MAYNE REID

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Prologue.

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During one of many journeyings through the remote provinces of the Mexican republic, it was my fortune to encounter an old revolutionary officer, in the person of Captain Castaños. From time to time as we travelled together, he was good enough to give me an account of some of the more noted actions of the prolonged and sanguinary war of the Independence; and, among other narratives, one which especially interested me was the famed battle of the *Puente de Calderon*, where the Captain himself had fought during the whole length of a summer's day!

Of all the leaders of the Mexican revolution, there was none in whose history I felt so much interest as in the *priest-soldier*, Morelos—or, as he is familiarly styled in Mexican annals, the "illustrious Morelos"—and yet there was none of whose private life I could obtain so few details. His public career having become historic, was, of course, known to every one who chose to read of him. But what I desired was a more personal and intimate knowledge of this remarkable man, who from being the humble curate of an obscure village in Oajaca, became in a few short months the victorious leader of a well-appointed army, and master of all the southern provinces of New Spain.

"Can you give me any information regarding Morelos?" I asked of Captain Castaños, as we were journeying along the route between Tepic and Guadalaxara.

“Ah! Morelos? he was a great soldier,” replied the ex-captain of guerilleros. “In the single year of 1811, he fought no less than twenty-six battles with the Spaniards. Of these he won twenty-two; and though he lost the other four, each time he retreated with honour—”

“Hum! I know all that already,” said I, interrupting my fellow-traveller. “You are narrating history to me, while I want only chronicles. In other words, I want to hear those more private and particular details of Morelos’ life which the historians have not given.”

“Ah! I understand you,” said the captain, “and I am sorry that I cannot satisfy your desires: since, during the war I was mostly engaged in the northern provinces, and had no opportunity of knowing much of Morelos personally. But if my good friend, Don Cornelio Lantejas, is still living at Tepic, when we arrive there, I shall put you in communication with him. He can tell you more about Morelos than any other living man: since he was *aide-de-camp* to the General through all his campaigns, and served him faithfully up to the hour of his death.”

Our conversation here ended, for we had arrived at the inn where we intended to pass the night—the *Venta de la Sierra Madre*.

Early on the following morning, before any one had yet arisen, I left my chamber—in a corner of which, rolled in his ample *manga*, Captain Castaños was still soundly asleep. Without making any noise to disturb him, I converted my coverlet into a cloak—that is, I folded my serape around my shoulders, and walked forth from the inn. Other travellers, along with the people of the hostelry inside, with the

domestics and muleteers out of doors, were still slumbering profoundly, and an imposing silence reigned over the mountain platform on which the venta stood.

Nothing appeared awake around me save the voices of the *sierras*, that never sleep—with the sound of distant waterfalls, as they rushed through vast ravines, keeping up, as it were, an eternal dialogue between the highest summits of the mountains and the deepest gulfs that yawned around their bases.

I walked forward to the edge of the table-like platform on which the venta was built; and halting there stood listening to these mysterious conversations of nature. And at once it appeared to me that other sounds were mingling with them —sounds that suggested the presence of human beings. At first they appeared like the intonations of a hunter’s horn— but of so harsh and hoarse a character, that I could scarcely believe them to be produced by such an instrument. As a profound silence succeeded, I began to think my senses had been deceiving me; but once more the same rude melody broke upon my ears, in a tone that, taken in connexion with the place where I listened to it, impressed me with an idea of the supernatural. It had something of the character of those horns used by the shepherds of the Swiss valleys; and it seemed to ascend out of the bottom of a deep ravine that yawned far beneath my feet.

I stepped forward to the extreme edge of the rock, and looked downwards. Again the hoarse cornet resounded in my ears; and this time so near, that I no longer doubted as to its proceeding from some human agency. In fact, the moment after, a man’s form appeared ascending from

below, along the narrow pathway that zigzagged up the face of the cliff.

I had scarce time to make this observation, when the man, suddenly turning the angle of the rock, stood close by my side, where he halted apparently to recover his breath.

His costume at once revealed to me that he was an Indian; though his garments, his tall stature, and haughty mien, lent to him an aspect altogether different from that of most of the Indians I had hitherto encountered in Mexico. The proud air with which he bore himself, the fiery expression of his eye, his athletic limbs, and odd apparel, were none of them in keeping with the abject mien which now characterises the descendants of the ancient masters of Anahuac. In the grey light of the morning, I could see suspended from his shoulders the instrument that had made the mysterious music—a large sea-shell—a long, slender, curved conch, that hung glistening under his arm.

Struck with the singular appearance of this man, I could not help entering into conversation with him; though he appeared as if he would have passed me without speaking a word.

“You are early abroad, friend?” I remarked.

“Yes, master,” he replied; “early for a man as old as I am.”

I could not help regarding this as a jest; for over the shoulders of the Indian fell immense masses of jet black hair, which seemed to give contradiction to the statement of his being an old man.

I looked more narrowly into his countenance. His bronzed skin appeared to cling closely to his angular features, but

there were none of those deep furrows that betray the presence of advanced age.

“How old are you?” I asked at length.

“That I cannot tell, cavallero,” replied he. “I tried from the time I was able to distinguish the dry season from that of the rains to keep an account of my age; and I succeeded in doing so up till I was fifty. After that, for particular reasons, I did not care to know it, and so I left off counting.”

“You say you are more than fifty years old?” and as I put this inquiry I glanced at the long purple black tresses that hung over his shoulders.

“Nearly half as much more,” was the reply. “You are looking at the colour of my hair. There are ravens who have seen a hundred seasons of rain without having a feather whitened. Ah! what matters the course of years to me? A raven croaked upon the roof of my father’s cabin when I was born, at the same instant that my father had traced upon the floor the figure of one of these birds. Well, then! of course I shall live as long as that raven lives. What use then to keep a reckoning of years that cannot be numbered?”

“You think, then, that your life is in some way attached to that of the raven that perched on the paternal roof when you came into the world?”

“It is the belief of my ancestors, the Zapoteques, and it is also mine,” seriously responded the Indian.

It was not my desire to combat the superstitions of the Zapoteques; and, dropping the subject, I inquired from him his purpose in carrying the conch—whether it was for whiling away his time upon the journey, or whether there

was not also connected with it some other belief of his ancestors?

The Indian hesitated a moment before making reply.

“It is only a remembrance of my country,” he said, after a short silence. “When I hear the echoes of the Sierra repeat the sounds of my shell, I can fancy myself among the mountains of Tehuantepec, where I used to hunt the tiger—in pursuing my profession of *tigrero*. Or at other times I may fancy it to be the signals of the pearl-seekers in the Gulf, when I followed the calling of a *buzo* (diver); for I have hunted the sea tigers who guard the banks of pearls under the water, as I have those that ravage the herds of cattle upon the great savannas. But time passes, cavallero; I must say good day to you. I have to reach the hacienda of Portezuelo by noon, and it’s a long journey to make in the time. *Puez, adios, cavallero*!”

So saying, the Indian strode off with that measured step peculiar to his race; and was soon lost to my sight, as he descended into the ravine on the opposite side of the plateau.

As I returned towards the inn I could hear the prolonged notes of his marine trumpet rising up out of the chasm, and reverberating afar off against the precipitous sides of the Sierra Madre.

“What the devil is all this row about?” inquired Captain Ruperto Castaños, as he issued forth from the venta.

I recounted to him the interview I had just had; and the singular communications I had received from the Indian.

“It don’t astonish me,” said he; “the Zapoteques are still more pagan than Christian, and given to superstitious

practices to a greater degree than any other Indians in Mexico. Our Catholic *curas* in their villages are there only for the name of the thing, and as a matter of formality. The business of the worthy padres among them must be a perfect sinecure. I fancy I understand what the fellow meant, well enough. Whenever a Zapoteque woman is about to add one to the number of their community, the expectant father of the child assembles all his relations in his cabin; and, having traced out the figures of certain animals on the floor, he rubs them out one after another in their turn. That which is being blotted out, at the precise moment when the child is born, is called its *tona*. They believe that, ever after, the life of the newborn is connected in some mysterious manner with that of the animal which is its *tona*; and that when the latter dies so will the former! The child thus consecrated to the tona, while growing up, seeks out some animal of the kind, takes care of it, and pays respect to it, as the negroes of Africa do to their *fetish*."

"It is to be presumed, then, that the Indian father will make choice only of such animals as may be gifted with longevity?"

The captain made no reply to my suggestion, farther than to say that the Zapoteque Indians were a brave race, easily disciplined, and out of whom excellent soldiers had been made during the war of the Revolution.

After a hasty *desayuno* at the venta, my travelling companion and I resumed our journey; and, crossing the second great chain of the Mexican Andes, at the end of six days of fatiguing travel we reached the ancient town of Tepic.

Here it was necessary for me to remain some time, awaiting the arrival of important letters which I expected to receive from the capital of Mexico.

During the first week of my stay at Tepic, I saw but very little of my fellow-voyager—who was all the time busy with his own affairs, and most part of it absent from the little *fonda* where we had taken up our abode. What these affairs might be, God only knows; but I could not help thinking that the worthy ex-captain of guerilleros carried on his commercial transactions, as in past times he had his military ones—a little after the partisan fashion, and not altogether in accordance with legal rules.

After all, it was no affair of mine. What most concerned me, was that with all his running about he had not yet been able to meet with his friend, Don Cornelio Lantejas—whom no one in Tepic seemed to know anything of—and I was beginning to suspect that the existence of this individual was as problematical as the business of the captain himself, when a lucky chance led to the discovery of the ex-aide-de-camp of Morelos.

“Don Ruperto appears to have gone crazy,” said Doña Faustina, our hostess of the fonda, one morning as I seated myself to breakfast.

“Why, Doña Faustina?” I inquired.

“Because, Cavallero,” replied she, evidently piqued at the captain’s disregard of her hospitable board, “he is hardly ever here at meal times, and when he does show himself, it is so late that the *tortillas enchiladas* are quite cold, and scarce fit to eat.”

“Ah, señora!” replied I, by way of excusing the irregularity of the captain’s habits, “that is not astonishing. An old soldier of the Revolution is not likely to be very punctual about his time of eating.”

“That is no reason at all,” rejoined the hostess. “We have here, for instance, the good *presbitero*, Don Lucas de Alacuesta, who was an insurgent officer through the whole campaign of the illustrious Morelos, and yet he is to-day a very model of regularity in his habits.”

“What! an officer of Morelos, was he?”

“Certainly; all the world knows that.”

“Do you chance to know another old officer of Morelos, who is said to live here in Tepic, Don Cornelio Lantejas?”

“Never heard of him, Señor.”

At this moment Don Ruperto’s voice sounded outside, announcing his return from one of his matutinal expeditions.

“To the devil with your tortillas and black beans!” cried he, rushing into the room, and making answer to the reproaches of his hostess. “No, Doña Faustina—I have breakfasted already; and what is more, I shall dine to-day as a man should dine—with viands at discretion, and wine, as much as I can drink, of the best vintage of Xeres! I have breakfasted to-day, good clerical fashion. Who with, do you think?” asked he, turning to me.

“Don Lucas de Alacuesta, perhaps?”

“Precisely; otherwise Don Cornelio Lantejas, who, on changing his profession, has made a slight alteration in his name; and who, but for a lucky chance, I should never have found till the day of judgment, since the worthy *presbitero* hardly ever stirs out from his house. Who would have

believed that an old soldier of the Independence should so change his habits? In fact, however, we have had so many priests turned officers during the Revolution, that it is only natural one officer should become a priest, by way of compensation."

In continuation, Don Ruperto announced to me, that we were both invited to dine with his old acquaintance; and further, that the latter had promised to place at my disposition such souvenirs of the illustrious Morelos as I desired to be made acquainted with.

I eagerly accepted the invitation; and in three hours after under the conduct of the captain, I entered the domicile of the worthy padre, Don Lucas de Alacuesta. It was a large house, situated near the outskirts of the town, with an extensive garden, enclosed by a high wall, rendered still higher by a stockade of the organ cactus that grew along its top.

We found our host awaiting us—a thin little man, of some fifty years of age, nimble in his movements, and extremely courteous and affable. He appeared to be one who occupied himself, much less with the affairs of his parish, than with the cultivation of his garden, and the preservation of entomological specimens—of which he possessed a bountiful collection.

Nothing either in his speech or features, as in those of Captain Castaños, recalled the *ex-militario*, who had borne a conspicuous part in the long and bloody campaigns of the revolutionary war.

It is not necessary to give any details of the dinner—which was after the fashion of the Mexican *cuisine*, and

excellent of its kind. Neither shall I repeat the conversation upon general topics; but enter at once upon those scenes described by the ex-aide-de-camp of Morelos, and that of which our drama has been constructed.

Chapter One.

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The Grito of Hidalgo.

The great revolutionary war of 1790 was not confined to France, nor yet to Europe. Crossing the Atlantic, it equally affected the nations of the New World—especially those who for three centuries had submitted to the yoke of Spain. These, profiting by the example set them by the English colonies in the north, had taken advantage of the confusion of affairs in Europe, and declared their independence of the mother country.

Of the Spanish-American vice-kingdoms, New Spain—or Mexico more properly called—was the last to raise the standard of independence; and perhaps had the wise measures of her viceroy, Iturrigaray, been endorsed by the court of Madrid, the revolution might have been still further delayed, if not altogether prevented.

Don José Iturrigaray, then vice-king of New Spain, on the eve of the insurrection had deemed it wise policy to grant large political concessions to the Creoles, or native white population of the country, and confer upon them certain rights of citizenship hitherto withheld from them.

These concessions might have satisfied the Creoles with the government of the mother country, and perhaps rendered their loyalty permanent. Mexico, like Cuba, might still have been a “precious jewel” in the Spanish crown, had it not been that the decrees of Iturrigaray produced dissatisfaction in another quarter—that is, among the pure Spaniards themselves—the *Gachupinos*, or colonists from

Old Spain, established in Mexico; and who had up to this time managed the government of the country, to the complete exclusion of the Creoles from every office of honour or emolument.

These egoists, considering the acts of the viceroy ruinous to their selfish interests, and the privileges they had hitherto enjoyed, seized upon his person, and sent him to Spain to give an account of his conduct.

Tyrannous counsels prevailed; the prudent plans of Iturrigaray were rejected, and Mexico fell back into the same political bondage under which she had groaned since the conquest of Cortez.

The dismissal of Iturrigaray took place in 1808. The Gachupinos were not without apprehensions of an outbreak; but as two years passed over in tranquillity, their doubts became dissipated, and they ceased to believe in the possibility of such an event.

Theirs was but fancied security, and lasted only two years. In 1810 it was abruptly terminated by the rising of Hidalgo in one of the northern provinces, the news of which event descended upon the Gachupinos like a thunderbolt.

Strange enough that a priest should be the leader of this movement in favour of liberty: since it was through priestly influence that Mexico had all along been governed and oppressed! But in truth Hidalgo, and the other priests who figured in this insurrection, were a very different class of men from the great metropolitan ecclesiastics of the capital and the larger cities, who conducted the affairs of state. Hidalgo was but a simple village *cura*—a child of the people

—and so, too, were most of the other patriot priests who espoused the popular cause.

In October 1810, Hidalgo had nearly one hundred thousand men in the ranks of his army. They were badly armed and equipped, but still formidable from their very numbers. This immense host, which consisted principally of native Indians, overspreading the country like a torrent, could not fail to produce consternation in the minds of the Gachupinos.

Even among the Creoles themselves it created a certain confusion of ideas. All these were the sons or descendants of Spaniards, and of course connected with the latter by ties of consanguinity. It was but natural, therefore, that some of them should believe it to be their duty to take the part of the government against the insurrection, while others should sacrifice the ties of family relationship to the more noble idea of liberating their country from a foreign yoke.

This difference of opinion among the Creoles existed only in families of the higher and wealthier classes. Among the poorer Mexicans—the people—whether white or half caste, there existed only one sentiment, and that was in favour of independence from Spain. The Indians of pure blood had their own ideas. They had been more enslaved than the Creoles, and of course readily united with them for the expulsion of the Spaniard—their common oppressor. Some of them also indulged in the idle dream that circumstances might restore the ancient splendour of the Aztec race.

Chapter Two.

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An Irksome Journey.

In a morning of the month of October, a solitary traveller was pursuing his route across the vast plains which extend from the limits of the state of Vera Cruz through that of Oajaca. It is scarcely necessary to say that the traveller was on horseback—in a country where no one ever thinks of journeying on foot. He was armed also, as well as mounted; but both horse and weapon were of such an indifferent character as to be ill suited for an encounter with an enemy of any kind. This, too, in a country just then in a state of revolution, where the traveller might expect to meet with an enemy at any moment—either a political adversary, or one of those professional bandits with whom Mexico at this time abounded, and who robbed all alike, irrespective of party.

The only weapon our traveller possessed was an old curved sabre; but it was doubtful whether it could be drawn from its iron scabbard, which appeared as rusty as if it had lain for years at the bottom of a river. It was carried obliquely along the flap of the saddle, and under the thigh of the horseman—the common mode in Mexico—thus transferring the weight of the weapon from the hip of the rider to the ribs of his horse.

The steed of our traveller showed evident signs of having been at one time the property of some *picador de toros*: as was manifested by the numerous scars that traversed his flanks and counter; but whatever good qualities he may have once possessed, he was evidently now one of the sorriest of jades—worth no more than the value of his own

skin. Notwithstanding the repeated strokes of the spur, which his rider administered without stint, it was impossible to force him into anything more rapid than a shambling walk, and at this slow pace was he proceeding, evidently to the great chagrin of the impatient traveller.

The costume of the horseman thus ill mounted consisted of a sort of jacket of white cotton stuff, with open *calzoneros* of olive-coloured velveteen. On his feet were short boots of goat-skin—dressed in imitation of cordovar leather—and covering his head was a broad-brimmed hat of common palmetto plait. Though not positively shabby, his garments had the appearance of having been a long time in wear, out of regard to economy. There was something, however, in their cut and texture that bespoke the wearer to belong to a class above that of the mere peasant.

He was a young man—apparently two or three and twenty—of slender figure and rather thin in flesh. His countenance bespoke gentleness of disposition, amounting almost to simplicity; and this would have been the impression produced upon an observer, but for a pair of lively spiritual eyes that sparkled in sockets somewhat sunken. These, combined with a well-formed mouth, and lips of a sarcastic cut, relieved the otherwise too ingenuous expression of his features, and proved that the young man was capable, when occasion required, of exhibiting a considerable power of repartee and acute observation. Just then the predominant expression upon his features was that of chagrin, mixed with a certain degree of uneasiness.

The scenes through which he was passing were of a character to cause apprehension—especially to one

journeying alone. On all sides extended a vast plain of sterile soil—the brown earth but thinly covered with a growth of cactus and wild aloes, under the shadow of which appeared a sparse herbage, wild, and of yellowish hue. The aspect was monotonous and dreary beyond expression; while here and there vast clouds of dust rose in whirlwinds, and moved like spectres over the plain. The straggling huts encountered at long intervals on the way were all empty—apparently abandoned by their owners! This strange circumstance combined with the heat of a tropic sun, the absence of all signs of water, the profound silence that reigned over these solitary steppes, had created a sense of discouragement in the mind of the young traveller, amounting almost to fear.

Notwithstanding a liberal use of the spur, his horse could not be induced to depart from a walk. If by a desperate effort he was once or twice forced into a trot it was only to return again to his old gait as soon as the spur was taken from his flanks. The painful exertions of the rider had no other result than to cause the perspiration to flow profusely over his face, rendering it necessary for him every now and then to make use of his pocket-kerchief.

“*Maldito cavallo*!” (Good-for-nothing beast!) he exclaimed at intervals as his patience became exhausted; but the horse, fatigued with a long journey, was as insensible to the insults of his rider’s speech as he had been to the strokes of his spur, and moved not a whit the faster.

Wearied with these idle efforts to increase the speed of the animal, the young traveller turned in his saddle and looked back. His object was to compare the route he had

come with that which lay before him—in order to form some calculation as to the distance yet to be travelled before he could reach the other side of the desert plain.

The observation did not appear to gratify him. On the contrary, his countenance became clouded with a still deeper shade of chagrin; and, abandoning himself to a complete despair, he made no further attempt to urge forward his unwilling roadster, but left the sorry brute to his creeping pace.

For several hours the traveller kept on his slow course—his spirit alternately exasperated and depressed.

Mid-day had arrived, and the tropic sun, glaring down vertically from a cloudless sky, was causing a degree of heat almost intolerable. The breeze had ceased to cool the atmosphere; and even the dry leaves of the trees hung motionless from the boughs. At every moment the horse, crawling painfully forward, threatened to become motionless as they.

Suffering from thirst, and wearied with the journey he had already made, the young traveller at length dismounted, and threw his bridle-rein over the neck of his horse. He had no fear that the animal would take advantage of the freedom thus given him. There was not the slightest danger of its running away.

Leaving the steed to himself, therefore, the rider walked towards a clump of *nopals*—in hopes of finding some fruit upon them, by which he might relieve his thirst.

As good luck would have it, he was not deceived in his expectation. The *nopals* were in fruit; and having plucked a number of these “Indian figs,” and stripped them of their

spinous skins, he was enabled, by swallowing a quantity of the sweetish pulp, to allay in some measure the excessive thirst that had been hitherto torturing him. Thus satisfied, he once more mounted into his saddle, and continued his interrupted journey.

Chapter Three.

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An Enigma.

After riding several miles farther, he arrived at a small village, situated in the same plain through which he had been journeying. There, as all along the route, he found the houses deserted and abandoned by their owners! Not a soul was to be seen—no one to offer him hospitality; and as nothing could be found in the empty houses—neither food to satisfy his hunger, nor water to quench his thirst—the traveller was compelled to ride on without halting. "*Cosa estrana*!" muttered he to himself, "what on earth can be the meaning of this complete depopulation?"

In addition to the desertion of the houses, another odd circumstance had struck his attention. Almost at every hut which he passed, he saw canoes and *periaguas* suspended from the branches of the trees, and raised many feet above the ground! In a part of the country where there is neither lake nor river—not so much as the tiniest stream—no wonder the sight astonished our traveller, considering that he was a stranger to the district, and had not yet

encountered a single individual who might explain the ludicrous phenomenon.

Just as he was pondering over an explanation of these singularities, a sound fell upon his ear, that produced within him a feeling of joy. It was the hoof-stroke of a horse, breaking upon the profound solitude. It came from behind him; and betokened that some horseman was approaching in his rear, though still invisible on account of a turning in the road, which the young traveller had just doubled.

In a few seconds' time the horseman appeared in sight; and galloping freely forward, soon came side by side with our traveller.

"*Santos Dios*!" saluted the new-comer, at the same time raising his hand to his hat.

"*Santos Dios*!" responded the young man, with a similar gesture.

The meeting of two travellers in the midst of a profound solitude is always an event, which leads to their regarding one another with a certain degree of curiosity; and such occurred in the present instance.

He who had just arrived was also a young man—apparently of twenty-four or twenty-five years; and this conformity of age was the only point in which the two travellers resembled each other. The new-comer was somewhat above medium stature, with a figure combining both elegance and strength. His features were regular and well defined; his eyes black and brilliant; his moustache thick and curving, and his complexion deeply embrowned with the sun. All these circumstances tended to show that he was a man of action; while a certain air of energy and

command bespoke fiery passions, and the hot Arabian blood, which flows in the veins of many Spanish-Mexican families.

His horse was a bay-brown, whose slender limbs and sinewy form declared him also to be descended from an oriental race. The ease with which his rider managed him, and his firm graceful seat in the saddle, betokened a horseman of the first quality.

His costume was both costly and elegant. A vest of unbleached cambric suited well the heat of the climate. His limbs were covered with *calzoneros* of silk velvet of a bright purple colour; while boots of buff leather, armed with long glancing spurs, encased his feet. A hat of *vicuña* cloth, with its trimming of gold lace, completed a costume half-military, half-civilian. To strengthen its military character a rapier in a leathern sheath hung from his waist-belt, and a carbine, suspended in front, rested against the pommel of his saddle.

"*Puez, amigo*!" said the newly-arrived horseman, after a pause, and glancing significantly at the back of the traveller. "May I ask if you have far to go upon that horse?"

"No, thank goodness!" replied the other; "only to the hacienda of San Salvador; which, if I'm not mistaken, is scarce six leagues distant."

"San Salvador? I think I've heard the name. Is it not near to an estate called hacienda of Las Palmas?"

"Within two leagues of it, I believe."

"Ah! then we are following the same route," said he in the laced cap; "I fear, however," he continued, checking the ardour of his steed, "that there will soon be some distance

between us. Your horse does not appear to be in any particular hurry?”

The last speech was accompanied by a significant smile.

“It is quite true,” rejoined the other, also smiling, as he spoke; “and more than once upon my journey I have had reason to blame the mistaken economy of my good father, who, instead of letting me have a proper roadster, has munificently furnished me with a steed that has escaped from the horns of all the bulls of the Valladolid Circus; the consequence of which is, that the poor beast cannot see even a cow on the distant horizon without taking to his heels in the opposite direction.”

“*Carrambo*! and do you mean to say you have come all the way from Valladolid on that sorry hack?”

“Indeed, yes, Señor—only I have been two months on the way.”

Just then the Rosinante of the circus, roused by the presence of the other horse, appeared to pique himself on a point of honour, and made an effort to keep up with his new companion. Thanks to the courtesy of the moustached cavalier, who continued to restrain the ardour of his fine steed, the two horses kept abreast, and the travellers were left free to continue the conversation.

“You have been courteous enough,” said the stranger, “to inform me that you are from Valladolid. In return, let me tell you that I am from Mexico, and that my name is Rafael Tres-Villas, captain in the Queen’s dragoons.”

“And mine,” rejoined the young traveller, “is Cornelio Lantejas, student in the University of Valladolid.”

“Well, Señor Don Cornelio, can you give me the solution of an enigma which has puzzled me for two days, and which I have been unable to ask any one else, for the reason that I have not met with a soul since I entered this accursed country. How do you explain this complete solitude—the houses, and villages without inhabitant, and skiffs and canoes suspended from the trees in a district where you may go ten leagues without finding a drop of water?”

“I cannot explain it at all, Señor Don Rafael,” replied the student; “it has equally astonished myself; and more than that—has caused me most horrible fear.”

“Fear!” echoed the captain of dragoons; “of what?”

“The truth is, Señor Capitan, I have a bad habit of being more afraid of dangers which I cannot comprehend, than those which I know. I fear that the insurrection has gained this province—though I was told to the contrary—and that the State of Oajaca was perfectly tranquil. Like enough the people have abandoned their dwellings to avoid falling into the hands of some party of insurgents that may be scouring the country?”

“Bah!” exclaimed the dragoon, with a contemptuous toss of his head. “Poor devils like them are not in the habit of fleeing from marauders. Besides, the country-people have nothing to fear from those who follow the banner of the insurrection. In any case, it was not for sailing through these sandy plains that the canoes and *periaguas* have been hung up to the trees? There’s some other cause, than the panic of the insurrection, that has breathed a spirit of vertigo into the people here; though, for the life of me, I can’t guess what it is.”

For a while the two travellers continued their journey in silence—each absorbed in speculating upon the singular mystery that surrounded them, and of which neither could give an explanation.

Chapter Four.

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The Hungry Travellers.

The dragoon was the first to resume the conversation.

“You, Señor Don Cornelio,” said he, “you who have come from Valladolid, perhaps you can give me some later news, than I have received about the march of Hidalgo and his army?”

“Not any, I fear,” replied the student; “you forget, Señor, that, thanks to the slow pace of my old horse, I have been two months on the route? When I left Valladolid, nobody had any more thought of an insurrection than of a new deluge. All I know of it is what I have heard from public rumour—that is, so much as could be divulged without fear of the Holy Inquisition. If, moreover, we are to believe the mandate of the Lord Bishop of Oajaca, the insurrection will not find many supporters in his diocese.”

“And for what reason?” asked the captain of dragoons, with a certain hauteur, which proved, without committing himself to any disclosure of his political opinions, that the insurgent cause would not find an enemy in him. “What reason does the bishop assign?”