

THE WAR-TRAIL!

CHAPTER LVI.

THE BIVOUAC OF THE GUERRILLA. I STAYED to hear no more, but drove the spurs against the ribs of my horse till he sprang in full gallop along the road. Eager as were my men to follow 'twas as much as they could do to keep up.

We no longer thought of scouts or cautious marching. The trappers had mounted, and were galloping with the rest. We thought only of time.

We rode for the hacienda de Vargas, straight up the river. Although it was beyond the rancharia, we could reach it without passing through the latter—which lay some distance back from the stream. We could return to the village afterwards, but first for the hacienda. There I wished to arrive in the shortest time possible. The miles flew behind us, like the dust of the road.

Oh, should we be no in time! I feared to calculate the length of the interval since the boy had heard that rabble rout. Was it more than an hour? Five miles to the rancho, and he on foot. Had he travelled rapidly? Yes, here and there; but he had made a stop: some man had passed him, and he had hidden in the bushes, till they were out of sight. He had been more than an hour on the way—nearly two, and one would be enough for the execution of the darkest deed. Oh, we should not arrive in time.

There was no delay now. We were going at top speed, and in silence, scarcely exchanging a word. About might be heard the clattering of hoofs, the clinking of bits, or the ringing of steel scabbards. Neither the simy gutter nor the deep rut of carreta wheels stayed our advance; our horses leaped over, or went weltering through them.

In five minutes we came to the rianconada, where the road forked—the left branch leading to the village. We saw no one, and kept on by the right, the direct road to the hacienda. Another mile and we should reach the house; a quarter of that distance, and we should come in sight of it; the trees alone hindered our view of its walls. On—on!

What means that light? Is the sun rising in the West? Is the chaparral on fire? Whence came the yellow gleam, half intercepted by the trunks of the trees? It is not the moon!

"Ho! the hacienda is in flames!" "No—it cannot be! A house of stone, with scarcely enough timber to make a blaze! It cannot be that!"

It is not that. We emerge from the forest; the hacienda is before our eyes. Its white walls gleam under a yellow light—the light of a fire, but not of a conflagration. The house stands intact. A huge bon fire burns in front of the portal; it was this that caused the glare through the forest.

We draw up, and gaze upon it with surprise. We behold a huge pile—the material supplied from the household stack of dry fagots—a vast blaze drowning the pale moonshine. We can see the hacienda, and all around it, as distinctly as by the light of day!

For what purpose this holocaust of crackling aecias?

Around the fire we beheld many forms, living and moving. There are men, women, dogs, and saddled horses. Huge joints are roasting over the red coals, and others, roasted, are being greedily eaten. Are they savages who surround that blazing pile? No—we can see their faces with full distinctness, the white skins and black beards of the men, the cotton garments of the women; we can see sombreros and serapes, cloth cloaks and calzonerios of velvetene, sashes and sabres; we can distinguish their voices as they shout, sing and enrouse; we note their lascivious movements in the national dance—the fandango. No Indians they! 'Tis a bivouac of the guerrilleros—the ruffians for whom we are in search.

O, that I had listened to the voice of prudence, and adopted the strategy of a surround! But my blood was boiling, and I feared to lose even a moment of time, lest we might be too late. But one or two of my followers counselled delay, and, as the event proved, they were the wisest. The rest, like myself, were impatient for action.

The word was given, and like hounds fresh loosed from the leash, we rushed forward with charging cheer.

It was the madness of fools. Well knew our enemy the horse Texan "hurrah!" It had been shouted to terrify them, when there was no need. They would never have stood ground.

The shout scattered them like a herd of deer. The steep hill proved too heavy for our horses; and before we could reach its summit, the main body of the guerrilla had mounted, and scampered off into the darkness. Six of them fell to our shots, and as many more, with their she-associates, remained prisoners in our hands; but as usual that subtle coward had contrived to escape. Pursuit was idle; they had taken to the dark woods beyond the hill.

I thought not of pursuit; my mind was bent on a far different purpose.

TO BE CONTINUED.

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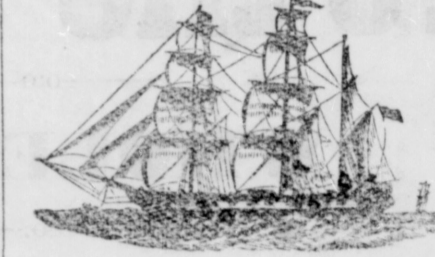
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Table with 3 columns: STATIONS, MIXED, MIXED. Rows include Ch'town, Royalty, N. Wilshe's, Hunter R'r, Bradalbal's, Co'ty Line, Freetown, Keusingt'n, Summ'side, Wellington, Port Hill, Cleary, Bloomfield, Alberton, Tignish, Royalty, Bedford, Mt. Stew's, Carligan, Georgetown, Mt. Stew's, Morell, St. Peter's, Bear River, Souris.

L. B. ARCHIBALD, Superintendent Railway Office Charlottetown, Nov. 29, 1881 (61 wky)

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