The Treasure of Pearls: A Romance of Adventures in California

Gustave Aimard

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THE TREASURE OF PEARLS

A Romance of Adventures in California

BY

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GEORGE VICKERS, ANGEL COURT, STRAND

AND ALL BOOKSELLERS

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THE TREASURE OF PEARLS

CHAPTER I.

THE PIECES AND THE BOARD.

We stand on Mexican soil. We are on the seaward skirt of its westernmost State of Sonora, in the wild lands almost washed by the Californian Gulf, which will be the formidable last ditch of the unconquerable red men flying before the Star of the Empire.

Before us, the immensity of land; behind us, that of the Pacific Ocean.

O immeasurable stretches of verdure which form the ever-unknown territory, the poetically entitled Far West, grand and attractive, sweet and terrible, the natural trellis of so rich, beautiful, mighty, and unkempt flora, that India has none of more vigour of production!

To an aeronaut's glance, these green and yellow plains would offer only a vast carpet embroidered with dazzling flowers and foliage, almost as gay and multicoloured, irregularly blocked out like the pieces of glass in ancient church windows with the lead, by rivers torrential in the wet season, rugged hollows of glistening quicksands and neck-deep mud in summer, all of which blend with an unexampled brilliant azure on the clear horizon.

It is only gradually, after the view has become inured to the fascinating landscape, that it can make out the details: hills not to be scorned for altitude, steep banks of rivers, and a thousand other unforeseen impediments for the wretch fleeing from hostile animals or fellow beings, which agreeably spoil the somewhat saddening sameness, and are hidden completely from the general glance by the rank grass, rich canes, and gigantic flower stalks.

Oh, for the time--the reader would find the patience--to enumerate the charming products of this primitive nature, which shoots up and athwart, hangs, swings, juts out, crosses, interlaces, binds, twines, catches, encircles, and strays at random to the end of the naturalist's investigation, describing majestic parabolas, forming grandiose arcades, and finally completes the most splendid, aye, and sublime spectacle that is given to any man on the footstool to admire for superabundant contrasts, and enthralling harmonies.

The man in the balloon whom we imagine to be hovering over this mighty picture, even higher up than the eagle of the Sierra Madre itself, who sails in long circles above the bald-headed vulture about to descend on a prey, which the king of the air disdains--this lofty viewer, we say, would spy, on the afternoon when we guide the reader to these wilds apparently unpeopled, more than one human creature wriggling like worms in the labyrinth.

At one point some twenty men, white and yet swarthy, unlike in dress but similarly armed to the teeth, were separately "worming" their tortuous way, we repeat, through the _chaparral_ proper, or plantations of the low branching live oak, as well as the gigantic ferns, mesquite, cactus, nopal, and fruit laden shrubs, the

oblong-leaved mahogany, the bread tree, the fan-leaved abanico, the pirijao languidly swinging its enormous golden fruit in clusters, the royal palm, devoid of foliage along the stem, but softly nodding its high, majestically plumed head; the guava, the banana, the intoxicating chirimoya, the cork oak, the Peruvian tree, the war palm letting its resinous gum slowly ooze forth to capture the silly moths, and even young snakes and lizards which squirmed on the hardening gum like a platter of Palissy ware abruptly galvanised into life.

These adventurers insinuated themselves through this tangle unseen and, perhaps, unsuspected by one another, all tending to the same point, probably the same rendezvous. A marked devil-may-care spirit, which tempered the caution of men brought up in the desert, betokened that they were master of the woods hereabouts, or, at least, only recognised the Indian rovers as their contesting fellow tenants.

Elsewhere, a blundering stranger, of a fairness which startled the pronghorn antelopes as much as a superstitious man would be at seeing a sheeted form at midnight, tramped desperately as one who felt lost, but nervously feared to delay whilst there was daylight, over the immense spreads of dahlias, flaunting flowers each full of as much honey as Hercules would care to drain at a draught, whiter than Chimborazo's snow, or ruddier than the tiger lily's blood splashes; through thick creepers which withered with the pressing circulation of boiling sap like vegetable serpents around the trees, from which gorged reptiles, not unlike these growing cords themselves, dangled, and now and then half curled up, startling with his inexpert foot (in a boot cut and torn by the bramble and splinters of the ironwood and lignum vitae shattered in the _tornado_--a "twister," indeed)--animals of all sizes and species, which leaped, flew, floundered, and crept

aloof in the chaos not unpierceable to them: forms on two, four, countless feet, with long, broad, ample, or tiny wings, singing, calling, yelling, howling up and down a scale of incredible extent, now softly seducing the astray to follow, now taunting him and screaming for him to forbear. If he were not maddened, he must have had a heart of steel.

Elsewhere still, a man was riding on a horse whose harness and trappings smelt so strongly of the stable, that is, of human slavery, that it alarmed the stupid, mournful-eyed bisons, the alligator as he basked in the caking mire, the hideous iguana slothfully ascending a wind cast trunk, that maneless lion the cougar, the panthers and jaguars too lazy or too glutted with the night's raid to follow the prey, the honey bear warily sniffing the flower which harboured a bee, the sullen grizzly who looked out of a hilly den amazed at so impudent an invader. Upon this horse, whose Spanish descent and state of born thraldom was resented by the angry neigh of his never-lassoed brethren, proudly careering in unnumbered _manadas_ upon endless courses, this man was resolutely progressing, ruthlessly severing vines and floral clumps with a splendid old broadsword, cool as only a Mexican can remain in a felt sombrero and a voluminous blanket cloak; charging and crushing, unless they quickened their retreat, the venomous cotejo, the green lizard, the basilisk and tiny, yet awful, coral snakes, and never swerving, though the tongue could almost attain what was unmuffled of his face, the monstrous anaconda and its long, spotted kinsfolk. This mounted Mexican took a line, not so straight as the footmen were pursuing, which would bring him to the spot whither they were converging.

Imagining that the one of the wayfarers who evinced an ignorance of

prairie life which made his existence each moment a greater miracle, and that the horseman who, on the contrary, rode on as sturdily as a postboy in a well-worn road, formed two sides of a triangle of which the evident destination of the rider and the other Mexicans was the final end, in about the centre of this fancied space, other human objects of interest were visible to our aerial observer.

Toilsomely marching, one or the other of two men supporting alternately the young girl who, singularly enough, was their companion in this wilderness, the new trio formed a group which fluttered the almost never-so-startled feathered inhabitants of that grove; curassows, tanagers, noisy loros, hummingbirds as small as flies, hunting flies as large as themselves, toucans that seemed overburdened with their ultraliberal beaks, wood pigeons, fiery flamingoes, in striking contrast with the black swans that clattered in the cane brake.

Behind them, in calm, contented chase, easy and active as the pretty gray squirrels, which alone took the alarm and sprang away when he noiselessly appeared, a shining copper-skinned Indian, with robust limbs and graceful gait, an eye to charm and to command, moved like a king who scorned to set his guards to punish the intruder, on his domains, but stalked savagely onward to chastise them himself. The plentiful scalp locks that fringed his leggings showed that he had left many a skeleton of the paleface to bleach in the torrid sun, and that the sex, the youth and the beauty of the gentle companion of the two whites on whose track he so placidly proceeded, would not spare her a single pang, far less obtain her immunity. On his Apollo-like bosom was tattooed, in sepia and vermilion, a rattlesnake, the emblem not merely of a tribe, but the sect of a tribe, the ring within the circle; he

belonged to the select band of the Southern Apaches, the Poison Hatchets, initiated in the compounding of deadly salves and potent potions, to cure the victim of which the united faculties of Europe would be baffled. No doubt those arrows, of which the feathers bristled in a full quiver, and his other weapons, were anointed with that venom which makes such Indians shunned by all the prairie rovers.

Such was the panorama, sublime, enthralling and fearsome, and the puppets which are presented to our imaginary gazer.

Leaving him to dissolve into the air whence we evolved him, we descend to terra firma near the last party to which we directed attention.

The sun was at its zenith, which fact rendered the animation of so many persons the more remarkable, since few are afoot in the heat of the day in those regions.

Suddenly, with a slight hiss as of a living snake, an arrow sped unerringly through a tuft of liquid embers, and laid low, after one brief spasm of death, a huge dog which seemed a mongrel of Newfoundlander and a wild wolf.

Shortly afterwards the branches which masked the poor animal's stiffening body (on which the greedy flies began already to settle, and towards which the tumblebugs were scrambling in their amazing instinct), were parted by a trembling hand, and a white man of Spanish-American extraction, showed his face streaming with perspiration and impressed with terror and despair, to which, at the discovery, was immediately added a profound sorrow.

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