequences of his decision now loomed close before him, and they were not too attractive.

His interview with his Uncle Hamilton had taken place an hour ago, and had been even less delightful than he had schooled himself to expect. Alexander Hamilton, stout, red-faced, plethoric, and extremely difficult to realize as the half-brother of Colin's dainty girlish-looking mother, had received him in his private room at the bank. He had apologized in a cool, offhand way for being unable to "put up" the boy during his stay in London. His wife and daughter were spending the winter on the Riviera, and the house in Grosvenor Square was closed, the banker living meanwhile at his club.

Mr. Hamilton had put Colin through a pretty searching examination with regard to his capabilities. He had raised his bushy eyebrows at the boy's handwriting, saying with emphasis that it would have to be improved before he was "much good" inside a bank; and had failed to exhibit any enthusiasm over his attainments in French and German.

"Yes, yes, a foreign language may no doubt be sometimes an advantage to a banker; but you won't be going over as our Paris manager just yet, you know," and he laughed huskily at his own joke. "Well, I can say no more

than this at present: that I'll think it over and will see what can be done. I'll see. You're not staying long?"

Colin replied that he was going home the following day.

"Quite right; nothing to keep you here. I'd ask you to have dinner with me at the club to-night, but I am dining with a friend. Well, I think that is all there is to say just now; that I will think the matter over and will let your father know. Meanwhile you can't do any harm in trying to write a better hand." And Colin found himself dismissed.

So, as he turned up Bond Street, the boy's thoughts were not less gloomy than the raw and foggy air. The cold indifference of his uncle's reception; the hushed voices of the clerks; the close warm atmosphere and general sense of airlessness within the bank—all seemed to stifle him, accustomed as he was to the comparatively free and jovial life of home and school. How should he ever live in such a place, he asked himself? Still, if his uncle offered to receive him, he would go; he had no doubt of that.

He paid his mother's bill and then strolled back towards Piccadilly. Close to the foot of Bond Street, on the right-hand side, there is a large confectioner's, of which the window display struck Colin as particularly attractive. He examined the various trays of sweets with some interest. What about a box of chocolates for Dido? She, poor kid, would have to learn economy like all the rest of them. Still, just for once.

There was a shining Rolls-Royce car drawn up before the door, and Colin, while still hesitating, glanced at it in a casual way, sufficiently to notice that there was a little girl inside. She was about Dido's age, or perhaps slightly older, but very different from his little sister with her dark-brown eyes and thick, close-cropped brown hair; this girl was pink and white, with fair hair floating in a flood upon her shoulders, and a pair of large blue eyes. Upon her lap she held a small fox-terrier puppy, on whose glossy head the child was rubbing her round dimpled chin. Looking up, her eyes caught Colin's, and she almost smiled.

Colin turned again to the window, and a moment later heard the child greet a middle-aged gentleman who emerged from the shop and entered the car. He had a shrewd but pleasant face, thick-growing grey hair, and keen blue eyes. He gave an order to the chauffeur in a slightly nasal tone, and the big car moved slowly off. As it did so there came a shrill childish cry of terror or dismay.

The puppy, attracted by another dog on the pavement, had escaped from the arms of his small mistress and leaped through the open window. Now, terrified and panic-stricken at the bustle around him, he was running wildly in the middle of the crowded street, with every chance of having his career cut short by some item of the stream of traffic.

The hoof of a horse grazed his ribs and threw him yelling on his back. A bicycle missed him by a hair's-breadth, and the narrowness of the escape sent him flying towards an omnibus wheel. Colin saw clearly that another instant would most likely bring about his end. Almost unconsciously the boy had sprung across the pavement, reached the street, and dived into the traffic, bent on rescuing the frightened dog.

The chauffeur of a swift electric brougham jammed the brakes on hard and did no more than leave a streak of Bond Street mud on Colin's sleeve. The fast-trotting pony of a butcher's cart sat down upon its haunches in obedience to a tug of its young driver's reins. The carman of a two-horse dray slanted his team across the road, and gave his views of Colin's conduct with fluency and vigour. There were confusion, shouting, cries. Twice the puppy, wholly unaware of the boy's kind intentions, managed to elude his grasp.

But Colin persevered. He had a wide experience of a football scrum, knew twenty different methods of evading tackling, and at least as many ways of picking up—and sticking to—a wet and slippery ball. The dog was making a fresh bolt of terror when a hand descended on him, gripped him, held him fast. Then Colin's foot slipped and he fell; a moment later he discovered himself sitting in the middle of the street, looking up into the astonished and obviously disapproving faces of a pair of brougham-horses.

He was on his feet next moment, still retaining a firm grasp upon the dog; dodged the dignified approach of an irate policeman, and then looked about him for the car. It stood beside the pavement a few yards away, and its elderly occupant was now approaching with no small anxiety upon his kindly face.

"Say now, young gentleman, that was a real risky thing to do; you couldn't hope to play that game in Broadway and come back alive, and a man's life weighs heavily against a dog's, a fifty-dollar thoroughbred though he may be. But all the same I thank you very heartily, and so does Maisie here. It was a real kind thing to do. I guess you're sore some, eh? No? Well, anyway you'll be the smarter for a little grooming; step right in."

He laid a friendly hand on Colin's arm and tried to lead him towards the car. But all young Charteris's instincts as a Briton and a public-schoolboy rose in arms against the thought of any recompense for such a simple act. A little crowd had gathered, and he was in haste to disappear. He again assured the American—as he obviously was—that he was not at all hurt, nor even muddy—a wholly inaccurate statement—and that he was in "rather a hurry".

"Well, we'd have liked to thank you better, sure," said the gentleman; "but we won't keep you if you've got a date." He shook hands heartily and Colin raised his hat to Maisie's smiling face. The car glided off, and Colin entered the confectioner's to make his purchase.

He gave a very mild account of the affair when he reached home; some allusion to it was necessary owing to the sharpness of his mother's eyes in noting a mudstain on his overcoat. A little dog had run away and he had caught it; that was all. Colin had little taste for seeing himself exposed to public view—even the view of his own family—in the rôle of a hero.

Crossways Farm, the largest of the three which formed the greater portion of the Meadowgrange estate, was tenanted by a farmer whose ancestors had been for several generations on the place. The land was mostly pasture, and the family had long devoted much energy and skill to the rearing of pure-bred Hereford cattle. The Crossways herd was famous, and not a year passed without valuable animals fetching high prices, frequently for export abroad.

Mr. Henry Barnett, the present tenant of the farm, was a shrewd, practical, and rigidly upright man. He had paid several visits to the United States, and often entertained foreign buyers and agents in his very comfortable home. The farmer, about sixty years of age, was short, inclined to stoutness, and wore old-fashioned mutton-chop whiskers.

A few days after his return from London, Colin said:

"I think I'll go and look up Crossways, Pater, eh?"

"Do, by all means," replied his father.

Colin strolled off across the lawn, up the Monks' Walk—an avenue of limes—and a few minutes later passed the great wrought-iron gates of the big red-brick Georgian house which was the Barnetts' home. He was about to ring when he caught sight of Mr. Barnett in a fold-yard that adjoined the garden wall.

"Why, that you, Mr. Colin?" cried the farmer in a hearty tone. "Come in."

“Weren’t you just going round the yards?” asked Colin, for the farmer had been walking from the house.

“Well, yes, I was; just going to have a look at someone that I’ve got to part with soon.”

“Who’s that?”

“Sir Benjamin; I’ve sold him. Your old friend Sir Benjamin goes out to the Argentine next month. Bit of a journey, eh? but he is in good order and he’ll stand it right enough. Come in and have a look at him; a picture, isn’t he?”

While Mr. Barnett talked, Colin and he had crossed the yard to a long range of boxes; the door of one of these was opened and they stepped inside. A friendly bellow greeted them, and as they entered the box a massively-built bull, standing knee-deep in golden straw, moved a step towards them.

Sir Benjamin, the great two-year-old Hereford bull, was, as his owner had said, indeed a picture, with his broad back level as a dining-table, his sleek well-filled sides, close curly coat, and short strong horns. There was the usual ring passed through the gristle of his nose, but he was not secured in any way; for, treated with unvarying kindness during his two years of life, the bull was gentle and sweet-tempered as a child.

The great beast nuzzled at his master’s arm, and blew a snorting breath at Colin, whom he seemed to recognize. Colin adored these cattle of his native county. Born and brought up in constant touch with them, he had not, even as a child, known such a thing as fear, and now he fondled the great animal, until the farmer said:

“Well, it is time I took my nooning—bread and cheese and cider, and you’ll have a snack with me. How is the major and your mother and the little lady? All quite well?”

Colin was ushered into the oak-panelled dining-room, hung with paintings of the Crossways cattle, many of the pictures a full century old. They all displayed their bovine “sitters” either in remarkably green pastures or in the seclusion of immaculately clean boxes. But Colin knew them all by heart; what caught his eye at once was someone seated at a table by the window, writing fast. The writer laid his pen down and turned round as Mr. Barnett and the boy came in. He looked at Colin, with surprise at first, and then with obvious pleasure on his genial face. It was the gentleman of Bond Street—he of the Rolls-Royce car, the pretty child, and truant dog.

"Why, why! the world's a small place, isn't it?" exclaimed the stranger, jumping up and taking Colin's hand in a firm friendly grasp. "Who would have guessed that we should meet down here?" And Colin found himself introduced by the farmer to Mr. Dickson.

"Of Noo York," put in that gentleman. "Well, well, I'm glad to meet you once more, anyway. Often done business with our friend here, and I'd promised to run down and stay a day or two. Got here last night and leave again to-morrow afternoon. This is the kind of spot that does me good; none of our Noo York hustle; peace and quiet, cattle and green fields."

Cider and bread and cheese were brought, and Mr. Dickson did full justice to the simple fare. Rather to Colin's confusion the Bond Street story was related at length for the farmer's edification, and Mr. Barnett, with whom Colin had always been a prime favourite, heard it with obvious satisfaction.

"Ah, Mr. Colin wouldn't think about the risk if he could save a horse or dog from trouble; I know quite enough of him for that," he said.

Maisie, it seemed, had not accompanied her father, but was staying with other friends. Mr. Dickson explained that, though not an expert in cattle, he was connected with a syndicate which had extensive interests in the trade. In this connection he had several times met Mr. Barnett in the States.

The conversation prolonged itself for some time after Mr. Barnett had gone out again, the American being seemingly much pleased with Colin's company. At luncheon the boy recounted his unexpected meeting.

"Your friend seems to be a rather interesting person," said his father; "we might ask him in to dinner. Barnett must come with him—if he will."

An informal invitation was sent up to the farm an hour later. The farmer excused himself, but the American accepted readily.

He proved himself a very entertaining guest; a thorough man of the world, widely travelled, and full of interesting information. There was an obvious friendliness about him, a frank simplicity of manner, and a rather old-world courtesy, which put his entertainers instantly at ease.

In the course of conversation it came out that his syndicate had lately bought a cattle ranch or *hacienda* in the north of Mexico, and that some pure-bred Herefords were being tried upon the range.

"I knew, of course, that our cattle go out to the States, the Argentine, and elsewhere," said the major, "but I did not know that Mexico was a great

place for them. I know there are big *haciendas* in the north."

"Why, Major, Mexico's *the* country of the cattle range. It's there that ranching started—all our ranching words have got a Spanish twist. Take Chihuahua for instance; there you'll find the very finest ranching land in all the world; dry, out of the wet season; but with proper irrigation it will equal anything the world can show. Mind you, their ways are out of date; but we are out to change all that. Our syndicate has clean bought out this native rancher—*haciendado*, as they call him—and now owns three hundred square miles of first-grade horse and cattle ground."

"Three hundred square miles in a single property!" said Colin in surprise.

"Our boundary's ten miles by thirty," said his friend; "a quarter of a million acres, more or less. That's not large either, for the state of Chihuahua; one or two million acres is a common holding, and there are some ranges of ten times that size."

"What head of stock have you upon a range like that, sir?" Colin asked.

"At present about fifteen thousand head of cattle, with two or three thousand horses. We reckon fifteen acres will support a beast; but better irrigation will enable us to run more stock."

"What sort of life is it out there for ranching hands?" asked Major Charteris.

"A little lonely, perhaps. A fine life all the same; for any man who rides, who cares for stock, and likes the open air and freedom, it's all right. Just now what we want there especially are men who've got the knack of 'bossing' men."

The visitor took leave soon after dinner, saying that they kept early hours at the farm. Colin proposed to walk across with him, an offer the American accepted with alacrity.

"And what's your future occupation, Mr. Colin, if I'm not intruding?" asked Mr. Dickson, as they went down the drive.

Colin hesitated; but there was something so friendly about his companion that he decided to be frank.

"Well, sir, I was to have gone into the cavalry, like my father; but—things have rather altered, and I may have to take work in a bank."

"Not much to your taste, perhaps?"

“Not much, sir, I must say.”

“Ride well?” inquired Mr. Dickson.

“Oh, well, you see, I’ve ridden since I was a kid.”

“Health good? You look as though it were.”

“Oh yes, I’m never ill!”

The American nodded, but said nothing more, and a few minutes later the pair parted.

Soon after ten the following morning, Major Charteris, coming from the stable-yard, met Mr. Dickson making for the door.

“Come in,” said the major, as the two shook hands.

“Well, Major, if it’s all the same to you I’d rather be outside. I’m country raised, and don’t get all the air I’d like in town. That’s a fine avenue of trees you have there; couldn’t we walk up and down?”

“By all means,” replied the major, and then led the way to the Monks’ Walk.

“Now,” said the American, “I’m quite aware I’m going to butt right in where you may say I have no right to be. I’m going to take my chances all the same. I want to talk about your son.”

“I’ve no objection to his being the subject of your conversation,” said the major, with a smile.

“Ah, but you may not care so much for what I’ve got to say; still I’ll get down to brass tacks straight. I understand from him that he is at a bit of a loose end. Well now, I want him to go out to Mexico and take on work at this new range of ours—the Hacienda of the Star.

“Now let me have my say right out before you turn the proposition down,” continued the American. “You’ve some fair notion as to what such work will be. Some fifteen thousand head of cattle, with about three thousand horses, running loose upon three hundred miles of land. We keep our eyes skinned on them all the time. Each day and all day—sometimes all night too—*vaqueros* are upon the range to look them up. These chaps are mostly Mexicans or Indians, but we have some fellows from the States as well.

“I want to try some English hands. You’ll likely ask me why. I’ll tell you; we Americans—I’m one and I admit it—don’t get on so well with

native races, half-breed folks or coloured men, as English fellows seem to do. It's perhaps a question of geography to some extent; we've always had our troubles with the Indians, with the niggers in the South; perhaps that's the reason that a prejudice against all coloured folks is in our blood. Another thing no doubt is that the native won't be hustled, and the American has 'hustle' in him all the time. That, sir, is why I want to get some Britishers upon our range."

"You won't think that I look a gift horse in the mouth," said Major Charteris, "if, without committing Colin, I inquire what would be his prospects if he did go out."

"Not much for the first year, though he'd have better pay than what we call the 'greasers' get. I'd give him twenty dollars monthly and all found. He'd do a lot of cowboy work; he'd be on horseback, helping with the overlooking, branding, rounding-up. But I would like for him to take a real interest in the job; to study greasers and their ways, pick up the way to manage them. Then, if he cares to stick to it, he'll not be long before he's drawing better pay.

"Now, Major, don't you run away with any notion that I'm simply trying to do your boy a kindness. I am grateful to him, certainly, for picking up my little daughter's dog, and I'd be glad to do him a good turn. But I'm a business man; I want your boy because I think he'll suit our work. I think so just because he did that very thing: we like men who can see what wants doing in a moment and who'll do it on the jump. And we want men who will get on well with other men. I've heard about your son from Mr. Barnett; heard how he is with animals and how he is with men. I'm satisfied that he's a man I want. Out in the States I should have gone to the boy first; our lads consider they've the right to fix things for themselves. But here in England, why, I come to you."

"I'm grateful to you, both for the offer and for bringing it to me. I'm just a little startled, but I'd like to hear what Colin says himself. You seem to think the prospects good in Mexico; but is not the political horizon just a little cloudy, eh?"

"I don't deny there has been talk of trouble, but I feel sure things will settle down; I wouldn't ask your boy to go out there unless I did. Diaz is growing old, but he's a strong man still. That meeting between him and Taft upon the frontier some weeks back looks well. I don't know just what they fixed up together, but the very fact that they did meet has had a good effect.

As long as Taft and Diaz keep good friends, why, any malcontents will do a heap of thinking before starting to make trouble there."

After some further conversation, Major Charteris said:

"And when should you want Colin to decide?"

"I'd like to know before I sail for Noo York Tuesday week; and if he comes I'd like him to come soon. Now I'll not keep you longer. You just put the thing before your boy as I have put it before you. Good-bye." And Mr. Dickson walked with quick steps towards the farm.

Half an hour later Colin was in possession of the American's unexpected offer.

"Well, Colin, what d'you say? The state of Chihuahua's a long way off. I don't know what your mother'll think."

"I shall hate leaving you and Mother—Dido too," said Colin; "and yet somehow—it seems rather that I'm *meant* to go."

"Meant! In what way?"

"Well, look here, Pater. I see Uncle Hamilton; it's pretty clear that he's not really pining for me in the bank, though perhaps he'd take me at a pinch. The question is what sort of job I'd make of banking, eh? Then Mother sends me into Bond Street, and I run against this Mr. Dickson in a funny way. He seems to like the little that he's seen of me and knows about me; I dare say old Barnett's stuffed him up with quite a lot of rot. But I do think I can get on with outdoor working-men, and I can ride all right. To tell the truth, I've got a feeling that I *ought* to go."

"Well, Coll, you've given up your prospects in the army for the sake of others; I don't feel that we've a right to hinder you from choosing what you like. I rather like this Mr. Dickson; he has got the air of being 'straight'. He's asked me to refer to various London men about him, and seems quite well known upon this side. Well, we must talk about it to your mother and see what she says."

"I think she'll give in, Pater, when she sees I really want to go. And with a chap like Mr. Dickson at my back, why, it may turn out something quite first-rate. You never know."

CHAPTER III

In a New Land

Some two months later, on a cloudless afternoon in March, Colin Charteris shifted his position for about the hundredth time upon the hard black leather cushions of a first-class car on the Mexican railway.

That morning he had crossed the shallow chocolate-coloured waters of the Rio Grande del Norte, and now, as for some hours past, the train was traversing a country the unvarying monotony of which began to pall upon the English boy.

The speed was slow, being little more than some eighteen or twenty miles an hour. The stations were few, far apart, and very much alike; clusters of small, untidy wooden buildings, roofed with corrugated iron. Upon their platforms stood invariably a crowd of dark-skinned natives; the women dressed in plain black shawls and coloured skirts, the men in cotton suits of dingy white, a further item of their costume being a scarlet blanket with black stripes across its ends. Most of the men displayed this blanket neatly folded on one shoulder; others wore it draped around them, the owner's head being thrust through a hole in the centre.

A great many people seemed to travel in this country, Colin thought; passengers entered and left the cars in crowds at every stopping-place—at Magdalena and Tierra Blanca, at Laguna and Puerta—Colin liked these sonorous Spanish names. He knew as yet too little of this strange new land to be aware that natives of the poorest classes often squander their last coin for the delight of riding in a train. But he was able to observe that begging was a popular custom of Mexico. At every station dirty hands were thrust in through his window, in an appeal that was by no means mute. Sometimes the beggar sang, or played a mandolin or harp, and Colin was relieved to find how very small a gift was graciously accepted as an adequate return. Women crouched round small braziers placed upon the station platforms, cooking not unsavoury-smelling dishes for the benefit of any traveller who might care to buy. Fruit in considerable variety was also to be had.

The country lying between the stations had, in the earlier hours of the day at least, offered but few attractions to the eye. Mile after mile the train had travelled through a wide and level plain, of which the most conspicuous feature was the bare and sun-baked earth. Some stunted shrubs and bushes

of the cactus tribe, dry, sapless-looking, and suggestive to Colin of anything rather than vegetation as he knew it, broke the surface here and there; while now and then was to be seen a "feather duster" palm. Such watercourses as appeared were either dry or almost so, with every sign of having been in that condition for some months. Weary at length of such an unattractive landscape, Colin had closed his eyes against the glare and fallen back on his own thoughts.

The last eight weeks seemed like a crowded dream. His mother had, though with great and natural reluctance, finally consented to his accepting Mr. Dickson's offer. Inquiries in two or three reliable quarters—inquiries suggested, and indeed insisted on, by the American himself—had shown him to be all and even more than he had claimed: a man of large means, of many flourishing business enterprises, and personally of the highest reputation for integrity. It presently transpired, too, that he was known, at least by name, to Mr. Hamilton; and that gentleman, possibly not over anxious to become responsible for his young nephew's future, had strongly urged acceptance of the Mexican proposal. So, in the end, accepted it had been.

Swiftly had passed the few short hurried weeks of preparation, crowded with the purchase of the needed outfit and the booking of a berth. Upon the farewell scene at Meadowgrange Colin still scarcely cared to dwell; his father's handgrip and unsteady voice; his mother's shining eyes, and lips set in a firm determination against breaking down; and Dido's clinging arms and burst of tears.

The passage out had furnished no particular incidents of special interest; but Colin had been fortunate in striking up acquaintance on the boat with a young Mexican who was returning from a business trip to Europe. From him he had picked up quite a useful grounding of colloquial Spanish. All his spare moments were devoted to a diligent study of that language, and already he was able to sustain a modest conversation without coming to a stand too soon.

Well, it was no use looking back too much—that way homesickness lay. Better to look ahead, and strengthen his determination to "make good". He roused himself and once more gazed through the window on the slowly passing scene.

Ah, this was better! here were hills at last; hills to the westward, still some distance off, but drawing nearer at each mile. They were, of course, the great backbone of Mexico, the high and wide Sierra Madre range, hidden

somewhere in the heart of which there lay his destination, the Hacienda of the Star.

The range drew slowly nearer; it seemed dry and dusty, although not so wholly bare and desolate as was the plain. Some trees appeared in places; near the banks of streams and shrunken river-beds grass showed a tinge of green—though not the green of Herefordshire pasture-lands, thought Colin, swallowing a sigh. The range rose from the plain by gentle slopes, until its undulations stretched so far into the distance as to fade from sight in a faint haze of blue. Colin caught sight of cattle grazing in a small ravine. This was the gateway of the cattle country then, destined to be his home—quite probably for years.

Towards evening the train entered on a broad and fertile-looking valley, where hills rose on either side, though higher on the west. Signs of an important town at length appeared; five minutes later the long train clanked slowly to a stand within a large bare station. Colin's eyes lighted on a signboard; yes, this was Nazarenos, the town nearest to the range, and that at which he was instructed to alight.

Among a crowd of other passengers he struggled down the gangway of the car and descended to the low platform. Putting his bag and suit-case on the ground beside him, he looked round.

"Say, will your name be Charteris, sir?" said a somewhat drawling voice behind him.

Colin turned quickly at the words and faced the speaker. He had been told that one or other of the American hands employed upon the range would be told off to meet him at the station and to pilot him to his new home; and he had expected, perhaps not unnaturally, to be received by someone who would differ little from himself in matter of costume. The tall young man of three-or four-and-twenty who held out to him a sunburnt sinewy hand in greeting, while a slight smile played upon a pair of firm thin lips, was dressed in a style wholly different from what Colin was prepared to see.

To begin description at the pinnacle of his costume, and work thence downward to its base, the newcomer wore a large sombrero hat—quite certainly the most extensive piece of headgear Colin Charteris had ever seen. The crown, a sugar-loaf in shape, was fully thirty inches high; the brim on every side not less than some ten inches or a foot in breadth. The whole seemed made of felt, a third of an inch thick. "Seemed" was, advisedly, the

word to use; for crown and brim alike were thickly covered with a braiding of gilt tinsel, so that the underlying material could be barely seen.

A short close-fitting jacket, something of the Eton shape, but half-concealed a shirt of deep rich yellow silk. A pair of trousers which fitted tightly from the hip to ankle were adorned upon the outside of each leg with three long rows of highly polished silver buttons, closely set. The boots were of soft brown unpolished leather, fitted with immense steel spurs inlaid with silver. Such was the attire of this newfound friend—if friend he proved to be. It remains to add, however, that a leather belt carried a wallet, a very obvious stock of cartridges, and a serviceable-looking revolver.

"Yes, I am Charteris," answered Colin, extending his own hand, which the other received in a brief, vice-like grip.

"Pleased to know you; I'm Jim Westman. These your traps?" He pointed to the bags on the platform.

"These and a couple of portmanteaux in the baggage-car."

"That so? Let's have your checks."

Colin handed his checks to the ranchman, and that gentleman in turn passed them over to a small slim native who had meanwhile been hovering near, apparently awaiting the American's commands. The man had a light, crate-like wooden frame upon his back, supported by a broad woven band passed across his forehead.

"He'll fix it up," said Westman; "give him those as well."

Colin, thus instructed, parted with the suit-case, but was for retaining the small hand-bag which contained some of his more intimate possessions. Westman interposed.

"Say, you can't carry that around—not in this country, sure," he said decisively; "hand it all over. He'll not lose it; if he did I'd have his skin. That's it; now come this way."

He led the way to the station entrance, where Colin found a small carriage, drawn by two depressed and sleepy-looking mules. In this conveyance the two young men seated themselves, and it at once drove off at a smart pace.

"Roads pretty rocky, eh?" said Westman presently, regarding his companion with a friendly grin; for Colin was recovering from the effects of a violent jolt which had bid fair to throw him altogether off the seat. "I guess the paving section isn't in just first-rate order here in Nazarenos."

After about ten minutes' driving at a rapid rate, the carriage pulled up with a jerk before a massive doorway, and its occupants sprang out. Beneath a broad deep arch they passed to a large open court beyond. A well-dressed man took off his hat and bowed, a salute which Colin returned with the best grace at his command, while the American responded with a nod and a curt word. While the hotel proprietor, for such he was, took Westman's orders, Colin looked about him, getting his first impressions of a Mexican hotel.

The house, one story high above the ground, was built all round the central court. This court was, for the most part, paved; but here and there the paving-bricks gave place to flower-beds or clumps of evergreen and often fragrant shrubs; while in the centre was a large round basin full of water, in the midst of which a fountain played. All round the court ran an arcade of handsome arches, which were richly carved; these supported a broad covered corridor or balcony upon the floor above. Large pots containing shrubs or flowers stood at intervals upon the balustrade of this, while others hung between the arches of the lower floor. Altogether the hotel struck Colin as a very handsome place.

Servants, both male and female, were seen passing to and fro in an unhurried, free-and-easy way. Small groups of dark-skinned waitresses or chambermaids were seated, laughing and chatting quite at ease, upon the double flight of broad stone steps that led upstairs. Now and then one would rise and disappear, presumably upon some errand, but without any show of haste. The long dark hair of nearly all of them flowed loose upon their shoulders, unconfined in any way.

Close to the entrance-door, outside a little room which seemed the office, a large blackboard hung against the wall. On this were several names and numbers scrawled in chalk, and Colin presently saw his, with that of Westman, added to the list. Westman's, its owner having doubtless often used the house before, was quite correctly spelt; but Colin saw with some amusement that he himself was described as "Señor Shatters".

"Your chums, if you have any hereabouts, will hardly spot you, eh?" said Westman, laughing. "Now let's go upstairs; you'd like a swill before we get our grub."

The promised "swill" was, however, a function for which the Hotel de la Santa Cruz appeared to Colin to provide no very lavish facilities, in spite of the picturesque and promising appearance of its outer court. The bedroom to which he was now ushered was certainly, as regards size, a stately apartment, being fully thirty feet by twenty, and not less than fifteen feet in

height. But the pavement of small red tiles which formed its flooring was irregular in surface and was broken here and there. There was no window, light and ventilation being admitted only through the door. This opened from the balcony, and, in case of any guest desiring privacy and closing it, its upper part contained two panes of tinted glass.

The furniture required no extended inventory. There was a wooden bedstead, small and low. Colin examined the bed-clothes with some interest, and was much relieved to find that they were fairly clean. There was a wooden chair—with broken back and one leg badly split; a tin basin, tiny water-jug, and one or two large nails behind the door to serve as clothes-pegs. That was all; yet Westman told him later that it was the best hotel the town could boast.

The young American had turned to leave the room when a light quick step was heard upon the balcony outside; the door was pushed open, and in walked the little man whom Colin had seen at the station. In the light crate upon his back were Colin's two portmanteaux, suit-case, and bags. These articles the man proceeded to set down upon the floor.

"Great Scott!" said Colin, "surely the fellow hasn't carried that lot from the station on his back?"

"Why not?" said Westman, after having paid the man, who then withdrew with an entirely contented air; "these *cargadors* will carry twice a load like that, and carry it for miles. For a short distance I have seen 'em move five hundred pounds. Give a good *cargador* two hundred pounds, start him upon a journey of two hundred miles, and he will make a good six miles an hour all the way, uphill or down, over what sort of track you like, and come in fresh—before a mule is half-way there."

Colin made such ablutions as the rather limited facilities allowed, and then went down to join his friend in the large dining-room upon the lower floor of the hotel, fully ready to do justice to the coming meal. A well-cooked omelette was a familiar dainty to the English boy; but upon most of the subsequent dishes he embarked with a strong sense of adventure. Bread—as he knew it—was absent from the table, being represented only by *tortillas*, similar to somewhat tough and tasteless pancakes, which, however, Colin grew to like before he had been long in Mexico. This was the case too with the beans—*frijoles*—which he soon discovered was a dish invariably displayed at every meal. On this first evening he enjoyed a salad of sliced tongue, mixed with olives, celery, and lettuce, the whole covered with a mayonnaise dressing. *Cocidas* proved on close examination to contain

potatoes finely chopped, together with meat, carrots, beetroot, cauliflower, maize, and what Jim Westman vaguely and comprehensively summed up as a "whole heap of other fancy stuff". *Chili-con-carne*, a meat dish, was also good, though very hot with pepper and a great variety of other spice. Colin soon found the contents fiery on his tongue, and asked for water. His companion ordered lager beer for himself, and suggested that the boy should do the same.

"I wouldn't sort of recommend the water," he explained; "this city's drainage system isn't just its very strongest point, and now and then the water's apt to be a little mixed. I guess you don't drink spirits, and for them I'm on the water-wagon all the way. But this light ale won't hurt you and it's very good. They make it down in Monterey. Or you can have minerals—any sort." So Colin was supplied with mineral water. Looking round the various tables near them he saw little wine being drunk, and commented upon the fact to his companion.

"Well, they don't turn out wine in Mexico, although the vine grows well enough. You see, when first the Spaniards came across the pond a good few centuries ago—I'm a bit shaky on my dates, but you'll know when—they figured out that any wine the greasers wanted should come out from Spain—keep up home exports, see! Of course, there's nothing now to stop folks making wine; but here, what they did yesterday, last year, or half a dozen centuries ago, why, they do just the same to-day. You'll soon find that out for yourself; the greaser don't get any forrarder than he can help; just likes to slouch along the same old trail. Look at their ploughs. The share a thousand years ago was just a piece of whittled wood. Well, it's the same to-day, among the peons, anyhow. How do they thrash their corn? By driving mules and horses round and round upon it, and they winnow out the chaff by throwing it up into the air until it's clean. Will they make decent bread, d'you think? Not they, though wheat does well. *Tortillas* are the things they've always baked, and so they bake 'em still. Oh, they're a proper crowd of sleeping beauties, are the greasers, you can bet."

"But I suppose things are more up to date upon the Hacienda of the Star?"

"Why, yes, to some extent they are. But we have the Mexican peons and *vaqueros* on the range, and native servants in the house; and where you get the greaser you have got to take his ways or none at all. Out on the range, it's true, we have some fellows through from Texas and some other parts of God's own country; but it's queer how soon they're apt to slide into the local ways. That's what we have to fight against, to some extent. You wonder, I

dare say, to see me fixed up in this kind o' fancy dress. Well, it ain't always quite convenient, when you're out upon the range, to look conspicuous from the other hands. But now I guess you're tired some with a day's trip inside the Texas-Mexican express. How about bed? You'll find we have to keep real early hours on the range."

Colin was nothing loth to follow his new friend's advice; and it was well that he retired early. Long before dawn the following morning he was roused from slumber by the clanging of the bells in every church—and they were not a few—calling good Catholics to early Mass. Far different was their tone to that which he had often heard float softly from the ancient Norman tower of the little church at Upper Hope; discordant, most unmusical, are Mexican church bells.

After his breakfast he joined Westman in the hotel court, or *patio*, where the young American was fuming angrily. It seemed he had intended to start early on their drive of thirty miles into the hills; but one of the men, he said, now reported the necessity of some repairs to the vehicle in which they were to travel, the drive to town upon the previous day having resulted in the breaking of a bolt.

"Find it out yesterday, d'you think, when he outspanned? Not he; always *mañana*—to-morrow—with a greaser, when a thing wants putting right. However, you won't mind a stroll around the city, I dare say."

So the pair spent an hour or two in looking at the principal sights of Nazarenos. It was a place of striking contrasts, Colin thought; uneven, dirty, ill-paved streets, and yet in almost every one of them some splendid and substantial Spanish house, through the great entrance-door of which he caught a glimpse of a wide *patio*, stately archways, marble stairs. Some of the churches were of interest too; and altogether the few hours till a start was possible slipped quickly by.

They made a rather hasty midday meal, and then went out to find their vehicle awaiting them before the door of the hotel. It was a four-wheeled carriage of American make, half buggy, half light wagon, drawn by four tall and handsome mules, well harnessed. Beside it were two Mexicans on horseback, each carrying a revolver in his belt and a rifle slung across his shoulder. Their native saddles were of very massive, cumbrous make, and their spurs and bits extremely complicated in construction, and, as it seemed to Colin, cruel. He noted their well-armed appearance with no small surprise, but refrained from any comment on the point, Westman being busily engaged inspecting the interior of the carriage, where, in addition to

Colin's baggage and some other miscellaneous stores, were stowed some small square wooden boxes, strongly made.

Presently Westman mounted to the driving-seat, with Colin at his side. The horsemen rode a few yards in advance. In twenty minutes they were clear of Nazarenos, and were heading westward towards the hills.

"You seem to travel in some style," said Colin presently.

Westman regarded him with the dry smile which was so often on his lips.

"Well now, I haven't got to fetch a new chum to the *hacienda* every day, and when one does turn up, why, sure, I like to hand him over safe and sound." He looked again at Colin with a humorous twinkle in his eyes, and then went on: "Besides, I've got one eye upon those little boxes in behind."

"Why, are they valuable?"

"Dollars—to pay the hands," was the American's reply.

"Are you afraid of being robbed, then? I thought brigandage had been entirely stamped out."

"Well now, friend Diaz would just love for you to think that, and he'd tell you that it's so. But we're not taking any chances on our ranch, you bet.

"I don't say that things aren't some better than they were," continued Westman, after an interval in which he applied his long whip-lash in most artistic and effective fashion to the near leader; "for the *rurales* have sure done good work. They're some police. But, saying there are no brigands in the country, though no doubt it's just the goods to give the European or American investor, isn't much to trust to if you're living out among the hills like us. So don't go strolling off alone with dollars in your pocket or without your gun."

"I understood from Mr. Dickson that these *rurales* are a sort of very high-class police force; almost military, like our Royal Irish Constabulary?"

"Don't know about the gentlemen you name," answered Westman; "but the *rurales*, nearly all of them at any rate, were in the business for themselves, and so they know it through and through."

"You don't mean they were brigands themselves?"

"Sure thing, they were. A little after Diaz came to power he got mighty busy cleaning up the mess that Mexico was in. The old man was no fool; he saw at once that chasing brigands up and down the hills with regulars was

going to cut but mighty little ice. So he talked to 'em good and straight: 'Keep on at your old game,' says he, or words to that effect, 'and if it takes me till the judgment day I'll hunt you down in time, and then you can get fitted for a comfortable size in coffins right away. Come in and form my cavalry police, and you shall draw good pay and do your work in your own way. How's that?' And that's the way that the *rurales* came."

"Do they take many brigands prisoners?" Colin asked.

Westman coughed drily.

"I don't know that they figure much on prisoners. There's a law—*lex fuga*—that a brigand trying to get away from the *rurales* shall be shot; and it's a funny thing, but most of 'em do seem to try and run. It's mighty seldom that a captured brigand comes to town; he nearly always 'tried to get away'; at least that's mostly the report brought in. Oh, tell you, the *rurales* are some shots.

"But it's a sure fact that the brigands wanted putting down. Why, there's folks living still, and not so very old, can tell you all about a gang that used to work here in Chihuahua State. They used to rob the coach; would rob it regular, say every week or so. They'd strip the passengers of every mortal thing they'd got—glad rags and all. Folks used to watch the coach as it was coming into town, and if they saw the window-curtains weren't in place, why then they knew the passengers were wearing 'em in place of shirts and trousers. That's a fact.

"It wasn't only brigands from the hills that played the game; you never knew who might be in with 'em. One time there was a fellow robbed by a small gang. But he was rather tougher than they'd thought for, and he beat them off in style; collared their leader, tied him up, and set him on a *burro*—that's a donkey—and then toted him along to the next village. When he got there he asked the people for the judge—the chap you'd call a magistrate, I guess. 'Why,' cried the folks, 'you've got him on the *burro* there!' "

Colin laughed heartily at Westman's tale.

"But things aren't like that now?"

"We-ll, not so bad as that. But still I wouldn't like to bet too heavy 'gainst a brigand being within some twenty miles of us this minute—no, nor ten, or even five. Anyway, we take no chances, see."

The road for some few miles had been a fairly good one, and the team of mules went fast. But later it began to rise among the slopes of the Sierra Madre range, and rapidly deteriorated, soon becoming a mere mountain

track. At the same time the country much improved to Colin's eyes. Trees, singly at first, but presently in clusters and small woods, appeared. Streams, though with but little water in them at that season, crossed the track; and they passed herds of cattle here and there.

When nearly twenty miles had been travelled the carriage and its escort halted for two hours' rest beside a wayside dwelling. It was a ramshackle erection, built of *adobe*—sun-dried brick—and the one room which it contained was covered with a much dilapidated thatch. A native and his wife, with half a dozen almost naked children, were the human occupants; but the use of the hut seemed equally free to numerous fowls and turkeys, a calf, a blind mule, with two bare-ribbed pigs and several dogs. While the mules and horses rested, Colin and young Westman sat and smoked beside a little stream, or strolled about in the immediate neighbourhood; but Colin saw that never for a moment did the young American allow the wagon and its contents to be out of sight.

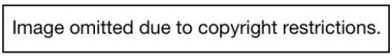
Late in the afternoon the journey was resumed. The road now passed along a hill-side, now dipped down to cross a stream. Such streams—and there were several—lay at the bottom of deep gullies, the sides of which were sometimes little short of precipitous. A carriage other than the light and most accommodating one in which they rode would certainly have overturned at least a dozen times on the track; as it was, Colin often held his breath as the mules slid and scrambled, climbed, and even jumped upon their breakneck way.

By sunset they were deep among the hills, with not a sign of human life in sight. The dusk was falling swiftly when, a short time after having crossed a more particularly deep and difficult ravine, they turned a sharp and rocky corner, and young Westman, pointing forward with his whip into the gathering darkness, said to his companion: "There's the Hacienda of the Star."

CHAPTER IV

The Hacienda of the Star

The night had fallen, dark and moonless, when they reached the Hacienda of the Star. Colin could only see that it was an extensive block of buildings, which the wagon entered by a wide arched gateway, after having driven past long rows of little dwellings at the doors of which stood natives, their dark faces seen but dimly by the light of smouldering charcoal fires. He had been introduced to Mr. Osgood, the American manager of the range, and then to several young Americans of about Westman's age. A hearty supper had been eaten, after which Colin had been glad to go to bed in a large barely furnished room adjoining the one occupied by his new friend. The long ride in the buggy, with the jolting over the rough track, had been almost as tiring as a day in the saddle. Colin had dropped into deep dreamless sleep almost the moment that his head had touched the pillow. When he woke the sun was high. He dressed and then looked into Westman's room, but found it empty; the American was evidently up and out. Colin descended to the *patio* of the *hacienda*, and strolled out to take stock of his new home.



"TRY HIM A MILE OR TWO"

The main buildings formed a large oblong quadrangle, built of that popular material of the country, sun-dried brick. The style of the great house was similar to that of the hotel at Nazarenos, though it was on a vastly larger scale. Very few windows pierced the outer walls, which were quite four feet thick; and those that did so were extremely small and very strongly barred. The building was a single story high above the ground floor, the latter being chiefly occupied by immense ranges of stables, storehouses, and workshops. This, however, was not the case at one end of the block, where the dwelling-house, formerly occupied by the Mexican proprietor, was now used as the bachelor quarters of the manager and his American assistants. It looked out on a smaller *patio*, which was separated from the larger one by buildings and a wall, and entered by an inner gate. Here both the upper and the lower floors were used as living-rooms and had, though simply furnished, an air of considerable splendour. The smaller *patio* was, like that at the hotel, laid out

to some extent as a garden, having flower-beds, with a basin and fountain in the centre.

At each of the four corners of the outer quadrangle a loopholed tower slightly overtopped the other buildings; while immediately adjoining the dwelling-house was a pink stucco-plastered church with a high dome. The whole place had clearly been planned and built with a view to being defended if attacked; and Colin, looking at it, thought that it might make a fairly strong defence against a siege. There was but one main entrance; namely the great arched gateway through which they had driven the night before. This could be closed by two immensely heavy doors, four inches thick, strongly studded with great iron bars and nails.

Presently Colin strolled through this gate, and at once found himself in an extensive and seemingly populous village. Rows of the little huts or *jacals*, through which they had passed the previous night, surrounded the great *hacienda* building on three sides and at a distance from it of about one hundred yards. The better class of these were built of *adobe*, and had roofs of neatly woven thatch; but others were less tidily constructed of stout upright posts. None of them seemed to boast of more accommodation than a single room, which, like that of the small roadside dwelling seen the day before, was plainly free to human beings and animals alike. About the doors played dark-eyed, brown-skinned children, nearly all very scantily clad, and many of the smaller ones entirely naked. Women with neatly braided hair were kneeling on the ground, busy preparing the *tortillas* for the morning meal; some grinding moistened maize in a stone mortar or *metate* with a heavy rolling-pin of stone; others already frying the flattened cakes of dough above the charcoal fires.

Beyond this village there stretched fields of maize and other crops; as also many large enclosures very strongly fenced, which Colin rightly judged to be the corrals into which stock could be “rounded-up” for purposes of branding and the like. Fields and enclosures lay around the *hacienda* building for perhaps half a mile or more on every side but one—that towards the east. Here, on the side where stood the dwelling-house, the land sloped gently down to a small artificial lake, made by the damming of a little stream, which, flowing past the *hacienda*, fed both house and village with clear drinking-water and supplied the plashing fountain in the inner court.

Retracing his steps after half an hour spent in an interested examination of his surroundings, Colin presently encountered the manager, who approached him with his hands thrust deep into his pockets and a long

cheroot between his lips. Mr. Osgood was a short, "stocky", keen-eyed man of about forty years of age.

"Well, Mr. Charteris, looking round and taking stock of things; that's good. I have your schedule pretty straight from Mr. Dickson, and I think he's put me wise about what you can do. Now, I don't much opine that you are 'nervy', but right here I'll tell you what may soothe you some if you're at all inclined that way. Don't run away with what you've perhaps picked up from schoolboy story-books of the way we treat a tenderfoot new chum; putting him up on man-eaters or buck-jumpers to break half the bones he's got. That kind of stuff don't pay and we aren't in that class of business on the Hacienda of the Star. No doubt but I *could* put you up right now upon a horse who'd savage you and very likely lay you on your back a month or more. That sort of thing would cut no ice for me; you're here to work, to ride the range, and not to be sick-nursed. Now, Mr. Dickson tells me you can ride; how much?"

Colin gave the manager as accurate, and at the same time as modest, an account of his equestrian powers as he could in a few words.

"Broke a colt, have you? That sounds good. Well, come right in to breakfast now, and afterwards we'll look you out a horse. For the next month or two the first thing, and the second, and the last thing you'll do here is *ride*; ride till you know the range and get a notion of the way that things are worked. Then, later, you will take a look inside the office now and then to see the business side. I hear you're pretty good at handling men."

"I don't know about that, sir," Colin answered. "I have not had much of it to do; nothing indeed, for I have only just left school."

"H'm, well the boss tells me he thinks you are the kind of fellow to make good out here. I tell you frankly, we Americans don't altogether seem to hit the way of managing these greasers. Westman's about as good as any of us at it, but he isn't perfect—not by miles."

"Is Westman on the range to-day?" asked Colin, as they shared the meal.

"Went out at sun-up. I told him to let you lie. Thirty miles over these hill-tracks in a wagon's apt to shake you some. Feel sore?"

"Oh no!" said Colin.

"Right. Now come along."

They walked out to one of the corrals, in which about six or eight saddle-horses were grazing. They were rather small-sized and wiry-looking

animals, and carried but very little flesh; but they struck Colin as in hard condition, and looked capable of work. Mr. Osgood looked at them reflectively, with running comments upon each.

"Grey's a good goer, but he bucks a lot; you'll have to learn to sit him and a whole heap like him, but you needn't set about it for a start. Sorrel's a savage; goes all right when once you're on him, but you'd find it none too easy getting on him out upon the range, once you'd got off. He killed a man last fall; stamped on the chap till there was mighty little left to gather up. I think the bay's the best; he wants some handling, though."

The manager drew out a little silver whistle from his waistcoat pocket, and upon it blew a loud shrill call. A small lean Mexican appeared from somewhere in the buildings and came towards them at a run.

"Here's Pablo, one of our *vaqueros*," Mr. Osgood said to Colin as the man approached; "a good one too; one of the best upon the range, though he is not the head. Pablo, here's Señor Charteris, who will be taking work with you. He will go out to-morrow and will want a horse. I think that the bay here will do; just get a saddle on him and we'll see."

The bay was, not without some difficulty, caught, led into the *hacienda* yard, and there equipped with an American saddle and bridle. Mr. Osgood explained that, while the native hands upon the range used their own Mexican saddles, of which massive structures he showed Colin a formidable-looking specimen, the Americans preferred the lighter saddle of the States.

"Don", as the bay was named, sidled away and laid his ears back as the boy approached to mount; but Colin, not unused to skittish horses, was soon in the saddle.

"Try him a mile or two; straight up the trail between the corrals and then back," instructed the manager.

Colin rode the horse quietly out, turning into the rough track that led between the enclosures. The bay fidgeted, reared violently once or twice, and seemed disposed to fight for mastery; then, feeling a firm, light, far from inexperienced hand upon the reins, he soon grew more amenable. After riding at an easy pace for a few hundred yards, Colin allowed the animal his head, and he stretched out at once into a long swift gallop which would soon have distanced many a far bigger horse.

"He'll do for me all right," his rider told the manager, as, some ten minutes later, he rode back.

Mr. Osgood laughed:

"Yes, so I see," he said; "but we shall put you up on something less arm-chairish before very long. But you can stick to him a bit for now."

The following morning Colin, under his friend Westman's guidance, gained his first experience of the work upon the range. The two were up before the dawn; swallowed a plentiful but hasty breakfast; took some *tortillas* and cold meat to form their midday meal; and, half an hour after waking, were in the saddle and away.

"We've got to keep our eyes skinned for a bunch of horses that have kind o' faded out of sight the last few days," said Westman as, clear of the *hacienda* buildings and enclosures, the two put their horses to the loping pace which takes the place in Mexico of our English trot; "that very likely means a ride of forty miles or more. Guess that won't hurt you, kid?"

Already that was Colin's name with Westman, and the boy was very willing to comply with his new friend's demand that he should call him Jim. Westman had clearly taken a strong fancy to the "new chum", and Colin certainly liked him. He was frank, breezy, yet seemed shrewd and sensible. Mr. Osgood had told Colin that young Westman's father, a New Yorker, was a very wealthy man, and that the son had adopted the life of a ranch-hand entirely as a matter of taste. No man upon the range, however, Mr. Osgood added, could work harder or more conscientiously than Jim.

"How many horses are there in a 'bunch'?" asked Colin, as they cantered side by side.

"Usually twenty-five mares to each stallion, more or less, with a few youngsters now and then. See, over there's a bunch full up." He pointed down a little gully past the head of which they were then riding. Just in sight, perhaps half a mile away, Colin could see a group of horses grazing quietly.

"They seem to me a very level lot for colour," he remarked; "why, surely every one of them's dark bay."

"That's so; it's that way that we aim to keep 'em. Every colour's kept apart as far as possible."

"But how on earth can that be managed when they are all running free?"

"Easy enough, my son; here's how. A month ago we bought a new roan stallion—came across from Texas—to put on the range. We turned him out with five-and-twenty mares of his own colour. Now sure, if they were left

alone, some of those mares would stray away, and, what is more, the horse would rope in others from some other bunch. But we're not having that. For the first week or two—three weeks sometimes—that a new horse is put upon the range, he and his bunch are watched; a fellow rides round with them all day long and keeps 'em to themselves. A fortnight's usually enough; by then they've learnt to stick together. You won't find another mare allowed to join them, or one stray away."

"But how about at night?"

"The day man's usually relieved at night; sometimes by one man, but more often, if the bunch seems restless and at all inclined to scatter, we put two. The night work is a pretty lively job sometimes; a wolf or coyote'll perhaps startle them, and then the whole blamed bunch stampede and scatter who knows where. You have to scoot away alongside of 'em quicker than greased lightning, through the dark and all; may be your horse'll put his foot into a hole and break his neck—or yours. We're putting two new horses on the range within a month or so; then it'll likely be night work for you and me."

"A good thing too," said Colin; "I shall like that job."

For the most part the hills through which they rode that day were bare of any larger growth than scrubby grass and scattered clumps of prickly pear. The latter, Westman said, was often fed to cattle when all other keep ran short in the dry season, the leaves being first scorched to burn off the prickles. As they rode farther westward, deep into the heart of the great range, they passed small stretches of oak woodlands, sometimes surprising horses or a bunch of cattle sheltering in the shade. Gullies ran down at intervals from the wide uplands upon which they rode, and it was necessary to explore these gullies on the chance of the lost bunch of horses being secluded somewhere in their depths. The going in these was very rough, and Colin soon had reason to admire the extremely clever way in which the bay picked out his footing among prickly cactus bushes and upon smooth stones. Don's looks were not perhaps equal to the memories of Darkie's stately shape and slender build, but Colin had to own internally that he felt more at ease with him on treacherous footing than he would have done upon the back of the big steeplechaser, used to the good clean jumps of Herefordshire hedges and the level turf of the old county's fields.

At noon the missing bunch was still unfound; but Westman called a halt for luncheon, which they ate beside a stream-bed where a trickle of clear

water ran. They loosed the girths, secured the horses, and then threw themselves upon the ground to eat and rest.

"Guess I know where they are, as they're not here," said Westman; "after grub we'll make another cast.

"We've got through this dry season pretty fair," he went on presently, as they discussed their simple meal; "indeed on this range we are never very badly off—good few of streams that don't run dry. On some it's pretty bad. You see, the cattle go down daily to a river or small stream to drink, and then eat all the grass that's on the banks. As that's ate up they work still farther back, and have to go a longer distance for their drink each day. The weak ones soon drop out, lie down and die like flies. Then it's the turn of wolves and coyotes to come in and clean the bones. But you will find that we're well off upon the Hacienda of the Star."

Not until after two more hours of riding did they come at last on the lost horses, hidden deep in a ravine, apparently all well; and it was after dark when, men and horses alike weary, they reached home. Then supper and to bed. The next day, the day after, and the days and weeks that followed, brought the same routine; up with the dawn, a hasty breakfast, then the saddle and the long day's ride. Only on Sunday came a rest; and even then emergencies—news of a missing bunch, a sickly or an injured horse—would often mean a full day's work for one or other of the *hacienda* hands.

Yet Colin, though it was sometimes with difficulty that he found the time and energy to write a weekly letter home, soon grew to like the life. The fresh keen air, when once he had become acclimatized to living at an elevation of some seven thousand feet, invigorated him; the constant exercise on horseback very quickly stripped him of superfluous flesh, and in three months from his first coming to the *hacienda* he was "hard as nails".

He liked, too, the society of Westman and the other "hands" from the United States. The latter, when they had become convinced that the new chum from England would put on no "frills", that he could ride with almost any of them, was quite ready to accept his share of work and to take the rough with the smooth, were very ready to admit him to their friendship and fraternity. Upon the whole they were a clean and healthy-minded lot of men, ranging in age from two-and-twenty to thirty. But with no one of them did Colin grow to be on terms so intimate as with Jim Westman, his first friend in this new life.

They one and all, including even Westman, who was perhaps more open-minded than the rest, looked on the Mexicans or greasers with a scarcely

veiled contempt. This feeling Colin did not wholly share. He certainly saw much to be condemned in the general character of the native *vaqueros* and peons who worked on the range and in the cultivated fields. They seemed to him devoid of all ambition; to live only to eat, drink, and smoke; while most of them had a frequently disastrous passion for the native brandy, known as *mescal*.

For the first weeks that followed his arrival on the range, Colin worked mostly in company with his friend Jim. But Westman's work lay chiefly with the horses, while Mr. Osgood wished the English boy to acquire an early knowledge of the cattle side of the business. With this end in view he presently placed him under the guidance and direction of Canuto, the chief *vaquero*, with whom Colin spent long days.

Canuto was a very silent man of about thirty-five, and Colin had not been a week in his society before he began to feel an ever-increasing admiration for the Mexican's extraordinary instinct for animals, especially for the great herds of cattle in the care of which he was employed. Quiet, impassive, indolent even, when not actively engaged upon his work, no sooner was he in the saddle and upon the range than his whole soul seemed centred on the task in hand. He soon appeared to Colin to be gifted with a sort of "second sight", to have some subtle instinct which revealed to him the place at which a given bunch was to be found, however many miles away; or what an individual beast would do in any particular set of circumstances. Did he, as would a dog, scent out the missing herd? Colin would sometimes ask himself this question, when, on a search for missing cattle, the *vaquero* led the way for miles by devious tracks, or oftener by no tracks at all; riding in silence along hill-sides, through deep winding gullies, until, soon or late, guided by not a sign that Colin could discern, he came upon the missing beasts.

In the first weeks Canuto spoke but rarely while they rode together through the long and cloudless days; but it grew clear in time that he liked Colin. Westman and other of the young Americans were kind to the greasers in a careless, half-contemptuous way; made trifling presents to them—coins and other gifts for some small service done. Canuto, as did all his fellows, took such gifts; but it was with a different air, a different look in his dark eyes, that he accepted Colin's little courtesies upon the range—a cigarette, a drink from the boy's water-bottle, or a portion of his meal. His manners would have graced an English drawing-room; though, in a land where not a workingman will pass before his fellow without saying a courteous *con permiso* (with permission) this was not a matter for particular remark.

And Colin presently succeeded in overcoming the reserve of the *vaquero*, gaining his confidence to some extent. Little by little the man grew to talk to Colin of himself, of the small details of his life; and one day, to the boy's astonishment, he mentioned the word "slaves".

"But you are not a slave," said Colin; "peons and *vaqueros* on the *hacienda* are not *slaves*."

"*Señor*, what are we then?" the man replied. "It is perhaps true we are not now as once we were; and yet, what are we, señor? Tell me that."

"Why, free men, earning wages; free to leave the work if you prefer to do so. Is not that the case?"

"Not wholly, *señor*; no. True, we are now paid wages every fortnight in good coin; we have our *jacals*, land on which to grow our corn; also a doctor is provided for us, and a priest who marries us; baptizes our children, lays us in the ground when we are dead. But are we free? We have to buy what we require at the *hacienda* store, and we are all of us in debt—or nearly all. With hardly one of us the debt grows smaller, and with most of us it is growing larger every year. We cannot leave the *hacienda* till that debt is paid. And yet this land, which now belongs to the rich men who own the *hacienda*, was, long years ago, our own."

A look of bitter anger darkened the man's eyes. He rose abruptly from his seat upon the ground by Colin and went towards his horse. When he next spoke it was of matters in connection with their work.

That evening Colin mentioned to Jim Westman the *vaquero's* words. Jim rubbed his chin before replying.

"Well, kid, the fellow is not altogether off the rails in what he said. No hand can rightly quit the range, even if he should want to, till he's paid the store his debt; and there's a debt scored up to pretty nearly every hand. The syndicate's improving the condition of the peons, all the same. In the old days these fellows hardly ever touched a single coin; they drew the things they wanted from the store; it was scored up against their pay—and the debt score was always the biggest. If a *hacienda* changed owners the purchaser took over the hands and their debts; so, if you look at it in that way, they *were* a sort of slaves. Now they are paid in coin; they still buy at the store—where else are they to buy? It's thirty miles to Nazarenos, as you know. But getting deeper into debt is not encouraged as it used to be.

"As to their having owned the land themselves, well, that's true too, maybe. Mexico, years ago, was swarming with small peasant-owners—half-

breeds, Indians, and what all. What happened, kid? Why, just the usual thing, of course. Smart men were out for land and money. They put lawyers busy, asking to see titles, papers, and what not. In a few years ninety-nine hundredths of the little holdings disappeared, swept up into a heap to form these million, ten-and twenty-million acre ranges that you have to-day. It can't be helped; and anyway the greasers are as well off as they mostly have the right to be. Let them alone to work the land themselves and they would only lie about and drink."

Colin did not pursue the subject; but the talks with the *vaquero* and Jim Westman helped him to see matters in some measure through Canuto's eyes.

CHAPTER V

A "Round-up"

Colin had been some months upon the range before the opportunity occurred for him to take a part in "round-up" work. The round-ups usually take place before the setting in of the hot season, so that sores caused by the application of the branding-irons may be given a good chance to heal, free from the irritation brought about by heat and flies.

Colin had grown by this time pretty well acquainted with the general work and with the class of stock kept on the range. The horses were almost entirely of the riding class, improved by being crossed with imported stallions of considerable value. The same was the case with the cattle; the original stock of small, wild-looking, long-horned Mexican beasts was giving place to larger animals that carried much more flesh; the improvement in this case being effected by the introduction of both Durham and Hereford bulls. Colin could never look upon a "white-face" of his native county, when he came upon one on the range, without his thoughts flying back to Meadowgrange so far away.

Large herds of goats were also kept; but these were cared for wholly by their native *pastors*, and the Americans and Colin took small interest in the stock.

It was upon a cloudless morning, with a pleasant breeze, that Colin, with Canuto, Pablo, and some twenty more of the *vaqueros*, left the *hacienda* courtyard at the break of day, bound on a long and arduous ride. Their work was to effect a round-up; that is, they were to collect and gather in as many cattle as could well be got together in the day. The herd thus gathered would be driven to a corral, where the calves and other young unbranded animals would receive the *hacienda's* mark upon the following day.

The route they took was one on which the head *vaquero's* knowledge of the recent movements of the cattle told him that most bunches would be likely to be found. They might perhaps gather in as many as a thousand beasts; or, if the herds had scattered unexpectedly, the number might be a few hundreds less.

The head *vaquero* rode in front, with Colin at his side. The muffled thud of many hoofs upon the ground, the clink of bits and spurs and stirrups, with the voices of the riders, made a pleasant music by the way. The troop of

horsemen rode at a leisurely pace, in order to husband as much as possible the strength of their mounts, which, later on, would frequently be called on for their utmost speed to head or turn a wayward bunch. Colin, as usual, offered a cigarette to his companion, which Canuto quietly accepted with a bow of thanks.

After about two hours' easy ride, in the course of which, when passing cattle, they took careful note of the position and direction of a moving bunch in order that it might be gathered in upon their homeward way, they reached the point from which the head *vaquero* meant to operate. Here girths were loosened and a light meal was consumed; it was very uncertain whether they would find the time or opportunity to rest and eat again. That over, once again they mounted, and the business of the day began.

The horsemen now split up into five parties, four or five in each. Colin and Canuto, with three others, rode off to the northern limit of that portion of the range intended to be searched that day. A similarly strong group was dispatched in the opposite direction; while the three remaining parties took the ground between these points. The breadth of the whole space intended to be covered in this manner was about three miles.

Canuto's party, having reached the point at which he meant beginning work, turned their horses' heads in the direction of the *hacienda*. Then, separating to a distance of about three hundred yards apart, thus covering a line about a mile or so in length, they began to ride towards home at a leisurely pace, each member of the party keeping a look-out on every side. No yard of hidden ground was left unsearched, no group of trees or bunch of scrub neglected, no gully, however small, went unexamined.

The first cattle found consisted of a bunch of about thirty cross-bred cows, some having calves beside them, and the group owing allegiance to a fine three-year-old Hereford bull. It was Colin who first saw them, coming suddenly upon them in a shallow gully among very rocky ground. The cattle, taken by surprise, gave no little trouble. Before Colin could whistle to his nearest companions for their assistance, the bunch, alarmed by his sudden appearance, galloped past him, heading at full speed in the wrong direction. It cost himself and two *vaqueros* fully twenty minutes of hard riding before the beasts were got in hand and started on the way they were required to take.

The bull was an extremely fine upstanding beast; but, save for his markings, it was very difficult to realize that not long since he had been one of those sleek, stall-fed animals which Colin knew so well. Slim, wiry,

active, and wild-eyed, with savage and suspicious air; his red coat torn and ragged from much contact with the prickly pear and other cacti of his present grazing-ground, he had a very different look from stout Sir Benjamin and others of his breed. He had a different temper, too, as Colin and his helpers quickly found. Repeatedly he charged in a determined way at one or other of the riders, but the horses slipped aside from his blind rushes with an easy and experienced skill.

In rounding up a thousand cattle, as in many other things, the first step chiefly counts. When once this first bunch, flurried and exhausted with the chase it had provoked, had settled down a little and was going steadily before the men, the task grew easier. Other cattle, being disturbed, and seeing the little herd in movement, joined it readily. Within an hour of the first lot being secured the number of beasts jogging towards the corral was at least one hundred, not including calves.

Carefully Canuto set the pace to suit the driven beasts. Larger and larger grew the moving mass; thicker and thicker rose the cloud of dust stirred up from the dry grass and scrub through which they passed; hoarser the voices of the cattle, raised in a wild uneasy cry.

After a time Canuto called a halt—for the cattle, at least; but hardly for a moment did the men cease riding gently round the herd, which was now close upon two hundred strong, this circling movement being needed to frustrate the frequent efforts of the cattle to break out and gain once more the freedom of the range. But presently the sight for which the head *vaquero* had been waiting appeared in the distance; clouds of dust announced the coming of the other parties with the cattle they had gathered in.

When the converging groups of cattle had joined forces a fresh move was made. Canuto and two others rode in front to regulate the pace; Colin was sent to take his place with several other riders who, on either side of the great herd, guarded against attempts to break away; while a strong line of horsemen closed the rear. As the miles slowly passed, the efforts of the cattle to break off to freedom grew less frequent and soon wholly ceased; but, to balance this relief from active labour, the now weary animals moved more and more slowly, until Colin thought the corral never could be reached by dusk. At length, however, it came into sight a mile and a half away.

Here Canuto made yet another change. So far the cattle had been left to travel as they pleased, and they had formed a broad loose front—twenty or thirty, sometimes even fifty of the leaders going abreast. This now required to be changed. Repairs had already been effected in the fencing of the corral

which it was intended that the animals should occupy that night, and at the gate there had been built a temporary V-shaped guiding-fence, the narrow point of the great V being at the entrance, while the arms spread out on either side. Canuto now began to form the herd upon a narrow front which could be driven down the V.

Colin could hardly say precisely how this manœuvre was effected. He, for his part, received instructions from Canuto to ride closer in on his side of the herd, and he could see that others did the same; and yet the pressure did not cause excitement or uneasiness among the beasts. It was, however, wholly successful; within ten minutes of the change being made, the whole herd gradually strung out into a long and straggling line, the front consisting of no more than two or three abreast. In this loose narrow order they approached the V, beside which several men had taken up their stand. Led by a bull, and far too weary to detect a trap, the long line straggled in; the double gates were closed on the last loiterer, and this first day's round-up was complete.

"*Señor*, a good day's work," remarked Canuto, satisfaction kindling in his eyes.

Colin, however, soon discovered that all work connected with his first day's operations was by no means at an end. The cattle, he was told by young Van Dooren, who had ridden with the others, must be watched all night to guard against the possibility of a stampede.

"Stampede!" said Colin in amazement; "surely they can't stampede inside that fence;" he pointed to the stout posts, massive as railway sleepers, that formed the great enclosure.

"Think not?" replied Van Dooren drily; "you stay on this ranch a year or two and perhaps you'll see. I've seen five hundred cattle charge a fence as strong as that, and inside of two seconds half its length was down and the last cow a quarter of a mile away, tail up and going strong. And we've got close upon nine hundred here to-night."

The watchers chosen as the night-guard of the corral were, with the exception of Canuto, men who had not been upon the range that day; but Colin, tired though he was, preferred to join the party, and sat with them round the fire they had lighted, listening to their talk and to the ceaseless bellowing, lowing, wailing that the herd kept up for some few hours. At length, however, the beasts settled down to rest and sleep, and little but their gusty breathing broke the silence of the night. Four or five horses, ready saddled, stood close by beneath the shelter of an open shed. Among them

was the roan mare, Carmen, Colin's second horse, which he had had the satisfaction and success of breaking in himself.

Colin had dropped into a fitful doze when he was roused by the melancholy cry of a coyote. So faint it came upon the night wind that he told himself the prowling creature must be quite a mile away. Again the cry, much nearer this time. Silence for some minutes; then once more the mournful call, but this time close at hand.

Then chaos, as it seemed to Colin, broke upon the scene. There was the sound—felt rather than heard—as if ten thousand people had sprung suddenly upon their feet. A rush, a crash! and then the drumming thud of countless hoofs. Colin sprang up, looked, hardly credited his eyes. There in the faint light of the waning moon he saw the corral empty, half one side of its high fence upon the ground; while, some five hundred yards away, and fading fast into the darkness of the distance, the whole herd which they had got together with such pains and labour was flying rangewards at full speed.

With Spanish imprecations each *vaquero* was upon his feet and springing towards his horse. Colin was not the last to reach his saddle, and the next moment the whole band were off in hot pursuit.

"Follow me, *señor*," called Canuto, as he drove the spurs into his horse, while shouting cautions and instructions to the other men.

Never, as long as Colin Charteris lives, will he forget that ride. Swift as the men had been to leap to action, the great herd had had the start of them and made the most of it. The cattle were a mile away by now and out of sight. The five men rode at racing speed. Colin's mare put her near forefoot into a hole, pecked forward almost on her nose, recovered gallantly, while Colin by a blend of skill and luck retained his seat and galloped up behind the clever sorrel which Canuto rode. He could see one *vaquero* "take a toss" almost before his horse was well into its stride. The creature turned a somersault and threw its rider half a score of yards in front; yet man and horse were up and in pursuit again as Colin passed.

Before them there rose presently the thunder of the flying herd, and Colin knew that they were gaining on the fugitives.

"Follow me, *señor*," came again Canuto's voice upon the wind that whistled past his ears; and Colin slightly checked the headlong pace of Carmen, drawing her in behind the head *vaquero's* horse. The other men, less strongly mounted, were by now strung out behind.

Colin and Canuto were but little more than fifty yards behind the flying beasts, and the *vaquero*, steering for the right flank of the close-packed herd, urged on his horse at its full speed. The first mad burst of the herd's headlong flight had spent itself a little, but the cattle, freshened by the hours of rest within the corral, were still going hard. It was but a few stragglers, weakly steers, or cows with their small calves, that here and there began to fail. One cow, her month-old calf beside her, suddenly turned on Colin as he passed; she charged him furiously, and a collision and a serious fall were just avoided by a desperate swerve.

The two men were now well abreast of the main body of the herd, but still Canuto used his spurs and flew ahead. Colin could see that he was steadily drawing closer in as he approached the leading animals, and the boy took care to follow where the sorrel led. And presently he heard Canuto give a clear shrill whistle, at the sound of which the leaders of the mob swerved slightly to the left. It was but a small movement, but it was a change; and the *vaquero* pressed still closer on the flank.

Before long it was clear to Colin that Canuto's tactics were succeeding; he was changing the direction of the flight. The more the cattle slanted to the left, the more he pressed in closely on their flank. Colin, fixing his eyes for a few seconds on a distant rise of ground behind which the moon was just about to dip, saw that his leader had the cattle running in an obvious curve.

The pace was also growing easier; the herd, losing the stimulus of sudden and unreasoning terror which had roused it, and had caused the charging of the corral fence and the mad flight, was growing more and more exhausted every instant.

Behind them there now came the sound of still more riders in pursuit; for other hands had been roused up to help in the recapture of the beasts. Presently Westman rode abreast of Colin's horse and galloped at his side.

"Say, kid, what price your fence?" for Jim had overheard the conversation with Van Dooren a few hours before. "I didn't think you'd see a stampede quite so soon. I've seen 'em more than once, but don't remember nothing to beat this. That fence was real tough; but not a fence you'll make will hold nine hundred beasts when they go mad like that. Say, you can take it a bit easier, kid; Canuto's got them milling now."

"Milling? What's that?"

"When cattle get away upon the jump like that, it's no use trying to head them; they'd just run you down. You've got to get against their flank and

press 'em gently all the time. Of course they shy away, and if you keep on pressing you will have 'em running in a circle before long; then you can turn 'em good and right. That's what we call setting them 'milling'."

The moon had set by now, but dawn was breaking, and soon Colin saw with his own eyes the truth of what the young American had said. The cattle, pressed persistently on their right flank, kept turning to the left, until they had at last described a semicircle and were now running almost directly for the corral. Canuto knew the chances far too well to let them go in that direction yet; he still kept up the milling movement, while the herd, now more and more exhausted, steadily reduced its pace. The men, much reinforced by new arrivals, rode on the right flank.

The pace was soon no more than a slow trot. When next the herd was headed towards the corral the *vaquero* waved his hand; and at the signal the men all fell in upon the flanks and rear. About an hour after sunrise the exhausted cattle had been safely penned in two small corrals hastily prepared for their reception.

The great enclosure which the herd had entered on the previous evening was a melancholy sight. Some fifty yards of the strong fence lay flat upon the ground. Entangled in the wreckage lay a cow and three fine steers—all four with broken necks, and trampled almost out of recognition by the hoofs that had swept over them in that mad rush. At intervals along the line of the stampede were other animals thrown down and injured, although some of them still lived. A few small calves wailed pitifully for the mothers who would never tend them more.

"That's a bad break," said Westman, as he looked with Colin on these remnants of the night's disaster; "but it's no one's fault. You can't hold cattle once they're mad with fear. A passing wolf, a coyote yelping like that cussed beast last night will do it; they are up and off before you've time to wink. It doesn't matter what's before 'em; put a stone wall there they'd have it down."

After this exciting and wholly unexpected experience, the actual operation of branding, which was the main business of that day and to which Colin had been looking forward with some curiosity and interest, fell a little flat. Only the calves, with a few older animals which had succeeded in eluding previous round-ups, needed marking, but the business of sorting them from the main body of the herd was a tedious one.

Two closely adjoining corrals were required for the work, one being the yard in which a portion of the herd had been secured. From this a narrow

passage, strongly fenced, and fitted with a gate at either end, led into the smaller enclosure. As the animals were driven one by one into this passage, young Van Dooren, perched precariously upon a plank which spanned it, called out to another man, outside the fence, the sex, approximate age, and any noticeable marks or characteristics of each beast. The animal was then passed on into the branding-yard.

Here it was lassoed, thrown, and its feet bound. Swiftly the red-hot branding-iron was applied upon its flank. This iron, about six inches long, bore on its face the star within a crescent which was the *hacienda's* special mark. Then came the pungent smell of singeing hair and burning skin; although, when skilfully applied, the iron merely touches the skin without inflicting any actual burn. Each creature shuddered with the sudden pain; but, once released and sent upon its way, not one seemed any the worse for the operation, or for the cutting of a marking-slit in the right ear.

CHAPTER VI

Old Nick's Gully

"Kid, what d'you say about a few days' trip with me?" Westman asked Colin on a morning two or three weeks later, as they rode together on the range.

"A trip with you! That sounds all right. Where to?"

"Down to a *hacienda* about three days' ride away. It's like this," went on Westman, after he had lit a cigarette; " 'way at this place—it's just inside Sonora State, some seventy miles south-west from here—they've got a pretty useful lot of stallions, and the boss thinks one of 'em might do for us. He wants me to ride over, take a look, and, if I see a likely specimen, to bring it back. He said last night it wouldn't do you any harm to come along. There's no great press of work just now, and you would see new country and learn how a horse-deal goes. We'll have to take a guide, for I'm not rightly sure about the trail. We'll call it fixed if you're agreeable; what d'you say?"

"I'm game, of course," said Colin, much delighted; "that is if you're quite sure you wouldn't rather take some other fellow, Jim."

"Nonsense," said Westman; " 'course I want for you to come."

He then proceeded to unfold the details of the trip. The *hacienda* whither they were bound, some three days' ride away, lay on the western slope of the Sierra Madre range. Their route would take them over more than one deep gully or *barranca*, one of which, the great Barranca del Diablo, known more familiarly to the Americans upon the Hacienda of the Star as "Old Nick's Gully", was quite famous throughout Northern Mexico. It was nearly three thousand feet deep; a river flowed throughout its length, and near its head was a fine waterfall. As it was highly dangerous, if not quite impossible, for horses to negotiate the almost precipitous cliffs that formed its sides, the pair would make the journey upon mules; and, in the event of Westman's purchasing and bringing back a horse, they would require to return by a more circuitous route, which, lying higher up the mountains, passed above the heads of this and other fissures in the great Sierra Madre range.

It was with a keen feeling of both physical and mental enjoyment that, on a morning two or three days later, Colin hurried through an early breakfast and then joined Jim Westman in the court. He found his friend

receiving from Mr. Osgood a few final hints as to the purchase of a horse, while Pablo, who, being well acquainted with the country which they were about to visit, had been chosen as their guide, was putting the last touches to the harness and equipment of the mules. Of these Westman and Colin each rode one; a third was allotted to the *vaquero*, who also had charge of the pack-mule, the latter laden with the blankets, food, and a small sleeping-tent. Few Indian villages lying on the route, the travellers had to make provision for their nightly camp, and also carry a sufficient store of food.

"Well, good luck, boys, and safe return," said Mr. Osgood; and the little cavalcade set out upon its way, Pablo, who led the old white pack-mule, Chipa, riding first to set the pace.

After getting clear of the native village, and of the fields and corrals which immediately surrounded it, the party rode due west for some few miles and then turned south. By midday they had left the land belonging to the Hacienda of the Star behind them, and Colin found himself on unknown ground. The land rose gradually but steadily; the open grazing-ground gave place at times to scattered strips of woodland—chiefly oak at first, though this, as they ascended, was soon mixed with pines.

The pure free air, the brightness of the morning, and the pleasant breeze, together with the sense of exploration into unknown country and the prospect of a new and interesting scene, raised Colin's spirits to the highest pitch. On Don or Carmen he would have enjoyed a gallop; but the strength of the mules had to be husbanded for the long journey, and the party travelled at a walking pace.

Pablo still led the way, riding about fifty yards in front. In answer to some favourable comment made by Colin regarding the *vaquero*, Jim Westman grinned.

"Yes, quite a decent fellow for an Injun," he replied in his cool, drawling tone; "looks just as mild as milk. You wouldn't likely guess that Pablo helped to kill his dear old father some half-dozen years ago?"

"You don't mean that!" said Colin in a tone of horrified surprise.

"Sure thing, he did."

"Why, what had the old man been doing; ill-treating Pablo's mother perhaps, or something of that kind?"

"Shucks, not a bit of it; though Mrs. Pablo senior, with her other children and a heap of their relations, took a hand. Moreover, the old man himself agreed to it, and took it like a lamb.

"It's this way, kid," continued Westman, when he had sufficiently amused himself with Colin's stare of incredulity; "most of these Indians that you set such store on have their funny little ways. Round us the few there are about are mostly of the Pima tribe. Friend Pablo isn't of that bunch, his father having come from farther away south. Well, his particular brand of Indians have a curious trick. When any man—or woman either, for that matter—gets real sick and doesn't seem to shape like getting better, then his friends do *sobar* on him, and that ends his illness right away."

"Do *sobar*! What on earth is that?"

"Well, the proceedings begin with a grand pow-wow to consider the sick man's case. Then, if the relatives decide that the medicine-man, wizard—*shaman* is the name the Indians give those chaps—or whoever has been trying to doctor him, is doing no sort of good and don't seem likely to do any; and especially if the illness has gone on for a few weeks or months, why then they say: 'The time has come for him to die; our pity does no good, and it is cruel that he should suffer any more.' Mind you, the man himself agrees to the whole thing. The next thing is the preparation of the funeral feast. Then the whole family, generally with godfathers and godmothers and other friends, get round the patient, and the job's set going. Some of them hold his head and hands and feet, while all the rest begin to pound and knead upon his chest and sides. This is supposed to make the breath in his body rise to the heart and 'eat' it; for all I know it does; we don't know much of what goes on inside us, anyway. While they are doing this, they talk to the poor beggar in the kindest way: 'Jesu! what pity. Oh, how sad it is that you must die!' Still, they go right on with the treatment, and so pretty soon the man *does* die. And that's how Pablo's father came to be deceased; he'll tell you all about the ceremony if you like."

"I certainly shan't ask him," said Colin; "what a horrible business! Doesn't the Government take any steps to stop such things?"

"I guess the Government of Mexico has got enough to do with sitting tight upon the Revolution scare these last few years, to bother very much about an Indian more or less," replied his friend. "I don't say that this kind of thing is done in towns; but out away in Indian villages or camps, who is to interfere? Of course if Indians took to doing *sobar* upon you or me, why, no doubt, old Porfirio would get busy about having a selection of 'em shot. But when it's Indians, why, who cares? And, after, all, it's their own country, or it was so once, as you and friend Canuto are so fond of pointing out; why should we interfere?" And from this somewhat callous attitude of mind

regarding Indians and their habits Colin found it quite impossible to move his friend.

They halted shortly after noon to rest and feed the mules. Towards evening they had reached a high-lying country where they rode for several miles through woods of fragrant pines, with scattered oaks at intervals. Occasionally there came to their ears the cry of the great black-and-white woodpecker, a large bird fully two feet long from beak to tail, with a bright crimson crest upon its head. Tree-creepers, blackbirds, crossbills, Colin also saw; while now and then they rode across a patch of ground where the evening primrose and the columbine were in full bloom. But flowers, on the whole, were rare.

Their camp that night was pitched upon the border of a stretch of woodland, close beside a little stream. The day had been quite hot, although the sun was tempered by a breeze; but when the dusk had fallen it grew chilly, and a fire of pine-cones and dead wood gave very welcome warmth. Even within the shelter of the tent, the glowing fire just outside, Colin was glad to wrap himself up snugly in his blanket before going to sleep.

The old white pack-mule, Chipa, was known upon the *hacienda* as a *yegua*—one recognized by other mules as the leader and chief of any company in which she might be travelling. On this occasion she had been provided with a bell, which was hung round her neck immediately upon the party reaching camp. Thus furnished she was neither hobbled nor secured in any other way at night, it being a certainty that Chipa would not roam away from camp, nor her companions leave her company.

During the morning of the next day's journey they passed over country very similar to that which they had ridden through the previous afternoon. So far they had met not a single traveller on their way; but about noon they saw advancing towards them in the distance half a dozen figures, each one having on his back a bulky load. As they drew nearer Colin could make out these loads as crates, much larger than the one which he had seen used by the Nazarenos *cargador*.

"They're *huacaleros*," said Jim Westman when the men were about fifty yards away; "kind of pedlar tramping through the country selling goods. These fellows have got native pottery, I think; yes, that's their line. Others sell baskets and all kinds of notions."

The *huacaleros* stopped for a few moments to exchange some words with Pablo, and then once more started forward at a steady trot, their huge crates swaying, creaking, jingling with the load of earthen pots and jars

which they contained. Westman looked after the retreating forms reflectively.

"Go sixty miles a day that way, I'm told; they are sure tough."

Early that afternoon the party reached the great Barranca del Diablo, a huge rift cut deep as with a knife in the Sierra Madre range. A mile or more before they reached it the whole aspect of the country over which they rode had changed. Woods, even grass, had almost wholly disappeared, and the track Pablo followed wound among high pinnacles of rock and past deep fissures in the ground. They took a course which the *vaquero* seemed to recognize with little trouble, for he showed hardly any hesitation as he led the way. And presently, quite suddenly, they found themselves upon the very edge of the great cleft which must be crossed.

It yawned before them like a gash cut by some giant hand across the great hill-side; and as he gazed into the depths that lay before his feet, Colin admitted that the place was not unfitly named, so sinister and sombre in appearance was the gulf. Its breadth from side to side was perhaps two hundred yards; but of the depth he could form no idea, for the great walls of rock on either side dropped almost sheer from where they stood, and showed no bottom. That on the farther side of the ravine was clad in places with a scanty drapery of shrubs and clinging grass, with here and there a tree. Colin surveyed its rocky face as far as he could follow it on either hand, but saw no sign of any possibility of climbing from its foot; nor was the cliff upon whose summit they were standing any more inviting to descend.

"Where is our path?" he asked his friend.

Jim Westman grinned.

"Search me!" he answered; "we'll leave that to Pablo—it's his show."

Pablo had been surveying alternately the ground before them and the cliff upon the farther side of the ravine. Apparently he had now recognized some landmark, for he moved a little to the right, then stopped the mules and pointed with his hand.

"He's got it; come along," said Jim.

Then began a descent during which Colin's heart was often in his mouth. Pablo led the way, leading his own mule, the *yegua* following alone; then came Colin, Westman bringing up the rear. Pricking their long ears forward, moving slowly and with cautious and considered steps, the mules passed over the cliff-edge, and, among jutting pinnacles and over bare smooth slabs of rock, began to pick their way.

“Don’t force her; let her take her time and her own way,” Westman advised his friend, and Colin was careful to leave his mule pretty much to her own devices, and indeed not seldom took some useful hints from her.

Twisting, zigzagging, sometimes almost doubling back for several yards upon the way already passed, the slow descent went on. At times a pebble was dislodged by one or other of the mules or men; and when this happened Colin heard it bounding downwards, striking sharply on rock after rock, till the sound faded into utter silence in the dark still depths below.

Had he been asked to make that long descent alone, much more to lead a mule by the same track—if track it could be called where not a sign of path was visible—Colin would certainly have said that such a feat would be impossible. But though he more than once felt almost certain they had reached a point from which all further progress was completely barred, each time he found that such was not the case; for always Pablo, though he might stand motionless for several minutes, searching with keen eyes the precipice below them, finally puzzled out a practicable way.

The task was no small strain on the boy’s nerves, for rarely did they find a spot at which their care and vigilance could for a moment be relaxed, or men and mules take breath for the next stage of the descent. Sometimes, indeed, the path was slightly better than at others; but again it grew so threatening that the mules, sure-footed, docile as they were, hung back and seemed reluctant to go on. More dangerous even than the rocks which formed the greater portion of the way were the occasional short slopes of grass they had to cross; for it was dry and sapless and at such an angle as to offer no security of footing.

Down, down they went; and, as they still descended, Colin found himself perspiring freely—not, as he at first imagined, from the fear of a disaster, but as an effect of the increasing heat. For they were dropping from a temperate, almost a chilly country, to the tropic depths that lay below. Foliage and plants which Colin had not yet observed since entering Mexico here grew luxuriantly upon the rocky wall to which the party clung like flies, and formed a curtain of rich green. The air grew stuffy, motionless, and enervating.

Once Westman’s mule, following a dozen yards in rear of Colin’s, bungled a step in turning a sharp corner where their way led past a point of rock; the creature slipped, recovered, slipped again, then fell and finally began to roll. Colin held his breath; the mule would crash against his own and hurl both it and him to certain death in the bottom of the *barranca*. But

no; the young American, the moment that the animal had lost its footing, flung his lithe form backwards, braced his feet against the slab of rock on which he stood, and held to the mule's bridle with a grip of steel.

Colin could see the bridle tighten until rigid as a fiddle-string. Would the tough leather hold, or would it part with the tremendous strain of the mule's weight? Or would the head-stall slip, leaving the creature free to sweep them down? But Pablo had foreseen the possibility of accidents like this, and before the long descent had been commenced had made quite sure that every strap was fully to be trusted, every buckle firm and sound. The bridle held; for a few moments the mule, caught, as by a miracle, against a sapling tree that clung precariously to the rock-face, lay motionless, then struggled to its feet, regained the track, and Colin breathed again. He thought he heard a sigh of thankfulness float down from Westman just above, but the American displayed his usual calm indifference and composure when his eyes met those of Colin.

"Thought we were down on top of you, I guess," was his remark upon the recent situation; "no, no fear," and he devoted his attention to the readjustment and securing of the much-disordered trappings of the mule.

This was the only close approach to a disaster during the descent, though there were many smaller crises which Colin was not sorry to see safely passed. It took them two long hours of unceasing caution and tense vigilance to reach the bottom of the cliff; but the whole party, men and mules alike uninjured, stood on level ground at last, and Colin looked around him on the novel scene.

The bottom of the *barranca*, little more than thirty yards across, was fresh and green with grass, which grew on either bank of a small river, crystal-clear. Upon each side the wall of rock rose up almost precipitous and far as eye could follow till it reached the narrow line of clear blue sky so far above. The place was wholly sunless, for the hour was late afternoon.

After a rest of half an hour to invigorate the mules, which were refreshed with water and a bite of the lush grass, Pablo led the way down the river for about two miles. More than once a large blue heron rose from its stand beside the water and flew heavily away; while the *vaquero* sometimes pointed out the tracks of otters and raccoons upon the banks.

They halted at a spot where Pablo showed the route by which they would ascend the farther side next day; though Colin, his eyes following the *vaquero's* pointing hand, was quite unable to see how they were to scale the cliff, which seemed to him unclimbable. The camp was pitched, dusk being

close at hand, on a smooth patch of grass a short distance from what appeared to be a deserted Indian camp or village. Small huts stood here and there; while, on examining some caves, of which there were several in both walls of the ravine, they found clear signs of comparatively recent habitation. In one cave they discovered skeletons. Also, in places where the level ground beside the river gave sufficient space, some signs of cultivated patches were observed. No human life, however, could be seen.

"The Indians often have both summer and winter villages," said Westman. "In summer they go up to the high ground to live and grow their crops; in winter they come down to shelter in the warm *barrancas*, living in both huts and caves."

"They are not Catholics, like those upon some *haciendas*, I suppose, but heathen, aren't they?" Colin asked.

"Well, there you rather have me; but I fancy a good many of them are a kind of blend of both religions," said his friend; "in fact I've heard that in some Indian villages you'll find the priest's church and the native god-house standing side by side. Except perhaps among some of the more civilized Indians in the towns, all the religion that they get from Catholics is just a sort of surface stuff; scratch it a bit, and you will find the native superstitions down below. Of course they have a god all right; their god is Tata Dios, or the sun. They say that his chief occupation in heaven is to run races with the angels."

"What a curious notion!"

"Well, not so queer in their case, after all. Most of these Indian tribes are mighty good upon their feet, and the Tarahumares, who live down about here, fairly beat the band. I'm very keen to see a first-grade Indian foot-race; they'll run fifty miles or more, eight miles or so an hour, and without a stop. But, talking of religion, even the most uncivilized of Indians think a lot of priests, and will hand over anything they want. There was a famous brigand once, who had got fairly down to bed-rock—luck was out. What did he do but put on a black mackintosh and go off to a lonely Indian settlement away among the hills some part. The Indians swallowed down his story that he was a priest, and every one of them agreed to be baptized. He charged a goat apiece for every baptism, and by the time that he'd worked through that settlement he had collected quite a decent flock, which he drove off. They found out later that they had been done, and some of them went after him and caught him; in the end I rather fancy that he got away.

"Yes, they respect a priest, yet they will put a joke off on him, times. There was a peon wanted to get married, and he went to see a priest about the job. The priest asked several questions, found the peon rather shaky on religion, and refused to marry him until he knew the catechism. The peon studied on the business some, and presently came back and said he could not understand it—specially he could not understand how God was everywhere. Was he in the house? Yes. In the cornfield? Yes. Well, was he in the yard outside the house of the peon's godmother? 'Yes,' said the priest, growing tired; 'don't I tell you he is everywhere.' 'Ah, little father,' says the peon, 'I have caught you now; there is no yard to my godmother's house.' "

A fire had meanwhile been lit by Pablo, and fresh-baked *tortillas* formed a leading item of the evening meal. As Colin fell asleep the soothing murmur of the river sounded in his ears.

The climb from the *barranca* on the following day, though more laborious and exhausting than the long descent had been, was made in safety. Late that afternoon they reached the Hacienda of the Running Water, at which lay the business of their ride; a large house, finely situated, facing to the west, beside a stream. Here they were most hospitably welcomed by the elderly proprietor, Señor Castaños, and all talk of business was postponed until the following day.

Besides the head of the family, who was a widower, the Castaños household consisted of his two daughters, dark-eyed *señoritas* of about eighteen and twenty years of age; of another slightly older lady, widow of the old man's only son; and of her son Benito, a small boy of about nine. This boy, as Westman had already told Colin, would ultimately inherit the greater portion of his grandfather's property, which was reputed to be very large, including, in addition to the *hacienda*, a large amount of money and a palatial house in Mexico City.

The reception of the unexpected guests was extremely hearty, and the change to the society of ladies not unwelcome to the two young men. The evening hours that followed an elaborate dinner passed in pleasant conversation and in listening to the music of piano and guitar. An English visitor was quite a novelty to the Castaños family, and the household did its best to make our hero feel himself at home. Benito in particular took a strong fancy to the English boy, and much of the next day was spent by Colin in being shown the child's innumerable pets—his riding-horse, dogs, parrots, other birds.

Neither Castaños' reputed wealth nor yet his lavish hospitality prevented him from being a keen and even grasping man of business at a "deal", though the negotiation for the horse was conducted in a dignified manner between Westman and the *hacienda* manager, while the old gentleman stood by with a detached and seemingly uninterested air. Still, the horse which Jim soon picked out as being the best of several very fine ones was undoubtedly a beauty and exactly what was wanted for the range. Finally, after much hard fighting on both sides, the bargain was concluded. Early the next morning, furnished with an ample stock of fresh provisions, the two friends set out for home. Benito rode with them a mile or two upon their way, a peon following in attendance. As the child waved farewell with small brown hand, Colin had little notion where and in what case the boy and he would meet again.

The homeward ride took nearly two days more than had been spent in coming, for the party had to keep the uplands all the way, passing above the head of the Barranca del Diablo. They would have liked to visit the fine waterfall, formed by the river a short distance from the head of the ravine; but though the sight was but a few miles off their track, it would have been difficult, if not impossible, to take their new purchase, and the project was consequently abandoned. A few days' riding found them once more at the Hacienda of the Star.

CHAPTER VII

Clouds in the Sky

"Well, the Old Man seems pretty safe for getting on his seat again," said Westman, throwing down a newspaper one Sunday afternoon, when Colin had been on the *hacienda* for about six months. The two friends, with a young American named Pendleton, were seated in the shady *patio* of the house.

"Who? oh, the President, you mean," said Colin, recalling himself with an effort to his present surroundings. He had been thinking of the summer Sunday afternoons at Meadowgrange; pictured his father dozing in a chair, his Panama tipped down upon his eyes; his mother wandering here and there among her well-loved roses; Dido lost to all about her in a book.

"Yes, old Porfirio. He'll be in again, you'll see."

"No one about here seems to take much interest in the politics of Mexico, so far as I can see," remarked the English boy.

"That's so," said Westman; "but unless I'm off the rails in my ideas, they'll sit up and begin to take some notice before long. Some of these next days things are going to get interesting for us all. There are a heap of folks who've had enough of Diaz, you can bet on that."

"Why? He's a good man, isn't he?"

"Well, he's a strong man, I will grant you that."

"He's put this country on its feet at any rate," struck in young Pendleton; "look at the railways—twelve to fifteen thousand miles of track, against three hundred when he first took hold. Look at taxation, how it's been cut down. Look at the bandits; where d'you find 'em now? Why, made into *rurales*, keeping order all the time."

"Well, I won't say but you might sure smell out a bandit here and there to-day, if you were keen on finding one," said Westman; "anyway there's folks who see another side to Diaz' rule, and don't exactly care for it. Look at his ways of dealing with the opposition; look at the newspapers; look at the Yaquis, footing it away for Yucatan."

"Who are the Yaquis?" Colin asked.

"The Yaquis," answered Westman, as he lit a cigarette; "well, they're some Indian tribes that live about the Yaqui River, 'way across the range down in Sonora—north from where we were a while ago to buy that horse from old Castaños, kid. I won't say they're the very nicest people to get up against, by all accounts. They have a pretty little fashion, so I've heard, of cutting off the soles of a man's feet, and leaving him among the scrub to die there quiet at his ease. By what I understand these Yaquis were the lot that made the strongest stand against the Spaniards when they first came in; so strong, indeed, that the *conquistadores* let them go their way and keep their lands. As long as you don't meddle with 'em, they won't interfere with you; but if you do get interferin', why, look out. Now, ten to fifteen years ago there was a row with them about some irrigation scheme. They said that water was being turned away from their territory and so their crops were dying. I don't know all the rights of how it was; perhaps they were wrong, perhaps not. Anyway, soldiers were put after them, and naturally came out top dog. And ever since that time, to keep the Yaquis out of mischief's way, whole herds of 'em—men, women, children—have been constantly marched off to Yucatan to work upon the *hennequin* plantations there; the stuff that hemp is made of, mostly used for binder-twine back in the States. They say a good few of the Yaquis die upon the road; still more die off in a few months on the plantations, for the climate down there doesn't seem to suit their health."

"You never see anything about this in the newspapers," objected Colin.

"You bet your life you don't; old Diaz sees to that," replied his friend. "There was a fellow wrote a book in which he showed it up, but I should rather guess there's not a copy of it to be found in Mexico. As for the newspapers, Diaz has got them in the pocket of his pants just all the time. Did you never hear what happened down in Mexico City, when some papers had been criticizing something he had done. Why, Diaz clapped the whole blamed bunch of pressmen into Belem prison; and they tell me Belem isn't just the place where anyone would take a pleasure trip. Underground cells quite handy to the city sewers; rats; skin disease when you've been there a day or two; with good plain bread and water for your meals. Well, Diaz left the pressmen there to meditate for a few days, and then he sent for them. 'Good morning, gentlemen,' says he; 'now tell me frankly, what is your opinion of my Government.' They'd had about enough of Belem by that time, and answered that the Government was just a first-grade, copper-bottomed, all-wool brand. 'Then, gentlemen, just keep on thinking that and we shall get along first-rate,' says the Old Man, and lets 'em go. That's old

Porfirio's way of doing things, but it isn't what you'd stand for over there in little old Great Britain, eh?

"No; well, these chaps and lots of others have kept pretty quiet ever since; but you may take it that they wouldn't do a very serious lot of weeping if old Diaz chanced to get the push. But how to push him, eh? Why not stir up the peons to a rising? that's one plan. The weak spot there is that so long as you will give a peon grub and cigarettes, a little brandy, with a holiday on every saint's day, and not too much work, it's not so very difficult to keep him satisfied; and when he's satisfied with life he's quiet. But it's being tried for, all the same. I've seen a pamphlet on the range, within this fortnight, that's being circulated wholesale through Chihuahua and elsewhere, telling the *peons* that they ought to have the land. Oh yes, I fancy we are going to see things before long."

"I guess the plan that upsets Diaz will come over with a 'norther'," Pendleton remarked.

"Quite likely," said the young American.

"Why, what has any plan for a revolution got to do with the weather?" inquired Colin. He had already made acquaintance with the norther, that bitter driving wind which suddenly sweeps violently over Mexico.

"Oh, he just means that it will blow in from the north, across the Rio Grande," explained Westman. "Texas belonged to Mexico one time, you know, and there are lots of Mexicans across the frontier still. That's where most plots against the Government are hatched."

"Who's this Madero that one hears about?"

"Madero! Well, to my mind he is just the largest kind of fool; vegetarian, spiritualist, who knows what beside. But he's a rich man—a big rancher—and there's no doubt quite a lot that's on his side. Well, we shall see what comes; I fancy there'll be pretty lively doings quite fairly soon."

Westman was right; the staff upon the Hacienda of the Star were soon to have full proof of that, and to find themselves more actively concerned with politics than from a mere onlooker's point of view.

One morning, in the middle of the following week, Westman and Colin started out at daybreak on a long day's ride. Not but what nearly all their almost daily rides were long; but upon this occasion they knew well that they would probably be called upon to travel many miles. Their special object was to find a bunch of fine bay horses which were known to have their favourite grazing-ground some fifteen miles away upon the very border

of the *hacienda* range. The bunch was led by a particularly valuable imported sire, purchased from Texas eighteen months before. Beside some five-and-twenty mares there were four three-year-olds of first-rate quality.

For some few hours after the two reached that quarter of the range in which they looked to find the bunch no sign of it was to be seen. They diligently "quartered" every yard of likely ground, keeping some quarter of a mile apart, searching each hollow and each small ravine in which there was the slightest likelihood the horses might be sheltered. They had no success, till, from the summit of a little knoll, Colin at length espied the lost ones more than half a mile away. He galloped back to Westman and informed him of the fact. The wind was blowing freshly from the horses, and it should be possible to get quite close to them and satisfy themselves that all was well.

"There at last, are they? 'bout time too," said Westman when he heard the news. "It's all that we shall do to get back by two hours after dark. What brings the brutes away down here, I'd like to know? They're almost off the range." And, as they cantered towards the horses, the American, a puzzled frown upon his face, kept muttering angrily below his breath.

As they drew near the bunch the pair pulled in to a slow canter, it being the habit to approach all horses at an easy pace, as far as possible, in order to avoid alarming them, especially when close inspection was desired. But upon this occasion their precaution was quite unsuccessful. Suddenly all the horses threw their heads up, and the next instant they were off at utmost speed. Westman uttered an angry exclamation.

"Those horses have been startled lately; that's a sure thing, kid. By what, I ask you? search me if I know."

"Wolves, perhaps, or coyotes," was the best suggestion Colin found to make.

"Coyotes!" said Westman, in a tone of much contempt; "coyotes don't scare that lot a cent. No, sir, it's quite another kind of coyote that I've got in mind. Ride hard; we must catch up with them, however fast they're off. Ride hard, I say."

He drove his spurs into the sides of his powerful horse. Colin touched Don, and together they flew across the rough and dangerous ground. It was a stern chase, but in this case not a very long one; the large bunch of horses, travelling closely packed, were no match in speed for two well-ridden

animals with ample room to pick their ground. In a few minutes they had overhauled the horses and were able to examine them closely.

"Count 'em," said Westman, when he had surveyed them for some moments with a searching gaze.

"I make them twenty-five, besides the stallion," Colin answered, when he had scanned the group with attention.

"Oh, you do, do you? Well, that's curious, for I figure 'em the same. Let's try again."

They did so, with the same result.

"They should be thirty," Colin said; "the five-and-twenty mares, the horse, and the four three-year-olds."

"Yes, I was figurin' that," replied his friend; "and which d'you make the missin' four to be?"

"The four young horses, I am nearly sure."

Westman drew rein and brought his panting horse to a stand.

"Well," he inquired, "what d'you make of that?"

"The youngsters must be somewhere else. Can they have joined another bunch? Or are they sick or fallen lame?"

"What! All four lame? Not much! Out of the line of a coincidence, my son. No, kid, those horses have been pinched, and pinched quite lately. That's why the rest of 'em are so blamed scared."

"Pinched! Stolen! But are horses often stolen from a range?"

"Not lately; but a few weeks back the boss was put wise we were going to have a taste. This means that we shall soon be up against it now."

"Up against what? A general outbreak of horse-stealing?"

"Pshaw, kid, this isn't common stealing; it's recruiting horses for the cavalry, that's what it is."

"The cavalry?"

"That's what I said. Just war is what we're going to have—or revolution, if you like. The opposition to the Government is arming, and the first thing that it wants is horses, see. That's what there is to it and nothing else. They have been taking horses from some other ranges, so the boss has heard upon

the quiet; but it isn't every range has got the class of horse we have, and, as you see, they're out to take the best."

"What are we going to do about it now?"

"Do?" replied Westman, grinning; "why, run home and tell, like momma's darling when he gets one in the eye in class! That's our next move, I guess. Come on, get going."

They turned their horses and began the ride for home at a slow pace. Westman, who rode in silence for some minutes, was quite clearly thinking hard. Presently Colin spoke.

"Those horses have our brand on. How will the fellows who have taken them get over that?"

"I guess that if we ever get the chance to see those horses, anyone that happens to be on 'em won't mind much about our seeing the *hacienda* mark. And as for now, you bet they're hidden mighty snug."

"But surely we shall get some news of them. Four first-rate animals like that can't well be hidden right away."

"I shouldn't figure too much upon that. Not hide four horses? Yes, or four hundred—easily."

"But where?"

"Oh, search me. Perhaps upon some range a dozen or more miles away; perhaps across the frontier, on a Texan ranch."

"Surely no *hacienda*-owner would agree to harbour stolen horses? And why take them across into Texas?"

"You sure do make me weary, kid; you're just too innocent and British all the time. Who's this Madero we were yarning of the other day? Isn't he one of the first *hacienda*-owners in Chihuahua State? Isn't he getting up a revolution or supposed to be? At any rate he's being shoved forward as the figure-head of the concern. Well then, why shouldn't he collect upon the quiet on his range the horses that he'll want? Not that I fancy they'll be there; more likely hidden, two's and three's together, with the smaller men. And why not take 'em into Texas till they're wanted, eh? It's likely that the plot to start this revolution—if there is one coming, and it looks blamed like it now—is being hatched back there. But, just because folks over there in Texas mean to help the Mexicans to shoot old Diaz off his seat, it don't quite follow that they're going to serve out horses free all round. Not much! The Texas folks'd make the revolutionists buy horses, you can bet—and pay for

'em. So it comes cheaper to steal horses from a range in Chihuahua, and ship 'em across the river till they're wanted, than it would to buy 'em. See?"

Yes, Colin saw—to some extent. But to the English boy the ways of a Mexican revolution still remained dark and mysterious. That a man of education, means, and position, like Madero, eager though he might be to unseat the President and to take his place, should resort to, or even tacitly sanction, such methods as the appropriation of his fellow *hacienda*-owners' horses, was a new idea to him. He presently asked:

"Do the United States Government want Diaz unseated, since they seem to wink at all this kind of thing?"

"Search me," said his companion, with a shrug. "You see, kid," the American went on, "the United States is a quite tolerable big bit of country, not like your little old Great Britain that you can quite easy keep an eye on all the time, and put safe in your pocket when you feel that way. You can't expect that Washington can keep alongside what goes on on every Texan ranch. If you ask me, why I should rather say that Wall Street and the moneyed people generally would like friend Diaz to stay right where he is. To men with money, any sort of trouble like a revolution means a row, and shooting, and a healthy chance of dollars getting lost; a tight hand on the reins means business doing. Old Diaz does keep order—after his own fashion—that's quite sure; and though he's getting a bit ancient, he is strong enough to hold on yet for quite a while. But still there's lots of fellows in the States would like to see him put away to bed and someone take his place."

That evening at the supper-table there was much surmise about the disappearance of the horses and concerning the events it might foretell. Mr. Osgood's face had lengthened when he heard the news from Westman. On the following morning he sent off two mounted men with information to the chief of the *rurales* at their quarters in a little town some twenty miles away, and the next afternoon the *hacienda* was visited by a detachment of this famous body of police.

Colin had already met with the *rurales* more than once; both while at work upon the range and upon one or two occasions when he had accompanied the wagon into Nazarenos to bring back the money for the peons' pay. Small bands of the police were often to be seen patrolling roads, or making searches for offenders great or small.

These Mexican *rurales* were, without exception, an extremely well-set-up and even a distinguished-looking lot of men, mounted upon fine horses in hard condition. Their uniform was made of dark-grey cloth, tight-fitting,

freely trimmed with silver braid. A flowing crimson scarf was knotted loosely round the throat, and a large Mexican sombrero worn. Each man was armed with a Winchester rifle, a revolver, and a sword.

The officer in charge of the detachment that now visited the Hacienda of the Star was closeted for a full hour with Mr. Osgood and Westman, taking full particulars of the four missing horses, inquiring where and when they were last seen. After he had gone the manager informed the hands that, by advice of the police, they would now have to keep a keener watch than ever upon the stock of horses and cattle; that bunches must, as far as possible, be drawn up nearer to that portion of the range on which the house and buildings stood.

These new precautions naturally involved no little extra work, and for the next few weeks Colin had but small time in which to think of subjects other than his daily tasks. But it was quite impossible to blink the fact that there was every sign of trouble being near at hand. Hardly a week passed without news of local outbreaks, rioting, or the looting of lone houses or small towns in various parts of the wide State of Chihuahua. There was a serious riot in the city of that name, where order was with difficulty restored by a regiment of regulars, who, however, were brought upon the scene too late to prevent the pillage of several churches and the looting and burning of some handsome houses. On more than one extensive *hacienda* there was rioting among the peons; while two others were attacked by brigands, in one case a large sum of money being carried off. Meanwhile horse-stealing was reported from all quarters of the neighbourhood, and was often carried out on an extensive scale.

The threatening condition of unrest in Mexico soon became a matter of general knowledge all over the world, and Colin began to receive letters telling him of the anxiety of those at Meadowgrange on his account. His mother even hinted at his giving up the work and coming home. The major was less definite in his advice, saying that he must, to some extent, be guided by his local knowledge and the state of matters on the range.

Colin was quite determined to stay where he was. He had accepted Mr. Dickson's offer with enthusiasm, and it seemed to him that it would be ungrateful of him to retire from the work merely when signs of trouble showed. Moreover, Mr. Dickson had quite recently sent reassuring letters to the manager. General opinion in New York, he said, was fully confident that any local trouble would be speedily put down with a firm hand. The Government of the United States was not disposed to let a country on its

frontier-line be long disturbed by bloodshed and disorder. Diaz would, if needful, have America's support.

So Colin wrote reassuring letters to England. He pointed out that accounts of disorder were often largely exaggerated; spoke glowingly of the good qualities of the *rurales* force, and begged his parents to believe that he was not in the least danger, and that everything was going on very much as usual. He did not think it necessary to add that, in spite of the precautions taken by the manager and hands, horses still disappeared at not infrequent intervals from off the range.

CHAPTER VIII

Ambushed

The days and weeks of strenuous work slipped quickly by, and Colin was astonished when he came to realize that he had been for a full year upon the range.

Christmas had come and gone. Colin had helped to eat the Christmas turkey, and, it must be owned, enjoyed the portly gobbler none the less for the reflection that the bird had drunk itself to death. At such an altitude as that at which the Hacienda of the Star was placed meat can be kept in good condition for only a few hours, and it was needful to take drastic measures to make freshly killed flesh tender. The fated turkey was still living and enjoying his usual health and spirits upon Christmas morning; was induced —perhaps little loth—to drink its fill of native brandy or *mescal*, and, by this feat, came crisp and fresh to table later in the day.

Within the spacious court, festivities were organized for all the peons and their families, the syndicate having authorized a generous expenditure for the purpose. There was no Christmas-tree, indeed; but this was hardly missed, its place being taken by its Mexican substitute, the *pinate*. This is a vessel of coarse earthenware, brightly painted, and decorated with coloured ribbons and streamers. Crammed full with sweets and toys, the *pinate* is suspended to the roof or to a pole, the children, upon whose behalf the entertainment has been given, being then blindfolded and furnished with long sticks. In time a lucky shot breaks the *pinate* and its contents scatter on the ground, where a royal scramble ensues.

A few weeks later, on the feast-day of St. Anthony, Colin was witness of another interesting and novel sight—the blessing of the animals. It might have been extremely picturesque: the sight of the old priest maintained upon the *hacienda*, as he stood before the doorway of the church, his hands upraised in benediction on the beasts whose peon owners dragged and pushed them forward through the crowd. Cows, goats, and donkeys, sheep and mules, pigs, fowls, pet parrots, doves, were all brought up to have the Church's blessing and be sprinkled with the drops of holy water which the old man showered round. Somewhat unhappily, so far as Colin was concerned, the rite was rendered rather laughable than solemn by the custom of the natives, who, determined that their creatures shall appear before the priest in festive garb, invariably adorn them with paint of the very brightest,

startling, and incongruous hues, wholly regardless of the colouring already bestowed by nature. Pink goats, blue pigs, and bright-green sheep proved rather much for Colin's gravity!

Meanwhile Madero, threatened with imprisonment for what the Government of Mexico regarded as a seditious speech, had some months previously retired into Texas, and lay safe behind the frontier of the Rio Grande. Rumours, however, were afloat that he was now again upon its southern side. Some optimists upon the Hacienda of the Star and neighbouring ranges steadily maintained that he was without serious power, that all trouble had blown over for the time. But others shook their heads. They prudently declined to offer any forecast of the future, but, like an English politician of a later date, advised their friends to "wait and see".

Jim Westman, having been longer on the range than any other of the American hands, was generally regarded as the head, though he did not assume authority in any way on that account. It was, however, he who—occasionally replaced by the manager—usually took charge of the wagon on its fortnightly journeys into Nazarenos for the coin with which to pay the men. As often as possible without giving an appearance of favouritism, he would apply for Colin to go with him, two hands besides the *peon* escort being always sent. Such was the case upon a trip made late in March.

Owing to the events which had occurred within the last few months, extra precautions were now taken on these trips to town. The wagon, when it first brought Colin to the range twelve months before, had been escorted by two mounted men. That number was now doubled, each of the four riders being strongly armed and well supplied with cartridges. Colin himself, on leaving Meadowgrange, had been presented by his father with the major's own revolver, a very reliable weapon. He had brought out from England his own double-barrelled gun, but no rifle. This deficiency, however, he had lately remedied by purchasing an excellent Winchester from young Van Dooren. So that, on leaving with the wagon for the trip to Nazarenos, he was armed as were all others of the force.

Upon the morning of departure from the *hacienda*, when the escort mustered for the start, Westman, as he took up the reins from the mules' backs, looked round him at the mounted men, and made a pause in climbing to his seat.

"Hullo! Where's Pedro?" he inquired, in his usual somewhat peremptory and staccato tone. "Maximo, what are you doing here? This ain't your job."

"Pedro sick, *señor*, so I go instead," answered a tall and rather sullen-looking man.

"Pedro was not sick yesterday," said the American; "he was upon the range all right. And, anyway, who ordered you to come?"

Maximo shrugged his shoulders, but made no reply.

"What's wrong with Pedro, Zeferino? Do you know?" asked Westman, turning to another of the men. A rather sheepish smile was the answer.

"Drunk, is he; too much *mescal*, eh?" and Zeferino's look implied assent to this surmise.

"Well, anyway, we're late already; come, get on," said Westman, swinging himself into the driving-seat; and they drove off without more words.

"Queer that," said Jim to Colin, as the mules went down the slope and past the little lake at a sharp trot; "most of these fellows will get drunk as often as they have the chance, and dollars for the stuff; but it's the first time I've known Pedro caught that way. On Sundays or a saint's day, perhaps; but never to prevent his being at work. Besides, he likes a trip to Nazarenos just as well as any of the hands. It's queer." And through the drive Jim Westman's face retained a puzzled and reflective air.

No incident of interest was encountered on the way. The town was duly reached, and the two friends put up at the hotel. After their evening meal Westman asked Colin if he cared to take a stroll. The two went out into the street, which at that hour, shortly after dark, was thronged with people of the place.

It was by no means the first time that Colin had walked through the town of Nazarenos after dark, but he was long in growing weary of the scene—the loitering crowd, the flaring lights from drinking-houses, shops, and stalls, with here and there the moon's rays lighting up the pleasant *patio* seen beyond the entrance-arch of some great house. Barefooted, bare-legged Indians, too, were here and there encountered in the streets, with heads and shoulders muffled in a scarlet blanket, ragged wife and children trailing at their heels, and eyes turned curiously upon the novelties of town.

After an hour's stroll, while on their way to the hotel and bed, the two friends passed across the end of a dark, quiet, and deserted-looking lane which turned from the main street. Colin, who chanced to glance along it, saw a group of three men standing half within the shadow of a broad-arched

door. One of the three looked up and, as it seemed to Colin, drew back hastily on seeing him pass.

"That looked to me a little like Maximo," Colin said to Westman as the two walked on.

"Likely enough," replied his friend indifferently. "I dare say that the fellow has some friends in town."

Besides the money for the peons' and *vaqueros'* pay, together with a great variety of necessary stores for both the house and range, the wagon's load upon this occasion included several small but heavy boxes holding cartridges. There was but little question now in most men's minds that very serious trouble might break out at any time. Stronger and more persistent had become the rumour that Madero, the young and dreamy *hacienda*-owner, had returned from Texas, and was soon to raise the banner of revolt. It was further known that he was practically certain to receive the active and determined support of Pancho Villa, better known by his ominous nickname of "The Tiger of the North".

Villa, in early youth, had been a shepherd in the hills of the Sierra Madre range. A wrong done to a member of his family had been swiftly avenged by the lad, who shot dead the offender in broad daylight in the very centre of a busy town. Outlawed for this, and with a price upon his head, Villa had taken to the hills again and had become a bandit, hunted far and wide by the *rurales*, but yet never caught. Utterly uneducated, unable either to read or write, and of the grossest habits, he was nevertheless in his own way both daring and skilful, and undoubtedly possessed of no small share of military capacity. But several cruel outrages, the coarseness of his life and violence of manner, had combined to earn for him the name by which he was soon widely known.

Matters being thus in such a threatening state, Mr. Osgood had thought it only prudent to lay in a good store of ammunition for the protection of the *hacienda*, should it be attacked in force. Hence the consignment of cartridges, which, under the superintendence of Westman and Colin only, was snugly stowed away beneath the other items of the wagon's load, the American having found a pretext to ensure the absence of the Mexican hands.

The hotel chanced on this occasion to be rather full, and the two friends had had to share a room. Colin, on going upstairs for something which he had forgotten, found Jim Westman busy charging his revolver, while his belt-pouch obviously contained its full supply of cartridges.

“Expect to be attacked this afternoon?” inquired Colin, with a smile.

“Not that I know of special,” was his friend’s reply. When he had fitted the revolver in his belt he spoke again.

“Now see here, kid. No, I’m not saying that we shall be attacked to-day; maybe we shall, and maybe not. But if we are”—he spoke with emphasis —“why, I’ll just trouble you to put your fancy British notions right away inside your pocket till the shooting’s over. See? These fellows will sure shoot to kill; just bet on that. You’ll kindly do the same; no firing in the air or any other pretty stuff from overseas. You understand?”

Yes, Colin understood; and it gave him a curious feeling to accept the fact that, very possibly, in a few hours’ time, he might be called upon to kill a man. Undoubtedly, however, Jim was absolutely right. He was not now in England, with policemen, judges, magistrates at hand to deal with possible offenders in their own deliberate, orderly, and law-abiding way; this was a land in which men often had to take upon themselves the task of self-defence. It was his very obvious duty to defend the property of his employers, and he tacitly accepted the instructions of his friend. Yes, he would “shoot to kill” if called upon to shoot at all; and, following Jim’s example, he attended to his arms.

Ten minutes later he set off with Westman and the mounted men. The fifteen miles or more which stretched from Nazarenos to the half-way house at which the mules and horses fed and rested were passed by without event. Delays in obtaining some few items of the wagon’s rather miscellaneous load had made the party later than usual in leaving the town, and Westman had the halt cut short by half an hour.

“I’d like to see the *hacienda* before dusk,” he said.

Two members of the escort rode some twenty yards before the leading mules, the others following the wagon close behind. During the previous day’s journey, and the half of the return already passed, the man Maximo had been one of those who rode in front. Now, as young Westman mounted to his seat by Colin, he observed that the *vaquero* had changed places with a man in front.

“Get back behind there, Zeferino,” ordered Westman; “you, Maximo, take your proper place.”

The man named Zeferino made a movement to obey, turning his horse to ride behind the wagon; but Maximo hesitated, muttering something about “riding with his friend”.

Colin saw Westman's form grow rigid. The American looked steadily at the *vaquero* for some seconds without speaking, till the man's eyes first flickered and then turned away.

"You'll blamed well ride just where I tell you," rapped out Westman in a tone of ice; "or are you looking round for trouble? If you are, just say so, and I'll hand it to you here and now."

Maximo dared to hesitate no longer, but rode forward sullenly to join the other man in front. As Westman adjusted the reins in his hand he turned to Zeferino and addressed him in a quiet tone.

"You keep your eyes skinned, Zeferino, back behind there; you and José both, you look well out."

Once more they took the road, and Westman drove for some three miles without a word. The track hence onward to the *hacienda* was, as has already been remarked, extremely rough. Higher and higher it rose, now running over a broad stretch of open upland, now sidling crabwise on the side of a steep hill, now plunging down to cross the bottom of a deep ravine. The escort rode in silence, and there were few sounds to break the sense of solitude and desolation which lay heavily upon the scene; only the cry of a rare bird, the tramp of hoofs, the creak and jingle of the steel and leather of the harness, and the jolting of the wheels on the rough road.

Presently Colin saw that Jim was looking at the leading members of the escort with no friendly air. Following the look he noticed that the men were drawing steadily ahead, the advance being apparently led by Maximo, who kept furtively touching his horse with the spurs, while the other man pushed on to keep abreast of his companion.

Suddenly Westman called in a clear ringing tone:

"Say, you Maximo, I'll be much obliged if you'll keep your right distance from the wagon. Thirty yards ahead, my friend, and not another inch. I like to look at you. If you should chance to turn a corner too far on and get where I can't see you, something quite unfortunate might happen. See?"

Maximo reined in his horse without a word and without turning round.

"You seem to have a 'down' upon Maximo, Jim; you know, he isn't a bad sort, I think."

Westman turned slightly in his seat, regarded Colin for a moment with a frosty eye, and again fixed his steady gaze ahead. They were now

approaching the last and deepest of the ravines already mentioned. To reach the bottom and ascend the other side the rough track zigzagged down a declivity of unusual steepness, with several sharp turns. Dusk was not yet entirely upon them, but the sun had set behind the western hills, and the gully was already in deep shadow.

The steep descent began, the wheelers holding back in awkward fashion, with the wagon pressing forward on their hocks.

They turned a corner, on the inner side of which a large rock helped to hide the road beyond the bend. Westman applied the long whip freely to the team, anxious apparently to keep Maximo and the other man in sight as they went round the turn. An instant later he exclaimed:

"Ah, that's it, eh? I thought as much."

The reason of the exclamation was made clear to Colin as it left Jim's lips. Barely a dozen yards before them, laid with obvious care and purpose right across the road, were four or five large boulders, evidently dragged from among many that lay scattered in the scrub on either side. Someone had placed them on the track—so much was plain. Hardly less obvious was the reason for so doing—to block the narrow and uneven road and cause delay. It was a trap and they were in it; there could be but little doubt of that.

The vision of the barrier and the reason for its being there passed in one swift flash through Colin's mind. A moment later he saw something which made doubt impossible. Maximo, turning suddenly upon the man who rode beside him, dealt him a stunning blow upon the head with the butt of his rifle. The Mexican reeled for an instant helpless, then rolled heavily, and clearly quite unconscious, from his saddle to the ground. Maximo spurred his own horse sharply, driving him at the steep bank that sloped up on the right-hand side of the track. The track lay in a hollow, and once up the bank Maximo would be out of sight and safe.

The treacherous *vaquero's* victim had but barely reached the ground when Colin heard a sharp report beside him. Westman had taken his revolver from his belt and fired at Maximo's head. Colin could see the native wince; but he still spurred his horse and was already half-way up the bank.

"Catch hold!" said Westman in a sharp tense tone, thrusting the reins towards Colin, while his right hand reached behind him for his Winchester, which hung in slings fixed for that purpose to the wagon's awning-supports.

Maximo's horse had climbed the bank; he and his rider were now outlined clearly for a moment at a distance of some forty yards. Westman,

his rifle at his shoulder, took a quick but steady aim and fired.

The horse sprang forward and was out of sight; but as he did so Colin saw Maximo give a quick convulsive start, throw up both arms, and then fall forward heavily.

"I've handed him *his* pay, at any rate," said Westman in an even tone.

Just as he spoke a rifle shot rang out from a thick patch of scrub upon the farther bank of the ravine, some hundred yards or more away. Colin could hear the bullet whistle and then thud on something soft. One of the leading mules reared violently on its hindlegs, then fell crashing to the ground, dragging its fellow down at the same time.

"Now we are for it, sure," said Westman, springing from the driving-seat. "Down with you, kid, and get cover. Here, behind these rocks, and facing forward, see."

Colin had followed Jim, his rifle in his hand. The two ran forward a few yards and stretched themselves behind the boulders placed to block the way, which were quite large enough to hide a man. But as they sprang for cover Westman called an order to the men behind.

"Face back, you two, for some will come downhill. Shoot straight and steady, and for all sakes shoot to kill."

More shots now came from the far side of the ravine, but failed to take effect. A minute later Westman and Colin heard the sound of hoofs upon the track behind.

"José and Zeferino'll see to them," said Westman, keeping his eyes fixed steadily upon the gully and the road in front. "I'm rather looking for the main attack from here."

Colin followed his friend's example, though he strained his ears to learn what might be going on in their rear. The clattering hoofs drew nearer, seemed to turn the corner, and he heard a shout. Then the two rifles of their rear-guard spoke together, and there was a heavy fall. Again two shots; then silence for an instant, followed by the sounds of horses galloping uphill.

Then Colin saw a flash before him, coming from the scrub beyond the bed of the ravine. He took a steady aim and fired. He had been a leading marksman in the corps at Clinton, and the recollection of his doings at the rifle-range afforded him no little satisfaction now. There came no further shots from the low bushes where the flash had shown. One or two came from other parts of the steep bank, but presently they ceased.

"No more seem coming this way, *señor*," said the voice of Zeferino in their rear.

Colin and Westman now rose from their shelter. Going to the rear of the wagon they found Zeferino and José looking at a fallen horse, whose right foreleg was evidently broken by a rifle shot. Westman soon put an end to the beast's sufferings by a bullet from his revolver.

"His rider was not hurt, and got away; but José shot the man upon a second horse—see, he lies here," said Zeferino, moving a few paces up the road. "Three only came; the third man also got away."

Just round the bend they came upon a figure lying in a limp heap upon the ground. A brief examination showed him to be dead—shot through the heart. He was a tall and well-built man of little more than three or four-and-twenty, wearing a *vaquero's* dress. Westman examined the still form with close attention.

"D'you know him, Zeferino? Or you, José?"

Both men disclaimed all knowledge of the figure stretched upon the ground.

The man whom Maximo had struck down was now sitting upright on the spot where he had fallen from his horse, having recovered consciousness to some extent, though he was still a little dazed. Maximo was soon found, his horse beside him grazing quietly. The *vaquero's* brain had been pierced by Westman's rifle bullet.

"Well, let's get on and out of this," said the American. "Zeferino, you and José help to move these rocks; and we must take these two dead scoundrels home, I guess, though they're fit food for coyotes and deserve no better, that's a fact. We'll have to drive a 'spike'."

It took the efforts of four men to drag the heavy boulders to the roadside and thus clear the way. Colin was placed on guard meanwhile, his rifle in his hand, in case of the attack being suddenly renewed. But there was no further alarm. It seemed pretty clear that Westman's prompt and resolute defence, with the swift fate of the treacherous Maximo, had alarmed the bandits and disorganized their plans.

The startled mules were soothed, the team reharnessed to the wagon as a "unicorn"—or "spike" as Jim preferred to call it; and the bodies of Maximo and the unknown brigand lifted in. The man Maximo had attacked affirmed that he was quite recovered and could ride; he therefore continued at his place in front, leading the dead man's horse.

The bed of the ravine was crossed in safety. As they toiled slowly up the farther side Colin suggested that he should go on ahead and search the bushes whence the shots had mostly come. Westman consented, though with some reluctance on the score of wasting any time in reaching home. The place was quickly found. A trail of stains lead from it, and immediately behind the bushes was a little pool of blood.

"You must have hit the fellow pretty badly, but he's evidently got away," said Westman from his seat when Colin told him this. "Well now, jump up, and let's get on."

"He may be dangerously hit and in great pain, perhaps lying helpless," Colin said. "I'd rather like to have a look for him."

"He may; and whose fault's that, I ask you, kid? Look for him! Yes, and likely get a bullet in your back. Not much! If I thought we could catch him, and see him shot as he deserves, why that'd be another proposition; but he's likely run a mile by now. We've got off easy so far; I'm not asking for more trouble. Up you get." And Colin felt he could do nothing but comply.

There was, quite naturally, no small excitement when they reached the *hacienda* and reported the event. Later that evening, when the two friends were at length alone together, Colin said:

"Jim, you had some suspicions of Maximo, had you not?"

"Why, sure, I had; the fellow gave himself right dead away just every time. First, when we started in the morning yesterday, I figured it was queer that Pedro should be drunk just then; he likes a trip to Nazarenos just as well as you or me. Last night when you had gone to bed, and left me talking to a fellow down below, I slipped off to the stables where the mules were quartered, and discovered that Maximo was still out about the town. I had a word or two with Zeferino, and the main of what I learnt from him was this: Maximo had been pretty thick with Pedro for some days; all of the previous evening he was treating him to *mescal* till he'd got him good and drunk. Then, when Maximo tried to ride behind this afternoon, why 'course I wanted nothing more to put me wise."

"How many men do you suppose there were in the attack?"

"Not many—perhaps no more than five or six, and maybe even less. The less the better, from their point of view; because the fewer of them, the less likely they would be to draw attention if the *rurales* got a sight of them when they were waiting in the hills or near the road. You see, the thing went wrong for them the very minute that they started to sail in. They'd figured

on Maximo being behind; I saw to it that he kept just where I could draw a trigger on him all the time. As they had fixed things I don't doubt but he had orders to shoot me—and very likely you as well—as soon as we had turned that bend. But as it was *I* did the early shooting, José and Zeferino put up a sound fight, and there you are. You didn't do half-badly either, kid; you're cool and you are sure some shot. I'm only sorry that you didn't kill that scoundrel in the scrub."

But Colin did not wholly share in this regret; he was contented that his shot had only wounded, and not killed, a man.

"Who would the fellows be, I wonder? Regular brigands, do you think?"

"Dunno; quite likely some of 'Tiger' Villa's men. They had got round Maximo, must have got the word that there'd be ammunition, besides dollars, in the load, and chanced the raid being well worth while. Dollars and cartridges are mighty useful when you're going to raise a revolution, kid. Yes, likely it was some of Villa's bunch. I guess we're going to know a heap more about Villa before very long."

A forecast which was to be confirmed for Colin sooner than he either thought or wished.

CHAPTER IX

The Tiger of the North

"Well, kid, your chum Canuto's gone," was the remark with which Jim Westman greeted Colin on a morning about ten days after the event narrated in the last chapter.

"Canuto gone! Gone where?"

"That's what the boss would rather like to know," said the American; "but I can give a guess; he's gone to do a little revoluting, you can bet."

"But he was here all yesterday."

"Yes, but he isn't here to-day. His grandma says that he went out last night a little after dark, and she's seen nothing of him since. She may know where he is, or she may not. There's half a dozen other fellows disappeared as well."

This was in fact the case; and, similar disappearances having occurred within the last few weeks on other *haciendas*, it seemed most probable, as Westman had surmised, that Canuto and the other missing hands had gone to join the revolutionary forces, which were now known to be assuming formidable proportions. Colin could recall some circumstances which made this quite probable, and many of his conversations with Canuto, during which the man had plainly showed dissatisfaction with his lot.

This disappearance of the head *vaquero* naturally increased the work for other hands, already exceptionally heavy owing to the need for increased vigilance in keeping touch with the large head of stock. The daily rides were long and arduous, often extending several hours after dark. This was the case with one which Colin Charteris and Westman made together three days after the disappearance of Canuto. The two friends set off early in the afternoon with instructions to find and, if possible, bring nearer to the home district of the range a particularly fine bunch of horses, which, in spite of the efforts of the staff to keep the stock as close at hand as possible, had recently broken away and were believed to be now at a considerable distance.

The friends rode at an easy pace, for both the horses had already done a morning's work. It was some hours before the bunch was found. The number was correct, and all the horses seemed in good condition; but it proved impossible to drive them nearer home as intended. However

cautiously and patiently the riders tried to coax them into travelling towards the *hacienda*, labour and patience went without result. At last Jim called a halt.

"No go," he said; "we'll only get their backs up real high by trying it any more. We know just whereabouts they are and must come out to-morrow with more hands to drive them in. It's us for home." And the pair turned away.

Jim's horse was reasonably fresh; but Colin's Don, who had been working extra hard for the past fortnight owing to the fact that the mare Carmen had gone lame, now showed obvious signs of fatigue. They were by this time a full hour's ride from home.

"We'll have to take it quietly," said Colin to his friend.

"As easy as you like," said Westman, reining in his horse; "here comes the moon, so we shan't lose our way." The pair rode forward at an easy walking pace.

The moon indeed was at that moment coming into view, and soon the portion of the range that lay before them was completely flooded by her light. The pair had just emerged from a long trough-like hollow of the ground which they had until now been following, and were on a broad and fairly level plain. A little to their left there lay the head of a ravine, shallow at first but soon growing deeper, and, if followed, leading through the lower slopes and foot-hills to the distant plain.

"What's that?" said Westman suddenly, and checked his horse.

Colin, listening intently, soon grew conscious of a faint and distant thudding sound, which seemed to be growing louder as the moments passed. Soon it was recognizable to the two friends as being the noise of many hoofs. Then, far to the south, a large dark mass appeared. It was undoubtedly a herd of cattle moving rapidly across the range.

"Has something startled them?" said Colin; "no, they're not stampeding; they are going more as if they were being rounded-up."

"They *are* being rounded-up, no error about that," said Jim; "say, kid, this is a raid."

"You think so, Jim?"

"I do. I wonder what the numbers are."

That question was soon answered. The herd, now immediately in front of the two horsemen, passing across the course they were pursuing, was not more than six or seven hundred yards away. It was easy to see that the cattle must number fully three hundred. Behind them, in a long line which curved round the herd on either flank, rode about twenty men.

"H'm, not much use our butting in," said Westman, looking with lowering eyes on this imposing cavalcade. "The question is, will they see us? If so we're in for trouble, sure."

That question also was not long in doubt. The words had hardly left Jim's lips before a shout was heard, and three or four members of the raiding party broke off from the line and came at a swift gallop towards the friends, fatally visible in the bright moonlight. Quite clearly there was no course left to them but flight; any attempt to interpose against so large a band was out of the question.

"Ride for it, kid," cried Westman, wheeling his horse round and driving home the spurs.

"Which way?" asked Colin quietly.

That seemed a question not easily answered. The herd of raided cattle was now right across their path, barring the way to the *hacienda*. Any attempt to ride through it or across its front meant danger of being ridden down and trampled on. Bearing to the right in rear of the herd would bring them at once in contact with the raiders. There seemed little hope of getting off save by retreating down the hollow they had lately traversed, with the chance of eluding the pursuit among the neighbouring gullies and ravines.

"After me, kid," called Westman, dashing off. Colin obeyed, and the pair were in an instant at their horses' utmost speed. There came a shot behind them, with the sound of hoofs in swift pursuit.

And now began a desperate race. Colin kept close on Westman's heels. The young American, with his five years' experience on and knowledge of the range, galloped with confidence, doubling and twisting in an able effort to evade the foes so close behind. Now he would disappear behind some knoll, now race at headlong speed down some small gully, and, for the moment, seem to slip from his pursuers' clutch. But both he and Colin—especially Colin—suffered from the disadvantage that their horses had by this time done a long day's work. Ride as they would they could not shake off those who rode behind. At times, for a few moments, sound of the pursuit was lost behind some intervening ridge of ground, but never was

such respite long; a shout would tell them that they had been seen, and with each shout came rifle shots, and bullets whistling in the air.

The end, so far as Colin was concerned, came suddenly. The two were flying down a narrow gully, when another shot rang out, a ball sang close past Colin's head. The next moment Don set foot on a loose stone and fell, throwing Colin clear with stunning violence. Don struggled to his feet and stood trembling. Colin, shaken, gathered himself up more slowly, only to feel rough hands upon him and to find himself the centre of a little crowd of men.

He saw no signs of Westman and could not help feeling a momentary sensation of having been deserted. But, after all, it was a good thing Jim had got away; better for one to be taken rather than two. Westman would be able to give the alarm at the *hacienda*. Still——

Westman, meanwhile, was giving vent to hearty maledictions upon revolutions, raiders, and his own bad luck. His hard face twisted with sharp stabbing pain, he was now galloping in such direction as his horse was pleased to take. For that last bullet, passing Colin by, had broken the American's left wrist; then, ricochetting, chipped a portion from his horse's ear. The animal, excited by the gallop, maddened by the sudden sting, took the bit firmly in his teeth and raced away; while Westman, his left hand quite powerless, could do nothing to check and very little to guide him.

Colin, on looking at the group of men about him, saw that most of them were in *vaquero* dress. One, who had grasped him by the wrist, now shook him roughly, seemingly to make sure that the prisoner had sustained no serious damage by his fall. The others, standing by their panting horses—for the chase had been a hard one—looked at him curiously, when a new figure came upon the scene.

"Mount, you fools, mount!" exclaimed the new arrival; "ride, and catch the other gringo! It is not enough to have the one; don't let the other fellow get away! If he gets back to warn the *hacienda* we shall have the whole crowd on us long before we get the herd away."

Three or four men, obeying this order, sprang once more into their saddles and rode off in the direction in which Westman's horse had disappeared, while the newcomer and two others stayed behind.

"What are we going to do with him?" asked one of the latter.

"Oh, tie him up and leave him for his friends to find," suggested the latest arrival.

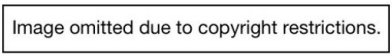
"Why? He is a gringo; kill him," was the kind proposal of the third.

Colin was wondering whether this suggestion was to be his fate, when a fourth rider now appeared. He seemed to exercise some sort of authority over the others, and began to question the prisoner.

"What is your name?" he asked.

Colin could see no purpose in refusing to reply, so gave his name.

"It is the English boy, so we will take him with us as a hostage," said the seeming leader of the band. "His friends may like to ransom him—all Englishmen are rich. And, be that as it may, the General will be glad to see him, for he may get useful information out of him. He knows the way to go to work in such a case, does the General——" he gave a laugh of which Colin did not greatly like the sound. "Tie him on his horse."



ANOTHER SHOT RANG OUT

Don was now caught, and Colin placed upon his back, his feet secured below the girths by a stout cord. A lariat attached to the bridle was held by one of the horsemen, and the party and their prisoner set off to rejoin the raiders and the herd. This was soon overtaken in the ravine leading to the plain. A little later several other men rode up, some of whom Colin recognized as being those sent in pursuit of Westman; but there was no sign of the American. Unless the gang had captured him and killed him, which seemed hardly likely, Jim had got away.

They rode on through the night, the captors often cursing poor Don's frequent stumbles and slow pace, for the animal was by this time thoroughly exhausted. At length, just as the dawn was breaking, the party emerged from the foot-hills through which for two hours past they had been travelling, and came out into the plain below. Presently the cavalcade turned sharply to the left and rode up to a *hacienda*, at and round the gate of which were standing a large crowd of men, with groups of horses picketed at hand. There was some conversation. Colin saw the herd of cattle disappear into a corral; his own feet were loosed and he was ordered to dismount.

His legs were stiff and cramped, and as he painfully descended to the ground he fell. One of his captors hauled him roughly to his feet and led him through the door into the house. They halted at the closed door of a room.

After a little time a man came out, exchanged some words with Colin's guardian, and at once the boy was led inside.

The room, a large one, was quite full of men. Seated at a table, smoking a cigar, with the untidy remnants of a meal before him, was a man who at once attracted Colin's notice. He was a coarse-faced, savage-looking fellow of perhaps five-and-thirty years of age; big-built and muscular, with straggling black moustache, small deep-set eyes, and evil-looking, loose-lipped mouth. He wore no collar and his shirt was open at his short thick neck, revealing portions of a brawny chest, and also signs of fine silk underwear. His mouth expanded in a most unpleasant grin when his eyes lighted on the English boy. It was quite clear that he held special rank among the rebels, for Colin's captor addressed him with much deference as "General".

"So!" he said roughly, "here we have a prisoner from the Hacienda of the Star. Tell me, young fellow, what you meant by interfering with my men?"

"I interfered with nobody," said Colin, speaking as coolly as he could.

"Then what were you and your companion doing out upon the range last night? Answer, and quickly."

"We had been out to find a bunch of horses and were riding home."

"But you tried to turn my cattle—cattle that were being taken for the army—for *my* army, that of General Villa." The man's chest swelled visibly as he pronounced the words.

"We did not interfere with them; and, if we had, they were our beasts."

A man who sat beside the general here leaned towards him and said something in low tones.

"So," said the big man, and his eyes grew dark; "it was you also, was it not, who murdered several of my men when they were requisitioning ammunition a few weeks ago?"

"I don't know what you mean," said Colin; but he thought that he could guess.

"You and another scoundrel! You resisted when our men asked civilly for ammunition; you attacked them and shot several men."

Colin, serious as his position was, could hardly keep a smile back at this description of the attack upon the wagon in the gully.

“I was certainly with our wagon when it was attacked—I do not know by whom. We fired, naturally, in self-defence.”

“Then I will have you shot, and that within five minutes.”

The man beside the general once more spoke in a low tone.

“True, true,” said Villa in reply. “Now listen, English boy. In spite of your disgraceful conduct I will pardon you and you shall live—but on conditions. You shall join my army; also, you shall tell me, now at once, where lies the money hidden at the Hacienda of the Star. Speak.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“You do. I mean the store of money that is hidden somewhere underneath a floor.”

“I know of no such money hidden there. I never heard of it and feel quite sure that it does not exist.”

“Don’t you! Then we will seek a way to make you know. Sebastian, bring a rope and fix it to the beam.”

A man who up till now had leant against the wall, behind the general, left the room, and in a few moments returned, bearing in his hand a coil of rope. This he proceeded to attach to a hook fixed in a beam of the ceiling.

“So. Now hang up this English gringo by the feet until he learns to speak.”

Colin’s blood turned cold. Once, years before, at Clinton, he had been hung up for a few seconds in this fashion by a dormitory bully—who had subsequently suffered expulsion on account of an unfortunate propensity for that and similar amusements—and could thus form a small idea of what the terrible experience that loomed close before him would be like. Well, there was nothing for it; he had nothing to divulge. Of any store of hidden money at the *hacienda* he had never heard.

There was a little group of men about the doorway, most of them with their heads and shoulders muffled in their blankets, for the morning air was cold. One of these, Colin noticed, now slipped quickly through the door. The figure was familiar; there was something in its movements Colin seemed to know; but he had had no sight of the man’s face.

“Come then, up with him,” cried the Tiger of the North; “we’ll see if he can’t find his tongue.”

Two men laid hold of Colin, who began to resist in grim silence. Then the door opened quickly and a man came in. He had the air of being a townsman, and was better dressed than others in the room. The general looked annoyed at the interruption.

"Well then, what now?" he cried, in a rough tone. "I am engaged in the examination of a prisoner."

"One little moment, General," said the newcomer, in a cool voice, seemingly undisturbed by Villa's rough reception of him. He drew the general to a distant corner of the room and entered into a long and earnest conversation with the man of war. Colin, whose acquaintance with the Spanish language was by this time good, caught scattered fragments of the cool man's arguments—for arguments they clearly were. The general frequently broke in upon him, violent, explosive, and profane, but the man was not to be silenced.

"Quite useless—never make him speak—and very likely does not know. Get to the ears of Britain—furious—English nation not like Washington; bring a whole nest of hornets round our ears—choke off investors and ruin trade. Valuable as a hostage if unharmed. Can take him with us, eh?" Finally Colin thought that he could catch the name of Madero.

"Well, as you will then," said Villa at last, though with obvious reluctance; "you and Madero have your ways, and I have mine; but as you will—to-day." He gave an angry glare at Colin. "Take him away, but let him follow with the rest—and well secured. If he escapes——!"

Colin was hustled from the room, his heart full of a grateful feeling for the man whom he had noticed by the door. He felt quite certain that this person, who had seemed mysteriously familiar to him, had gone out to fetch the man whose arguments with Villa had at length prevailed in his behalf, and had prevented, or at least postponed, the threatened torture.

Hurried across the *patio* of the house, Colin was led into a small bare room. The door closed on him, a key turned in the lock, and he was left alone.

CHAPTER X

With Villa's Men

Colin looked about the room and took stock of his situation. The single window, strongly barred, was in the outer wall, and he examined it. Had this occurred in a boys' story of adventure, he reflected to himself, one of the bars would prove to be quite rusted through, or loosely fixed. A vigorous effort upon his part would suffice to wrench it out, leaving a space through which he would be able to pass. A sentinel would be outside, of course, but something would occur to distract that functionary's attention for a moment from his duty, so that the prisoner could drop noiselessly upon the ground outside and steal away. Some minutes later he would be escaping towards the hills—no, "mountain fastnesses" would be the phrase preferred—and heading for the Hacienda of the Star.

Unhappily the window, being a window of plain fact, declined to conform to the recognized rules of fiction for such cases made and provided, and its bars offered none of the facilities so much to be desired. The door was equally discouraging; and, there being no chimney to explore, Colin saw nothing for it but to sit down on the floor and think.

His reflections were, however, shortly interrupted by the reappearance of the man who had conveyed him to the room, who now entered with an earthenware jug of water, a plate containing *frijoles* and two or three *tortillas*. These luxuries he placed upon the floor by Colin and then disappeared.

Unappetizing as the food appeared, Colin lost no time in consuming it; for, since his meal at noon the previous day, he had had nothing but a drink of water given to him by his captors during the night ride. The coarse meal swallowed, he returned to a consideration of his immediate prospects. They seemed far from rosy.

He was a prisoner in the hands of one of the worst characters in Mexico; a man of notoriously violent passions, capable of any desperate step, to whom human life was nothing, and torture the merest trifle. It was true that, as the timely intervention which had taken place just now on his behalf went far to prove, others of milder views possessed some influence, and even power, with the Tiger of the North; but Colin could not tell to what extent such influence was likely to be exercised to his advantage.

But happily, as has been said before, Colin Charteris possessed the happy gift of taking things as they arrived, and of making the best of the present moment, without troubling too much as to what might lie ahead. Such is not always perhaps an altogether prudent course, but it has certainly the great advantage of allowing those who take it to possess a fairly quiet mind. Instead of making gloomy forecasts as to the immediate future, Colin now reflected that he was extremely tired—for he had been in the saddle more than half the previous day and all the night. Some sleep, if he were given time for it, could do no harm. He lay down in what seemed the cleanest corner of his cell, pillowed his head upon one arm, and in three minutes was asleep.

Some hours later he awoke to find himself being prodded roughly in the ribs by a boot. Standing over him was his jailer, in whose hands were water and more food.

"Eat this, and quickly," said the fellow; "we are going." Then he retired, this time without locking the door, which indeed he left ajar.

Colin gulped down the food; before he had well finished it the man came back and motioned to the boy to follow him. On going outside the room, Colin discovered that the *hacienda* court was filled by a large crowd of men, all armed. Orders were being given, there was bustle and confusion upon every side.

The men about him were a very motley crew, the most tatterdemalion gang that Colin had ever imagined as an army—for an army, or at any rate a part of one, there seemed good reason to believe they formed. Some were very obviously pure-blooded Indians; others were Mexicans; while others still struck Colin as being subjects of the Stars and Stripes. Their dress ranged from the elaborate costume of the *vaquero* to the merest rags, ill-concealed by the universal blanket. Many were bare-footed; but, as already mentioned, all were armed, even in cases where the warlike equipment consisted merely in the possession of the Mexican knife or *machete*.

While he stood jostled by the crowd, his jailer at his side, there was a murmur of "the General", and, from the room where he had lately interviewed him, Colin saw the Tiger of the North emerge. The face of Villa was now deeply flushed, as though he had been drinking, and his eyes glared angrily, reminding Colin of a savage bull's. They roved for a few moments over the assembled men and finally lighted on the prisoner.

"Ah-ha, the English boy!' " cried Villa, with a smile of savage glee upon his coarse red face; "well, let him follow with the rest, but well secured. And

if he tries to get away, then shoot him through the head."

Colin received these pleasing orders for his custody in silence. It was useless to anger the man further, and there was indeed no time to offer any comment; for, on a further order from the rebel chief, the crowd of men began to pour confusedly through the deep archway of the *patio* gate. Outside there waited a still larger number of armed men. As far as Colin could well judge their numbers in the waning light—for dusk was now at hand—the whole force might be perhaps five hundred strong. Of these about a third were mounted, while the rest were infantry; and Colin also saw two Maxim guns.

Loud, confused, and often contradictory orders were being given, half a dozen voices shouting at once; but in a few minutes the band had been arranged in some semblance of order and began to move away. If their formation was irregular, still more so was the order of the march. Some would run forward to rejoin a friend; others broke from the ranks and darted back to the hacienda, apparently for some missing possession. Colin reflected, not without an inward chuckle, how the school sergeant would have raved at such a scene of muddle and indiscipline.

He felt a little less inclined to laugh when his own special guard secured a rope about each wrist, and, taking one himself, handed the second to another man. Colin was placed between them, and the three fell in at the rear of the column. From this position the boy was able to observe that about eighty or a hundred men remained behind, standing about the *hacienda* gate and shouting their farewells to friends in the main force.

The column moved in a south-easterly direction, with its back turned towards the hills. What was the objective, Colin wondered? Was it a raid, or were they going to fight a real battle, take a town? Well, he was evidently going with the rebels, so he would find out ere long.

With a halt of some ten minutes at the end of each hour's march, the progress of the little force lasted till midnight, by which time Colin concluded that they must have marched about ten miles. Then a rest of two hours was ordered, and the men lay down, rolling themselves in their blankets and going fast asleep. Colin slept fitfully himself. Then, as the moon dipped down behind the hills, the march was once again resumed.

By keeping his ears open to the talk going on among the men about him, Colin was presently able to pick up some details of the rebel general's plans. They were, it seemed, upon the way to a small town, Las Peñas, about five miles farther on across the plain. He further gathered that Government

troops were known to be advancing against them; but it was believed that they had not yet reached this town, which it was Villa's plan to take. Finally, from various comments, Colin gathered that there were a few fine houses and some wealthy people in the place, and that the probable plunder of these was looked forward to as a highly popular item of the proceedings. It was expected that the rebel force would reach Las Peñas some two hours before dawn.

From time to time Villa himself rode to and fro along the column with an eye upon its ranks, and Colin noticed that a glance was always thrown on him.

So far they had been crossing the bare level plain, upon which no opposing force could be concealed; but the boy noticed that a little company of horsemen was thrown out as an advance-guard about half a mile ahead. Presently they reached a low line of foot-hills, a small outlying spur from the great range, forming a gentle undulation in the plain; it was, however, quite sufficient to conceal what lay upon the farther side. A little distance short of this low ridge the column once more halted, while the advance-guard rode forward to reconnoitre. The dawn was breaking now, and objects at some little distance could be seen.

Almost at once a couple of the horsemen galloped back, quite clearly bringing news. There was a hasty consultation, and then Villa hurried to the front. In a few minutes orders were given for an advance in total silence. The two Maxim guns were brought up from the rear and sent ahead.

A march of a few minutes brought the rebel party to the little ridge. The road led over, or perhaps rather through it, crossing it by a shallow, fairly broad defile. The infantry were ordered to lie down in line upon each side the road immediately behind the ridge, the mounted men being drawn up in close column on the road itself, the Maxims on their front. Colin could see that preparations on the rebel side were planned with some amount of military skill. Villa might be a scoundrel, but, as a soldier, he was clearly not a fool.

The distant tramp of an advancing force of infantry could now be heard, soon mingled with the clink and jingle which betokened mounted men. Government troops, thought Colin; they had, then, been nearer than the rebels had foreseen. His own position was not enviable; he was liable to be shot summarily by the rebels if he made an effort to escape, and was equally likely to fall by a chance bullet from the regulars. But, for the moment, there

was nothing he could do to better matters, and he lay quite still between his guards.

Then suddenly a little company of horsemen, numbering eight or ten, came into sight upon the crest of the defile. At once the band was greeted by a volley from the rebel horse. Three horses fell, while two men reeled in their saddles and dropped to the ground. Those remaining, without firing a shot, turned round and galloped to the rear.

But the main body of the regulars was close behind, and now appeared in the pass, thrown into no little confusion by this unexpected attack on the advance-guard, which had clearly not been sent sufficiently ahead of the main force. Upon this body Villa instantly opened fire with his Maxims, sweeping the road and mowing down many men. At the same time a line of rebels quite a hundred strong dashed up the slope of the low ridge on either side the road, and, gaining the crest, poured down upon the regulars a rapid and destructive rifle fire.

The surprise was completely successful, and the Government troops paid dearly for the carelessness with which they had approached a spot so likely to conceal a foe. Though Colin was some little distance on the left side of the road, and thus possessed only a limited view of the defile, he soon realized that the regulars had been thrown into great confusion by the unexpectedness of the attack, and were already more than half-demoralized. Officers, both mounted and on foot, dashed forward bravely, trying to force a passage through the pass; but it was clear that they were ill supported by their men. It was, indeed, a wellnigh hopeless task which was so suddenly presented to them—that of forcing their way through a defile in which a pair of Maxims were in action, while from the higher ground on either side a heavy rifle fire played upon their flanks.

A BID FOR FREEDOM

The whole affair was practically over in little more than some ten minutes from the time when the first shots were fired. The rebel cavalry swept through the pass, the infantry charged down the slopes on either side. Colin, dragged forward by his guardians, saw the regulars forced back confusedly, and very soon they were in full retreat. Someone beside him raised a shout of “Viva Madero!” but it was not until another voice cried “Viva Villa!” that the men began to cheer with any real warmth, and “Viva

Villa!" sounded all around. The general was quite clearly, with his men at least, a much more favoured person than the dreamy would-be president.

As soon as Colin had been dragged across the crest he took in the whole situation of affairs. The regulars, forced back in confusion, were now a quarter of a mile away in full retreat—it might indeed be said in utter rout—towards the small walled town of Las Peñas a short distance in their rear. Colin could hear the voice of Villa giving vigorous orders, and at once the whole body of the rebels was in rapid movement; not in too orderly a fashion perhaps, but yet in one sufficiently imposing to inspire routed troops with fear. To keep up with the rapid advance Colin's custodians broke into a run, and he was hustled on between them at a pace which made him thankful that the sun was not yet up. As long as it was cool he felt that he was fit to run with any rebel of the band.

Villa's intention was quite plain—to overtake the regulars and to inflict on them, if possible, an utter rout before they should have time to reach the shelter of the town and close its gates. If they were caught outside the gate, hustled inside, and then pursued along the narrow streets, the result to them would be disaster, and the place would speedily be in the rebels' hands.

Precisely what the boy had judged to be the Tiger's purpose now took place. The head of the retreating column had already gained the gate, and some few men were through, when the rebels were upon them with a rush.

At once the archway of the ancient gate became a seething mass of struggling men. Shots were fired at point-blank range, knives drawn and deadly thrusts given and taken. But the dense block gave way at last; for, while the rebels were pressed forward by the weight and number of their friends who hurried up behind, the regulars upon the contrary were weakened every moment by the loss of those among them who decided upon making a "strategic movement to the rear". It was not long before the last shred of resistance was abandoned, and the gate and portion of the street immediately behind it were left clear. The now entirely victorious rebels swept into the town *en masse*.

Colin, still dragged between his guardians, entered with the rest. Once through the gate, where many men, both regulars and rebels, were lying dead or wounded on the ground, the place was for the moment fairly clear. The main force of the regulars had now got quite away, nor did it seem to be the rebel general's present purpose to pursue them farther than the town. Whatever might be his intentions, the chief object of his men was amply clear. It was on plunder that they were now bent.

On all hands men were breaking from the ranks, if ranks could be said to exist among that motley force; were entering houses, churches, stopping in the streets to rifle any dead or wounded officers they found—and there were several such. The Mexican officers had proved their worth as single-handed fighters and had suffered far more than their men.

The shouts of men, mingled with the cries of women and children, rose on every side, as the rebels burst into the houses and began their work of looting. Smoke, too, began to curl up here and there, and flames soon appeared from roofs and windows.

Colin thought that he discerned in the face of one of his custodians a decided wish to join the looters rather than continue guardian of a prisoner of small interest to himself. But he who from the first had had the charge of Colin seemed of sterner and more conscientious stuff, and steadily continued to drag on his prisoner towards the southern gate of the small town, which now appeared at the far end of the main street in which they were.

Quite suddenly came Colin's chance. A soldier of the beaten regulars, retreating with some comrades, but showing greater courage and determination than the rest, turned round, levelled his rifle, and fired at the advancing rebels. The bullet found its billet in the brain of Colin's most determined guardian. The man, a tall, heavily built fellow, threw up both his arms, spun round upon his heels and fell to the ground, nearly bringing down Colin beside him.

The boy, though for an instant stunned by the suddenness of the affair, saw his chance, and took it. The other man stooped for a moment over his dead comrade. In an instant Colin's clenched fist took him full behind the ear. The rebel fell like an ox, and the boy turned and ran.

They were just opposite the open door of a church, within which several men were busy at the cheerful work of plunder. Colin bolted inside, saw himself unnoticed by those engaged in the congenial task of tearing ornaments and sacred vessels from the altar; observed a second open door, and in an instant had slipped through it, to find himself in a narrow and apparently deserted lane.

There was a shout behind him, and he guessed that he was being pursued. Racing at full speed down the winding lane he dashed in through an open door which stood invitingly upon his right; saw another door immediately upon the left which seemed to lead to darkness; dived for the shelter which it offered, tripped and fell.

For a few moments he lay stunned; it was perhaps the best thing he could have done. The noise of those behind came near, passed swiftly by the outer door, then died away. Imagining that he was still in front of them they had continued down the lane and on into another street. Then, failing to discover him, had returned to their far more attractive work.

Colin raised himself to a sitting posture and looked round. He seemed to be in a large cellar a few feet below the level of the street. The only light came through the open door, and he could see but little of the place; but he was almost immediately conscious of not being the only occupant. The sound of heavy laboured breathing reached his ears from somewhere close at hand.

He sat and listened, holding his own breath meanwhile. The sound continued, but it seemed to him that it grew weaker as the minutes passed, and Colin now located it as coming from a distant corner of the gloomy place. Straining his eyes he could at last make out a figure lying half-propped against the wall.

There was a sound as though the man—if man it were—had moved. Colin was sitting just between the distant corner and the half-open door, and was thus doubtless visible to the unknown.

"Señor Colin."

The boy started in surprise. That was the name by which he was best known to the *vaqueros* on the Hacienda of the Star, "Charteris" presenting difficulties of pronunciation to their tongues.

"Who are you?" Colin asked in a low tone.

"It is I, *señor*; Canuto the *vaquero*," came the answer in a feeble voice.

Colin got up and groped his way with caution to the corner where the man was lying.

"Canuto! is it really you? What brings you here?" he asked, as he knelt down beside the semi-prostrate form.

"A folly, Señor Colin, as it seems," the man replied; "they told me that by fighting for Madero and the General I should have again my land. But now I shall have nothing, for I die."

"Where are you wounded? Let me help you; I will go and find a doctor if I can."

"You can do nothing, *señor*, though I thank you; you were ever kind to me," Canuto said. "I was among the first to get into the town; a bullet struck me as I passed the gate and I believe I bleed inside. So I have dragged myself in here to die alone, as do the beasts."

Colin, meanwhile, had searched in his coat pocket and had found a solitary match. He struck it, and one look at the drawn, pain-racked face of the *vaquero* speedily confirmed the truth of the man's words. Canuto was quite plainly at the point of death. He spoke with ever-growing difficulty—soon would speak no more.

"Can I do nothing for you?" Colin asked.

"No, *señor*, nothing; yet I thank the saints that you are here, for there is something I must say. Listen, I pray you, *señor*, while I can still speak. The *hacienda* is to be attacked, and soon, although I do not know exactly when; but in a day or two. That portion of the General's army which remained behind last night and did not march with us is going there; a man named Julian Perez will be in command. It were well that Señor Osgood should be warned; Perez is not a man to spare."

"They shall be warned if I can do it," Colin said.

"But, *señor*, take care not to fall again into the General's hands. I know him now for a bad man; I would do nothing more to help him and his party, even could I live. Be careful, *señor*; if he catches you again he will perhaps do to you as he is threatening to the poor Castaños boy."

"Castaños boy!" cried Colin; "what Castaños boy?"

"The little Benito, *señor*; grandson of the rich *señor* at the Hacienda of the Running Water, where you went with Señor Westman some months since to buy a horse. Have you not heard that Villa's men two weeks ago attacked the old man's *hacienda*, pillaged it, and carried off the boy? The general asks one hundred thousand silver dollars for his ransom. He has sent a message to the old man, threatening him that if the money is not paid at once he will cut off Benito's ears, double the ransom, then cut off his hands, and double it again."

Colin shuddered.

"Is poor Benito with the rebel army—here?" he asked.

"No, *señor*, he is being kept a prisoner."

"Where? Do you know?"

"Yes, *señor*, at the House of the Winds. But, *señor*, do not try to rescue him," the dying man went on, as though he had read Colin's half-formed thought; "for he is guarded and you will yourself be taken if you do. And then—remember what the General was about to do to you some hours since."

At these words from Canuto something grew clear to Colin which had puzzled him till now.

"Canuto! It was you who interfered when I was on the point of being tortured by this General Villa. *You* were the man I saw go out from by the door."

A gleam of satisfaction came into the dying *vaquero's* eyes.

"Yes, *señor*, fortunately I was there when you came in. I had not known you were a prisoner until then. I saw what was about to happen, and I went out quickly to find someone who had power with the General. Happily I found him and he interfered."

The man was silent for a minute; then he spoke again with sudden energy.

"Stay, *señor*, there is one thing more; a thing here which I wish to give to you."

He tried to raise one arm, but it fell back.

"I cannot; take it, *señor*, pray."

Following the feeble motion of Canuto's hand, Colin opened the front of his shirt, and found, sewn to its inner side, a small flat packet wrapped securely in a soiled discoloured piece of cloth. The threads that held it in its place were broken with but little trouble, and soon Colin had it in his hand.

"*Señor*," Canuto whispered, "take it for yourself. It is a charm, and though it has not brought to me good fortune, it may perhaps do so to you. My father possessed it, also his father before him; my grandfather was but a small child when it was given to him by a person famous in those days. He always said it had great power. Take it; you have been a friend to me, and it is yours."

Canuto's head fell back as the last words were spoken; Colin saw that he was dead.

CHAPTER XI

To the Rescue

Colin was much affected as he looked down on the dead *vaquero*, to whose talk he had so often listened, by whose side he had so often ridden for long hours on the breezy uplands of the range. Poor fellow! Just and well-founded as might be his claim to own a portion of those widespread pastures on which he had spent his life as the mere servant of their present owners, it was sad that he had chosen to throw in his lot with the rebellion and so meet his death.

Colin's first impulse was to go in search of help, to try to arrange for poor Canuto being decently buried. A minute's calm reflection showed him the impossibility of such a step. The rebels had been thoroughly victorious, and the town was even now being sacked. To show himself, to make inquiries, attract attention to his presence in the place, could only lead to his being recaptured. Moreover, duty called him to attend to other things—to think about the living rather than the dead. He straightened the dead limbs and drew Canuto's blanket round his face. Then he sat down and thought.

The "charm" which, at the dead man's earnest request, he had slipped into his pocket, was already forgotten; it was doubtless a thing of no value whatever. But the information just received was of the first importance. The Hacienda of the Star was soon to be attacked in force; poor little Benito, threatened with cruel mutilation, was a prisoner at the House of the Winds.

Colin took the matter of the *hacienda* first. It seemed his clear duty to make the best of his way there—if possible—and give warning to Mr. Osgood. The onset might take place at any moment, supposing it had not already done so; and though the manager and hands were far from being wholly unprepared, it would still be an advantage to them to be warned in time.

But then Colin's thoughts turned to the unfortunate Benito, a prisoner, held to ransom under threats of mutilation, and quite possibly of death; though it was perhaps not likely that his captor, Villa, would resort to this last extremity, seeing that the child's death would bring no profit to the rebel cause. But Villa's known violent temper was such that little reliance could be placed upon his acting in a reasonable manner, even where his own interests were concerned.

Still, looked at dispassionately, it certainly seemed that Colin's first duty was to his employers; to warn the *hacienda*, and then, on consultation with the manager, see if anything could be done towards rescuing the child. But Colin vividly recalled his visit to the Hacienda of the Running Water; the kind reception given to both Westman and himself by its proprietor; the charming manners of the girls and the boy's mother—what an agony of mind that mother must be enduring!—and the confiding friendliness of the poor child himself.

After all, those at the *hacienda* were well armed; the place might be regarded as being fortified to some extent; the rebels would discover that its capture was no easy job. The towers at the corners of the block were loopholed for rifle fire; those on the side where stood the entrance-gate were built out from the wall, and thus commanded it. It would be well no doubt that Mr. Osgood should be warned as soon as possible, but it was hardly a matter of vital importance. Benito's seemed the more pressing need.

On poor Canuto's dying story Colin felt quite sure he could rely. The *vaquero* and himself had always been on friendly terms, and there could be no object in the man deceiving him. Of course it was quite possible that the House of the Winds might be well guarded, or Benito might have been removed elsewhere; but these were matters which he could only discover by a bold attempt.

Although he had not visited the place in question, Colin knew practically where it was. The House of the Winds was a small *hacienda*, the land belonging to which had for many years been absorbed into a larger range. It was a small, lonely, half-deserted house, occupied now, as Colin chanced to know, by an elderly couple. Occasionally the owner or a cattlehand would stay there for a night, but for the most part the old couple were alone.

The place lay in a lonely gully, some fifteen miles distant from the Hacienda of the Star; and Colin knew the road to it quite well. One turned off from the Nazarenos track some two miles eastward of the half-way rest-house, then followed a rough bridlepath for six or seven miles. He could not miss the place, no other house being near.

Upon the whole, when Colin turned the question over in his mind, he came to the conclusion that common gratitude for all the hospitality and kindness shown to him by the Castaños family made it his duty to attempt a rescue of the boy. It seemed just possible he might succeed; at any rate he meant to "have a try".

Whether or not to start at once was a less easy matter to decide. Now that the first excitement of his own escape and flight to this dim refuge, the finding of Canuto, and the pathos of his death—now that all this was over and he was again alone, Colin was chiefly conscious of great weariness. That was no matter for surprise; he had been marching all the night, save for the two short hours of troubled sleep. He felt he must have rest—and food—before he could take any useful step.

There was a further reason for delay. It was broad daylight, and would be so for some hours yet. To go into the streets of that small town would certainly invite disaster; his dress, his foreign appearance, and his age would all combine to attract attention, even if he eluded the rebels themselves. No; it would be better to await the dark, or at all events the dusk, husband his strength, then do his best to get away in the direction of the hills.

Food was a pressing need. Colin stole softly to the doorway of the cellar and peered out. No soul was to be seen. A door stood partly open on the farther side of the small court, but no sound issued from the room beyond. Colin moved cautiously across the *patio* and looked in.

A frugal meal was on a table; on the floor beside it lay an upturned chair. A crucifix that had once hung upon the wall, a picture of a saint, some other trifling ornaments, were strewn about. Clearly the place had recently been visited by raiders, and the occupants had fled.

Colin decided that it was no time to consider nice distinctions of *meum* and *tuum*. There was the food of which he stood so much in need. He helped himself without a qualm, only devoutly hoping that he would not be disturbed. It was the usual morning repast of *frijoles* and *tortillas*—the latter still warm from the grid. He ate heartily and quickly, took a long drink of water from a tall jar standing just outside the door, and then returned to his cellar, after stuffing into his jacket pockets a good provision of the *tortillas*.

The sun was high by now; but the old house, with its wide overhanging eaves, its broad deep entrance archway to the court, prevented any rays from reaching even to the door of his retreat. Of course there was the chance of someone looking in, but that chance must be risked. The lane was narrow, quiet, and the houses in it mostly poor; the rebels would be busy in the better quarters of the town. He might perhaps have preferred another place to that in which the body of the dead *vaquero* lay; that, too, could not be helped. He chose a corner of the cellar and lay down to rest.

He was so thoroughly exhausted that his sleep was long and sound. When he awoke again the light which entered through the still half-open

door was growing dim. It was late afternoon. Colin, now feeling much refreshed, sat up. He must decide on what he meant to do, for it would soon be time to act.

Although he had not previously been in Las Peñas he had quite a good idea of its position as regards the hills. It lay a little distance to the north of Nazarenos, and about five-and-twenty miles from the *hacienda*. The first ten miles would be along a road he did not know; but after that he would come out into the route he had so often travelled with his friend on journeys to and from the town. A mile or so beyond the half-way halting-place lay the turning for the House of the Winds.

His watch was gone—was now some rebel's prize, his pockets having been rifled when he was taken prisoner on the range. But open-air life had made him largely independent of such artificial aids in reckoning time as clocks and watches; he could judge the time at almost any hour of the day. It must be after five o'clock by now. Provided he could hit on the right road and meet with no delay he ought to reach the half-way house by nine or ten.

Taking a last look at the still form of Canuto, wondering where would be the final resting-place of that dead body which he had known in life so well, the boy stole from his shelter, and, after peering round the archway, passed into the quiet street. No one in sight; no sound. He crossed the lane and entered a still smaller one upon the farther side; still no one to be seen. He went on till the lane ended in the street by which the rebels had entered the town, and found himself quite close to the north gate. The place might, judging by appearances, have been quite empty of all human life; but probably behind the fast-closed doors and shuttered windows, people were in hiding, fearing lest the vanished rebels should return. So much the better this, from Colin's point of view. If the Las Peñas people would remain indoors till he was clear away he would be much obliged.

In a few minutes he had reached the gate and was outside. It was now dusk; but clear before him lay the hills, and he could recognize the contours that would serve him as a guide. At first his route was somewhat devious, for he had to thread his way among small fields that lay immediately around the town. But soon he reached more open country, and was able to push forward at a better pace.

Two hours of fast walking brought him well into the foot-hills of the range. He had already debated the question of confiding in some person in the town or its immediate neighbourhood and trying to borrow a horse; but had decided that the less he showed himself the safer he would be. Some of

the rebels might be lingering in the neighbourhood. He would push on as best he could on foot; later he might be able to secure a horse. But as he went on he decided to let well alone. He might find a horse very much in his way if he succeeded in reaching the House of the Winds.

He felt refreshed by his long sleep and by the food. Soon he reached a portion of the route which he could recognize; not that he had ever travelled it before; but certain points of the great hills stood out before him, and by their position he could judge exactly where he was.

It must be nine o'clock. He was well up among the hills by now, and presently sat down beside a stream, a draught from which was very welcome. Cigarettes, matches, everything his pockets had contained, had gone—snatched from him by the cattle-raiders, with his watch. The watch had been a present from his father; he regretted it, and even more a little silver match-box, Dido's Christmas gift a year before. Dido! How far away, remote, almost as though belonging to another life, his little bright-eyed sister seemed. Should he ever see her again? The possibility of doing so had seemed most unlikely several times within the last few days.

No use in getting glum! Colin sprang up and once more took the road. He passed the little rest-house by a wide detour, not knowing but it might be by now a rebel post. About a mile beyond he came to the point at which he must turn off the *hacienda* road. The moon was up by now, and he could recognize a little-trodden track.

Two hours' steady walking brought him to a little ridge beyond which lay a small ravine. Upon the summit Colin paused. A hundred yards below him, on the farther side of the ravine, stood the House of the Winds, clearly visible in the moonlight.

It was a small house, strongly built, and of a single story only, save at one corner where a little tower rose above the level of the roof. The windows, doors, and other features of the place were not too clear, and Colin saw that he must wait till daylight before making any plans. He put aside a thought of going down to reconnoitre while it was still dark, fearing lest he might run into some trap. To risk doing so would be of no use to Benito—if the boy were really there—and would put himself once more into the rebels' hands, when he could hope for little mercy.

Several large boulders lay about the ridge on which he stood. Colin moved quietly about, and presently discovered two of these lying close together, the narrow space between them forming a secure and fairly comfortable shelter. If he could lie there undiscovered through the following

day he would be able, not only to study the details of the house, see who went out and in, but possibly to see Benito himself.

In some two hours the first signs of dawn were visible. Colin took up his post between the rocks. He had occupied the interval by gathering grass with which to make himself a fairly comfortable couch, for he foresaw that he might have to lie there the whole day. He had, too, stolen down to a small stream that watered the ravine, and taken a long satisfying drink. He now lay down, entirely concealed, both from the house and from a passer-by, yet able to command a full view of the place.

The portion of the house directly facing towards him was the angle of two walls. That on the left side of this angle lay quite clear in view. There was no window in it near the ground. But at its far end rose the tower already seen, and in this one small narrow window looked out on the roof below. To the right of the angle the wall was more in perspective; here was the entrance-door, with a small window on each side, both strongly barred.

"If the poor kid is here at all," said Colin to himself, "I'll bet a penny he is in that tower."

He lay with his eyes fixed upon the tower window, but for an hour there was nothing to be seen. Presently his attention was attracted by the sound of an opening door. Turning his gaze upon the other wall he saw two men emerge; tall fellows in Mexican dress, each with a rifle in his hand. Benito's guards!

In a few minutes they were followed by an older man, who wore a long grey beard. Some conversation passed between the three, and then the elder man went off to a small corral in which two or three horses were grazing. The other two kept their position near the door, and presently sat down on a stone bench and lighted cigarettes.

So far, so good; it seemed as though there were but two of them to guard the boy. Colin turned his attention once more to the tower window, and was presently rewarded by the sight of someone moving in the room. He saw a head appear inside the window; then hands grasped the upright bars by which it was secured, and for a moment a small figure hoisted itself up.

"Unless the window's very high up in the wall, that figure is a child's," said Colin to himself. "Benito's there all right; I'm jolly glad I came."

But how would it be possible to get the boy away? Colin lay still within his shelter, studying the house minutely, trying to measure distances and heights of walls.

The roof, as usual, was quite flat, and about five-and-twenty feet from the ground. From that the tower rose another twenty feet or more. The roof had a low parapet all round it, upright projections appearing at short intervals above the general level of the little wall. These, reflected Colin, would be useful for descent, provided that one had a rope to loop around them. The question of gaining access to the roof from the ground was more serious; a ladder was not likely to be handy. Yet without some kind of ladder, how was he to gain the roof or, thence, the window in the tower wall?

Beyond the house, upon the left, there was a spot which might be called a kind of lumber-yard, where various odds and ends lay heaped untidily together. Among these Colin could make out a pile of logs. It was not easy, at that distance, to judge accurately of their size and length; but some seemed to be the stems of young trees, collected there, no doubt, for mending corral walls or perhaps to be cut up for firewood. If only one of these were long enough he might swarm up it to the roof, drag it up after him, plant it against the tower wall and so reach the window. How about the strength of the two upright bars?

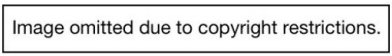
But nothing, it was clear, could be attempted until dark. Colin looked at the sun; he had at least nine hours to wait.

Slowly the hours wore away. A little food remained in the boy's pocket, but he ate it sparingly, partly to husband it for later in the day, partly for fear of thirst. He had no water-bottle and he dared not go down to the stream by daylight, though the guards—if guards they were—had disappeared by now into the house. Fortunately, though the day was warm, he was not suffering much from heat, the rocks that almost met above his head affording ample shade.

More than once the little figure he had seen behind the tower window came in sight and disappeared—sometimes for a few minutes only, but at others for a longer period. About midday it vanished wholly for two hours. Colin reflected upon this, and finally decided that Benito—for it was Benito, he felt sure—would probably be taken down by his custodians and allowed a little exercise and air. But he did not appear outside the house, and was doubtless confined to the *patio*.

It seemed to Colin Charteris the longest day that he had ever passed; but the sun sank behind the hills at last, and Colin, who had dozed a little in the long hot hours of the afternoon, now roused himself and began to prepare for action. What he could do must be done soon; he was now suffering not a

little from a steadily increasing thirst, and felt he could not go much longer without quenching this.



THE BAR WAS LOOSE AT LAST

Dusk came, and soon the dark. The house-door had not opened since about an hour before sunset, when the men whom Colin looked on as Benito's guards had come out for a little time to stroll about. Colin was thankful on reflecting that there was no sign of any dog; a dog would hear him moving round the house; but, had a dog been there, he would most probably have come outside with the old man.

Colin had already carefully studied his way down to the house; and now, having crept stiffly from his hiding-place and stretched his much-cramped limbs, he made his way cautiously down the slope. His first halt was beside the stream for a long drink. Then from beside it he picked up a piece or two of hard sharp stone, which he placed in his pocket.

He next crept quietly to the house and moved along the *adobe* wall. There was, as he had thought, no hold on it for hand or foot; he must find something by which he could gain the roof. He went on to the place where he had seen the pile of wood.

Hurrah! here was the very thing—a tree-trunk fully five-and-twenty feet in length. But how was he to get it into place? It lay with several shorter ones in a large pile—and not upon the top. A careless movement as he tried to get it out would set the heap in movement and create no end of din.

For fully half an hour Colin worked at this. Using great caution he displaced first one and then another of the cumbrous poles until the one which he had set his mind on lay exposed and free. It was the very thing he wanted, having several stumps of lopped-off branches still in place. But it was very heavy; it would be as much as he could do to drag it to the wall, and it would be impossible to raise it after him when he had gained the roof. A rope; but where could that be found?

But fortune favoured Colin in his search, which presently yielded the thing he needed, lying neglected in a pile of odds and ends. The rope was rather short—not more than twenty feet in length; moreover it was old and frayed. But it must do.

The moving of the trunk was a slow business, but he had it raised against the wall at last, its one end bedded firmly in the ground. Then Colin rested a few minutes, listening; but no sound was to be heard. It was an easy task to swarm up the rough stem, his feet helped by the stumps; in half a minute he was standing on the roof immediately below the little window in the tower.

On consideration he decided that he must not leave his ladder standing as it did; someone might come and find it; that would give the show away. The ground beside the wall was soft; he lowered the tree-trunk with his rope for a short distance and then let it fall with a dull thud. Then came the question of ascent to the barred window ten or twelve feet overhead.

For this he had already made his plans. His handkerchief, like other loose possessions, had been taken from him by the raiders. Sacrificing a strip from his shirt he wrapped in it one of the stones carried in his pocket, made it fast to one end of the rope, and threw the missile up at the window. A score of times and more he persevered in this without success; but at last a good shot sent the stone behind a bar, and it fell back upon the other side of this. The rope was thus passed round the bar, and Colin had a means by which to mount. There was just length enough of rope for him to use it doubled.

It was hard work swarming up, but Colin understood gymnastic work, and he had gained the window-ledge at last, and could look in. A narrow slit of light which showed right opposite him made it clear that there must be a second window in the room; but of the interior he could see practically nothing. Listening intently he could catch the sound of gentle even breathing. Clearly the chamber's occupant by day was there and fast asleep. So much the better; Colin did not want Benito waked as yet.

With some difficulty he managed to get one leg between the bars and thus secure himself a seat, though not one of the most comfortable. Then he examined, almost wholly by his sense of touch, the setting of the bars. The window-ledge was made in the form of a ridge which sloped down steeply on each side, the bars being inserted in the angle at the top. Colin soon realized that his best plan would be to work away the *adobe* on the outer side of the bar chosen for attack, and at its lower end. That done, it probably would not be difficult to draw it from its setting at the top; and it could, if needful, be put back in place, the removal of the setting from the outer portion of the ledge not being too clearly visible to anyone inside the room. There was no knowing what hours might pass before he would be able to get Benito out.

He had no knife with which to work; but he made up for this deficiency by using the sharp stones which he had brought. It was hard work at first; but presently he found that he was making progress; the small narrow groove that he had set himself to cut was growing. But it was several hours before he had cut down about four inches; then, upon trying the bar, he felt it yield. Another half-hour's work and he had cut down to its lower end. He worked it gently to and fro and felt that it was loosening at the top. The job was done.

While working steadily he had considered what must next be done, and soon found himself confronted with a serious problem. He could not hope to finish till an hour or so before the dawn; that would be far too late to get the boy away. An hour or two later they would certainly be missed and pursued. He had no horse, and could not hope for one. Benito would most probably be weak from his confinement, and he would very likely have to carry him a good part of the fifteen miles that lay between them and the Hacienda of the Star. If they deferred departure till the following night they would have a much better chance of escape.

But where was he to hide all day? Inside the room? But whether that were possible or not he had no means of judging yet.

The bar was loose at last. Colin drew it gently from the upper setting and retained it in his hand. Moving with caution, for he was now very cramped, he drew his other leg across the window-ledge and lowered himself upon the floor of the dark room.

CHAPTER XII

In the Nick of Time

The sleeper seemed to stir and wake as Colin placed his foot upon the floor.

"Who's there?" asked in Spanish a voice which was at once recognizable as that of Benito.

"Hush!" answered Colin; "it is Colin Charteris. You remember me?"

"Assuredly I remember you, Señor Colin. Oh, I am glad to see you; but how is it you are here? Are you a prisoner too?"

"No, no; I'm going to try and get you out. Have you got matches? Is it safe to strike a light?"

"No, Señor Colin, I have none."

"Then we must do without, that's all."

By this time Colin had discovered whereabouts the boy was lying—on a low bed in the far corner of the room. Feeling his way across the tiled floor he sat down beside him.

"Never mind now how I got here," he said, in answer to Benito's repeated inquiry; "there is but little time to talk of that. Is there anyone in an adjoining room to hear us speaking? When will anyone come in?"

"There is no room adjoining this one, *señor*; the old woman, Barbara, will bring my breakfast about an hour after dawn."

"Benito, is there anywhere where I can hide? Is the room searched each day?"

"But there is nowhere to search; no cupboard—nothing, unless underneath the bed."

"Does Barbara look under it when she comes in?"

"No; she sweeps under it a little now and then. She swept the room out yesterday, but she forgot, I think, to put her broom beneath the bed."

Sitting beside the boy in the now growing light, Colin explained to him briefly how he had learnt about his being there; told of his watch the previous day, and of his plans for getting away. Benito listened intently.

"But, *señor*, if they catch us they will kill us both."

"Then we must take care that they do not catch us; we shall have a good long start."

Colin went on to question Benito as to his prison life. The boy explained that Barbara, the wife of the elderly man whom Colin had already seen, brought him his breakfast in the morning; that at midday she fetched him down into the court, where he remained an hour or sometimes more; that after that another meal was brought him in his room; while supper was served a little before dusk, after which he was locked up for the night.

Colin learnt further that at present only two men acted as a guard. Sometimes a larger party came and stayed for a few days, though for what purpose the boy did not know. Such bands appeared and disappeared at irregular intervals.

"I see," said Colin; "now then, let me think."

It seemed to him that there was only one thing to be done; that he should stay in the boy's room all day, hiding beneath the bed at such times as old Barbara was in the room; then, a few hours after dark, endeavour to escape. It was a risk, as he knew well; the woman might quite likely chance to look beneath the bed, when he would be discovered. In that case he would have done no good, but rather harm. But there seemed nothing else to do. It would be daylight soon, and far too late for them to try and leave the place. Even as he thus reflected there was heard a slow and heavy footstep on the stair.

"She's coming, *señor*," said Benito; "she is earlier than usual. You must hide."

Colin lost little time in slipping underneath the bed, where the thick dust suggested that the visits of old Barbara's broom were rare. A key was fumblingly inserted in the lock outside, the door was opened, and a not unkindly voice inquired:

"Well, little master, how are we to-day?"

Judged by her heavy footsteps as she moved about the chamber, Barbara was stout. Colin inclined to augur well from this: stout folks were usually good-natured. Nor did the woman's tone as she talked ramblingly to the young prisoner suggest any tendency to harshness or ill-treatment. Colin could hear the clink of crockery; but Barbara still continued to lumber about the room, to the boy's no small irritation. He was acutely aware of both

hunger and thirst, and was longing to ask Benito for a modest share of the breakfast—always supposing that it was on a fairly liberal scale.

Benito evidently had the needs of his intending rescuer in his mind, for he seemed to be trifling with the coffee and *tortillas*, till the woman asked him if he felt unwell.

"No, but I am not very hungry yet. I think I'll leave the rest for half an hour; I may like it then."

"As you will, little master; I shall come for you as usual at midday. Till then, farewell."

The door was closed and locked; but Colin waited till the sound of Barbara's retreating footsteps was no longer heard, before emerging, dusty and dishevelled, from beneath the bed. He then required little pressing from Benito to accept the food and drink the boy had not consumed.

For another hour or two the pair talked in a low voice, though there was in fact little need for that special caution. About midday old Barbara came up again and took Benito down into the court, then returning to set his apartment tidy in her own negligent fashion. Poor Colin lay on thorns for the half-hour she was in the room. If she should go too near the window, lay a hand on the loose bar; if she should thrust her broom below the bed and thus discover him, then all was up. But neither of these much-feared accidents occurred. After about an hour's absence Benito was brought back—this time by one of the two men whom Colin had already seen. This guardian glanced about the room, made one or two remarks, and then left the boy to himself, humming a tune as he went clattering down the tower stair. Benito's custodians were, it seemed, quite at their ease as to the possibility of the child making his escape.

After the dinner brought by Barbara had been removed, Colin explained his plans. Once it was really dark, the sooner they were off the better. He meant to lower Benito to the house-roof by the rope, and then descend himself. The cord would then be pulled down from its loop about the untouched bar, Benito would be lowered to the ground, while Colin followed as he could. Both might have several feet to fall, but that could not be helped.

The afternoon seemed long, although Benito talked at no small length about the details of his capture and confinement. He did not speak of any special threats being made to him, and Colin carefully refrained from telling him of those which had been sent by Villa to his grandfather. He admitted

having been much frightened by “that man, Villa”, but did not seem to have been at all ill-treated by others, either upon his journey to the House of the Winds or since he had been captive there.

Dusk came at last, and with it the boy’s supper, of which Colin took a part. The second window of the room commanded a partial view of the small corrals placed behind the house; and Colin set Benito at it to keep watch until the lantern of old Esteban, the woman’s husband, should be seen; the man, Benito said, went out each evening to look round the place and see that all was right. About an hour after this, thought Colin, would be their best time to start.

The English boy was well aware of the great risks they ran. He reckoned they were distant fully fifteen miles from the Hacienda of the Star; that he would have to walk, and very likely carry his companion for no little portion of the way. Benito was accustomed to go everywhere, the shortest distance even, upon horseback, and was likely to prove a poor pedestrian. A horse, or better two, would have been very welcome; but that was out of the question. To attempt to take one from the corral would be far too big a risk.

At last the time had come. Colin removed the loosened window-bar, which he had carefully replaced in position upon entering the room; made fast the rope beneath Benito’s arms, and, helping him to climb upon the ledge, lowered him until he stood upon the roof below. Then, drawing up the cord Benito had undone, he passed it round the untouched bar, swung himself over, and was soon beside the boy, drawing the cord down after him.

He walked across the roof to the inner side, and, crouching down behind the low parapet, listened intently. No one could be seen; but Colin heard the sound of voices talking quietly from some apartment near the court. All safe so far.

He felt a touch upon his shoulder; turning, he found Benito at his side.

“Hark, Señor Colin, what is that?”

Colin rose from his stooping position and listened. It was a quiet, windless night. Yes, he could hear a faint sound coming from the east. In another minute it was all too easy to make out its nature—the dull thudding tramp of several horses on soft ground. A party of mounted men was approaching.

Till now Benito had been more composed than Colin had perhaps expected. But now his calmness suddenly gave way, and the child clung to his companion with both hands.

"Oh, Señor Colin, they have come for me—to take me to that Villa!" he exclaimed; "oh, do not let them take me, *señor*, for I am afraid."

"No, no, old chap, they are not going to get you," Colin reassured him; but his own heart sank.

If indeed it proved to be a party coming to remove the boy elsewhere, why then it was quite certain they were trapped. The party might have orders to return at once; the room would be entered, Benito missed—and very shortly found!

Two minutes later horsemen were dismounting at the door, on which a vigorous knocking could be heard. Colin could hear the guard inside the house cease talking, caught the rattle of their rifles as they hurried out.

"Who is there?"

"Orders from General Villa. Open quickly."

The door was opened without further parley, and a man who seemed the leader of the party of newcomers tramped into the court. Colin still crouched behind the parapet and strained his ears to catch what passed.

"We have an order to take young Castaños to the General. Is he here all right?"

"But certainly, my Captain, he is here. Where should he be?"

"Good. We will start shortly—say one hour from now. See that he is ready."

Colin could not see the speaker, but the voice was that of someone young. An hour from now! Then certainly it was all up. Colin was sorry for Benito, but he could not help a certain speculation as to his own fate.

But now another voice was heard—this time an older voice.

"Captain, it is not possible. The horses are exhausted and must rest. There is no need for such immediate haste."

"The General told me to return with speed."

"Doubtless, my Captain; but remember, the more haste, the less speed. Our horses have done thirty miles this afternoon; they will be standing still ere half the journey back is done. Give them some hours to eat and rest; then they will travel like the wind."

The man addressed as "Captain" hesitated; it struck Colin that he was not over-sure of his authority.

“Well, perhaps,” he said at last; “but I must see the boy at once.”

Again Colin waited breathlessly for the next move. It was now old Barbara who, all unconsciously, came to the rescue.

“But, Captain, why disturb the child when he is sleeping? Most assuredly he will not sit upon a horse for a long ride if you arouse him now.”

“You have him there all right?”

“But certainly, he is there safely in the room above. Ask Ferdinando if you doubt my word.”

“He is there, Captain, for I took him back myself when he had had his airing in the court;” the voice was that of the man who had brought Benito to his room.

“Well, let him sleep till we require him; but we shall start three hours before dawn. See to the horses, and then get this woman to prepare some food.”

There came the sound of horses being led away. Colin could judge them to be six or eight at least.

Three hours before dawn! Dawn broke a little before six, and it was now perhaps half-past ten. That gave them nearly five hours for the fifteen miles. That ought to be enough; the horsemen, even if they took at once the right direction for pursuit, would not come up with them before the Hacienda of the Star was reached.

But they must not descend just yet from their comparative security upon the roof, for fear of what might chance. Colin drew Benito down beside him, and, whispering to him not to be afraid, told him to keep strict silence while they listened to the conversation in the court below.

Most of the party had gone with the horses to the corrals, while the captain seemed to have entered the house. But one rider certainly remained outside, for, after a few minutes, Colin heard the man named Ferdinando say:

“What is going forward, comrade? It is dull work we have here, to guard this child. Are we to ride with you?”

“No, you remain. Perhaps the Castaños boy may be brought back. At any rate I know your orders are to stay.”

Ferdinando gave vent to an oath of discontent.

"Others are in the midst of fighting and of plunder," said the fellow in a grumbling tone; "it is not right. Our leaders used to tell us all would have their share."

"Some, certainly, will have their share to-night," replied the other man, with a low laugh; "those who attack the Hacienda of the Star. There is good plunder there—gold hidden underneath the floor of every room, they say."

Colin grew rigid with attention. The attack, then, was to be to-night. Could he get there in time to warn his friends—to take his part in the defence?

"How many go?" asked Ferdinando presently.

"Some eighty or a hundred—quite sufficient for the purpose," said the other man.

Their further conversation was here cut short by the return of the men from the corrals. Colin heard their grumbling demands for supper, with old Barbara's peevish exhortations to patience. In a few minutes now, when the whole party were well occupied with supper, would be the time for Benito and himself to get away.

And presently came Barbara's call. Five minutes later, when the silence in the *patio* told that the whole band had gone inside the house, Colin stood up and took Benito by the arm.

"Now then, old fellow, we'll be off," he told him in a cheerful tone.

Benito was lowered from the roof to the ground without much difficulty, for the child was slim and light. Then Colin slipped the rope round one of the projections of the parapet and followed him. He had a rather long drop at the bottom, having had to use the rope doubled; but the ground was soft and he was quite unhurt. Three minutes later the two fugitives had climbed the little hill and were upon their way to freedom.

Colin regretted that he dared not take a horse; could he have done so they might reach the *hacienda* in two hours or less. But, in addition to the possibility of one of the men having been left in charge of the animals, it was quite dark. To venture in among strange horses would be folly; he might very well get kicked, and would, moreover, be unable to discriminate in choosing one. There was a further drawback. If they should be discovered and pursued it might well be that they would have a better chance to hide without a horse. No, they were best on foot.

Nevertheless that mode of flight soon proved to have its own drawbacks. Benito, as Colin had expected, was no great pedestrian. He plodded along at Colin's side gamely enough for the first mile or two; but after that he soon began to flag, and Colin doubted how far he could "stay the course". When the boy stumbled heavily against a stone and almost fell, Colin pulled up.

"Get on my back," he said.

"But, Señor Colin, you can never carry me," he remonstrated.

"Can't I? We'll see. Jump up."

Benito did as he was told, and Colin carried him a mile or more.

But the pace was much slower than Colin had hoped. It was impossible to urge the child beyond his strength, yet Colin was on thorns at their slow progress; he was anxious to reach the *hacienda*, give warning—if in time—of the intended attack upon it, and take part in the defence.

At half-past three he found that they had still five miles to go, while Benito was worn out, and hardly able to drag himself along. He begged that they might rest if only for five minutes, and the pair sat down beside a clump of bushes a short distance from the track. Colin had difficulty in preventing the poor boy from dropping off to sleep.

Suddenly Colin started to his feet. What was that sound far back upon the way they had been following? Horses, assuredly. Had the child's absence been discovered, then?

Colin looked round him for a better hiding-place than the low bushes beside which they sat. They were upon the brink of a small shallow gully into which the track dipped gently down. But the ravine was almost bare of bushes, as the moon, now high, made amply clear. There was no shelter there.

Some eighty yards away, however, the ravine bent sharply round. If they could reach the corner ere the horsemen came in sight of them they might escape. Colin grasped Benito by the hand.

"Run for it, run!" he cried; and dragging the exhausted boy beside him, started down the slope in the direction where their only chance of safety lay.

Too late! Some thirty yards still stretched between them and the bend of the ravine when Colin heard the horsemen close behind them—heard a sudden shout. A rifle shot was fired; there were cries to him to stop. But Colin, hardly knowing what he did, dashed on and reached the shelter of the

turn—to hear a sharp command of “Halt, or we shall fire!” and to see a little company of mounted men immediately in front.

CHAPTER XIII

Captain Santa Ana

Colin's first thought was that they had met another rebel party and were fairly trapped. But a second glance at the small mounted band drawn up across the gully was enough to change his feeling from despair to thankfulness. In the moonlight he recognized the well-known uniform of the *rurales*. They were saved.

But a dozen rifles were levelled at him, and it was clear that he was regarded with suspicion.

"Who are you, boy?" questioned a sharp incisive voice.

"I'm Colin Charteris, from the Hacienda of the Star; this is Benito Castaños, who has escaped from the House of the Winds. We are being pursued by some of Villa's men; they are just close behind."

"So," said the man who had already spoken, and who seemed to be the leader; "that indeed appears the truth."

The thud of the pursuers' horse-hoofs could be heard just round the bend of the ravine. A moment later there swept into sight some mounted men, their horses urged to a full gallop. Then came an exclamation of astonishment and anger as the riders saw the band awaiting them.

There was no time to turn and fly.

"Fire!" came the order from the *rurales* leader, and at once a score of rifles spoke as one. There was the noise of curses, groans, the thud of heavy falls. Then silence, broken only by the struggles of a wounded horse.

Some of the police dismounted and went forward to examine those who had thus rushed upon their fate. There were four men in all, and three of them were dead, the sole survivor being desperately wounded. Meanwhile the *rurales* leader beckoned Colin to his side, and looked at him with close attention.

"Yes," he said, after a few moments, "yes, Señor Charteris, I remember you. You were at the Hotel de la Santa Cruz at Nazarenos with the Señor Westman some two months ago; I saw you in the *patio* as I chanced to pass the door. And now perhaps, *señor*, you will favour me with an account of

how it comes that you and Señor Benito Castaños are found wandering here."

As briefly and clearly as possible Colin told the tale of his adventures of the last few days; not indeed mentioning Canuto by name, but explaining that he had by chance received news of Benito's being imprisoned at the House of the Winds, and had determined to attempt to rescue him. The *rurales* captain listened attentively, with obvious signs of surprise and admiration.

"Well, Señor Charteris, I congratulate you heartily," he said at last; "assuredly but you have earned the thanks of the Castaños family by your bold stroke. I am the Captain Santa Ana, of whom possibly you may have heard."

Colin had heard the name, not once or twice, but many times. It was that of one of the most noted of *rurales* officers; famous all over the north of Mexico for courage and skill in his profession, as well as for the cool ruthlessness of his dealings with all criminals who fell into his hands.

"Well," went on Captain Santa Ana, "we have put an end to *them* at any rate." He waved his hand towards the dead men upon the ground; the fourth had by this time succumbed. "The fellow at the House of the Winds must have discovered your escape a little earlier than you hoped; he would no doubt divide his party into bands to search for traces of his prisoner. The others will not find him; these assuredly will tell no tales." He laughed.

"Now," he continued, "what is our next move? I think it will be best that you should ride with us to quarters—you and the small *señor* here."

"But, Señor Captain, there is an attack being made upon the Hacienda of the Star to-night. I want to hurry on and warn them if there is still time; it may be taking place by now."

"How! An attack upon the *hacienda*! Then you heard that spoken of among the rebels, eh?"

As quickly as possible Colin related what he had not mentioned yet—his overhearing the conversation in the *patio* of the House of the Winds.

"Ah, so!" exclaimed the captain, in an eager voice; "but now I understand. We received warning of the likelihood of trouble at a place away down there"—he pointed southward with his hand—"we ride down in hot haste, but there find nothing; all is quiet and at peace. Meanwhile—ah, yes! I see—your *hacienda* is to be attacked. Some eighty or a hundred men, the fellow mentioned, *señor*, did you say?"

"Yes, that was about the number that he thought would go. They are, I believe, to be led by a man named Perez."

Colin saw the captain start.

"Perez! Do you tell me that Julian Perez is to lead them there?"

"Yes, Captain, Julian was the Christian name that was told me. I had forgotten till you mentioned it."

The face of the *rurales* leader broke into what seemed a happy smile beneath his well-trimmed beard.

"Good! Oh, but excellent—most good! Some eighty or a hundred men, and we are twenty-four." It seemed to Colin that this disproportion of the forces—odds against him of some four to one—afforded special satisfaction to the officer.

The captain now gave some brief orders to his men. One of the rebel horses had been killed in the brief mêlée, one had galloped off into the hills, two others were secured by the *rurales* men. One of the force was ordered to give up his horse to Colin, mount a captured horse, and take Benito on the saddle before him.

Colin looked at the dead men upon the ground. Captain Santa Ana saw the glance and seemed to guess the thought in the boy's mind.

"I am no undertaker, *señor*," he said grimly, "and time presses, as you know. Their friends can come and bury them if they so choose—but let them take good care against encountering me."

He gave a word of command, and the whole party was in motion at a rapid pace.

"Do me the favour, *señor*, to ride forward at my side," said Santa Ana, spurring his horse to the head of the troop. "That animal will carry you quite well, I think; a little spirited and fiery, but that you will not mind, I know."

That was another moonlight ride that Colin is but little likely to forget. They rode at a fast lope, which broke into a gallop when the nature of the ground allowed. The captain led the way by a short cut across the hills, riding with an absence of all hesitation that spoke well for his acquaintance with the ground. He was apparently in high spirits at the prospect of the coming fight, and more than once he questioned Colin with an eager air.

"Perez, you told me, *señor*; he was to be the leader of the band? Pardon my asking yet again; but you are very certain, *señor*, that you have the name

aright?"

"Quite certain, Captain," answered Colin; "Perez—Julian Perez—was the name."

"Good, *señor*, good; I thank you. Surely you have done good service for this night at least; you take the young Castaños out of Villa's hands, and now you give me what I have desired for long years." Captain Santa Ana hummed a pleasant little tune, but offered no explanation of his cheerfulness.

They had travelled some five miles since Colin met the party, and were now drawing near the Hacienda of the Star. Suddenly Captain Santa Ana reined his horse in and held up his hand for silence.

"Listen!" he said.

Above the jingle of a shaken bit, the stamping of a restless horse, over a ridge of hill before them could be heard the sound of rifle shots.

"Good! They are at the business," said the leader; and the moonlight showed a sparkle in his eyes. "Dios! but that is well. Forward, my lads, and let us get to work."

They dashed on at a gallop, and within three minutes topped a little ridge from which they could look down upon the *hacienda* buildings, rather less than seven hundred yards away.

The moon had lately set, but there was other light that shone upon the scene. The peons' huts were blazing; and, in the glare of flames, amid dense clouds of smoke, Colin could see that the great block of building was surrounded by a crowd of men. Shots rang out constantly across the slope that lay between the house and the *rurales* troop.

The captain gave a rapid order to his men, who formed themselves into a line two deep. Two were ordered to remain behind in charge of Benito. Then Santa Ana turned to Colin with a courteous bow.

"You are still young, but you are English, *señor*, therefore I do not ask you whether you will stay behind or ride with me. Do me the favour to take this, I beg, and use it freely; I have yet another here." He handed Colin his revolver as he spoke, and at the same time drew his sword, his men following the example.

"Keep perfect silence till we are upon them, lads, then give them sword and pistol at your will." He added an order that the first line only was to

charge with him, the second following half a minute later. Then the *rurales* leader gave the word.

The little line of horsemen dashed off down the smooth and gentle slope at racing speed, Colin riding a few yards ahead with the captain. The rebel band was far too busily occupied with the attack upon the *hacienda* to observe their coming, and the troop burst upon the raiders as an absolute surprise. The captain led the way to where the crowd was thickest, gathered round the massive entrance-gates; and the next moment the *rurales* were among the rebels, firing their revolvers, cutting, thrusting, hacking with their swords, and riding down and trampling on the startled men.

Colin, as he rode beside the captain, saw that Santa Ana's small keen eyes turned here and there with most amazing swiftness, seemingly in eager search of some one man. Then suddenly he gave a short ejaculation, spurred at lightning speed to where a rebel sat on horseback, seemingly directing the attack upon the *hacienda* gate.

The fellow turned and saw the sudden onset. Instantly he raised his pistol—fired. Colin heard the ball sing past his head. At the same moment Santa Ana shouted in a voice of triumph:

"What then, Julian, have we met at last! It is the reckoning, my good friend."

The words had barely left his lips before his sword was plunged deep in the rebel leader's throat, the blow being given with a force so furious that both Perez and his horse were thrown upon the ground. Only by a skilful effort did the captain of *rurales* save his own horse from a heavy fall. He did succeed, however, and, reining in the excited animal, sprang swiftly from his saddle and stooped over Perez. Blood streamed from the man's throat. The captain looked upon him for a moment, and then mounted quickly with a smile of satisfaction on his lips.

The first line of the *rurales* had thus burst, unseen and unsuspected, on the mob of rebels, firing and stabbing as they swept upon their way. Before the raiders could recover from the shock the second line of horsemen was upon them, taking up the work their comrades had begun. Three minutes later the *rurales* had re-formed beyond the crowd and made a second furious charge.

It was enough; the short but sanguinary fight was won. Already the whole rebel band, though close upon a hundred strong, was more than half-demoralized, when a loud cry went up that Julian Perez had been killed. The

news put the last touch to the disaster, and the raiders now began to scatter towards the hills.

But very few escaped, for the *rurales* worked upon familiar and time-honoured lines. No quarter was given, even to the few who stayed to ask for it. Calls to surrender were indeed occasionally heard, but were the merest farce. Colin caught sight of a *rurales* trooper following an escaping raider. “Halt there!” the horseman cried; but even as he spoke he levelled his revolver, fired, and the man fell dead.

Within ten minutes of the coming of the captain and his party, not an active rebel could be seen, though many were stretched dead or wounded on the ground. The great gates of the *hacienda* had by this time been flung open; Colin found himself once more among his friends.

CHAPTER XIV

Canuto's Charm

Late that same afternoon, when he, his troopers, and their horses had been rested, fed, and hospitably entertained, Captain Santa Ana left the *hacienda*, taking with him little Benito Castaños. Benito had seemed half-inclined to stay with his friend Colin; but both the captain of *rurales* and Mr. Osgood thought it best that he should accompany the former and his troop to Nazarenos, where the Castaños family had relatives and friends, with some of whom Benito might remain till an opportunity should offer of restoring him to his mother and grandfather, now in Mexico City. So Colin and Benito parted, the boy overwhelming Colin with expressions of his gratitude.

Santa Ana offered to leave six or eight troopers at the *hacienda* as a guard if Mr. Osgood wished; but at the same time he hinted that he should be glad for them to be sent back to him as soon as possible, as, from reports he had received, revolt seemed spreading, in which case his force would have its hands full for some time to come. This being so, the *hacienda* manager declined the offer. The repulse of the attacking party had been so complete, and their losses so heavy, that he did not think a second attempt was likely to be made. The peons and *vaqueros* who had not as yet deserted were all men he felt inclined to trust, and he was confident he could defend the place.

The rebel dead were buried, and the few wounded men and prisoners led away beside their captors' horses, only a few of those most seriously injured being retained at the house. Not one of the *rurales* had been killed, and the few wounds they had received were of a trifling nature.

An hour before dusk the *hacienda* gates were closed and barred, and a watch set. Not until then did Colin find the time and opportunity to tell his own experiences and hear what had been going on upon the range.

"You'd likely think me every kind of skunk, kid, that I did not stick by you," said Westman, speaking of Colin's capture by the raiders; "but I couldn't, that's the solid truth. My bridle wrist was useless, and that brute that I was riding had a cinch on me. To stop or even turn him was just more than I could do. He headed right away for home and never slacked an instant till he landed me beside the corral gate."

Westman carried his arm in a sling, but his usual spirits were quite unaffected by his broken wrist.

"Well," he went on, "as soon as it was daylight Hoopes and Parker were sent off to Nazarenos to give notice about you to the *rurales*, and to see what could be done. They haven't turned up yet, and it's most likely they've been picked up by a band of rebels on the road. The next thing was that several other of the peons kind o' faded off the landscape; that meant trouble coming, we felt sure. We fixed things up as snug as we could make 'em and then just sat tight till last night's little serenadin' party came along."

Colin had already learnt how, previous to the timely coming on the scene of Santa Ana and his men, Westman had begged Mr. Osgood to let him and several others make a sortie on the raiders, and he found Jim half-inclined to think that the arrival of the captain had spoilt half the "fun". When Colin hinted some distaste for the extremely drastic methods employed by the mounted police in dealing with the flying rebels, the young American put up a vigorous defence of that force.

"Oh, come, kid, cut it out—all these humanitarian views of yours. What would you want to do? Take chaps like Villa and this Perez by the arm and ask 'em to sit down? Send for a buggy so that they may ride to court and have 'fair trial', eh? That sort of stuff would cut no ice with them; the brutes themselves would call you the first kind of fool. No; treat 'em decent while they do behave—I'm with you all the time for that; but when they do get out of hand, why, hit 'em, and take care to hit 'em good and hard. It's quickly over, anyway; they don't use torture, the *rurales* don't; at least I've never heard of it," he added cautiously.

"What's all this tale about there being money buried in the house?" asked Colin. "Villa wanted to hang me up by my feet to make me tell him whereabouts it was."

"Yes, and he'd do it too, as soon as breathe; that shows you what they are. Why, yes, there is a yarn—I wonder that you've never heard it here—that a great store of silver is lying buried underneath the floor; not dollars, mind you, silver bars. I dare say that there was, one time. These Mexican ranch-owners used to pay the very largest sums in dollars, or in bars straight from the mines. They had no use for banks. They tell a tale of one, years back, who one day bought another range; he paid the price of it with silver bars that filled six mule-wagons."

When Colin recounted to his friend the way he had encountered Santa Ana, he commented upon the captain's seeming knowledge of the trackless

route by which they had so quickly reached the *hacienda*; also on his eagerness on hearing that the man named Perez was to be the leader of the raid. Westman threw back his head and gave a hearty laugh.

"Knew the ground well! You bet he knew the ground. He's travelled it too often to make much mistake. Why, kid, old Santa Ana was a first-grade bandit till he came to wear the pretty uniform he sports to-day."

"A bandit! Why, he seemed a gentleman to me."

"Well, and why not? He'd tell you that he is, make sure of that; and so would many other folks. He always took a lady's jewels politely; told her he was sorry, made a pretty speech. He wouldn't shoot at you unless you drew on him.

"And," went on Westman, "I can rather guess I know the reason of his keenness to meet Perez too, and settle up with him. It's twenty years since Santa Ana was a bandit; Perez was one still upon the quiet, so they say, though he pretended that he dealt in horses. I've heard all kinds o' tales, and don't know which of all the lot may be the bed-rock truth. The story goes that Santa Ana had a grouch on Perez over something that occurred when both were in the bandit business in the hills; something about a woman, I'm inclined to fancy—rivals or some tomfool stuff like that. But, anyway, it's general talk that Perez has been pretty keen on keeping out of Santa Ana's way, and that old Santa Ana has been just as keen on getting hold of him to make him squeal. Of course, being high up as he is in the *rurales* force—the heads of which think lots of Santa Ana, let me tell you that—he did not want to make a splash; but has, I guess, been waiting until he could settle with friend Julian in a legal way. Well, naturally, when he fell in with you and heard your tale, he saw his chance just right in front of him. I bet you he felt good and happy in that half-hour's ride. He doesn't seem to have left Perez any overplus of time to do his squealing in, by your account; but it's a sure thing that there's one blamed greaser less in Mexico to-night."

And from this simple view of the affair the young American declined to move. Nor had he much pity to spare for Canuto, dying miserably in the dark cellar of the little town.

"What did the blamed fool join the rebels for?" he asked; "oh, no, kid, cut it out, for I know every word of what you're starting in to say about the peons and the land. What if it was their land; it's ages back. What use was it to them—what use is it to those of them who've got a bit to-day? To scratch it with a stick; to keep a saw-backed hog, a foundered mule or two! Don't

yarn to me about the peons; they're a blamed sight better off than they deserve."

"Talking about Canuto," broke in Colin; "there is something I had quite forgotten till this moment. The poor chap gave me a charm."

"A charm! What for? To frighten spooks, or set you right when you've had too much grub? Let's see the late Canuto's charm."

Colin felt in his breast-pocket and drew out the dead *vaquero's* gift, which, on receiving it from the dying man, he had slipped without a thought into the most easily available place of security. His eagerness for sleep and food, the rush of subsequent events, his exciting adventures at the House of the Winds and in the company of Santa Ana, had quite banished this memento of his late companion from his mind. But now he looked at it with curiosity, and Westman did the same.

It was a small, flat, and, it must be owned, very grimy-looking packet, some eight inches long by about half that breadth, that Colin now produced. Its outer covering, neatly sewn all round, appeared to be of waterproof material of some kind. Colin turned it over and about in his hand with curiosity.

"Say, ain't you goin' to open it?" Jim Westman asked.

"Well, yes, I think so," answered Colin; "have you got a knife? Mine's gone. I don't suppose that what's inside amounts to very much; it's perhaps some kind of 'catch' you know—the sort of thing you read about. Still, we will have a look; here goes."

He slit the stitches, drew out some of the threads, and unfolded the cover. An inner wrapping, this time of discoloured linen, came to sight. That, on removal, showed a folded piece of paper, stained and with its edges somewhat frayed. The outer side was blank; but, on Colin's unfolding it carefully, the inner surface was seen to be closely covered with writing. Colin examined it attentively for a few minutes; then he said:

"I can make nothing of it. Here, you have a look."

Jim Westman took the paper and glanced at it—casually at first, but soon with obviously increased interest.

Just then a step was heard outside the room in which they sat alone. Jim passed the paper back to Colin, saying as he did so:

"Yes, a jolly letter; thank you, kid."

There could be no mistaking the meaning of this remark, coupled as it was with a significant glance. One of the American hands had entered the room, and it was clear that Westman wished to keep the matter of the charm between themselves.

Westman and Colin did not meet alone again that day. In his own room at night the latter again looked at the paper for some minutes before going to bed. A casual glance made clear the fact that the writing on it was in Spanish —as might indeed be expected; that the concluding lines contained a reference, more than once repeated, to "Masses"; while there also seemed to be one or two names of places. But a great portion of the writing was almost illegible, apparently from age, and Colin was too tired to make a thorough investigation of his property just then.

The next day the two friends—Westman, in spite of his maimed wrist, could ride a quiet horse—were told off to a spot not far away to guard against the breaking through of a small bunch of horses which were being kept near the house. As Colin went to see about his horse his friend remarked:

"Bring out that bit o' paper, kid; and you might bring your pocket Spanish dictionary, too."

The couple halted on a little "bluff", from which they had a full view of the grazing bunch.

"Picket your horse, kid," ordered Westman; "then sit down by me. Let's see that charm of yours again."

"You seem to find it interesting," said Colin, as he passed the faded paper to his friend.

"Maybe you'll find it interestin' too, kid, if it should pan out to be what I surmise."

For two full hours Westman gave the paper close attention, occasionally searching in the dictionary for a word, while Colin kept an eye upon the horses. At last Jim's task was at an end. He had spelled out the contents of the paper word by word—as far as it was legible; had looked up such words as he was unacquainted with; and had now written out in a small pocket-book a full translation of the charm. Some words could not be read, being too much stained or faded even for Jim's eye; but these were for the most part such as did not render meaningless the paper as a whole, the meaning of all but a few being sufficiently obvious from the context. Long ere the task was quite completed, Colin, who looked over his friend's shoulder now and

then, had quite changed countenance. Wider and wider grew his eyes as Jim went on; and when at last the English version was completed, and Jim Westman passed the pocket-book to Colin so that he might read the whole, the boy grew pale, and said in a quick breathless tone:

"Great Scott, Jim! Do you think it may be true—not just a hoax?"

This was the contents of Canuto's charm, translated into English, with the words that Jim had had to guess filled in:

> "Directions for the finding of the treasure hidden by the captain El Lobato. For fifteen years his state was that of a commander over thirty men, who had his own distinguished confidence.
>
> "It is in the following way, my brethren, that we have agreed among ourselves, in the name of the Most Holy Trinity and of the Blessed Virgin Mary, to hide the treasure we have gained from time to time by working upon those who use the road. A train of mules was passing through the mountain to the coast with money to be sent by sea; we met with it upon the mountains near a pit where coal is digged. There the cañon is steep, well suited to our purposes. Our men surrounded the enemy, and, when the attack was put in hand, they, filled with fear, did throw away their arms and yield. Thus we possessed the many loads of money which they were carrying upon the mules at their peril. We made them prisoners every one, and went with them to a ranch which one of our comrades owned, and there we did bury the money.
>
> "Seven of the enemy we held as criminals. In the meanwhile our captain, El Lobato, joined with us in disposing of the money. We were compelled to hide it because of a severe persecution which the *jefe* of Huala instituted against all our band. One of our number, of the name of Sebastian, told the others that captain El Lobato should decide the place at which our treasure might be deeply hidden in the earth, beneath some mark. And so it was. Upon the Cerro of Tayatlan is the place, a little towards the north, beside a stone, where, to the west of it, a spring of water flows.
>
> "Now for the many jewels which we had taken on the road from time to time, including many diamonds, with rubies, emeralds, and sapphires, it was agreed between us that they should

at this time be hidden in another place, for greater safety of the whole. Thus, brethren, shall the place be found:

"At Ventadina, not far distant from that place where Indians dwell and grow their crops in summer, is the spot. Near to the first stone fence, the oldest and most broken, to the left-hand of the way from Taxlan, just where a pile of large stones lies, the jewels were taken from the mule on which they were. As yet another sign; in the fence is a great stone, projecting from it and in great part sunk into the ground. From this stone measure ten full paces towards the sunset, from the place where wall and stone do meet. Turn then towards the front and measure five paces. Once again to the sunset, three yards; there the hole was digged. A grave it is, full deep, and one yard either way, and in the grave the jewels were placed within a demijohn. Five men were helping me. Into the pit we placed the demijohn, and over it a great square stone. I then commanded Bernardino, known also as Contrado, to go down, and forthwith he was punished with the penalty of death. Two bullets he received, and lay upon the bottom of the grave with blood and groans. But presently the man was dead and cold, and there he stays to watch the jewels. This death I gave him for that by his means some men of our own band had died upon the gallows, being taken by the judge. It was to punish traitors that this deed was by me done. The grave was then filled up.

"Now by this order, I do command the person who shall find and lift these jewels, whatsoever person he shall be, to pay the following dues to Mother Church:

"One mass with vigils, to the Lord of Penitence;

"Three masses said in recitation to the Lord of Penitence;

"Three masses to the Lord of the Water of the Cathedral;

"Ten masses for all souls that be in Purgatory;

"Three masses to our Lord of Pardon; finally,

"Eleven masses to Our Lady of the Rose.

"Further, the jewels remaining, after these masses shall be said, shall certainly be the having of whoever be the person who doth find them, be he of my country or of any other land. None may dispute them with him, none shall seek to take them from his keeping, for they are his right. And this same writing I do hereby

sign, this day of June, year of 1787; so shall the place and store of jewels be found.

"As captain of the band that is at my command I sign this same,

"El Lobato."

CHAPTER XV

The Quest

"You really think the thing is genuine, Jim?" repeated Colin; "do you think there might be treasure hidden at the place this paper tells about?"

"Yes, kid, I think it's likely," answered Westman in a serious tone. "No, I don't fancy it's a hoax; the greaser don't go in a lot for hoaxes—he is not a joking sort. The thing looks real genuine to me; the paper's old, and there are phrases in it that are out-of-date to-day. One thing is certain sure, at any rate; there *was* a brigand who was known as El Lobato—that means Wolf-cub—and he lived about a hundred years ago. I don't know what his real name was, but I have heard a heap of stories of his little games, and this just sounds as if it might be one of 'em. He was a genuine high-grade brigand, and I think he rather specialized in jewels; robbed ladies as they travelled in their coaches from the mountain *haciendas* to the towns."

"You really think, then," went on Colin, "that it might be worth while trying to find the place to see if there is treasure there?"

"Sure thing, I do. Of course, there's one thing strikes me as being rather queer about it," said the American. "You say Canuto told you that the charm was given to his grandfather when he was nothing but a kid. Well, that don't quite fit in with probabilities, it seems to me. Why should this El Lobato give a thing of real value to an Indian kid, risking the chance of its being opened by some fellow who could read and understand it, who would go and lift the stuff. No, sir; it seems to me a heap more likely that the Wolf-cub had a rather sudden end, and that whoever was in at the killing found this thing hung round his neck and took it for a charm. But that don't count; whatever way it happened, you have got it now, and that's the thing."

"Well, but look here," said Colin; "just supposing for a minute that we had the luck to find these jewels, and that they're worth a lot. Won't they be treasure-trove, belonging to the owner of the land? Or won't the Government claim them?"

"Huh!" replied Westman, with a scornful laugh, "what 'Government' would you propose to hand them over to? To that blamed fool Madero, who would share them with some second-sight professor, eh? Or to your dear pal Villa, who was all for hanging you up by your heels a day or two ago? What about sending them along to old Porfirio, all across the herring-pond in Paris

city? No, you can cut out the conscientious restitution stuff! If the stuff's there it's yours, and make no error about that. What does the Wolf-cub say himself? 'Further, the jewels remaining, after these masses shall be said, shall certainly be the having of whoever be the person who doth find them, be he of my country or of any other land'—d'you see that, kid? 'None may dispute them with him, none shall seek to take them from his keeping, for they are his right.' Why, the old rascal writes as if he had you in his mind."

"Well, yes, it does read pretty clear," said Colin. "If we do find them, you and I shall share of course."

"Not much, we shan't," said the American decidedly; "Canuto was your friend, not mine. The stuff is yours if we can find it; but we haven't found it yet."

"No, and quite likely never shall."

"Oh, come, cut out that hopeless business, kid. Just half a minute back you were for running after Villa or Madero with the stuff in both your hands; now you don't think there's any stuff at all. I do; but finding it may be another thing."

"It may indeed; why, we don't even know where this place Ventadina is."

"Oh yes, we do," said Westman; "you yourself have been within three miles or so of it."

"I! When?"

"When? Why that time you and I rode down to deal with old Castaños, your young friend Benito's grand-dad, at the Hacienda of the Running Stream, and came back round the head of the Devil's Gully. Well, Ventadina lies about half-way between the head of the *barranca* and the track we took. If we'd gone down to see the fall, as we half thought of doing, we should have passed right through the place; it's two days ride from here."

"Is it a village or what?"

"It used to be an Indian summer camping-ground or village, but I fancy that it's been deserted for a long time now. There are some scraps of walls and such-like, as this paper says."

"Could you and I go down there, Jim?"

"Well, it looks rather like we shan't lay hands upon the stuff unless we do, kid, eh? We'll have to think of how to go to work. But see here; we will

keep this young bonanza to ourselves as yet, except for just one man, and that's the boss. We can't get down there nohow without telling Osgood, and in any case he'll be all right; but there's no sort of sense in speechifying about it to the other fellows on the range. Most all of them are straight enough, but there's just one or two I wouldn't ask to hold my money if it was in bearer bonds or dollars, see. So we will keep it snug just yet."

Colin quite readily agreed to this, and it was finally arranged between the friends that the range manager should be admitted to their confidence without delay. An opportunity presented itself in the course of the following evening, and in Mr. Osgood's private room Colin exhibited Canuto's charm, and explained the circumstances under which it had come into his possession, while Jim Westman spoke of knowing the indicated spot.

Mr. Osgood examined the faded paper and Jim Westman's translation of it with close attention and evident interest; nor did he display any of that incredulity for which Colin, in his own mind, had been quite prepared.

"There's not the slightest doubt," the manager remarked, "that there are numbers of these hidden hoards in Mexico; bandits often buried their ill-gotten gains. In the case of valuable jewels, especially, they would doubtless sometimes have great difficulty in knowing how to dispose of them to advantage. A large proportion of those brigands, though not all, were rough, uneducated men. I think it not improbable—quite possible at least—that El Lobato's store of plunder is still buried where he says.

"But how this paper came into Canuto's hands," went on the manager, "is something of a mystery to me, I must admit. I incline to agree with Westman in disbelieving the man's grandfather, who said that it was 'given' to him when he was a child, although, of course, it might be so. But if El Lobato drew up the paper as a guide to digging up the jewels, why should he give it away—unless indeed—— I think it is more likely that this bandit met a violent and sudden end, perhaps on account of some outrage committed on Indians; that the paper, sewn up as it came into your hands, was found upon his body; and that the finder took it for a charm."

The manager was quite in agreement with Westman that the jewels were rightly Colin's—if they could be found.

"The hoard, if it exists and you discover it, is yours undoubtedly. This rascal El Lobato states quite plainly that whoever finds the treasure, of whatever country he may be, shall keep it for his own. That unfortunate Canuto gave you the paper freely; what more would you have?"

Colin remarked that perhaps it would be possible to find the heirs of those to whom the jewels had formerly belonged; but Mr. Osgood laughed at the idea.

"That would be hopeless and quixotic, my dear boy; how would you set about discovering those from whom the jewels were taken a full century ago? No, if you can put your hand on them, they're fairly yours; and I only hope that you may succeed."

The manager looked grave, however, when Colin asked if he and Jim might go in search of them forthwith—that is, if Mr. Osgood could manage to spare them for three or four days.

"I'd spare you certainly," he said; "and I admit that, if they are to be searched for at all, then, in some ways, the sooner the better. There's just a chance that someone else may get to know about the *cache* and get there before you. But, you know, Charteris, it is a risky business, you and Westman going there alone, as things are now. It's greatly to be hoped that Villa will not come to know that it was you who got Benito off; in any case he knows you've got away yourself, and if he finds out all that you've been up to, why, he'll be real mad! If you should fall into his hands again you'd get short shrift."

"We're not too likely to meet any of his fellows Ventadina way, I think," said Westman; "it's a lonely part, you know, and Villa will be pretty busy in the plain for quite a time to come. However things may turn out in the end, the regulars are coming up and the *rurales* are in force. I rather think that Kid and I might venture, boss."

"Well, if you like," said Mr. Osgood, "though I'm not sure that I ought to let you go."

Finally it was arranged that Colin and his friend should, early in the following week, set out for Ventadina. To the question whether or not they should take a *vaquero* with them, Mr. Osgood strongly advised in the negative. Westman knew the way, and therefore a guide was not necessary; one native, or even two or three, would be of small assistance should they meet with any rebel bands and be attacked; and to travel alone would have the advantage of keeping the object of their trip an entire secret. The digging for the treasure might be rather arduous work; but it would be far better than entrusting the labour to a native who could hardly be expected to keep silence among his friends. Mr. Osgood would invent an errand for them to a small *hacienda* about forty miles away, towards which the first few miles of track to Ventadina also led; they could turn off upon their treasure-hunt

when fairly out of sight of any of the hands they might encounter on the range.

Early in the discussion Colin had willingly accepted Mr. Osgood's advice to dismiss from his mind all thought of searching for the silver, which the bandit stated to have been taken from the mule-train. Not only was the "Cerro of Tayatlan, a little towards the north, beside a spring", too vague an indication upon which to work; but silver, even if it could be found, would be bulky, and therefore almost impossible to secure and dispose of, especially in the present state of affairs in the country. Mr. Osgood therefore advised Colin to devote his whole attention to the hidden jewels, at the same time warning him against building too much on their discovery. The whole thing might, as Colin had himself suggested, be a hoax; although the manager thought this improbable.

So four days later the two friends set off. It had been decided that they should ride mules, taking a third pack-animal to carry their blankets, sleeping-tent, and provisions for men and mules. The night before they were to start the manager produced from a locked cupboard in his room a narrow-bladed spade, fitted with a hollow steel shaft made to unscrew into two sections; also a pick of the same make.

"I'll lend you these, for you may find them useful," he remarked; "they can be rolled up in your blankets, and so won't be noticed by the hands who chance to see you start. I brought them with me when I came here first, but so far they have not been used. I hope they're going to do some profitable work at last."

All went well with Jim and Colin until the afternoon of their second day's journey, when they knew that they were drawing near the head of the great Barranca del Diablo.

"Well," remarked Colin, "as you say that Ventadina is no more than some three miles ahead, we shall be there at least an hour before dark. That gives us comfortable time for pitching camp. We can enjoy a 'long night in' and get to work early in the morning."

"That's so," said Westman, with a rather absent air.

His eyes were on the ground as he spoke, and he seemed to be searching the barely visible track for something. They were now riding over a broad piece of fairly level upland which stretched out before them for some miles. Upon their left, not half a mile away, there rose a long low ridge, raised forty feet or so above the general level, dotted here and there with scattered oaks

and pines. Westman, who now glanced at this ridge for several seconds, suddenly pulled up his mule.

"Say, kid, see that!"

Colin, whose eyes had followed the direction of Jim's pointing hand, could at first see nothing to account for his friend's abrupt exclamation.

"See what?" he asked.

For answer Westman motioned him to follow him, as, striking off their trail, he rode in the direction of the little ridge. When half-way there Colin could make out something white upon the trunk of a small oak which stood alone. It was a large cross, roughly marked. In half a minute they were close beside it, and could see that it was marked upon the trunk with some material which resembled chalk; also that it was still moist and glistening. Clearly it had been placed there quite recently.

"Who can have marked that there?" asked Colin, in surprise.

"Indians," said Westman tersely; "say, kid, this is going to be a little awkward, I'm afraid. They're going to have a foot-race here, I guess; we'll find another cross or two not far from this."

Westman's surmise proved right. Another tree some hundred yards or more away displayed a similar white cross, which, like the first, was still quite moist. As they rode slowly on immediately below the ridge more crosses came to sight at intervals.

"Yes, that's blamed awkward," went on Westman; "I half thought I could see tracks along the trail the last half-mile. Well, kid, it might be worse. I've never seen an Indian foot-race and no more have you, I guess. By what folks say they're well worth seeing. These crosses are chalked up to mark the course. It's often six or eight miles round, and ten or twelve times round it is the race."

"What!" exclaimed Colin, "foot-races of eighty or a hundred miles?"

"Yes, so I've heard from those that ought to know. The Tarahumare Indians are uncommon fond of racing, and I'd say they are about the finest runners in the world. Why, on some *haciendas* they are kept—or used to be so—just to run down horses on the range when they are to be caught. The Indian sets off after the horse wanted, loping quietly along. O' course the horse throws up his heels and is off clean out of sight. But the Indian keeps on after him a day, a day and night, or even more, until he catches him. When the job's done the horse is clean exhausted and knocked out; the man

is just as fresh as paint. Oh, it'll be some race. The worst of it is that we're sure going to find the beggars camped right there at Ventadina, where we want to dig. I know they do go there sometimes, but didn't figure on their being there now."

"What shall we do?" asked Colin, in no small dismay.

"Well," said his friend, "we can't go treasure-digging under their brown noses; sure thing that; it wouldn't do. We can't fix our next move until we find out what they're going to do. They may be camped here quite a while, or only for a day or two to run the race—or races, for they generally have more than one. That's what we'll have to see."

The pair rode on for some minutes in silence. Colin's spirits were a good deal dashed by this entirely unlooked for check. He saw the force of Westman's emphatic decision that it would be impossible to carry on their digging in the very middle of an Indian camp. But time was precious; he was fully conscious that his friend and he were running no small risks in thus being out alone while the whole country was in so disturbed a state. Yet here before them loomed the prospect of indefinite delay—perhaps an end to any possibility of searching for the hidden jewels.

"Sure, there they are," said Westman, after a quarter of an hour. He pointed ahead, and Colin saw the smoke of fires rising in the sunset air. They were upon the outskirts of a camp.

"Right on the very spot," exclaimed Westman, with an air of some exasperation.

The Indians had, indeed, pitched their camp precisely on the place where stood the ruins—some low and broken walls, with signs of more than half-demolished dwellings—of the long-abandoned village of Ventadina. A few rude huts had now been built of logs and unbarked boughs; but many of the Indians, of whom there seemed to be at least two hundred present, had been quite contented, as the sky was cloudless and the air quite warm and dry, to camp among the scattered trees.

Curious groups gathered as the friends rode boldly up. The Indians, whom Westman at once pronounced to be Tarahumares, were well-built, not unattractive-looking people; the men lithe and athletic in appearance, some of the younger women almost pretty. Their skin was reddish brown; black, rather wavy hair fell loose to their shoulders, or was bound by a handkerchief upon the head. Some were bare-footed, but most wore a kind of open plaited sandal, held to the foot by laces passed between the toes.

Colin observed that while some elders of the band were quite grey-haired, not one was bald.

Numerous small children, little more than babies, stood or squatted on the ground and stared at the newcomers; then, on seeing that they were looked at, scuttled away to shelter behind their mothers. Their movements much resembled those of little animals, for those too small to walk upright moved easily and quickly on their hands and feet, without allowing their knees to touch the ground.

A rather dignified-looking elderly man presently stepped forward and saluted Westman civilly. The pair entered into conversation, speaking in Spanish, with occasional Indian, and some English words. Presently Westman turned to Colin to report the news.

"Yes, kid, it's as I thought; they've come up here to hold some foot-races. The game begins to-morrow, but I haven't asked how long it's going to last; best not appear too curious just at first. I've told the chief that we are going on south, but that we'd like to camp here for to-night and stay to see the race. He's quite agreeable; so we're not doing bad."

The old chief led them to a spot a little way beyond the limits of the camp; here, on a little mound among some trees, the friends arranged to pass the night. A pole was soon secured between two trees, the tent-cloth stretched across it, and a comfortable shelter made. As Colin was busying himself with preparations for their meal, while Westman attended to the feeding of the mules, a pleasant half-smiling young Indian woman approached them and offered a large earthen bowl. Its contents much resembled a thin gruel, thickly dotted with small specks of finely chopped green stuff.

"What's this?" asked Westman, as he came to Colin's side. He gave a doubtful and suspicious sniff at the bowl's contents, then his face cleared.

"I know; it's *iskiate*, or some such name. Swallow your share, kid; it will do you good. I've heard of it before."

Colin accordingly poured half the contents of the bowl into a drinking-tin, and, not too willingly, swallowed the somewhat dubious-looking mixture. It tasted strongly of the herbs, but was not altogether disagreeable in flavour. Indeed, in a few minutes he felt much refreshed, hunger and thirst being alike satisfied.

"Not bad, eh, kid?" said Westman, who had now consumed his share of the present, and returned the bowl to the bearer with some words of thanks;

“yes, that is *iskiate* right enough. It’s made quite simply—toasted Indian corn ground up with water, and some herbs mixed in. But it is wonderful good stuff; there’s very little like it to buck up a weary man, and it’s a good thirst-quencher too.”

“Shall we be safe in going to sleep at the same time?” inquired Colin later on; “these Indians seem all right.”

“There never was but one ‘good’ Indian in creation, kid, and he is dead,” said Westman; “no, I never trust an Indian—never shall. We’ve got three mules to look to, and some other things I rather value—our two lives. If you’re agreeable I will get a sleep till midnight; then I’ll watch while you turn in. As we shan’t move to-morrow I can have a lazy day.”

“I wonder if the races are to last more days than one.”

“Can’t say, and we had better not ask yet. To-morrow we’ll know more about it; I will have a pow-wow with the chief. Then we can make our plans. Now I’ll turn in.”

He did so, while Colin, seated at the doorway of their shelter, with an eye upon the mules secured close by, was left to his own thoughts.

CHAPTER XVI

The Race

Despite Jim Westman's doubt as to the existence of any good Indian, the night passed by the two friends on the outskirts of the camp was entirely undisturbed, and Colin, on the following morning, found himself quite looking forward to the coming race. It was a nuisance, certainly, that their quest should be thus delayed; but there was no help for it, and at any rate the time would not pass without interest. He strolled out from their tent beneath the trees and soon discovered many things going on which attracted his attention and curiosity.

An Indian youth was busy polishing a wooden ball, and, seeing Colin interested in his work, handed it to him, with a smile. It was of oak, about two inches in diameter, and accurately shaped into a perfect sphere. A high polish was now being given it by means of handfuls of fine gravel and sand. When Colin tried to learn its use, the boy made a gesture of kicking it before him, leading Colin to suppose that it was in some way connected with the coming race.

He was soon able to pick out the competitors in the event of the day: sixteen well-built athletic-looking men, who seemed to range in age from twenty to thirty. Eight of them had head-bands of bright red, those of the other eight being white; and there was not one of them but was obviously receiving careful attention in some way or another. Two of the "white" party were being rubbed all over with handfuls of green freshly gathered herbs; while one of the "reds" was being treated in a similar manner with a large smooth stone. Others, one at a time, were taken apart by a wrinkled elderly man, who seemed to give them much instruction and advice.

"I guess that chap's the *shaman*," Westman said; "he is a sort of priest and doctor all in one. He always has his hand in jobs like this—tells all the runners what to eat and drink, and helps in the arrangement of the show. But each side has a manager as well." And this, indeed, seemed pretty clear, there being two men constantly hovering round the bands of reds and whites respectively, looking on while they were being rubbed and busying themselves generally about them.

Colin observed that nearly all the men were of comparatively small and slender build, and that not one of them displayed any remarkable muscular

development. Yet all, it seemed, were shortly to engage in a race of eighty or a hundred miles. Decidedly the sight should be well worth a day's delay.

Presently the lad who had been polishing the wooden ball seemed satisfied, and brought it up to the man obviously in charge of the white band. This man examined it, and then passed it on to the *shaman*, who, after a careful scrutiny, placed it, together with two or three others of the same kind which he took from his belt, at the foot of a small cross standing nearly in the middle of the camp. The cross was very simple—nothing but the stem of a small sapling, near the top of which the short stumps of two branches jutted out on either side and formed a cross.

"I suppose, then, that these Indians are good Catholics?" said Colin to his friend.

"They may be, but quite likely not. I understand the missionaries found the cross in Mexico when they first came. Most Indian tribes respect it; you see, everything that the runners are going to use is spread before it."

Two or three blankets lay upon the ground before the cross; upon these lay, beside the balls just placed there by the *shaman*, a variety of other things —large jars of water, bowls of *iskiate* and *pinole*, bags containing herbs.

Some sort of ceremony now seemed on the point of taking place. The *shaman* took his stand beside the cross, and both parties of competitors, each with its manager, ranged themselves before him, while a crowd of Indians looked on from a respectful distance. The *shaman* burnt some substance which gave off a thick and rather pleasant-smelling smoke. He then spent quite ten minutes in a kind of chant, followed by what seemed a speech, to which his audience listened in profound silence.

After this each competitor drank solemnly three times from the jars of water, ate a little of the food, then stood aside while others did the same. Then all marched in procession twelve times round the cross, after which the ceremonies ended and the bands dispersed.

"When do you suppose the race will start?" asked Colin.

"Not till this afternoon, I guess," said Jim; "they have a lot of business to get through with before then—there's all the betting to arrange. That takes some time."

"Betting! Do these fellows bet?"

"Rather," said Westman. "Indians are among the biggest gamblers going. I shouldn't wonder if a wife or two changed hands to-night; some beggar

will bet everything he's got—tent, blanket, knife, and if he's nothing else to stake he stakes his wife.

"Then there's the magic business to look after," the American went on; "one side will likely get the bones of a dead man—which are ill luck—bury them on the quiet in the race-track, and then try to manage that the fellows in the other team pass over them. The other fellows' manager has got to keep a sharp look-out for tricks like that, besides arranging the same sort of antics for his men."

The betting of which Westman spoke was soon seen to be in progress. The *shaman* presently sat down beneath a tree, and was immediately surrounded by an eager crowd of men. Not one of them but carried something in his hands which he desired to stake. Bows, arrows, girdles, blankets, head-bands, knives, beads, little balls of yarn; even sheep, goats, a donkey, and a mule were led up to be staked upon the race. As one thing after another was thus offered, the *shaman* gravely made a sign that he had noted the wager.

"Some head that chap must have," said Westman with a laugh; "one thing, when it comes to settling up, they've got to take his word. There's no disputing with the *shaman* over jobs like this."

"I wonder what the prizes are?" said Colin.

"I don't think they have prizes," said his friend; "the glory is the thing. But I fancy it is usual for the man who gains a bet to make some present to the runner he has backed."

Colin looked on at everything with interest, but his mind turned now and then upon his own affairs.

"You've no idea when they will move from here?" he said.

"Well, not to-day, that's clear; and I should think to-morrow they will want a rest—I should, that's sure, if I was going to run a hundred miles or so this afternoon. They will not finish till long after dark—quite likely half-way through the night."

Soon after midday it was evident the great event was shortly to take place. The runners gathered in their separate parties, grouped about their managers, and still wrapped in their blankets. Presently all followed the *shaman* to a little flat and open space quite clear of trees, at a short distance from the camp. The *shaman* here laid twelve white stones in line upon the ground. All the Indians, children, men, and women, gathered round, while

Colin and Jim took up a position which afforded them a view of all that was going on.

"Ah," said the young American, as his eye fell upon the line of stones; "then it's a twelve-lap race, I guess. You noticed that the chaps marched round the cross twelve times, and now there are twelve stones; I've heard say that the numbers correspond. That first marked tree we saw is three to four miles off—say seven miles there and back. It is a race of about ninety miles."

At a signal from the *shaman* each of the sixteen runners now threw off his blanket, and stood stripped of all clothing save his head-band, sandals, and a girdle round his waist. From these girdles there hung bunches of rushes and several deer's feet. Westman turned to a young Indian who stood beside him and asked a question, to which he received a long reply.

"I think he means that the deer's feet will give them swiftness; what he says about the rushes I can't quite make out—something about the rattling noise keeping the wearer from going off to sleep, I think."

One man of each of the two bands now stepped a little to the front of his companions, holding in his right hand one of the small wooden balls; there the two waited, the balls poised to throw.

The *shaman* raised his hand, and at this signal each of the two leaders threw his ball, using a dexterous underhand movement which sent it spinning down the track before them. In an instant the whole band were off, the crowd of Indians following close behind—men, women, even quite small children scurrying as fast as their small legs could carry them. Carried away by the excitement of the scene, Colin and Westman followed with the rest.

The pace was nothing extraordinary, being seven or eight miles an hour. Both Colin and his friend were in quite hard condition; but they were better used to activity in the saddle than to pedestrian exercise, and, after running for a quarter of a mile, they both pulled up and sauntered back to the starting-post—or rather line—and ascended to the summit of a little knoll, from which they were able to watch the progress of the race for some distance.

The runners, after following the level ground for some half-mile, took to the little ridge on which stood the trees marked with crosses, and which extended from the camp for some three miles or more. The friends were thus able to watch the race at their ease for the first mile or two.

“That tree that we first saw will be the turning-post, I guess,” said Jim. “We’ll stroll along and meet them as they finish the first lap.”

In some three-quarters of an hour from the start the runners were seen coming towards the camp, attended by a crowd of the more active non-competing members of the tribe. It was evidently part of the business of the race to keep the ball ahead by kicking it; once only Colin saw it touched by hand, when in its progress it had chanced to lodge beneath a heavy stone. Then it was picked up by the leading runner of the side that owned it, thrown out on the “fairway”, and again kicked on. The kicks were markedly accurate and straight, and usually sent the ball forward quite one hundred yards or more.

The runners reached the line of stones, and, turning, sped once more upon the outward course. The *shaman* kicked one stone aside.

“There,” remarked Westman; “that’s one lap. The race’ll last till after midnight, that’s quite sure.”

“Great Scott!” said Colin; “will they keep the pace up for ten hours and more? It seems incredible; why, that Italian chap who was first past the post in the Olympic Games Windsor-to-London race was nearly dead when he got in; and that was only about twenty miles.”

“Maybe; but he was not an Indian, kid; you’ll see these chaps won’t die.”

So, hour after hour, the race continued its course, Colin and Westman watching it with increasing interest; sometimes from the small knoll beside the camp, once going out to the turning-post, and at other times taking up position near the course. The runners were never unattended; many men and no small number of the younger women ran with them on either side the track; as fast as some dropped out exhausted, others took their place, taking up the cries of encouragement and exhortation ceaselessly maintained.

There was, too, constant practical assistance given to each band. Both men and women—generally the latter, who were perhaps the wives or mothers of competitors—stationed themselves beside the track; they carried jars of water, bowls of *iskiate*, which a runner would now pause for half a minute to consume. But others never stopped their steady pace; and upon these was thrown a shower of warm water, or a handful of fresh herbs, the latter no doubt thought to possess magic powers.

An hour before sunset, when the two friends reckoned that quite twenty miles had been covered, but few of the competitors displayed the slightest

signs of any great fatigue. Not one had yet dropped out, though several had tailed off behind. But all ran steadily, moving with an easy and unhurried pace which excited Colin's admiration and even elicited the approval of the American.

"These fellows can sure run," he said; "it's almost worth our waste of time to see. But they must get a move on when it's over," he remarked in a decided tone.

"Let's hope they will clear off to-morrow," answered Colin; "but we cannot make them go."

"They've *got* to go," said Westman, "and that's all there is."

The sun sank lower, disappeared below the shoulder of the mighty range; soon darkness would be on the scene.

"Torchlight, I guess," said Westman, replying to a question from Colin.

Torchlight it was to be; the next time that the runners reached the starting-line they found awaiting them a band of men, each holding in one hand a pine-tree branch, one end of which seemed to have received a coating of resin and grease. These were now kindled and their bearers sped off beside the race. This seemed the official illumination; but others snatched up branches from a pile lying ready, kindled them, and took their place. When one torch-bearer faltered and appeared exhausted, half a score of willing substitutes were ready to relieve him of his task.

As night drew on, the sight was picturesque in the extreme. Darkness was all around, save for some fires burning in the Indian camp, about which a few older men and women squatted or prepared an evening meal. Out of the darkness gleamed and danced the light of the approaching or receding torches that accompanied the race. The light grew stronger, brighter, as the race approached the camp; fell on dark eager faces, slender forms; showed up the swiftly moving figures of the runners as, amid the chatter of encouragement around them, they swept up the track light-footed, made a semicircle round the starting-line, sped once more down the course. The voices died away to distant murmurs, then to utter silence in the distance; while the glare of the bright-flaming torches faded to a speck of moving light.

Not till the race had lasted for six hours did a single one of the competitors fall out; then, as the runners turned about the starting-line of stones, one figure separated from the band of whites and turned away. Before the next lap ended several more had followed his example, some

from either band. The length, if not the pace, of this extraordinary competition, had begun to tell.

Colin and Westman went off to their tent, attended to the mules, consumed a hasty supper, and then mounted to the little hill. The runners were some distance up the course, beyond both sight and hearing, and there was but little stir in the deserted camp. Across the great sierra came the cry of some lone bird. Then gradually arose the hum of many voices, an advancing light drew nearer, and the race swept home. The friends went down to see the finish of the lap.

But seven competitors remained, and in another hour there were only five—three reds, two whites. One of the latter was the only one who showed distress; his breath came quickly, now and then he stumbled, even reeled as though about to fall. But he kept doggedly upon his way, and passed out with the others to the darkness of the hill.

Colin recalled to mind the mile-race at the Clinton sports; the white strained faces as the runners made the final lap; the swift collapse of the exhausted winner into the waiting arms of friends who stood to catch him as he broke the tape. Yet these men had been running for now close upon ten hours—had run sixty miles and more. Bother the hidden treasure! To look on at such a race as this was worth a week's delay.

The next lap told its tale upon the runners' ebbing strength; the failing white had fallen out upon the course, and with him one of the opposing band; one white, two reds, were all that now remained. A red was leading; twenty yards behind him came a white, the last red following closely in his rear. The *shaman* kicked away a stone; one more remained. The three competitors were starting on their final lap. It was now after midnight, and another hour or so would see the end.

"Last lap," said Westman; "let's go out to meet them, eh?"

Accordingly the friends strolled up the track until they saw the runners and the crowd again drawing near. Then the pair joined the torch-lit crowd and ran. This was no difficult matter, for by now the pace was little more than a jog-trot. Fine runners as the Indians were, twelve laps of more than seven miles each had told their tale. The three men still surviving in the race were clearly almost at the limit of their strength; their breath came in thick gasps, and in their eyes was a glazed vacant look. This was most noticeable in the red who was still leading and the white who followed ten or twelve yards in his rear. Both sometimes reeled as if about to fall. Last of the three, quite twenty yards behind the white, there followed steadily the second red;

he seemed almost as fresh as ever, running easily without a falter; but he made no attempt to gain upon or pass his rival just in front.

These details Colin saw as he and Jim ran on the outskirts of the crowd; saw, too, a sudden swerve made by the leading man just when the goal was some two hundred yards away. The Indian faltered in his pace, recovered for a moment, then he staggered from the track to lean, half-dazed, against a tree. At once a babel of excited voices rose; cries of encouragement, congratulation, to the second runner who now led; of anger to the man who had thus failed so near the goal.

Then suddenly there came loud counter-cries.

"Say, watch the little fellow, kid!" said Westman; "sure, this is some race."

The "little fellow", as Jim called him, was the red who had till now been running last—possibly content with that position in the rear so long as a member of his own party was leading. He was not markedly smaller than the other two; but his face had a boyish, simple, and almost child-like appearance and expression which went far to justify the American's term.

This red, on seeing his comrade fall out when so near the end, and the race an apparently easy win for the white party, had thrown off in an instant his indifferent manner, and was now seen straining every nerve to overhaul and pass the one competitor who still remained. It was soon clear that he possessed a large reserve of pace and strength for any such emergency as this. Yard by yard the distance separating the two men now ebbed away; those of the crowd who, feeling certain a few moments earlier that the white was bound to win, now saw the danger and gave vent to frantic shouts and cries exhorting him to keep his lead. The reds, whom failure had been staring in the face, saw hope appear again. The clamour from both parties was almost deafening.

The winning-line was barely forty yards away; Colin could see the *shaman* and the men about him, the red torch-light shining on their dusky skins.

Three yards at most now separated the two men, a lead which the exhausted white was doing his utmost to maintain. But his slim rival had reserved a mighty effort for the final spurt. He flung himself ahead of his competitor a bare two yards before the line was crossed. The reds had won.

"Well, I'll admit that that was certainly some race," said Westman, after he and Colin, having succeeded in pushing their way through the wildly

excited crowd, had congratulated the victor by a hearty handshake. “I reckon it would make the best of our Yale and Harvard fellows take a second row; and I guess the best of British athletes would be content to sit beside ’em, eh?”

“Yes, I think our fastest men would have to draw the line at a ninety-mile race,” admitted Colin; “I wonder if these chaps do any training, Jim?”

“Why, no, I fancy not,” replied his friend; “not in the way of running, anyway. You see they’ve been a race of runners for who knows how many centuries now. I can’t give you the right derivation of their tribe-name; but I know Tarahumare has something to do with ‘foot’ or ‘running’. So that they’ve got it in their blood. I fancy all the training that they do, and that for two or three days only, just before the race, is to be a little careful as to what they eat, and to practise kicking that small wooden ball. These fellows brought it with them the whole way; the white chap who was beaten on the post gave it the last kick in.

“And now, kid,” went on Westman, “us for bed. These gamblers mean to keep it up all night; their bets are always settled right away the minute that the race is done. There’ll likely be some argument, and we don’t need to get ourselves mixed up with that.”

Westman was taking the first watch; but it was some little time before Colin went to sleep. Loud were the arguments which could be heard going on around the *shaman*, beneath the tree where the old man had taken up his station to arrange the settlement of bets. But the man seemed to have his tribe—or portion of one—well in hand; for once or twice, when actions seemed upon the point of following angry words, Colin could hear his voice commanding rather than expostulating, and the quarrel would die down.

CHAPTER XVII

What the Grave Held

The friends had not been long astir the following morning when they became aware of a change of feeling with regard to them quite obvious in the Indian camp. The runner who had won the race kept hovering near them, met their looks with radiant smiles, and finally offered Colin the girdle of deer's feet and rushes he had worn. Equally marked was the favour in which the two white strangers were held by others of the tribe, including, as Jim Westman pointed out, all those of the red party.

On the other hand, the whites and their supporters fought extremely shy of the pair, made off if they approached, and, though offering no actual incivility, clearly regarded them with pronounced disfavour.

"We've evidently put our foot in it in some fashion," said the young American; "I'll have a pow-wow with the *shaman* and find out what's wrong."

He accordingly got into conversation with the old man, and presently returned to the tent, where Colin was attending to the mules.

"Well, what is wrong?" inquired Colin, not without anxiety.

"We have been making magic, kid," said Westman, with a grin; "these fellows never will believe in natural causes; they won't have it that the best man wins. As far as I can gather from the *shaman* and the talk that's going on in the camp, the white chap lost because he was bewitched, and not because he couldn't stay the course. The next question is, naturally, who bewitched him? Now, as we two turned up the day before the race, looked on at it, and even joined in at the end of the last lap, the thing is clear as mud —*we* made the magic which decided the result. And so, of course, the reds can't do enough for us; the whites are real mad. However, happily for us, there are as many reds as whites, perhaps rather more. Moreover, the old *shaman* is on our side; of course he disapproves of the idea that there is any white man living who can make a bigger magic than himself."

"Have you found out when they are going to move away?"

"They'll go this evening or to-morrow early," answered Jim Westman in decided tones.

"The *shaman* told you so?"

"Not he; he doesn't know it yet; but they are going, and you can bet on that." But when Colin asked an explanation of this certainty Jim only laughed and declined to supply further information on the point.

"There'll be more races this afternoon—races for boys and older men, and also one for women; then, when those are over, you'll see they'll clear out."

These secondary races were run over the same course as that used on the previous day, but were of fewer laps. Westman and Colin, mindful of the double light in which they were regarded in the camp, and by no means anxious to exert any influence, favourable or otherwise, on the result of the competitions, kept at a respectful distance from the track, and only looked on from the little knoll.

The race for girls and younger women was the most entertaining to the friends. It was a very spirited contest; the speed, pluck, and endurance shown was surprising, and Jim and Colin were pleased when, in a final spurt, the girl who had brought them the refreshing *iskiate*, on the evening of their coming, proved the victor.

When darkness fell, and the two friends had finished supper, Jim got up from beside their fire.

"Now I guess it's time to close the show and get to work," he said. "I'm going to have another little pow-wow with the *shaman*; shan't be long."

Nor was he absent more than half an hour. Even before he returned Colin became aware of a considerable bustle and excitement in the camp, saw figures flitting to and fro between the fires. A most serious consultation seemed to be going on, and a general feeling of consternation to be prevalent.

Jim declined to give any information as to his part in this, but said it might be well if both of them sat up for a few hours, though he assured his friend that there was nothing wrong. Soon Colin saw that groups were gathering round the simple wooden cross; that the *shaman* was going through various ceremonies—delivering speeches, uttering what seemed to be long prayers, and, as far as Colin could make out by the uncertain light of fires and torches, making offerings.

Meanwhile the greater number of the Indians seemed to be busy collecting their belongings, driving together their few sheep and goats, and making ready to strike camp. When the first signs of dawn at length grew

visible the whole tribe was at once upon the move. The *shaman* and a few of the red party came to the friends' tent to say farewell. Some half-hour later the pair found themselves alone, while the last of the Indians were disappearing in the distance.

"Now perhaps you'll tell me how it was you were so certain they would go, and what you did to make them move," said Colin, turning to his friend.

Young Westman laughed:

"Well, kid, I told the truth—or what we hope's the truth—and nothing else," he said; "there wasn't any reason why you shouldn't know, but it was just my joke to mystify you for a bit. It was some fun to see your face; but nothing like the fun it was to see the *shaman's* when I put him wise to where he was."

"What *do* you mean?"

"Well, when I went across to him last night I told him that I'd just looked round to offer our congratulations, say how much we'd both enjoyed the race; how splendidly we thought the red chap won, and what a first-grade contest the white man had put up. Then I just kind o' hinted that of course a tribe who owned a *shaman* like himself could likely bring off anything that was put before them. See?

"Well, the old chap was real pleased—felt sort o' buttered up and good inside; he said some civil things about ourselves. Then it was up to me again.

"I said that, when I found they had pitched camp and meant to race just on this spot, I knew at once what real good Indians they must be, afraid of nothing in the world or out of it—not even of a dead man's grave!

"You should have seen the *shaman's* jaw go down at that! What did I mean? There was no grave round here. I told him I was real sorry, but I was afraid there was; in fact it was a bed-rock fact. Then I put in a few cool truths about the late deceased; bit of a brigand, so I'd heard; done a few murders in his time; the sort of chap who might be apt to make a heap of trouble for the folks who got to holding their festivities around where he was lying.

"The fat was in the fire then, you bet; for quite a while I thought the *shaman* would have thrown a fit. At last he sort of quieted a bit, thought hard a little, and then said they must clear out all bright and early just as soon as might be, after he had made some magic round the cross. I said that seemed a good idea, and added that when they were gone we'd make a little

magic of our own that might perhaps do some good. The *shaman* thanked me quite a lot for having put him wise about the business, saying that, if they had cleared out not knowing about it, quite a lot of mischief might have come their way. They had meant staying here for a time, but as it was they must be off at once."

"It's half a shame to frighten them," said Colin, who, though sorry for the perturbation of the Indians, could not help admiring the clever way in which Jim Westman had got rid of them.

"Shame nothing!" said his friend; "it'll just make 'em go on tiptoe for a month or two, that's all. And, anyway, we had to get 'em going; we've lost two days already and were bound to get to work or chuck it up. I knew how scared these people are of playing around in graveyards, and felt sure the trick would work. And now let's get to business; where's my book?"

During their two days in the Indian camp the friends had been able to make nothing beyond a very incomplete survey of the scene of operations. To have studied the ground with any care in an attempt to find out the position of the grave and buried hoard might very likely have aroused curiosity, if not dangerous suspicions. Moreover, the presence of the little family camps, fires, and other matters which covered the spot rendered any definite conclusions out of the question. Now, however, they got out the pocket-book containing the translation of the charm and forthwith set to work.

"Now then," said Westman, "what has friend El Lobato got to say? 'Near to the first stone fence, the oldest and most broken, to the left-hand of the way from Taxlan, just where a pile of large stones lies, the jewels were taken from the mule on which they were.' Taxlan lies over there," he pointed towards the west, "and the road from there towards the head of the *barranca* would run somewhere about where we are. Now to unearth the fence."

"Unearth" was the right word; for the scanty remains of the former village of Ventadina were now hard to trace. But after twenty minutes of close search they did at last decide that they had found the "first stone fence", now little more than a low, irregular, and very broken line of scattered stones. A line, however, it quite plainly was; and the friends moreover decided, although not without some doubt, that they were able to identify as the "pile of large stones" a spot at which a score or more of massive blocks lay scattered here and there upon the ground in close proximity to the fence.

“ ‘As yet another sign’,” continued Westman, reading from the book; “ ‘in the fence is a great stone, projecting from it and in great part sunk into the ground.’ Now then, we’ve got to find that stone.”

That proved to be a task which cost them three long hours. No sign of such a stone was to be seen above the soil, and it was clear that search must be made below the surface. The pick was brought into action and every foot of the line of fence closely probed, the friends wielding the sharp-pointed tool alternately. Heavy was the labour in that hard and sun-baked soil; but at length, as Westman swung the pick, it jarred with a sharp ring. Five minutes spent in spadework presently revealed a large block of stone, irregular in shape, which closely adjoined the wall-line.

“This sure will be the goods,” cried Jim, in triumph; “kid, we’re on the trail and getting near, you bet. Now then, let’s see what’s next.”

“ ‘From this stone measure ten full paces towards the sunset, from the place where wall and stone do meet.’ Well, that’s easy done;” Jim strode ten paces to the west. “ ‘Turn then towards the front and measure five paces. Once again to the sunset three yards; there the hole was digged.’ ”

“Five paces to the front of what?” said Colin.

“Search me if I know.” Jim rubbed his head. “It won’t be west, for that would be straight on the way we have just come; nor east, for that would be straight back. It’s either north or south; but which?”

“In England the front of a house usually faces more or less towards south if it can be arranged,” said Colin.

“Yes, you like sun because you get so mighty little of it,” said his friend; “in Mexico we like a bit o’ shade. It’s a toss-up which El Lobato calls the ‘front’ of anything, I guess.”

“If it’s a toss-up, why then, let us toss,” said Colin, drawing a coin from his pocket; “here goes, heads for north, as we’re in Mexico.”

The fallen coin displayed a head. Five paces were stepped northwards, then three towards the west.

“Well, this should be about it,” said Jim Westman; “now for pick and shovel and a fortune, eh!”

All through that cloudless afternoon the pair toiled steadily, alone upon the wide and empty hill. The ground was hard and stony, and the labour great, necessitating frequent spells of rest. They dug a hole five feet or more in depth without result; no sign of either skeleton or buried treasure paid

their pains. But it was possible that they were out by a few feet, or that El Lobato's final measurements were somewhat roughly given; they therefore now began to dig around the hole already made, enlarging it on every side.

The sun sank down behind the shoulder of the hill, the west glowed richly, dusk was close at hand, when suddenly there seemed to come in sight the realization of all Colin's rosiest hopes. It was Westman who was at work with the pick, while Colin shovelled out what he had loosened, when the tool's point struck gratingly on something that was not a stone—something that seemed to give and break. The next few spadefuls taken out showed small chips of something yellowish white in colour. Another minute brought to light an object as to the identity of which there could not be the slightest doubt. It was a broken skull, half-shattered by the blow of Westman's pick.

The young American threw down his tool, seized Colin's hand, and wrung it in a grip that made him wince.

"Congratulations, kid!" he cried; "we've struck it, sure as sin. We're fairly on the spot—no error about that."

"It does look like it, sure enough." Colin's heart was throbbing violently, and his voice shook as he spoke.

Westman worked on, now slowly and with care. He had been working in the side of the first excavation made; but he now mounted to the surface of the ground above, and dug down steadily above the point from which the skull had been unearthed.

When, after a quarter of an hour, he had reached that level, other scattered bones appeared; an arm-bone, then a portion of a spine, then several ribs.

"This is the fellow that was 'punished with the penalty of death', sure thing. But El Lobato says he 'lay upon the bottom of the grave', and that the grave was 'deep'. This chap's not more than four feet underground. However, let's get on."

Westman dug slowly down from where the bones had been unearthed, closely examining each spadeful of earth moved. True, El Lobato's paper said the jewels were in a demijohn; but that vessel might be broken by a careless stroke, and half the contents lost.

A foot, and then another foot of earth was dug away; they had dug down at least six feet. And then once more the pick's point rang on something hard. Westman stooped down, groped with his hands in the loose earth, and then held up—another skull, this time unbroken!

"*Two* fellows killed and buried!" Colin cried. "Great Scott, this El Lobato *was* a brute!"

Westman's face, hitherto cheerful, had suddenly grown grave.

"Yes, so it seems," he said; "but why another, when the paper only mentions one? That's what I'd like to know."

They worked on silently. A sudden doubt—the doubt of the unknown and unexplained—had fallen on them both. Why did the brigand's paper so emphatically state that one man, and one only, had been killed and buried with the treasure, when it seemed clear that two at least had met that fate? Or—could it perhaps be that someone else had been before them in the search, that they would find the treasure gone? There was most certainly some mystery yet unexplained. The charm had not told all.

These thoughts and others passed through Colin's mind. He was called back from fruitless speculation to real facts by Westman's suddenly throwing down the spade and plunging both hands in the loosened earth. Some seconds later he held up to Colin's view an earthen demijohn.

"Struck it at last, kid, I believe. There's something in it, sure."

He handed the vessel to Colin. It was of about half a gallon capacity, and the boy knew in an instant from its weight that it was not empty.

"There's something in it, certainly," he said.

The neck of the demijohn was not closed in any way. Colin turned it up and shook it, but nothing emerged save a faint sound of rattling.

"The stones must be wrapped up in something," Westman said; "here, break it—but no, wait a sec."

He took his coat, which had been lying on the ground beside him while he worked, and spread it out.

"There, break it over that."

A smart tap from the point of the pick broke the jar without difficulty. As the earthenware fell apart in two or three pieces there was revealed to sight a little leather bag, tied round the neck with cord.

"The fellow must have put the empty bag into the jar, then poured the stones in and tied up the neck," said Jim; and there certainly seemed no other way of accounting for the position of the well-filled bag.

“Your show, my son,” went on Westman, as Colin stood with the bag in his hand and his heart beating violently; “come, ain’t you goin’ to open up the *cache*?”

Thus exhorted, Colin took his knife, slit the cord, and gently poured the contents of the bag out upon Westman’s coat.

There was a full minute of dead silence after he had done so. On the coat there lay a little pile—of common pebbles, such as they might easily have gathered from the ground on which they stood!

CHAPTER XVIII

The Cave below the Fall

Colin looked down upon the broken demijohn, the dirty leather bag, the little heap of common pebbles, feeling as though his heart were turned to stone.

Had he been asked, at any time within the last few days, whether he really counted seriously upon discovering the bandit's hoard, he would quite probably have answered "Not at all!" and would have said that he was following up the clue contained in poor Canuto's charm upon a mere "off-chance", and more from curiosity than moved by any real hope.

But what boy of eighteen could, in such a case as his, avoid the building of a group of gilded castles in the air, to be realized if the search did prove successful after all. What happiness it would have brought to him and his—that hoard of jewels a century old which, as both Mr. Osgood and Jim Westman had assured him, would be his by every right if it were found. At Meadowgrange he could have made things be as they had always been; as for himself, he could have gone into the cavalry as he had planned.

And then, how all appearances had led him on—only to crush his hopes at last. They had reached Ventadina without difficulty; had rid themselves of the intrusive Indians, thanks to Jim; had followed El Lobato's measurements correctly, found the *cache*, the bones of the long-murdered man—two men indeed—the very demijohn in which the jewels had once been hid; only to find it all a cruel hoax at last. Oh, it was hard!

But it was no use thinking about all that now. They had been wasting time, both Jim and he. He turned towards Westman, who had moved away a little distance and was standing with his back turned to the scene of shattered hopes, too wise to intrude on his friend's first moments of disappointment with commonplace condolences.

"Well, so that's that," said Colin; "I suppose I've been a fool to drag you here on such a wild-goose chase."

"Say, kid, I'm real sorry; but you take it like a man. Well, it's most dark; we'll get to supper and think over things a bit."

"There's only one thing to think over now," said Colin, rather bitterly; "back to the *hacienda* just as soon as it is light to-morrow, and waste no

more time. There's nothing further to be done."

Westman did not reply. Colin was carrying pick and shovel, while his friend had picked up from the ground a ghastly relic of their fruitless search—the larger fragments of the skull which they had first unearthed.

They cooked and ate their supper in a seldom-broken silence. When the meal was finished Westman took up the pieces of the skull and occupied himself in endeavouring to fit them together.

"This fellow was shot through the head," he said presently; "see, kid."

He pointed out to Colin an unmistakeable bullet-hole behind one ear.

"Shot when he had his back turned, likely," the American went on; "well, now, the way I figure out the thing is this. First, I got nervy when I saw a second skeleton after our friend Lobato only spoke of burying one; I think that Osgood had this in his mind as well, but didn't want to put you off."

"This scoundrel El Lobato never meant to leave the jewels there at all—too great a risk with half a dozen or more fellows knowing the *cache*. But he buried them quite openly, killed Bernardino, and drew up your friend Canuto's charm, which he evidently kept himself.

"Then presently he got his gang sent off elsewhere—all but one man, whom he would likely pick as being as big a fool as knave. To this chap he'd propose that they should steal a march upon the rest, dig the bag up, and share the jewels. The other fellow stepped into the trap right off; he and El Lobato came up here. Then, when the pair of 'em had opened up the *cache* and got the jewels, Lobato put a bullet in him when he wasn't on his guard, and buried him."

Colin reflected for a moment.

"Yes, that's about the size of it, I expect," he said; "at any rate it's good enough for me. The stuff's not here, we haven't the least notion where it is, and that's the end. To-morrow morning we'll be off."

"I wish we'd got the fellow here," continued Westman; "I'd soon find a way to make him speak. Bit of a joker, too, he must have been. Of course, when he'd once moved the hoard, the paper he had written out was no more good. He don't destroy it—no, not he, but gives it to an Indian as a charm. I guess Canuto's grand-dad's tale was likely true. Lobato would opine it might get opened some fine day, and that whoever read it would scoot off to get the goods. Well, the old scoundrel's got the smile on us, that's sure.

"Of course, he may have put the jewels to bed a second time quite near; but that don't seem too likely. Anyway, we can't dig up the whole blamed hill. I rather guess they're far enough away."

"Yes, it's a hopeless job; let's think no more about it."

But, spite of this decision, it was long before Colin slept that night. All further search was useless, he assured himself not once but many times. The treasure *might* be lying still quite near the spot where they had dug so hopefully; but far more probably it was many miles away—if indeed the jewels still existed as a single hoard, and had not been dispersed among a hundred different hands. A dozen times the boy turned over, closed his eyes, and vowed to banish the whole subject from his mind. But all his vows proved fruitless, and the missing jewels still filled his thoughts.

He slept at last—slept long and heavily, awaking in broad daylight. Jim was already astir and preparing breakfast. He nodded to Colin but made no remark.

"Well," said the latter, "when we've had breakfast I suppose we may as well be off."

"Um, perhaps; but I was rather calculating, now we're here, we might as well step down a piece and see that fall they talk about. It isn't far; won't take us half a day."

"I don't know that I am very keen on 'falls' of any kind," said Colin; "I have had a sort of bump myself," he added with a rather rueful smile.

"Yes, I'll admit that, kid; but that's no sort of reason why you ought to shut your eyes to what they say is well worth seeing. You don't feel like it now, I guess, but later on you may be sorry that you didn't take the chance when it's so near. To say the truth, I'm rather keen on it myself; been past the place already twice and didn't stop, and don't feel like neglecting this young Niagara again."

"Oh, if you want to go, all right," said Colin, anxious not to disoblige so good a friend.

Westman was perhaps less keen than he professed to be on seeing the fall. Under a somewhat dry and cynical exterior he possessed a very kindly heart. He was more fond of Colin than the latter knew, and felt keenly for his friend's great disappointment. The English boy had, from time to time, told him a good deal of his home and circumstances; and Westman, who had an indifference to money unusual in an American, had been delighted to think that his chum seemed on the eve of possessing what might prove a very

handsome fortune. Now that the hopes of the past week were dashed to the ground, he was anxious to distract his mind as much as possible, and it was for this reason that he urged a visit to the waterfall.

The fall, which lay about two miles from the head of the *barranca*, took them an hour's riding at an easy pace to reach. The great defile began as a mere shallow trough or depression in the uplands of the Sierra Madre range, watered by a small stream. Then, almost suddenly, the river flowed across a slab of rock, and thence dropped sheer nine hundred or a thousand feet into a pool below, from which point the rift in the hills assumed the form the two friends had already seen when crossing it upon their journey to the Hacienda of the Running Water several weeks before.

Viewed from the rock on which they stood, the great gorge formed a splendid spectacle, stretching away in deepest shadow far below. But the waterfall itself could only be viewed well from near its foot, and Westman insisted on descending there. It would have been useless, also somewhat difficult, to take the mules; but the American assured Colin that they would be quite safe where they were. For two active men the descent and return would not occupy more than about three hours; the Indians were by this time far enough away, and it was most unlikely anyone would pass the spot. Besides, the pack-mule was the trusty Chipa, and she would not let herself or her companions come to harm.

So the friends scrambled down. The sides of the *barranca* at this point were, although steep, much less precipitous than lower down, and there was little difficulty in finding out a fairly practicable path. And when Colin finally stood beside the stream, a little way below the pool at the cliff-foot, he owned to Westman that he was not sorry he had come.

The volume of the water in so small a stream was not enough to reach the bottom in a solid mass; before descending half the distance it broke up into a veil of silver mist which swayed and varied with each drifting breath of wind. The floating atoms fell upon the surface of the pool, the rocky sides of the *barranca*, with a gentle whispering sound, and the perpetual moisture gave an emerald brilliance to the grass and trees and bushes upon which it lay. The great ravine itself, together with the lower portion of the fall, was still in shadow; but upon the first few hundred feet below the rock the sun was shining with unclouded brilliance, and the colours of the rainbow gleamed and shimmered in the swaying spray.

"I say, that's really fine!" said Colin; "Jim, I'm glad you made me come."

"Well, yes, kid, not so bad. Compare it with our little old Niagara as a water-power proposition, and it hasn't got a chance; but for a beauty-spot I'd say it was some show."

They sat for twenty minutes gazing at the lovely, ever-changing sight, then strolled down the *barranca* a few hundred yards. It was Jim Westman who suggested their return.

"Although I'll own I could sit here and look at it all day," he said; "makes you feel kind o' good."

Colin, looking casually about him as they retraced their steps to the point at which they had reached the river-bank, noticed a bird—some kind of finch it seemed—which flew up from the water's edge and settled in a sapling clinging to the rocky side of the *barranca* at a height above them of about twenty feet. Idly he picked a pebble from the ground and threw it at the bird. It missed its mark and seemed to pass right through the foliage of the tree; but Colin heard no sign to tell that it had struck the rock behind.

No more than idly curious, he moved towards the cliff and peered up at the bush, which was densely foliaged and spreading. After a minute he picked up a larger stone, aimed carefully, and threw it hard. A dull and muffled sound came back in answer to the shot—as though the stone had struck on something a long distance off.

"Jim!" he called out to Westman, who was on in front; "come here; I fancy there's a cave."

"Likely enough," said Westman, turning back and looking lazily in the direction towards which Colin pointed; "all the same I don't see any sign of one myself."

"Don't you! Well, listen then;" and for the third time Colin threw a stone.

"Yes, now I seem to get you," said his friend. "Well, what about it? Feel like shinning up to have a look inside?"

"I think I will; I am not likely ever to be here again, and may as well look round at what there is to see."

The "shinning up" which Westman had so casually suggested proved no very easy task. That portion of the cliff-face screened from sight by the thick foliage of the little tree was fully twenty feet above the ground; the rock immediately below it fell quite smooth and sheer. But Colin seemed seized with a determination to explore the cave—if cave there were—which was

only increased by the quite obvious obstacles. Closely inspecting the situation, he presently found footholds rather to the right, and fancied he could get behind the tree by using these. That done, an exploration of the cave should not be difficult.

Slowly the two friends made their way—for Jim, delighted to see Colin's mind distracted, if but for a short time, from his recent disappointment, said he would go anywhere if given a lead; and soon they clung precariously upon a level with the upper branches of the bush. Colin swung carefully behind them, and the next minute shouted to his friend:

"Yes, I was sure of it; there is a cave all right, and I'm going in."

A moment later he exclaimed:

"My stars, it's a tight fit."

Some grunting and gasping, with violent struggles of the speaker's legs among the branches, spoke volumes for the difficulties that attended an entrance; but at length a muffled voice exclaimed:

"Come on, I'm in."

Westman, who was fortunately slim for his height, followed, and, once inside, struck a match. The natural entrance to the cave had clearly once been four or five feet high by about three feet broad; but a wall of stones and clay had been built up to within about ten inches of the top, so that only a low opening now remained. Westman produced a little piece of candle from his pocket, lit it, and the friends looked round.

The chamber, though not large, was very high; but what at once attracted the attention of the pair was a row of objects lying upon the bare rock floor against the inner wall. A very brief examination showed them to be several mouldering skeletons.

"An Indian burial-cave, I guess," said Westman; "what have we got here?"

He had now raised his eyes from the bones laid upon the floor, and was regarding a narrow natural ledge, high on the wall above them. Upon this ledge was ranged a row of half a dozen earthen jars.

"They're demijohns," said Westman, "like the one——" he paused.

"Yes, like the one that held the pebbles, up above," said Colin dryly; "I have had about enough of them."

“We may as well see what there is to see,” replied his friend; “here goes. Give me a leg.”

Setting one foot in a crack of the wall, and supported by Colin, he managed to reach a jar and bring it down. He turned it bottom-upwards and a little dust fell out. The contents of a second and a third proved similar.

Westman reached up for a fourth jar. As he raised it from the ledge his face changed, and he brought it down with care.

“I guess there’s something more than dust in here,” he said.

He turned the vessel upside down. Something was plainly heard to shift inside, but nothing came out through the narrow neck. Jim tapped the jar sharply on the rocky floor; it broke into two portions and the contents were revealed.

“A bag like that we found up there!” said Colin in a voice he could not recognize as being his own. His face paled, his heart beat violently, and he could feel his whole body shaking.

“Steady, kid, steady!” said his friend; “it may be nothing after all. Let’s have your knife.”

With a hand that trembled Colin took his knife from his coat pocket, passed it to Jim Westman, who with one sharp stroke slit the thin cord that tied the leather bag. Then carefully he poured the contents out upon the floor. There was a gentle rattle as he did so; then, in the dim light of the candle, many-coloured sparks flashed suddenly on Colin’s eyes.

The boy’s head swam; then he felt Westman’s hand upon his shoulder in a kindly grip,

“No pebbles this time, kid, I guess! We’ve run Lobato’s treasure down at last! Some treasure too! Gee, but I’m glad, I’m glad; for you deserve it, that’s a fact. *Now* what about it’s hardly being worth while to come and see the fall!”

There on the floor of the dim cave lay, certainly with hardly room for doubt, the brigand’s so long hidden hoard. Some treasure, truly, as Jim said. Diamonds formed the greater portion; but there were also rubies, emeralds, and sapphires. The size of the stones varied a good deal; some of the diamonds were large, but none of them equalled one magnificent sapphire.

Colin, hardly able to speak, so great was the revulsion of feeling, knelt above the sparkling pile.

"You think they're his?" he said at last.

"Small doubt about it, I should guess," said Jim; "we'll surely never get the bed-rock truth about it now, but what I figure out is this: Lobato, after he had dug these pretty stones up with the other fellow and then put him in the hole, came down here with the stuff. Why did he put it here? Who knows; but it is likely that the others of his gang had not gone far away, and he had perhaps arranged to meet them later near the *cache*. If so he couldn't get the goods away to any distance; couldn't keep 'em on him—too much risk. It's possible he knew about this cave or found it out by chance. The cunning rascal! He would know blamed well that Indians never meddle with the food-jars in a burial-cave; they always put some grub in at the funeral, so that the dead folks shall have a meal. Course this is just a bit of guess-work, but it's 'bout as far as you and I shall get. It's no great matter—you have got the stuff."

"Why did he not come for them? That's what I cannot make out."

"Who knows; killed, likely, looting someone else. The whole gang must have got paid off, one way or another, far as I can see; some of 'em surely would have gone back sometime and have opened up the *cache*. Well, now, let's see what you have got."

Jim's piece of candle was upon the point of burning out before they left the cave. Seated together on the floor, they sorted, counted, the whole store of gems. The total, carefully checked and re-checked, showed Colin the possessor of two hundred and thirteen diamonds, great and small; fifty-seven emeralds; thirty-three rubies; and forty-one sapphires—nearly three hundred and fifty stones in all. These they divided into two portions, which were safely stowed away in their belts. The two jars still remaining on the shelf were not forgotten, but were found to contain nothing but a little dust.

"And now let's make tracks out of this," said Westman, rising from the floor. "I shan't feel real happy till what's in your belt and mine is stowed away in Osgood's safe."

They left the cave, not altogether without difficulty; lowered themselves to the ground by the branches and stem of the tree; and climbing the steep side of the *barranca*, found the three mules grazing quietly where they had left them some three hours before. The pair pushed on at a good pace till dusk that night, and were again upon the move before the sun was up the following day. Two hours after dark that evening they were once more at the Hacienda of the Star.

CHAPTER XIX

Meadowgrange Once More

Colin, the manager, and Westman sat together late that night in Mr. Osgood's room.

"Well, now, my boy," said Mr. Osgood, when the stones had been examined, re-examined, and at length locked up inside the safe, "one thing is very clear to me—the sooner this snug fortune and yourself are safely out of Mexico the better for us all. With the money represented by a pile of stones like these it would be folly for you to remain upon the range."

At first Colin protested vigorously against the manager's suggestion, urging that for him to leave the Hacienda of the Star at such a crisis as the present would be base ingratitude. The range had provided him with a living and a prospect in life when he was much in need of both; now that this was no longer the case, and that his friends were in difficulty and even danger, he felt extremely reluctant to forsake them. Mr. Osgood remained firm.

"Yes, yes," he said, "I know just how you feel; but you have got your family to think about. This rising is but barely started yet; things will be worse before they're better—that's my view and it's the view of others who know the country. I know that when he let you come out here Mr. Dickson felt every confidence in the ability of Diaz to keep matters calm; otherwise I am quite sure that he would not have let you come. Nobody can be wise always and everywhere; and in this case I don't think that either Mr. Dickson or his fellow-members of the syndicate had realized how very nearly things which have been simmering for years had reached the boiling-point. Well, now they have boiled over, as you see for yourself, and a whole heap of folks are going to get pretty badly scalded. You are an Englishman and you are very young; you came out here because you were unable to go into your English army; now, with this fortune, you can do as you had planned. In any case I won't have the responsibility of your being here a day beyond what I can help. In fact, to set your conscience quite at rest, I'm going to *order* you to quit the range and to advise you to get out of Mexico as soon as possible.

"The only question is how best to get away. Of course across the Rio Grande to Texas is the nearest road and in some ways the simplest. But there are custom-houses at the fords and ferries on the Rio Grande; there is a

heavy duty upon precious stones that enter the United States, and you would probably have trouble upon that account. It's not so much the paying of the duty that I'm thinking of, as how you will explain possession of the stones. *We* know the deal's been on the square right through; but the story is a bit too picturesque to put up to a custom-house man. On the other hand, you might try to get down to Mexico City and thence on to Vera Cruz; but it's a longish way and there are many risks. In fact, there's quite a heap of risk whatever way you move."

The speaker pondered for some minutes, with his hands thrust deep into his pockets, and then said:

"Look here; if you will be advised by me, you'll take our friend Santa Ana of the *rurales* into your confidence. He has his faults; but he's an honest man—in his own way. What he has said he'll do, he'll do; and what is more, he has good friends of all kinds here in Northern Mexico—queer birds, a lot of 'em, if all the tales they tell are true. I can make some excuse to get him up here; then we'll tell him all about the stones and see if there is anything he can suggest."

To this course Colin readily agreed; and a few days later, in response to a request sent by a mounted man, the captain of *rurales*, once a brigand, reached the Hacienda of the Star, escorted by six men. Closeted after supper with the manager, Colin, and Jim Westman, he was made acquainted with the whole story of the jewels and their discovery. The stones themselves were laid before him.

The captain fingered them, as they lay spread upon the table, with a curious smile upon his lips.

"Felicitations, *señor*," he said, bowing politely to Colin; "pray believe that I feel greatly honoured by your confidence. Yes, yes, assuredly these pretty stones are yours by every right. And now you wish to leave our troubled Mexico, to take them somewhere where there are no brigands, eh?"—the grey eyes twinkled merrily. "Quite natural, that. Ah-ha, there was a time when Gabriele Santa Ana might have felt inclined to deal with such a charming treasure in a different way; but now—he is another man." The captain gave a little sigh, and then went on:

"Besides, I owe you no small gratitude for aiding me that night among the hills; you led me to a man whom I much wished to see. We met so suddenly that my men came near shooting you, eh, *señor*? they are so hasty with their guns, my men. Yes, I will help you to leave Mexico; you may trust to me."

He leaned back in his chair and seemed to reflect for a few minutes, while the blue smoke floated up from his cigar.

"Yes," he said presently, "I can assure your being put across the Rio Grande at a point where our good neighbours of the States will not ask inconvenient questions as to anything that you may carry in your belt."

"It will cost money, of course?" said Mr. Osgood.

"Not for myself—not one *centimo*," said the captain with a lofty air; "could I take Señor Charteris all the way I should be glad to do so, and would count myself his debtor still. That is impossible, for I am called elsewhere by duty. But I can see that others do the business; they—well, they will perhaps require to be paid."

"The trouble is that we are just now rather short of ready dollars on the range."

"That is no matter," answered Santa Ana; "listen, *señor*; in this way the thing can be arranged. Five thousand silver dollars—you would not think that too much?" The manager and Colin intimated that it was in their opinion quite a reasonable sum.

"Good! You will give me that sum in dollars, or in a satisfactory draft—but not until I produce a paper signed by Señor Charteris telling you that he is safe across the river—he and the contents of his belt!"

This was agreed to. Captain Santa Ana added:

"He must start without delay."

"To-morrow, *señor*, do you mean?" asked Colin, thinking that he would have little time in which to say good-bye.

"At midnight—in three hours, if you please," replied the captain, looking at his watch. "You have no doubt a horse that will do forty miles without a check?"

"We'll see to that," said Mr. Osgood; "then, Captain, we shall place our friend in your kind hands with every confidence?"

The manager's keen eyes looked steadily at Santa Ana as he spoke. With a slightly theatrical flourish the *rurales* captain drew his sword and kissed the slender blade; then he took from an inner pocket a small paper, which, on being unfolded, showed a tress of coal-black hair. This too he kissed.

"On all that I hold dearest, *señors*, both of the present and the past. You have the word and oath of Santa Ana; I can offer nothing more."

"We are quite satisfied," said Mr. Osgood in a quiet tone; "when Santa Ana gives his word, no one who knows him asks for more."

Three hours later, after a warm "Good luck!" from Mr. Osgood, and a handshake from Jim that nearly dislocated his wrist, Colin turned his back on the great house which for some eighteen months had been his home, and cantered briskly northward by the side of the *rurales* officer.

Before leaving he had arranged with Mr. Osgood for the advance of a sum of money to old Father Fabiano, the *hacienda* priest, that the prayers stipulated for by El Lobato might be said. He had also arranged that Canuto's grandmother, the dead man's only near relative, should have ample comfort for the remainder of her days.

It was in vain that Colin had endeavoured to divide his prize with Jim, urging that, but for his insistence, the jewels would still be lying in the cave. The young American was obdurate.

"Kid, I don't need the dollars, and you do. The old man's got a pile, you bet. If I asked him for half a million or a million, why he'd let me have 'em right away; we're right good friends. He'd like me in his business—but the saddle and the open air for me. Some day perhaps I'll set up a ranch all on my own; he'll pay for it."

Westman only yielded so far as to accept a fine diamond, promising to have it set in a ring for a keepsake.

Of the three days and nights that followed his departure Colin now recalls few details save an overwhelming sense of most intense fatigue. Long were the rides, and very brief the hours allowed for rest. Santa Ana and his escort went with him to a small village some miles north of Nazarenos, and there passed him over to the custody of another party of the force. The captain had already told him that the railway between Nazarenos and the frontier was unsafe, part of it being destroyed and the remainder more or less in the hands of the rebels, so that the whole journey must be made by road.

Colin's escort was by no means always official. On more than one occasion he was transferred to the care of some extremely questionable-looking gentlemen, who frequently received instructions for their mission with a scowl that boded ill. But always a brief glance at the small paper that bore Santa Ana's signature, and which was passed on from one escort to the next, produced an instant change. There was a nod of comprehension; Colin was inclined to think an oath was sworn; then a fresh horse, food, everything

the traveller needed for his journey, was produced with speed and even eagerness. It seemed quite clear that Captain Santa Ana was a power in the land, and not alone in the *rurales* force.

There came a night when Colin and a most disreputable-looking escort of four ill-clad men waited in silence on the right bank of the Rio Grande; waited until a flash flared out into the darkness on the north bank of the river, then died down. During some twenty minutes nothing happened; then a boat slid through the muddy water, and touched the bank. Colin, in words agreed upon between himself and Mr. Osgood, scribbled a line to say that he had safely reached the river and was just about to cross. A minute later he left Mexico behind.

There still remained a ride of fifteen miles to a small Texan town, where Colin ordered a room at the hotel, dropped on the bed at once, and slept for eighteen hours.

Two days later he was announced to Mr. Dickson at his New York office. That gentleman, on seeing him, started from his chair with a bound.

"Why, my dear boy," he cried, "I am right thankful to see you. I have been scared to death about what might be happening to you all—to you especially. Why have I had no answers to my letters this last month?"

Colin assured his friend that not a letter from the firm, or indeed from the United States at all, had reached the *hacienda* for some weeks, and then proceeded to give Mr. Dickson some details of the state of things in Chihuahua. The financier shook his head.

"I hope I needn't say that I should not have dreamt of letting you go out if I had had a notion of the way that things were going to turn. But I and other members of our syndicate had every reason to believe that Diaz would be able to keep hold on things. That, as you've got good cause to know, was not the case, and I can only ask you to forgive me for having sent you into such a hornets' nest. I fear that your good mother never will; they must be much alarmed about you back at home."

"There isn't much to be forgiven, sir," said Colin, with a smile; "you let me go to work upon your range because you thought that I might some day make a fortune at that kind of thing. I've made—or rather found—the fortune rather quicker than I hoped to do, that's all."

"You've found a fortune! I don't rightly get you; what d'you mean?"

The financier's surprise may be imagined upon Colin's spreading out the stones before his eyes, and telling him the tale of their discovery.

“Say, but that’s great!” he cried from time to time. “It’s like a fairy tale. Now, what d’you mean to do?”

Colin replied that he had thought of taking them to England, but that he was open to advice. Mr. Dickson was strongly in favour of disposing of the jewels in New York, both on account of risk in carrying them about, and because prices of precious stones were just then very high in the United States.

He at once offered to put the boy in touch with a reliable and expert dealer, to give his own guarantee that the stones were Colin’s lawful property, and to give help in any other way. That afternoon he carried Colin off to his suburban home, where Maisie welcomed him warmly. Before leaving the city, Colin cabled to Meadowgrange the non-committal message: “Leaving for England, Saturday. Good news.” He meant to keep the story of the jewels until it could be told by word of mouth.

The following day the bandit’s hoard was laid out for inspection by the dealer, not, however, before Colin had withdrawn the splendid sapphire for his mother, with whom that stone was a special favourite. He also reserved two fine diamonds for Enid and Dido.

The expert, after making a careful examination, pronounced every stone to be genuine, pointing out, however, that the greater number were but small in size. A dozen or more of the largest and finest were, he readily admitted, of considerable value. Asked by Mr. Dickson if he was prepared to make an offer for the lot, he fixed his eyes upon the ceiling for a quarter of a minute, then named a sum in dollars.

Colin made a rapid mental calculation. Over thirty thousand pounds! Surely enough to do a lot for Meadowgrange, with perhaps sufficient over to let him go into the cavalry.

“Is it a deal, sir?” asked the man of precious stones.

Colin felt much inclined to answer “Rather!” but he looked at Mr. Dickson for advice.

“Our friend here is a good judge and an honest man,” said the financier; “I’m quite sure he’ll give you time to think it over if you like.”

“Thanks, but I think I’ll take his offer,” said the boy.

The expert drew a cheque-book from his pocket.

“Shall I make it payable to Mr. Colin Charteris?” he asked.

Three days later Colin sailed for England; within a fortnight he was once again at Meadowgrange, recounting to a wondering circle his romantic tale.

"Well, Coll," his father said that night, when Dido had reluctantly withdrawn to bed, "this lucky find of yours will change the look of everything. You'll go into the cavalry of course? It's not too late."

Colin replied that he should certainly like to take up his intended career "if there was enough money"; but went on to say that what he really wanted was for his fortune to be used in putting Meadowgrange once more upon its old comfortable footing, or as nearly so as possible. The major and his mother pointed out that the money was his, and ought, until he came of age, to form a trust for his exclusive use.

Eventually the family solicitor managed to set forth a scheme by which, while the main portion remained intact, Colin's wishes were satisfied by a share of the interest going to the support of Meadowgrange.

Thanks to his brief but most eventful march with Villa and his men, it was not wholly the boy's first experience of the noise of battle when, in August, 1914, he found himself involved in the Great War. Through it he came without an illness or a serious wound, but brought with him a D.S.O.

Less lucky as to personal disaster was his old friend Jim. The young American had stayed on at the *hacienda* till the strongly growing tide of revolution in the country, and the raiding of all stock till the great range was practically bare, made further work upon the place impossible. Jim rather welcomed the outbreak of war in "little old Europe". Forthwith he crossed the frontier into Canada, enlisted, and reached France with one of the earliest contingents. After a year of fighting on the Western Front the flying fragment of a shell shattered his left arm, and partial amputation was necessary. He was invited to recruit at Meadowgrange; and Colin, coming home on ten days' leave, was both delighted and surprised to find his sister Enid and his friend engaged.

"I'm jolly glad about it, Enid," he remarked, congratulating her on the event; "but somehow I had never thought that Jim would be your style."

"Oh!" said his sister; "and what sort of person *did* you think would be 'my style'?"

Colin, a little at a loss, murmured something of a young French marquis who, a short time previously, had been paying Enid considerable attentions.

"*He!*" cried Enid, in a voice of most supreme contempt; "oh, well, he was amusing in a way, but that was all. Your Jim's a *man*."

Colin most heartily agreed; but privately he thought that, as regards the taste of girls, always excepting Dido, why—"You never know."

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Because of copyright considerations, the illustrations by D.C. Eyles have been omitted from this etext.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout. Page numbers have been removed due to a non-page layout.

When nested quoting was encountered, nested double quotes were changed to single quotes.

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